Collaboration

Together Again: Shared Spaces in the Post-COVID Office

Read 16 minutes

This article is part of a series of updates to our Steelcase guide "Navigating What's Next: The Post-COVID Workplace."

Why do we miss the office? And will we still love it when we return?

The simple pleasure of coffee with colleagues in the café. Sketching out ideas on whiteboards, post-it notes and digital displays in comfortable collaboration spaces. It’s the collective energy of a space where people come together with a shared sense of purpose.

Though we’re successfully getting some types of work done remotely and over video, we’re struggling with the creative work that generates new ideas and solves complex problems. And we are missing the intrinsic human experience of working together – connecting face-to-face – in spaces that were designed specifically to encourage the creativity, agility and innovation that organisations need to be truly productive and grow.

It’s clear that social connection builds trust and strong bonds. But our ability to adapt to remote work is built upon the relationships that have grown over time, through spontaneous interactions and relaxed conversations that happen in person – in a conducive environment. The informal, shared spaces where we socialised, collaborated, focused and rejuvenated, enhanced our work experience before COVID-19 sent us all home.

As we return, will these spaces that we love disappear because of safety concerns? Or will they change?

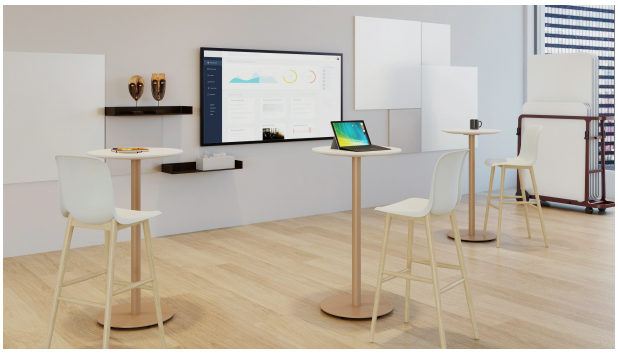
After months working apart, employees now say the main reason they want to come back to the office is to be with other people, socialise and collaborate in ways that just aren’t as effective remotely. That’s why the diverse range of spaces in the office that support these work modes will not go away. In fact, they are likely to be even more sought after. But they will have to evolve now and for the near term to meet the new requirements of the post-COVID workplace.

Coming together in the workplace to socialise and collaborate will become the greatest purpose that the new office can fulfill.

The shared spaces that support this purpose also bring a welcomed warmth and energy to the workplace. We'll continue to be drawn to spaces that bring us together in more residentially-inspired, comfortable settings which also support our performance. But the attributes that make these spaces desirable – softer furnishings, lush materials, crafted finishes – must also consider new safety concerns. Now, shared spaces must pivot towards supporting the physical distancing and cleaning protocols that are required to create a safer work environment. These spaces that employees most enjoy must be adapted or created to not only enhance productivity but to ensure that the people using them can *be* safe and *feel* safe too.

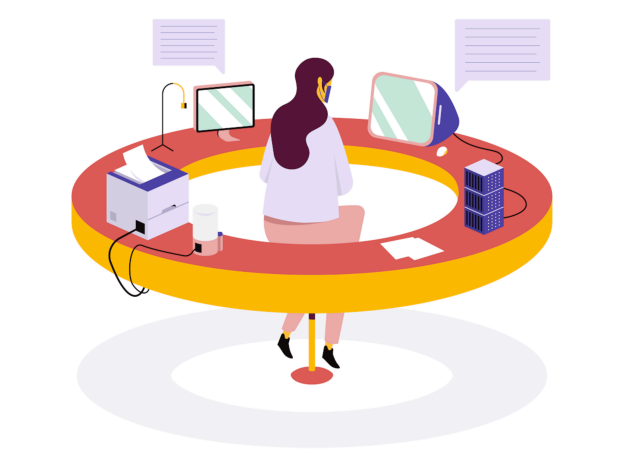
We’re striving to balance the need for *compelling* spaces with the need for *safety*.

Not just the sense of psychological safety that paves the way for good social interactions when people feel at ease – but the physical distancing and provisions needed to ensure they are safer. At the same time, shared spaces need to *perform* – more than ever, which is why we use the following design strategies to guide more effective outcomes.



