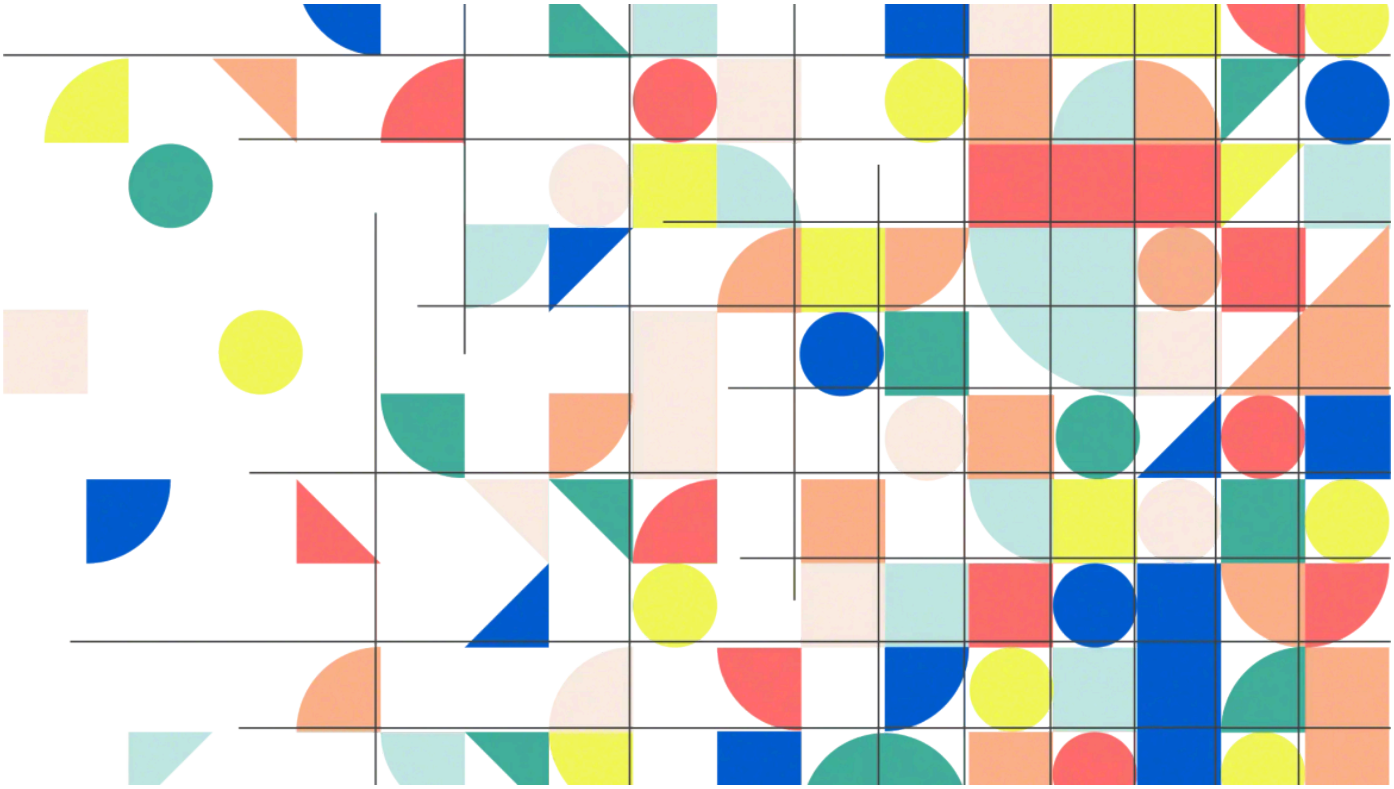
Hybrid Work

Pilots + Prototypes: When the Workplace Becomes a Laboratory

Use pilot and prototype spaces to test new work settings and behaviors

Read 28 minutes



In the last couple years, work has undergone a tremendous shift, including toward more hybrid approaches. This necessitates reassessment, reset and reimagination of the work experience. But change of such magnitude can be an overwhelming proposition, with implications for everything from attraction and retention to collaboration, resourcing and budgets.

