

# Design, Materiality + Performance Inspire at Work

Why are some parts of the workplace always buzzing with activity — social spaces with constant clusters of people, rooms that are always booked or desks and enclaves that are always taken? What makes people choose to work in one space over another? Increasingly, people at work are searching for something. They're looking for spaces that allow them to feel comfortable, help them think better and support their ability to solve problems.

These informal, authentic and inspiring spaces are creating workplaces where people want to gather, collaborate and perform at their best. The workplace is experiencing a rebirth to address the new ways in which people are working. Because technology allows people to work anywhere, the workplace is being reinvented to give people what their homes and cafes cannot — successful spaces providing places for focus, collaboration and socialization. These new spaces are human-centered combining design, materiality and performance to feel good, perform well and inspire people.

## Design

DLR Group, an integrated design firm in Houston, understands what people are craving from their spaces today. Using a human-centered approach, they've designed their offices to focus on the wellbeing of people by allowing choice and control over where and how their people get their work done.

"We want to allow more choice in the workplace and create a place that will spark innovation and collaboration," says Autumn Gloetzner, senior designer with DLR Group.

Gloetzner modeled the design of her team's office after the advice she gives clients. "By providing different types of spaces, we have choices. We can choose where and how we do our work. Offering choice drives performance," she says. Their space includes social spaces, focus spaces and collaboration spaces employees can choose from based on the work they need to do.

**"Offering choice drives performance."**

---

**AUTUMN GLOETZNER** | Senior Designer, DLR Group

The space should also reflect the unique qualities of the people working there and an organization's culture. For DLR Group's workplace, a local graffiti artist was commissioned to create a mural inspired by Houston and her team's commitment to clients to "listen.DESIGN.deliver."

## Materiality

Materiality helps to deliver a genuine, personal feeling within a space. Just think, when you wake up and get ready for your day, what you decide to wear tells a story about yourself. The same is true in the workplace.

**What you decide to wear tells a story about yourself. The same is true in the workplace.**

“Most of us think about materiality as decoration or superficial. But, it’s always more than that,” said Bruce Smith, Steelcase director of global design. When we think about *material*, Smith explains, we often focus on color, texture and patterns. But, in experience, we *appreciate* material with much greater depth by assigning it meaning, relevance, associations and performance.

Smith further describes this concept: There’s an aspect of feeling and an aspect of knowing, he says. If we see a sleek, black base to a stool, we know it’s going to be hard, cold and solid. We’re confident it will hold our weight. We can make a decision about how something makes us feel by observing the material.

**“Most of us think about materiality as decoration or superficial. But, it’s always more than that.”**

---

**BRUCE SMITH** | Global Design Director, Steelcase

The kinds of things that are attractive to Smith and his team right now are warm, humanistic and natural. He admits these words are vague because they mean different things to different people. That may be one reason why he says, “We see that our customers have interests in making spaces more eclectic, not so monolithic in colors, patterns and settings.”

“People want to feel a connection to the places where they work, where they can see themselves in the space, versus something that feels imposed upon them,” agrees James Ludwig, Steelcase vice president of global design.

## **Performance**

In addition to looking good and feeling good, a space also needs to perform to help people do their best work.

“We’re designing work environments that are harder working generally than our home environment,” says Ludwig.

Modern office sofas and chairs, for example, need to be smarter — encouraging a range of postures so people are comfortable and energized and created in a way to promote ergonomic and active sitting so people can move and shift postures to prevent stiffness and pain. People need access to power and worksurfaces so that they have the tools they need to do their job at their fingertips. And, the furniture needs to stand up to the riggers of the workplace including frequent use and consistent cleaning.

“Design, materiality and performance layer together in everything we do,” says Smith. This is the human experience, one that is plural, diverse, inclusive and full. How a space performs is just as critical as how it looks and feels.

Steelcase’s global design team delves deeper into the strategies for the creation of thoughtfully-curated destinations that blend design, materiality and performance in the latest issue of 360 Magazine.

---

**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.

**Steelcase**

© 1996 - 2021 Steelcase Inc. is the global leader in office furniture, interior architecture and space solutions for offices, hospitals and classrooms. Our furniture is inspired by innovative research in workspace design.