PERFORMANCE PRINCIPLES

Prior to COVID-19, our research led us to a series of performance principles to guide the design of shared spaces, which are both desirable and productive places to work in. In the post-COVID-19 world, these principles remain the same. The new challenges that have arisen can be addressed by considering *density, geometry and division*:

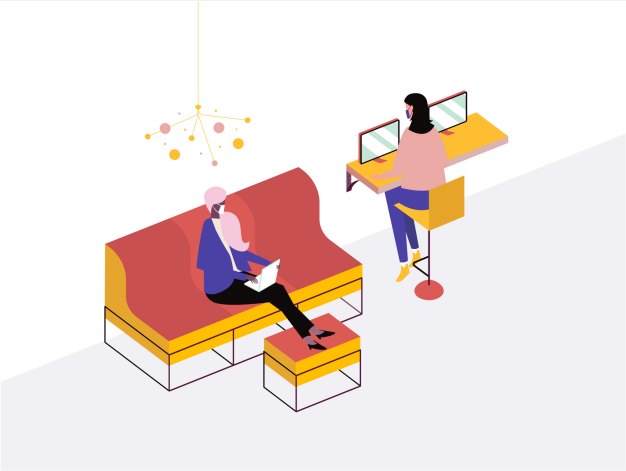


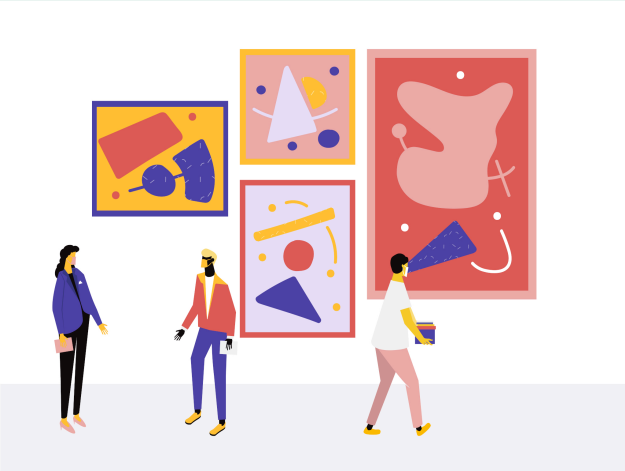
PROXIMITY

Proximity and density go hand in hand – and pose some of the greatest design challenges for shared spaces that are intended to bring people together. The proximity of*people-to-people* must now adequately consider physical distancing. The proximity of *people-to-technology* and tools for meetings in open spaces must match the provisions of enclosed spaces and accommodate remote participants. And the proximity of *furniture-to-furniture* must consider density and adjacencies in new ways – to help cue distancing behaviours.

PRIVACY

Privacy – *acoustical, visual, informational, territorial* – is still critical to making today's shared spaces productive. Each form of privacy contributes to creating a sense of psychological comfort and security – helping people feel at ease, free to share ideas and make work visible. But territorial privacy takes on additional significance for safety. Screens or boundaries that introduce division, can not only help you claim a space but also shield people from others in adjacent workspaces or direct traffic flow.





POSTURE

Providing a range of postures – *seated, stool height, lounging, perching, standing* – enable different kinds of work to happen more effectively, and contribute to health and wellbeing. A variety of seating types can provide more flexibility in creating greater or less distance – and enable changes in the geometry of furniture arrangements, as needed.

PERSONALITY

The aesthetics of shared spaces often drive design – to help set the tone for an organisation's brand and culture. That connection to identity is a drawcard for employees. While research continues on virus transmission through surfaces, the pandemic has created a new focus on cleanability for the residentially-inspired fabrics and finishes of today's shared spaces.

