

Fix What's Wrong with the Hottest Office Trend (Transcript)

Open Office Truth Podcast Series: Episode 4

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This episode features: Steelcase applications marketing designer Mary Elaine Rousch, Steelcase General Manager of Ancillary Partnerships Brian Shapland, Moooi Carpets CEO Martien Valentijn, Bolia CEO Lars Lyse Hansen, Extremis CEO Dirk Wynants, West Elm Vice President of Work and Contract Design Paulo Kos.

INTRODUCTION

Mary Elaine Rousch: For years and years and years, there's been tons of resident workstations, and when you think about how to design a resident workstation, there are so many details. Probably things that once the user is sitting there, they don't even think about, but designers do. We think about, how much work surface space do they need for their monitors and their docking station, and maybe if they have a notepad. I believe we need to start applying that same level of scrutiny in the details to the shared spaces. That's really going to be what starts to elevate or activate the performance in these spaces.

Host Katie Pace: Welcome to What Workers Want, the new 360 Real Time, a Steelcase 360 Podcast about how the places we work, learn, and heal are changing to help people thrive and ideas flourish at work. I'm your host Katie Pace here today with our producer Rebecca Charbauski.

Co-host Rebecca Charbauski: Great to be here. We're in the midst, Katie, as you know, of a five part series on the Open Office Truth. If you didn't start with us with episode one, don't worry, you can start with us right now. You can always access all of our archives at steelcase.com/openofficetruth.

Before we go any further, we want to make sure that everyone subscribes to What Workers Want. We're going to have a great episode coming up with the author of Joyful, where you can find joy in everyday objects, and we're also going to have a great conversation with our Vice President of Global Design and Engineering, and the CEO of Anchor Innovations about a brand new product called Steelcase Flex Mobile Power where you can just grab and go and take your power with, you and how that all came to be.

Katie: Last episode, we talked a lot about pods and this emerging trend that brings privacy to the open office plan. I love my pod. That's what privacy looks like when it has four walls, and when-

Rebecca: And we can shut the door.

Katie: We can shut the door can shut the door. We don't feel like we're in a fish bowl. But what happens when you don't have four walls? What happens when you need that strategic anonymity that Melanie talked about in the second episode?

Rebecca: Exactly. We know a lot of people need that. We did an Instagram poll on our Steelcase Channel and we asked people if they're in the open plan, and 74% of people said that is their work day. So we're going to hear today about research around what people want out of their spaces, away from the traditional workstation.

A lot of times you'll see companies investing in these really, really pretty spaces, but nobody's there.

Katie: Right, they're empty.

Rebecca: Yeah, it's a waste. What's going on there and what can be done? We have a bunch of guests in this episode including leaders from West Elm, the CEO of Bolia, Extremis, and Moooli Carpets, all companies that make absolutely beautiful, unique things that are used in these shared spaces to help people get work done.

DESIGNING SHARED SPACES PEOPLE ACTUALLY USE

Katie: I had the chance to sit down with Mary Elaine Roush, who works in a Steelcase Applications Marketing Design Studio and she essentially figures out how to take design principles for these alternative shared spaces and turn them into reality. Her team works with a wide variety of researchers, designers, consultants, people here at Steelcase who help narrow in on what makes a space not just beautiful, but also productive. Meaning people actually use it. People are actually getting real work done.

Rebecca: They're actually there.

Katie: Yes. Real work. Thanks for being here. Mary Elaine.

Mary Elaine Roush: Yes, I'm happy to be here.

Katie: Our Steelcase global study showed that 87% of people are spending two to four hours away from their assigned workstation. They're actually moving away and using these spaces that are not at a traditional desk, if you will. Let's start by defining what we mean by, some people say away from the desk, another term we may have heard is ancillary. How do you define this?

Mary Elaine: We keep it really simple. Everything away from the own desk. This could be enclosed meeting rooms. It could be really informal lounge spaces.

Katie: Your team has spent a lot of time studying these spaces, studying how people use them, what they need. How did you figure out how to design for these spaces? Talk a little bit about what you did and how you figured it out.

Mary Elaine: Yeah, definitely. We conducted surveys, we did a lot of different user observations and collected sensor data. What we were looking for is what drives the use of these ancillary spaces. What are users looking for to be productive away from their desk? And really what we saw, we saw patterns emerge that we could identify that really drove the use of these ancillary spaces.

