

Chicago Design Week: Workplaces That Help People Think Better

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At Chicago Design Week 2026, Steelcase highlighted solutions to a challenge many organizations are quietly struggling with: people are overwhelmed. The pace of work, constant digital stimulation and the rapid adoption of AI tools are reshaping how people think, focus and connect. But the workplace hasn't kept up in supporting what people need to do their best thinking.

Cognitive overload is no longer a personal issue. It's a business issue. And it's changing what people need from the places where work happens.

A new lens on workplace performance

As part of Design Week, Steelcase introduced new ideas and solutions that offer “ergonomics for the brain.” Visitors to the Steelcase showroom could move through a variety of spaces that support different needs our brains have throughout the day, such as the ability to sustain attention and do deep-focus work, to create social connections that help people manage stress, places to move that help boost creative collaboration, or areas to take a “brain break” and reenergize.

When people have inviting places to gather or pause, connection happens naturally — and those human moments are essential to our health and wellbeing. This modular lounge collection seen at Design Week, Viccarbe Missiva, makes it easy. Its mix-and-match sofas, chairs and poufs fit any space and support the quick resets and social interactions that help people think more clearly throughout the day.

Why brain health matters now more than ever

The complexity of modern work is stretching people's cognitive capacity. Screens dominate our days. Notifications compete for attention. AI tools accelerate decision-making. In this environment, community isn't a “nice to have,” it's a stabilizing force for the organization.

Workplaces that help create a sense of community help people feel grounded. They reduce the mental load of navigating work on your own. And they create the social fabric that makes teams more resilient in times of change.

At Chicago Design Week, Steelcase and its community of brands showcased environments designed to reduce cognitive load and support the full spectrum of work. These tools and solutions demonstrate how thoughtful design can create a cognitive advantage: helping people stay engaged, think more clearly and feel more connected throughout the day.

As organizations continue to navigate uncertainty, the workplace has a renewed role to play. Not as a mandate, but as a meaningful resource. The workplace can be a place designed to help people do their best thinking, build relationships and find clarity amid complexity.

Designing for cognitive performance is emerging as one of the most powerful ways to support wellbeing and performance. And at Chicago Design Week, Steelcase demonstrated what that future can look like.

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