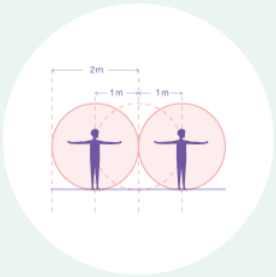
WELLBEING

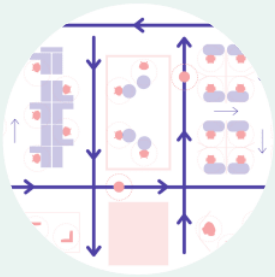
Shared spaces can also further enrich employee wellbeing by design. They can make us feel better. A range of postures can encourage active collaboration or relaxed conversation – reducing the physical stress that affects productivity. Introducing biophilia by bringing the outdoors in through living walls and natural materials, patterns and palettes can contribute to better health and wellbeing – both by improving air quality and connecting us to the calming effects of nature. And research is showing that being outdoors with access to fresh air is not just good for our state of mind but may be inherently safer than indoor environments due to air flow. Leveraging outdoor spaces to create areas for socialising and collaborating provides even greater choice for safer work environments.

Moving forward, organisations will value offices as a critical tool to remain competitive by fostering innovation for growth that can only be achieved when people work effectively together — face-to-face — to get the hard work done. And employees need both to be *reassured* that it's safe to return and *inspired* to return to a compelling environment that supports their physical, cognitive and emotional wellbeing – a place where they want to be rather than where they have to be. A place that fulfils their innate human need for connection, a shared sense of purpose and community. A place they love.

CHALLENGES IN POST-COVID OFFICE DESIGN

As we study the new issues of creating safer work environments in the COVID-19 world, we've discovered the following three main workspace design challenges – physical distancing, circulation patterns and spatial context. Understanding distancing and density, and their relationship to circulation patterns within an existing spatial context, is key to solving for the evolving safety guidelines in shared spaces.





Physical Distancing

Think of this as your personal 2m sphere in both static and dynamic environments. To maintain 2m from other people, each individual is responsible for their own sphere and how it intersects with others as people come together in shared spaces – or move through the office. Furniture arrangement must provide adequate distancing to accommodate personal spheres.

Circulation Patterns

Think of this as traffic flow through primary and secondary pathways – or main boulevards used by all and neighbourhood side streets used by residents. People must be able to move through spaces while maintaining their personal sphere. Safe circulation through and around shared spaces can be addressed through adequate width, directional traffic or additional shielding.

Spatial Context

Every space is different. Understanding your spatial context is required to adapt and design shared spaces to solve for physical distancing and circulation patterns. Are settings in enclosed spaces with fixed walls, static furniture, restrictive ingress/egress and limited airflow – or in open spaces with more flexible arrangements and additional airflow? How densely populated are the spaces? How tight are the pathways – and are they through open spaces or through doors and true corridors? What needs to be adjusted to provide adequate space or shielding?

The following *before* (Pre-COVID) and *after* (Post-COVID) examples illustrate these challenges in both an enclosed meeting and open cafe space:

