

Why Some of the Coolest Spaces at Work Sit Empty

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Offices around the world today look a lot more like a coffee shop or a boutique hotel than the rabbit warren of cubicles, private offices and conference rooms that people liked to poke fun at. Bringing baristas and bartenders into the workplace, along with cushy sofas, farmhouse tables and mismatched chairs is the hottest trend in workplace design. Whether you call it “resimercial,” “ancillary spaces” or “loose furnishings” the goal is the same: attract the best talent by offering a workplace with a relaxed vibe and hip sensibility. This decidedly “anti-corporate” approach to the workplace is intended to inject creativity and humanity into our culture and work process.

But there’s a problem: a lot of the time they’re not being used.

For all our complaining about traditional work environments, many of the coolest spaces sit empty. When presented with a range of spaces that look like stylish living rooms or whimsical play areas, our studies show that people don’t choose the plush lounge chairs nearly as often as you might think (read [Office Remix](#)). The question is why?

The answer may be surprising to some—but people actually come to work to get stuff done. There’s nothing wrong with injecting a little playfulness into work but not at the expense of being productive. People may like the coffee shop aesthetic, but they choose spaces optimized for work. Furnishings designed for watching television or curling up with a good book aren’t the same as furnishings designed to support people working on laptops or collaborating with teammates. And sitting on bean bag chairs on the floor actually inhibits creativity and collaboration rather than enables it.

So does this mean the office will go back to looking like a maze of gray and beige? We don’t think so. Offices can be designed to be relaxing and inspiring places to work where people can leave at the end of the day feeling a sense of accomplishment, as well as a sense of community. But this will require a fundamentally different approach to office design — one that thinks about the diverse types of spaces people need and how they get their work done — as well as how the space makes them feel.