

Where Discovery Happens

Redesigning Life Sciences Workplaces to Fuel Innovation and Adapt to Change

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Scientists, researchers and innovators in life sciences drive some of the world's most profound breakthroughs. Their critical contributions were never more evident than during the pandemic, which underscored the essential nature of their work. Today, the industry is undergoing rapid transformation and the fight for talent is intense. A CBRE study found 61% of leaders rate attraction and retention as a top concern. Additionally, advances in digital technology, the rise of AI, and the accelerating pace of research are reshaping how scientists work.

The rise in data science jobs is one of the biggest impacts on life sciences. According to a Deloitte study, today, there are seven times more data science job postings than there were five years ago. The industry will be "competing from within and outside the industry for the same digital and data talent." These new roles present an exciting opportunity for organizations to reimagine how work is done and create dynamic environments that support the changing work activities of this evolving workforce.

Steelcase researchers recently conducted a study to better understand scientists' and researchers' unique challenges and needs. The study aimed to redefine how the work environment can better support innovation, adaptability and wellbeing.

"Our research wasn't just about physical spaces; it was about understanding the people who use them," says Keith Bujak, PhD, the Steelcase Workspace Futures researcher who led the project. "These are individuals working tirelessly to make a difference. Their work is intricate, often isolating, and always demanding. We wanted to create spaces that help them succeed and remind them they're valued."

Beyond the lab

Life sciences professionals' work isn't done solely at a lab bench. Researchers identified the dual nature of the spaces they need: laboratories where experiments are conducted and the surrounding areas where scientists analyze data, share ideas and decompress. A study by biotechnology company Genentech reported, "The focus will no longer be on who knows how to monitor the equipment best, but who can derive meaning from data."

"Scientists often spend long hours switching between focused lab work, data analysis and collaborative problem-solving," says Bujak. "They need different kinds of spaces to support each of these and the ability to shift between them easily. There's a constant push for innovation, requiring access to a range of spaces that allow them to think deeply, collaborate meaningfully, and sometimes just breathe."

“Well-designed spaces can signal an organization’s commitment to its people. Features like natural light, biophilic elements and ergonomic furniture not only enhance productivity but also contribute to employee wellbeing—a crucial factor in retaining top talent.”

KEITH BUJAK, PHD | WorkSpace Futures Researcher

Emerging Workplace Trends

The study deeply engaged with life sciences professionals, which included interviews with 36 leading organizations and laboratory field research. By engaging directly with scientists, researchers and industry experts, the team identified three critical workplace trends shaping the future of life sciences that significantly impact their work and how the work environment will need to adapt:

DATA + AI TRANSFORMATION

The tools and equipment scientists use in their labs are becoming increasingly automated, revolutionizing how research is conducted. According to a Deloitte study, more than 90% of biopharma and medtech respondents expect generative AI to impact their organizations. Nearly 70% of biopharma respondents said using generative AI for research and discovery is a top priority.

Automation has enabled researchers to run experiments that generate unprecedented volumes of data—what once took weeks or months can now be achieved in a single day. Scientists are now tasked with analyzing vast amounts of data, often requiring advanced tools and environments for focused computational work. This shift has redefined the rhythm of scientific work. An architect at a pharmaceutical company who participated in the Steelcase research summarized what’s happening: “Technological advancements have led to increased automation in manufacturing and labs, reducing the need to perform routine tasks. The skills possessed by today’s workers have intensified. There’s a noticeable shift towards more laptop work and considerable transition between the lab and office.” The result is a dynamic workflow, requiring spaces to seamlessly accommodate transitions and foster productivity across these activities.

As data analysis takes center stage, it’s not just about processing numbers; it’s about making the information accessible and actionable for diverse stakeholders. This growing reliance on data-driven technologies presents an opportunity to design collaborative environments tailored to advanced analysis and cross-disciplinary communication. These spaces must support both solitary focus and teamwork, helping scientists bring their discoveries to life in ways that resonate beyond the lab.

CONNECTED DISCOVERY

Innovation thrives on teamwork, but coordinating across disciplines and spaces remains a struggle. Connected Discovery emphasizes the importance of fostering meaningful interactions among researchers to drive innovation. For years, the idea of serendipity—unexpected yet valuable encounters—has been central to workplace design. In life sciences, this means creating spaces that encourage daily connections, whether it's diagnostic teams meeting outside their labs or cross-disciplinary collaborators sharing insights. These interactions often lead to rich conversations and breakthroughs.

"Today, there is a new mindset that we can make more progress — and sooner — by collaborating throughout the scientific process. Sciences workplaces that facilitate this atmosphere of sharing accelerate innovation by allowing ideas to fail faster and cycle quicker," write Gensler's Kenneth Fischer and Fran Noval in "The Future of Office and Lab Space Has No Boundaries." The goal is to strategically position spaces where they're most needed, ensuring opportunities for connection are integrated into the daily flow of work.