Example 1

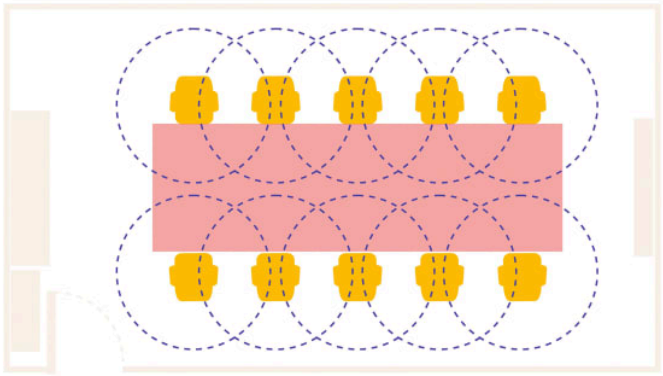
Enclosed Space: Formal Conference

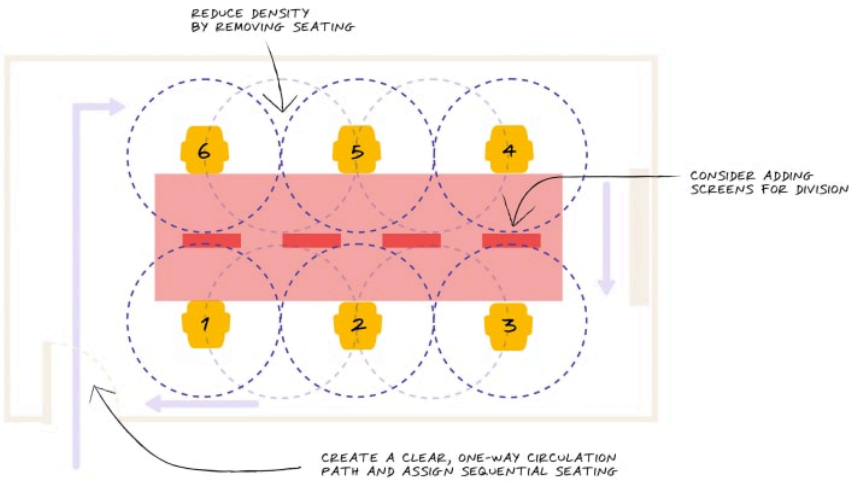
Before: Pre-COVID Scenario

Size: 7.6m x 4.2m; 32 sq m

Capacity: 10

Spatial context: Fixed walls and entryways in an enclosed space limit the space available to provide adequate physical distancing and safe circulation patterns – particularly for generative work.

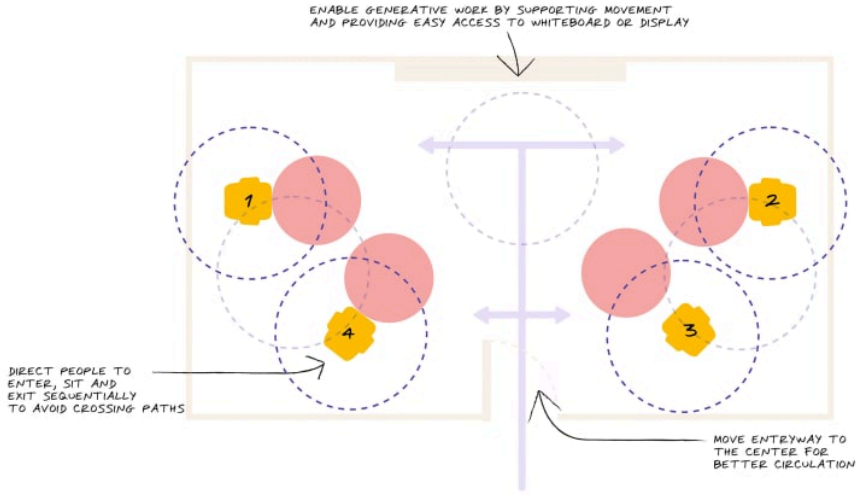




After: Post-COVID Scenario 1

Capacity: 6

Design considerations: Reduce density by removing seating and decluttering accessories and shared storage. Assign sequential seating and define a one-way circulation pattern for safer entry and exit. Consider adding screens and shielding to limit exposure. Add signage and sanitation stations to reinforce behaviours.



Post-COVID Scenario 2

Capacity: 4

Design considerations: Reduce density by reducing seating and replacing single meeting table with individual tables. Create clear circulation by moving entryway to the centre. Assign sequential seating and define circulation patterns for safer entry, exit and path to whiteboards for standing collaboration and generative work.

Example 2:

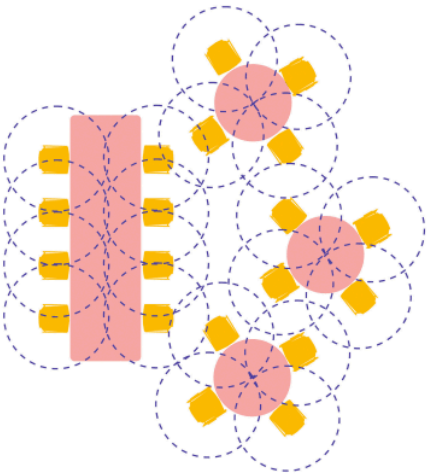
Open Space: Cafe

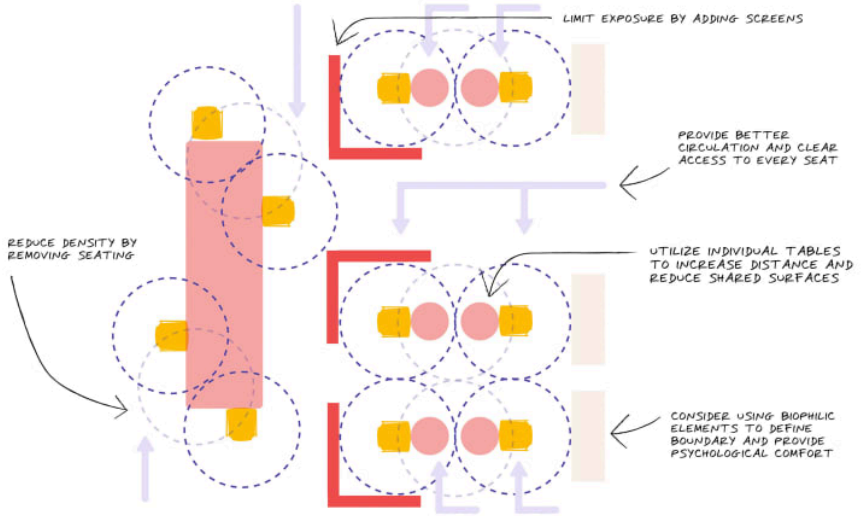
Pre-COVID Scenario

Size: 7.6m x 7.6m; 58 sq m

Capacity: 20

Spatial context: Open space settings provide more flexibility to allow for adequate physical distancing and safer circulation patterns.

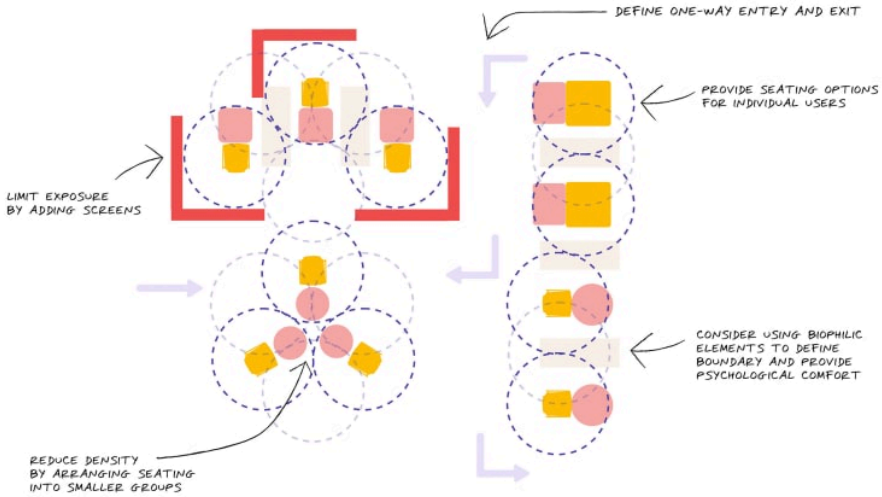




Post-COVID Scenario 1

Capacity: 10

Design considerations: Reduce density by removing seating, changing to individual tables and decluttering accessories and shared storage. Define one-way circulation patterns for clear access to each seat and avoid face-to-face interactions. Consider adding screens and biophilic elements to limit exposure and provide psychological comfort. Add signage and sanitation stations and develop staggered schedules to reinforce behaviours. Use technology to show occupancy and free table spaces.



Post-COVID Scenario 2

Capacity: 10

Design considerations: Arrange seating into smaller groups to reduce density. Introduce individual seating arrangements. Define one-way circulation pattern for entry/exit.

KEY DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS FOR POST-COVID OFFICE COLLABORATION

The following three key strategies are tools that can be used to solve for these office layout challenges:

Density
Reducing the number of people accommodated within a space to satisfy 2m physical distancing requirements.

Geometry
Changing the arrangement of furniture to maximize distance and minimize close face-to-face orientation.

Division
Adding screens or panels to create boundaries and barriers between people, spaces and pathways.

These strategies should be used in combination – along with the performance principles – to address the design challenges for creating shared spaces where people can come together more safely to collaborate and socialise.

As we adapt and design workplaces to our new world, shared spaces offer the greatest ability in the future to flex as our needs toggle between creating greater distance and coming closer together. Furniture in shared spaces is often more flexible – since it is freestanding, it can easily be moved apart to accommodate distancing, placed at angles to change geometry, or shielded to create division.