The use of prototypes and pilots can show the way forward. They are small, experimental work settings in which to test new ideas — in space design, furniture, technology, new ways of working and new behaviors.

In a prototype or a pilot, a small group of employees tries new work experiences or moves into a test space and uses it as their primary work area during a trial period. Prototypes tend to be less formal and smaller in scale, while pilots are typically more formal and broader — but either is an opportunity to experiment in a living laboratory. Prototypes and pilots give the opportunity to test new concepts, learn what works well and discover what needs to be refined or reconsidered as you seek to improve and evolve the work experience.

Pilots and the Pandemic

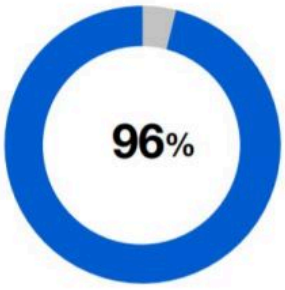
Significant difficulties can fuel great improvements. Accordingly, interest in prototypes and pilots has expanded as organizations began eyeing a return to the workplace in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

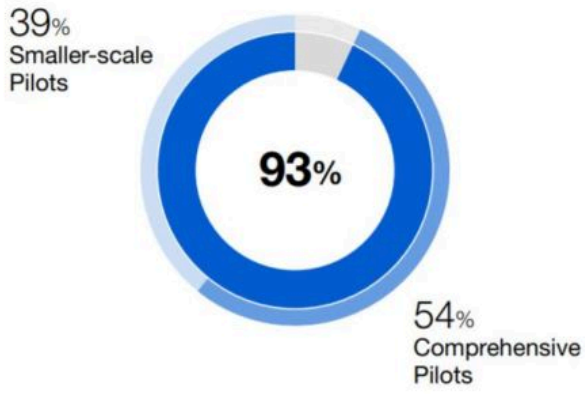
For some business leaders, pilots are a way to test new spatial approaches and reduce the risk of resuming business as usual. For others, they provide a forum to explore the expanded expectations employees have for safety, belonging, productivity, comfort and control over where and how they work. For all, pilots produce actionable insights that can inform prudent decisions in a time of uncertainty.

Many forward-thinking organizations grant that the pandemic presents an opportunity to reimagine the work experience — often in a new hybrid model. A reset may have been something they were contemplating previously, and which they can now accelerate. Prototypes and pilots can aid this effort by serving as a laboratory in which to learn and improve.

In Good Company

Our research has found large numbers of organizations are seeking to re-think their workplaces.





- In fact, based on Steelcase's global research, **96%** of leaders report they are planning **to shift their overall workplace strategies** in response to the changes in work and their need to respond and pivot.
- Organizations report they also want to foster participation and ensure they make the best decisions for their new spaces, so they are using pilots — globally, **93%** of companies report they are planning to **run pilots**. In particular, 54% plan to run comprehensive pilots, and 39% smaller-scale pilots.

Benefits

Implementing a prototype or pilot can afford plenty of benefits.

- Reduces risk by testing workplace concepts on a small scale before a larger investment.
- Uncovers challenges or potential pitfalls you may not have considered, exposing the unknown and helping you to anticipate responses.
- Embraces action and signals evolution and positive forward steps.
- Accelerates the journey to a better work experience by engaging people in the pilot process. Reduces resistance and increases buy-in among employees by giving them a voice as the pilot space is tested and refined.
- Communicates that you're open to exploring new approaches toward improving the work experience.
- Contributes to a culture of experimentation and learning.
- Communicates investment in the employee experience which can contribute to attracting and retaining talent.



Prototypes + Pilots

Often, when people think of pilots, they believe it is necessary for a formal, highly-planned and polished (or expensive) approach. But experimentation can be informal, streamlined and even scrappy.

In a **prototype** — less formal than a pilot — you may move ancillary furniture to a new setting and watch whether it attracts spontaneous and informal connections. Or you may put new technology in a conference room and run a quick QR code- enabled survey to find out what people think. Perhaps you shift to more unassigned spaces and ask a team to establish new protocols and obtain their feedback about the process. Several customers have even made craft-like replicas of furniture (think: tables made of foam core and cardboard tubes, or
storage solutions made of boxes and binder clips) and asked people to arrange and re-arrange the space, providing feedback about what is most effective to support their work.

