

Bots and Brains Need a New Workplace

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I asked my AI chatbot to help me write the lead for this column. I wanted to see what it would pull from the internet's vast assortment of stories about the state of work today. The chatbot composed a paragraph full of anxiety-provoking adjectives, like volatile, unpredictable, fluid, frenetic, and fragmented (chatbots apparently love alliteration). It talked about relentless technology advances, dizzying economic fluctuations, constant transformation, ambiguity, and chaos.

But it also noted "surprising possibilities."

Business and design leaders echo these sentiments (with a little less drama), but it's clear that a lot is changing and patterns of work are in flux. What we do, how we do it, and even why we do it are evolving. There are opportunities for organizations that figure out how to embrace and leverage changing circumstances to move past chaos into action.

There are major shifts contributing to the need for workplace transformation now, and two stand out: bots and brains.

Most organizations are trying to harness AI's capabilities to gain a competitive advantage. Leaders know they need to adapt their workplaces in the AI era, but many are uncertain about what to do or how to support new patterns of work. In the most recent Steelcase research conducted with US-based leaders, 88% of facility and real estate leaders report they expect to change their offices within 3-5 years due to AI integration. And over half envision the need for more flexible spaces as AI changes behaviors in the office.

But recent research from MIT and others suggests organizations haven't achieved their desired productivity gains from investments in AI: 95% of pilots fail, according to [The State of AI in Business 2025](#). It's early in the journey for most companies, and things will continue to develop and most likely improve. The essential step now is to recognize that AI isn't going to simply change how much time people spend on their computers. Organizations have to invest in creating places that offer what their human workforce needs most: social interaction, collaboration, and mental and physical rejuvenation.

Urgency around employee wellbeing is an ongoing area of focus for many organizations and brain health is emerging as a particular concern.

As more people begin working with AI extensively, the need for humans to be cognitively healthy, creative and curious is essential.

40 % of leaders surveyed by Steelcase recognize a greater need for more people-to-people connections to compensate for the increase in computer interactions.

"What do we need the brain to do, now and in the future?" asks Thomas Seitz from the McKinsey Health Institute. "(Working with AI is) a very different way of working, but it's a way that strains the brain a lot more...You're thinking all the time. If you don't give rest to your brain, you're not only going to be unproductive, you're going to get yourself and others into trouble...Creative thinking will be more important than ever."

It's not enough, however, for leaders to encourage more human-to-human interactions and ask employees to be more innovative. The intentional design of the physical workplace can create the conditions for organizations and people to be more resilient in the face of change and to thrive.

Steelcase Community-Based Design is a research-backed approach that can help organizations adapt to changing conditions and enable people to easily shift between focused work – whether alone or with an AI co-worker – and collaboration with other humans. It offers design ideas for creating social infrastructure, places that promote much-needed social interaction. Workplaces designed with these principles support the new kinds of work people need to do but also help create a sense of community at work. And when people feel they're part of a community, they also have higher levels of wellbeing, engagement and productivity.

In the coming weeks and months, Work Better will explore how work is changing now and how it will continue to evolve. We will offer practical ideas for making changes to the workplace that help people thrive in the midst of so much change. We will continue to tap into the knowledge of our technology partners, such as Microsoft, Logitech and Zoom to provide insights on how to integrate space and technology. Our goal is to bring you the information you need to move from a state of ambiguity, volatility and chaos to a place of surprising possibilities.

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