Additional design considerations for the layout of shared spaces:

Leverage open space: Shared social and collaborative spaces created in the open, rather than enclosed spaces with fixed walls, can more easily respond to the design challenges by providing greater flexibility for physical distancing and circulation patterns.

Consider provisions: Equip open, shared spaces with essential tools for generative collaboration (Steelcase Flex Markerboard Solutions, Steelcase Roam Stand and Microsoft Surface Hub 2, Steelcase Flex Mobile Power, Steelcase Flex Mobile Carts to store cleaning supplies and work tools, etc.) to transform existing shared spaces with enhanced performance and safety.

Integrate remote participants through technology: Equip meeting rooms with state of the art video conferencing technology – more suited to enclosed spaces over open for acoustical privacy.

Design in flexibility: Enable spaces to expand and contract as needed by integrating more individual seating, modularity and flexible pieces.

Rethink traffic direction (one-way vs. two-way): Intentional placement of furniture, boundary elements and accessories to cue behaviours; add directional wayfinding signage.

Equip outdoor spaces: Provide work tools to enable teams, enhance collaboration and increase performance in outdoor spaces.

Integrate touchless technology: Integrate touchless technology: Consider adding a product like Workplace Advisor throughout the office to help people find rooms, make and manage reservations, as well as identify high density spaces that may need deeper cleaning.

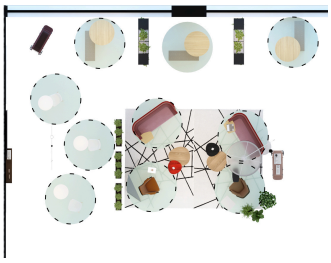
THOUGHT STARTERS

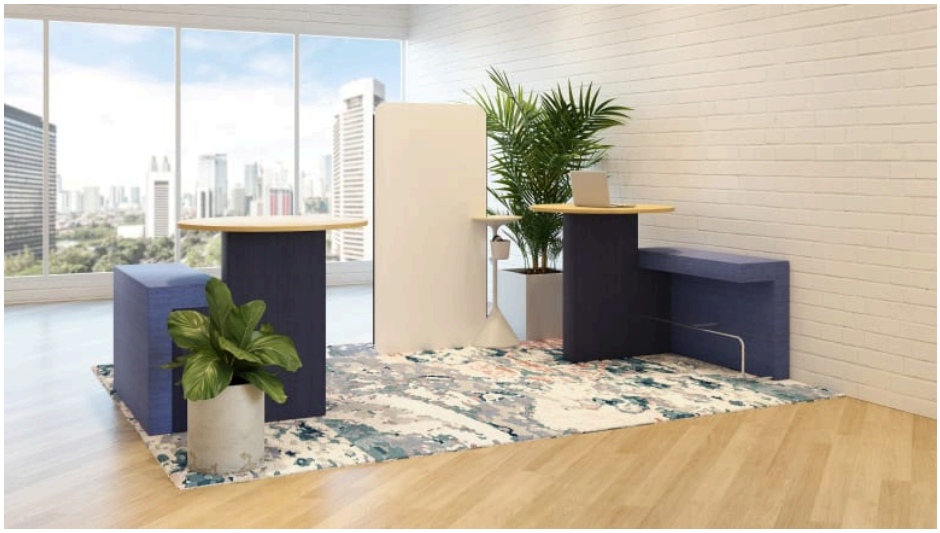
Collaboration, socialising, focusing and rejuvenating happen in both enclosed and open spaces — however, the challenges for making these two types of spaces safer differ drastically when considering density, physical distancing and circulation patterns. In the continuum of helping our customers with practical guidance in making their workplaces safer for their employees, **we're focusing first on developing compelling, high performing meeting spaces in the open that support socialising and collaborating** — both indoors and out.

And while collaborative work can be informative, generative or evaluative, the work that is enhanced most by face-to-face interaction is generative — which is highlighted in our thought starters. Informative and evaluative collaboration can effectively continue virtually through technology.

Shared Space: Commons

An open, expansive social commons supports multiple work modes – socialising, collaborating, focusing, rejuvenating – as well as varying postures. A sense of safety is created by allowing for adequate physical distancing between seating and circulation pathways. Psychological comfort and security are provided by boundary screens and biophilic elements. Workspaces are optimised for performance for both individual and collaborative work with access to power, technology and individual task surfaces.





