

Your Next Workspace: 4 Questions to Ask

New ways of working are driving the demands for different kinds of spaces at work. People are looking for more informal, comfortable places to get work done. Workers want to feel like they can be themselves at work leading them to seek out spots that remind them of home. But, while a couch and a coffee table might look inviting, they don't all survive the rigors of the workplace.

There are four questions you need to ask before investing in casual spaces. Whether it's a bench, office lounge chair, coffee table or something else — what works for a seating area at home doesn't always work at the office.

Does it feel good?

Just because it looks good, doesn't mean it feels good. But, at times, the lure of a cool vibe or a relaxing setting can cause people to set aside their physical wellbeing. It doesn't have to be that way.

"Design, engineering and ergonomics need to all work together to make something beautiful that also performs," says Rob Battey, Steelcase engineer. Battey and his colleagues spend a lot of time focused on improving performance.

A global posture study conducted by Steelcase sent people out with cameras to a number of cities including Munich, Kuala Lumpur, Tokyo, New York and Los Angeles. The images gathered allowed engineers and designers to see how people were using different spaces without any preconceived notions. As Battey tells it, people always surprise you.

"We went out to try to understand people and space. We wanted to let user behaviors inform the space solution." The results of these global observations helped inform solutions for a variety of workplace behaviors such as collaboration.

Engineers also work with ergonomists to evaluate chairs, lounges and bench seating. Ergonomists live in the realm between doctors and engineers and are an important piece of the puzzle when it comes to creating the best comfort and fit. It's one thing to create a nice sitting area where someone can host a quick, informal conversation. It's quite another to create a work area where people can gather, spend time together and get real work done.

By applying the science of ergonomics to the new ways people want to work, it takes these settings up a notch — allowing them to be both beautiful and comfortable.

Can you plug in?

Is the area you're planning to add to your workplace designed for working or waiting? If it's for working, people need to be able to use the right tools to get their job done. On average, people carry three devices with them during the day. As mobile devices multiply, power needs escalate. To avoid people crammed in a corner or sitting on the floor to get close to outlets, power in meeting spaces should be sufficient and easy to find.

A well designed seating area considers how people need to work with technology. Power can be embedded in the furniture or stationed conveniently nearby to make sure people aren't having to stoop under a bench or awkwardly reach behind a chair to access an outlet. In addition, there should be considerations given to the accessibility and ease around using the right technology. For example, is there a place for a laptop at the right height so that someone can comfortably sit, type and see the screen? These are some of the details that make the difference between creating an area for work versus an area to sit.

Will it hold up?

Never underestimate the creativity of the user. True, some people use spaces as they were intended. But, every time something new is developed, new user behaviors are discovered. That's why Steelcase engineers turn to heavy users to do vigorous testing.

Field testing is done in college common areas and 911 dispatch centers. These kinds of places, like a workplace, get extreme use in a short period of time.

"Users can almost never tell you what they really want because they don't even realize they have a problem," says Battey. It's only through years of observations and testing that designers and engineers can understand the problems they are trying to solve and provide solutions that will last.

Can you be proud of it?

Every new investment is an opportunity to pay careful attention to people, our planet and the living things it supports. Products designed for circularity avoid and eliminate materials of concern, optimize performance throughout the life cycle and provide end-of-life strategies. Providing great solutions should begin by ensuring they're the best solutions for our environment. That's why you should consider each step of the product's life cycle - design, manufacturing, delivery and end-of-use options. When you choose to invest in something new, you also have the opportunity to communicate to people how important they are and how important our world is.

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Rebecca Charbauski **Senior Communications Specialist**

Rebecca, an Emmy-winning journalist, reports on global research impacting the places where people work, learn and heal. Over her career, Rebecca spent 17 years covering local and national news events on television and a variety of digital platforms. She directed a digital news group in Kansas City for three years before becoming news director in Grand Rapids, Michigan for more than five years. Prior to Steelcase, Rebecca worked with one of the four largest media groups in the United States to coordinate news coverage among 48 newsrooms from the east to west coast.

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