Trying something new and obtaining input and participation sends a strong message about your willingness to learn and engage employees. In addition, there is significant value in just getting started and putting your toe in the water without having to take a deep dive. What you glean from your scrappy trials may lead to something more formal or it may satisfy your initial need to obtain input.

Beyond a prototype, a pilot, might feature settings that support multiple work modes — focus, collaboration, learning, socialization and rejuvenation. It's possible to include this range by creating an immersive experience that offers people choice and control as they transition among new ways of working throughout the day.

Overall, prototypes and pilots are meant for practice, not perfection. Test, learn, refine, try again — over and over, if necessary. As you learn what works, identify patterns and insights you can apply more broadly.

A note: In this white paper, we'll mainly refer to pilots, but know you can keep things simple, straightforward and create value when testing and hacking no matter your level of formality.

A Holistic Approach

A prototype or pilot shouldn't be only about the physical work environment. It should include a scope broad enough to test new ideas for improving the entire work experience. Focus on "behavioral prototyping or piloting" which looks at a full range of the ways people interact in their work, in the space and with each other.

The purpose of a pilot, after all, isn't just to design an attractive work environment, but a space that catalyzes desired behavioral change.

Space and behavior are inextricably linked in that place shapes behavior, and behavior over time defines culture.

You want to test not only space design and furnishings, but also other key aspects of the work experience — culture, process and tools. Culture implies organizational norms and values; process is the way work gets done; and tools encompass technology and other work aids.

All four attributes — **culture, process, tools and space** — must work together to create an effective work experience that contributes to an organization's chief ambitions – often engagement, innovation, and productivity. A comprehensive pilot, for instance, often incorporates trials of proposed technology. Used within a fresh space design, this new technology inevitably plays a role in influencing work processes and culture.

This symbiotic relationship between culture, process, tools, and space is illustrated in the work experience model below. When you're considering a pilot, ask yourself **key questions** in each of the four areas — culture, process, tools and space.



Process

- What are the work processes we need to support?
- What will be the process for the pilot and how will we obtain feedback?
- How will the pilot inform future decisions?

Culture

- To what extent do we want to change the culture?
- What are the characteristics of our ideal culture?
- What behaviors do we want to encourage?

Tools

- What technology do we want to test?

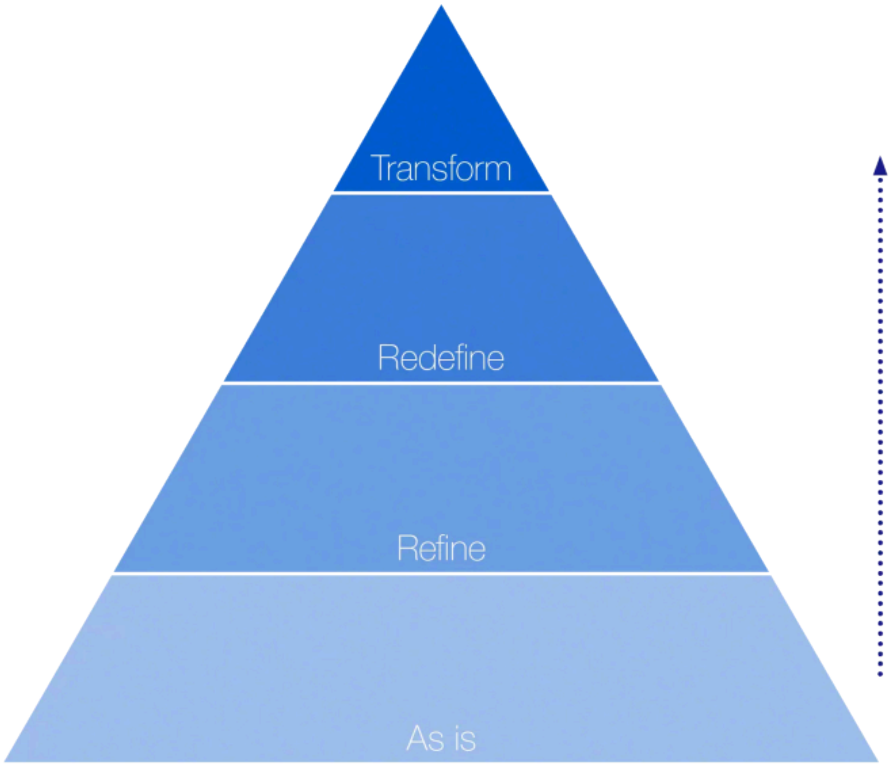
- How will technology influence behavior?
- How will we measure the impact of technology?