A shift toward greater collaboration within teams and across companies, industries and even global networks supports this trend. Examples include innovation hubs that unite research institutes, companies and other stakeholders, and instances where traditional competitors shared data during the pandemic to accelerate progress. This push for openness has inspired design features that make work more visible, such as writable surfaces for brainstorming or management systems that track projects and team updates. Coupled with flexible video-conferencing tools, huddle rooms and hybrid work technologies, these spaces are designed to connect people—whether they're across the hall or the world.

SPATIAL ADAPTABILITY

With experiments and priorities constantly evolving, spaces must adapt quickly and evolve in step with the ever-changing nature of scientific research. For example, a project might reach a dead end, prompting a shift in focus that demands more lab space—or less. This variability highlights the importance of adaptable spaces that can expand or contract as projects and team dynamics change.

Adaptable design is about more than flexibility; it's about efficiency. Scientists often work in multiple labs, requiring layouts that minimize travel between spaces and maximize collaboration. The ability to reconfigure labs and workspaces as needed helps organizations stay agile in the face of shifting demands. Whether through movable walls, flexible furniture, or maintaining "gray spaces" for future expansion, the goal is to create environments that support evolving needs without disruption, ensuring that space never becomes a barrier to innovation.

A new workplace experience

Steelcase research inspired the development of innovative workplace applications designed to support the precise demands of laboratory work and the collaborative, data-driven processes that are increasingly central to discovery.

DATA ANALYTICS NEIGHBORHOOD

The Life Sciences industry generates unprecedented amounts of complex data. With a constant drive for innovation, teams need access to various spaces near labs that support deep focus, collaboration and rejuvenation.

- Workstations with multiple displays for shoulder-to-shoulder data analysis; height-adjustability + ergonomics support people for long durations
- High-performing lounge space with analog and digital technologies, power and laptop tables supports serendipitous collaboration where teams can share research and information.
- Movable furniture provides flexibility and adaptability; furniture can be reconfigured to foster the exchange of ideas or to create more private and confidential, quiet workspaces for deep-focus work.
- Pods provide a private space for confidential discussions, focus work and video calls.
- Neighborhood café provides easy access to coffee and snacks, enhancing the overall wellbeing of employees.

INNOVATION COMMONS

The Innovation Commons is a multi-use space, often part of the café, designed to encourage spontaneous interactions and bring teams together to share their collective knowledge and insights. It includes spaces to celebrate achievements, showcase the company's mission, values and history, and create a sense of community.

- Acts as a social hub where people can get food and refreshments, as well as work. A range of spaces supports light work, collaboration and socialization. With access to technology and power, people can collaborate informally outside of traditional team spaces.
- A range of seating options supports various postures, making everyone feel welcome and comfortable. Providing choice and control reduces physical strain and promotes health for scientists and researchers with demanding work schedules.
- Biophilic elements improve air quality, reduce stress and enhance employees' wellbeing, helping to foster productivity and creativity.

CLOSE-TO-LAB WORKSTATIONS

Quick transitions between workspaces and the lab are essential for efficiency in fast-paced research environments. Individual workstations outside labs allow for longer-duration focus work, while nearby lounge spaces support brief social and collaborative connections, where scientists can coordinate their efforts, discuss challenges and provide updates on progress

- Height-adjustable desks can serve as personal ergonomic workstations that can support the weight and size of small, specialized lab equipment. This allows scientists to perform quick transitions and multitask while conducting experiments, analyzing data, and writing reports.
- Fixed-height desks provide a dedicated space for short-term tasks such as data analysis and report

writing.

- Open storage outside the lab stores refreshments that may be prohibited in the lab. This allows scientists to take short breaks in easy-to-access spaces.
- Scientists can have confidential conversations in acoustically private spaces, crucial for protecting intellectual property and adhering to regulatory standards.

COLLABORATION HUDDLE

Adaptable spaces near the lab support collaboration for the analysis and processing of data. Digital and analog technologies help people quickly and easily connect to make work visible and share information. Video conferencing equipment enables remote collaboration in real time.

- Whiteboards make ideas and next steps visible and allow for fast-paced work to happen. Individual boards can be brought back to team workspaces or translated digitally so that important ideas are never lost.
- Access to natural light and views of nature can enhance mood, reduce stress, and improve cognitive function.
- Adaptable furniture can enhance efficiency and productivity, by allowing the workplace to be tailored to the specific needs of the team or project.
- Amenities like coffee and tea can sustain individuals during long, demanding work sessions that require high cognitive effort.

CONCLUSION

Bujak reflects, “Life sciences are about solving complex problems, and the environments where these solutions take shape need to meet the same level of sophistication. But above all, they need to reflect the humanity of the people inside them.”

For more research and applications, visit [Life Sciences Workplaces](#).