

What Organizations Still Get Wrong About the Role of the Office

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This article is part of a series exploring how work is evolving — and what this means for organizations, people and the environments that support them. Through conversations with contributors from different fields, the series offers a range of perspectives on the challenges shaping the future of work.

Many organizations are still struggling to define the role of the office in a hybrid world.

Jeremy Myerson, Professor Emeritus at the Royal College of Art and founder of WORKTECH Academy, shares why the office should be understood as part of a broader work ecosystem — one designed to support performance, trust and innovation.

Work Better: What do organizations still misunderstand most about the role of the office today?

Organisations misunderstand how the office now sits in a much wider ecosystem of work in the age of hybrid and remote working. And because they misunderstand the office, not simply as a stand-alone technical box but part of a living network, organizations tend to make a number of fundamental mistakes.

In some cases, they bring people back to the office that has not been updated – and all research suggests that people do not want to go back to a noisy and crowded office, but that they want an environment that has been reformed and repurposed.

In other cases, they use hybrid work as an excuse to downsize their space so much that when they bring people back to the office, there aren't the desks there to accommodate them. You can think of Amazon delaying its return to office in North America because in several cities, they didn't have the desk space, while at JP Morgan Chase, staff were describing a Hunger Games scenario where people were struggling to get desks.

Sometimes, organizations do redesign the workplace and create enough space, but they treat the office as one big brainstorm, purely for collaboration – even though research tells us that people don't just want to come back to the office for collaboration, they also want to be able to do private work.

Organizations have not got the balance right in terms of the role of the office.

WB: As organizations try to improve experience, wellbeing and sustainability, some approaches resonate more than others. In your view, what makes a workplace change truly meaningful for people?

It's the new features and amenities that you add that matter to working lives. If you've got a long commute every day, having real-time travel information displayed is really important. If you cycle to work, having showers and bike repair facilities is meaningful for you. If you're on a restricted diet, having better and broader food choices matters.

Organizations should also provide a variety of settings and spaces for people who come to the office to hold meetings and do some teamwork, but who also have quiet solo tasks to accomplish.

Neurodiverse employees might want spaces to escape to or spaces to seek visual stimulation.

The workforce is more diverse than ever before and therefore workplace change has got to be meaningful, inclusive and human-centered.

WB: In practical terms, how does inclusive and human-centered design change the day-to-day experience of people at work?

Based on academic studies in neuroscience and environmental psychology, there are a number of things that organizations can do to look after people's physical and mental health and connect people's health with planetary health:

Better air quality is a very important issue. Just to give one example: 22 Bishopsgate, the tallest tower in London, has a dedicated consolidation centre for deliveries outside the city to cut down emissions.

- Better use of both natural light and artificial light.
- More opportunities for outdoor working with terraces and interior courtyards.
- Biophilia, use of plants, natural materials.
- More of a service mentality, treating the office as a Members' Club.
- Better sense of community, personalizing the experience of people using apps and AI.

It all helps to create a healthier, more welcoming, more inclusive environment.

WB: If you were advising leaders today, what is one principle they should prioritize when rethinking workplaces for the next decade?

I think the single priority should be performance. There's a lot of talk about including sustainability and wellbeing, but the primary principle of workplaces - and this goes back 150 years - is around performance.

At WorkTech Academy, we've done extensive research on how the office supports performance at the individual, team and organizational levels.

At the individual scale, the governing metric of performance should be personal satisfaction with your job, with your employer, but particularly with your environment and your tools. Can the office improve satisfaction?

At the team scale, the governing metric should be trust. Can the office help build trust and support teams to do the things they've got to do, especially when teams are larger, more complex, and more distributed than ever before?

Finally, at the organizational scale, the governing metric is innovation and creating value. Can the office support the generation and implementation of ideas? Is new thinking encouraged by the workplace? Can innovators prototype and pilot?

These are the questions that companies need to be asking.

ABOUT JEREMY MYERSON

Jeremy Myerson is Professor Emeritus at the Royal College of Art and founder of WORKTECH Academy, a global knowledge platform exploring the future of work and workplace. He is an author, researcher and commentator on workplace design, performance and inclusive environments.