Space

- Where will the pilot be located?
- Which work modes will be present?
- How will we design the space?

The Scale of Change

The scope of a pilot hinges largely on the degree of change it seeks to explore. The graphic below illustrates this hierarchy of change.



The bottom level — **As Is** — might include prototypes or pilots that simply aim to test new furniture, but otherwise are content with business as usual.

The next level — **Refine** — encompasses pilots investigating moderate change. A trial space that encourages more casual collaboration, for example, would belong here

The **Redefine** level describes pilots considering significant changes to culture, process, tools, and space. An example might be an IT department testing an agile work style that seeks to hasten project cycle time.

The top of the pyramid — **Transform** — suggests a more complete overhaul of the work environment and a significant cultural shift. An example of transformative mode would be a traditional organization that moves away from private offices and downplays conference rooms in favor of unassigned seating and informal interaction zones in an effort to break down silos and fundamentally enhance organizational collaboration and communication.

The degree of desired change has a bearing on how long and deep a pilot must be. The higher up the pyramid a pilot goes, the more likely it will encompass comprehensive change which impacts culture, process, tools and space.

The Pilot Process

Though no two pilots proceed in precisely the same way, they all share steps in common. Clarity of purpose is first. Why are you piloting? What do you hope to learn? How will you measure success and apply the lessons learned?

Establish tangible goals to align expectations among stakeholders. Perhaps your goal is to test a new way of working or a new work environment. Perhaps you're using a pilot to inform desired cultural change. Maybe you're considering new technology, exploring new approaches to collaboration or testing alternative settings for a specific work mode.

Other steps include planning the details of the pilot, setting up the space, installing furniture and orienting occupants to ensure a favorable, productive experience. You will also want to establish parameters for periodic checkups to see what is and isn't working, gather feedback and ensure people feel heard.

PLANNING A PILOT

When you're planning your pilot, be sure the team has appropriate representation. You will want people from multiple perspectives in the organization: Real Estate, Facilities, Human Resources and IT. In addition, include the leaders of any work group being considered as a candidate to populate the pilot space.

Broad leadership support is critical to the success of your pilot project — as it is to the success of any meaningful change. Senior executives should understand the intent of the pilot and be ready to champion the effort. Invite leaders into the pilot space for a tour, meeting or even a trial workday. If executives are ambivalent about the pilot, employees will be too. If they are enthusiastic, employees are more likely to give it a chance.

Also consider involving knowledgeable third-party professionals who can contribute expertise and objectivity, and who can run the pilot considering the holistic work experience.

POPULATING A PILOT

In deciding who should populate the pilot space, consider these criteria:

- **Willing.** Pilot users should have an open mind, be willing to give honest feedback, and be eager to try something new. In many cases, they will be testing new space plans, new ways of working and new technology. Groups noted for a rigid character are less ideal candidates.
- **Credible.** Change always meets with a degree of skepticism. You can dampen this likelihood by populating the pilot space with a work group that is well-known, well-respected and well-liked.
- **Relatable.** The nature of work conducted by the pilot group should be relatable to the work processes of other groups.
  Every group is unique, of course, but selecting a group whose work is more well- understood can instill greater confidence that pilot results can be replicated throughout the organization.

Be mindful of neighbors — those work groups situated near the pilot space — and of employees not directly involved in the pilot. They will be watching closely and are a likely source of news — favorable or otherwise — for the rest of the organization. Be sure they understand the intent of the pilot and communicate with them early and often. A tour of the pilot space, perhaps a month or so after move-in, can be helpful.