Shared Space: Small Lounge

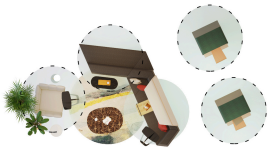
A small space for two – to connect, focus alone but together, or collaborate on individual devices. A staggered, opposing layout provides adequate distancing and eliminates direct face-to-face orientation while still enabling social connection. Planters help to signal entry and integrated screens provide boundary from adjacent spaces.

Shared Space: Flexible Lounge

An informal space that provides a setting for casual interactions or more informal meetings. The environment provides physical distancing between users and easy circulation. Individual chairs and tables maximise flexibility and minimise shared components. Personal tables and access to mobile power enhance productivity – while unique, residentially-inspired elements bring some of the comforts of home to the office.

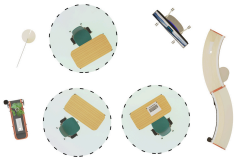
Shared Space: Lounge + Touchdown

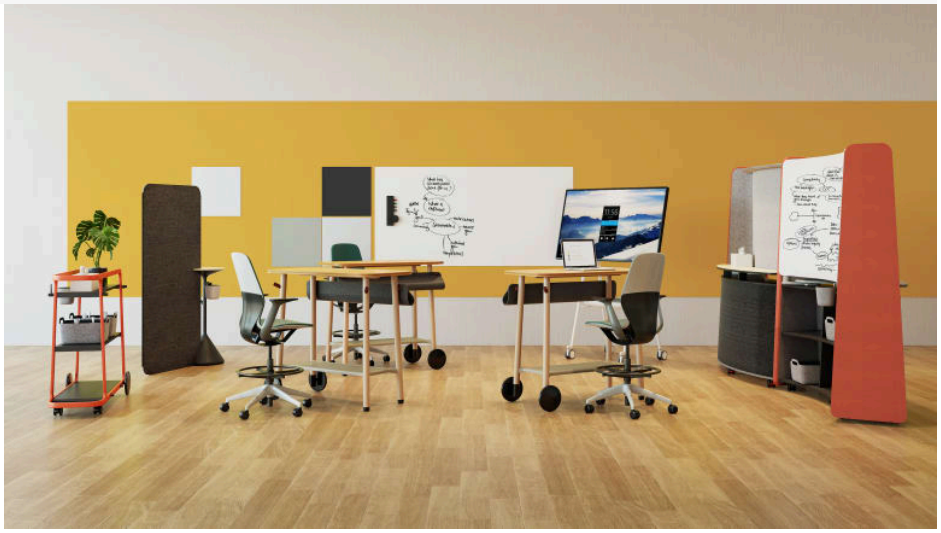
A multifunctional space that gives users a variety of choices for how and where to work. The lounge setting is shielded from its surroundings and provides a place for people to connect in a small group – and work together or individually. Adjacent touchdown workspaces provide lounge or seated height postures for focused, individual work – with built-in privacy and access to power.



Shared Space: Open Active Collaboration

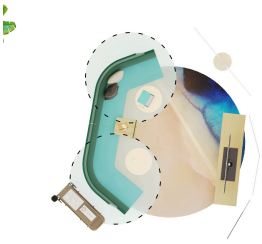
An open collaborative space gives teams a place to brainstorm, make work visible and generate new ideas. Individual tables enable flexible distancing and easy reconfiguration – allowing the space to expand and contract as needs change. Digital and analogue surfaces provide the essential tools needed to ideate and develop ideas – together.





Shared Space: Open Lounge-Based Collaboration

A relaxed collaboration space provides lounge seating with adequate distancing for up to three people. Integrated worksurfaces, power and high-back screens allow users to meet in the open – with a sense of privacy and security, as well as the tools needed for effective collaboration.



Shared Space: Collaboration Pod

An enclosed pod that is easily deployable anywhere in open spaces to create an enclave for two. Individual lounge seating and personal tables ensure physical distancing while the enclosure provides shielding and privacy from the surrounding environment. Digital tools can integrate remote participants. A standard ventilation system with an opening roof provides additional air flow in pods.