A word of caution: Consider the benefits and drawbacks of selecting your facilities group as the team for the pilot. The facilities group is often the team spearheading the change. So on one hand, their immersion in a pilot can demonstrate commitment and a willingness to go first. But on the other hand, their opinions of the pilot experience may not be perceived as objective and therefore may not be as impactful in swaying others toward the new space designs and behavioral shifts. A possible compromise can be to include your facilities group along with another unrelated group or two.

LOCATING A PILOT

Some pilots occupy an entire floor of a multi-story headquarters, others a portion of a prominent building on campus and still others a temporary space off-site.

Size varies according to purpose.
If a pilot is only testing a single work mode — say, a new approach to collaboration — it needs to be big enough for only a handful of occupants. This could be a series of individuals who don’t even belong to the same team. When their work requires something different — perhaps focus or rejuvenation — participants can simply relocate to a nearby shared space.

On the other hand, pilots studying a complete ecosystem — that is, one supporting all modes of work — will likely house at least 10 people and perhaps more than 50. These pilots are designed to be self-contained, allowing people to work completely within the space. They typically house intact teams accustomed to working together.

Though a pilot can be located anywhere there is adequate space, visibility should be a criterion. To arouse curiosity, select a site that’s close to the action — a place people frequently see as they go about their day.

High visibility communicates transparency. The more you can make the pilot a focal point, the more you can get people talking about it. Conversely, an out-of-the- way pilot space has the potential to be perceived with mystery or skepticism.

Proximity to leadership is important, too. Executive support is vital to the success of any pilot, so it pays to situate the space near enough to leadership to stay top of mind among those who set the tone.

PILOT LENGTH

The length of your pilot depends on what you're trying to learn. If you're simply providing the opportunity for multiple people to experience a space and try out new technology, a few weeks might be sufficient. Or if your pilot targets a single space type — a proposed work café, for instance, a shorter period of 30 days or so can produce meaningful feedback.

For comprehensive pilots, the experience should last at least 90 days to allow adequate time to measure behavioral change. This is especially true for a pilot intended to test multiple work modes. If your pilot encompasses a range of spaces to support focus, collaboration, learning, socialization and rejuvenation for example, longer is better.

Typically, a single intact work group participates in this type of pilot, transitioning between space types as their needs change throughout the workday. Under these circumstances, it will take time for participants to adapt, especially since the pilot space probably presents a departure from previous work behaviors. A minimum of 90 days is necessary to determine the extent to which new behaviors take hold.

For this reason, it's usually best not to undertake significant modifications to a pilot space within the first 90 days. Minor changes, however, should be encouraged in the spirit of experimentation. If participants want to move a workstation or boundary, for instance, let them. Behavior like this reveals something you need to know.

In addition, if a pilot contains an element that garners rave reviews perhaps whiteboards in every workstation — consider rolling it out in a broader fashion right away. There is no need to wait when success is unmistakable.

THE MESSAGE YOU SEND

Bear in mind your pilot space is more than a laboratory; it also serves as a window into your organizational priorities. Your people — both those participating in the pilot and those watching from afar — will be peering intently through that window.

The simple fact that you're implementing a pilot sends a message about your willingness to experiment, about your openness to change, and about how much you value employee participation.

The particulars of the pilot space send another message — about what your organization considers important enough to investigate. If your pilot incorporates new technology, or tests new collaboratives spaces, or downplays spatial boundaries, people will be primed to anticipate changes in these areas of the work experience.

No matter how small your pilot, it won't go unnoticed. Not only will it be under a spotlight, but its mere existence will get people thinking about what matters to your organization and what might be coming next.

Role of Change Management + Preparation

Change management should be part of the discussion whenever talk turns to pilots. It comes into play on two levels. There's the macro level: With significant workplace change, a pilot is often part of a comprehensive change management program, serving as a sample of what is to come.

There's also a micro level: Regardless of the scope of a pilot space, change management support should be part of the process. Many of the change management steps involved in a comprehensive workplace shift also apply to the pilot process, albeit on a more modest scale.

Whereas project management governs the logistics of setting up a pilot, change management covers the people side — preparing participants for the space and helping them adapt. Moving people into a pilot space without adequate preparation is a recipe for failure.

Consider these steps and modify them (up or down) based on the size of your pilot:

- Communication is key, both with pilot participants and the broader organization. Promote features of the pilot space
  as well as desired behavioral changes that link to your business goals — perhaps greater collaboration, faster decision making or better customer service.
- Move day is important. When pilot participants enter their workday laboratory for the first time, every detail matters. Bring in lunch. Provide orientation materials. Make sure IT personnel are on hand to help with new technology. Making the move easy and enjoyable creates a good first impression that puts your pilot on track toward success.
- Throughout the pilot experience, messaging should be frequent and intentionally repetitive. Give pilot participants clear guidelines about using the space and bring other employees on board with repeated exposure to the pilot purpose and goals — what's happening and why.
- Encourage feedback. When people feel they are part of the process by having some choice and control, they tend to be more engaged. Rather than being directive, your strategy will be more successful when you nudge people toward embracing the pilot on their own terms
  providing more choice and control.
- Consider other aspects of change management as well. Encourage pilot participants to develop their own protocols for working in the new space which is a good way to give them a voice. Host a party to celebrate the start or end of your pilot.
  Conduct an open house or tour (and consider asking pilot participants to act as guides) so other employees can check out the space once the pilot is underway.

Remember, it will take time for participants to adapt. Continued support and steady encouragement will be needed as they get used to new work behaviors.

The Importance of Measurement

To get actionable insights from your pilot, you will need to measure how well it worked by collecting data that is both big and thick. In addition, you'll need to establish a baseline before occupancy and then gauge success and inform next steps after the pilot ends. Without robust measurement approaches, you're reduced to making expensive decisions based on anecdotal evidence.

Like change management, your approach to measurement should vary based on the size of your pilot — the greater the pilot scale, the more comprehensive your measurement will need to be.

- Big data is quantitative including statistics that provide a numerical overview of how employee behaviors and attitudes changed within a pilot space. Occupancy sensors are an example, as are employee surveys that seek to measure variables like productivity, collaboration and satisfaction.
- Thick data is qualitative and includes contextual insights providing greater depth than numbers alone. Examples include employee interviews, focus groups, and ethnography, the practice of observing people on the job and taking notes about how they focus, interact and transition between work spaces.
- Employing a mixture of methodologies is most effective. With both quantitative and qualitative data on hand, you will not only gain an understanding of what happened in a pilot space, but also assurance about how to best move forward.
- Be sure to use similar methodologies both before and after the pilot is occupied. Pre-occupancy measurement establishes a baseline against
  which post-occupancy data can be compared. Responses to an employee survey, for instance, might be far different after a pilot concludes than before it gets underway — hopefully for the better.
- When studying a comprehensive pilot encompassing multiple work modes, try to wait at least 90 days before conducting any post-occupancy studies. It takes that long for pilot participants to acclimate and adopt new work habits. Also, be wary of skipping post-pilot measurement altogether, a common temptation when the pilot is perceived a success. Do so and you will almost certainly miss valuable insights.

A bonus: Measurement is good for engagement. When employees know their opinions matter, they are more likely to keep an open mind about the pilot space and what it suggests for the future.

After the Pilot

When a pilot experience draws to a close, be sure to thank participants and communicate the results to your organization. Be clear about what you learned and what decisions you made as a result, including how you intend to roll out the most successful aspects of the pilot more broadly.

Just be careful about portraying the conclusion of a pilot as a finish line. While individual pilots might end, the spirit of experimentation should live on. There will always be something new to test, and every pilot informs the next, and contributes to a culture of continuous improvement.

WE CAN HELP

Whether you’re considering your first steps toward prototyping or launching a full-scale series of pilots, we can help you plan and implement a pilot experience.

- Establish goals and relevant measurement options
- Identify audiences and locations
- Develop and refine applications to support emerging needs
- Provide guidance on the scale that’s right for you