Katie: Part of that research probably came from the sense that sometimes you see beautiful pictures, or beautiful spaces, in these really cool work environments and I want to work there, but wait, why isn't anybody working there? Or for an organization, I invested in this really cool expensive trendy couch and nobody's actually using it. Why isn't everybody happy?

Mary Elaine: Yes, definitely. That's what we started analyzing. We started looking at these spaces, okay, is this space utilized or underutilized and why? We really started digging in and those elements that we found, we found six main patterns that people were looking for when they were using these spaces.

The first is task oriented amenities and then surfaces. People are looking for surfaces in these spaces. Power, which is obvious at this point, but you really can't be productive for a long time if you don't have access to power. Privacy, this just goes back to our human need around comfort and shielding. Permissions in terms of can I make this space my own even if it's on a very micro scale?

Context matters. You could put the same space in two places and in one area it works really well and it's always highly utilized, and the other no one uses it. It's probably because it might be in the wrong space.

Katie: That's really interesting that you found all these. It feels like there's a science to creating these spaces, it's not just a bunch of pretty pillows and a cool comfortable couch.

Mary Elaine: Yes, and I do feel for these spaces, aesthetics has been a really primary driver, but I think we're beyond that. We need to use that square footage in a really meaningful way. Companies are looking for those spaces to be productive so they can get the most out of it.

Katie: Out of these six elements and patterns, which are really important and things that people need, then you created this framework for design. Talk a little bit about the framework.

Mary Elaine: Okay, yes, we created this framework and it really is all about six application performance principles. They are privacy, posture, proximity, personality, and those four done in the right combination, lead to psychological comfort and productivity. Really you can think about this framework as a how to design for these shared spaces, but also an easy way to talk about shared spaces.

Katie: We've used that term before. Talk a little bit about that. What is psychological comfort, and why does it matter to a work place?

Mary Elaine: Well I think when we think about wellbeing, this is an aspect of it. If you want to have your spaces away from the desk be utilized and be productive, your users have to want to go there and they have to feel comfortable doing that.

It needs to vary, depending on what the work behavior you're supporting is. That comfort could mean something different when you're trying to focus versus having a small group collaboration in the open. You really have to feel comfortable to share your ideas. These are open spaces a lot of times. How can you make people feel comfortable to do their best work?

Katie: Yeah, we're talking a lot about privacy in these series too in the open office, and that's one of the supporting elements of psychological comfort. I can sit here, no one's going to walk up behind me, or no one's going to... I'm anonymous here. I feel comfortable here, because I have a little bit of visual or maybe acoustical privacy, but I feel comfortable.

Mary Elaine: Yeah. And that was one of the things that we found when we did the observations on the sensor data actually, the shielded spaces, when you're talking about those privacy elements, those were the spaces that users went to first.

Katie: Let's talk about posture. Because sometimes I think, we're going to lounge, I'm going to put my feet up and then I'm going to be so productive. Maybe that's right, maybe that happens, but that's not necessarily always the key of what you guys found.

Mary Elaine: Well and it goes beyond a sofa and a coffee table. Again, with posture you want to think about supporting a range of postures within the space. Again, going back to what work behaviors are you trying to support and also personal preference throughout your employees.

One example of posture working well when you look at designing a space is if I want to design a space for generation and I want to be active and have people really jump in for collaboration, I'm going to think about maybe a standing or stool posture so that users can really jump in, in the moment.

Katie: That gets to the next point, which is what I always talk about, the buzzy spaces. I want to be in the buzz, I want to be in the cafe, I want some socialization, but I don't want to be too far away. If it's in a building next door, I'm not going to walk there to use that. That has to do with the proximity and the proxemics of these spaces.

Mary Elaine: Yeah. There's a lot in the proximity. You've hit on the proximity of that space to the whole open office. When we think about designing for these spaces, we think about the people, the people connection, and also people to the tools and technology in this space.

Katie: The last one that you talk about his personality. Talk a little bit about how you define that and do you have any recommendations, going too far or we see people putting ball pits in, which is a different problem to solve [inaudible 00:10:11]. But how do you express personality in the cool way in the office?

Mary Elaine: When I think about personality as one of these performance principles, this is not new to this shared spaces conversation. You don't forget about personality. Aesthetics still matter. Personality is where the organization can put their stamp on these spaces, they can communicate to the rest of the organization what they're about.

The ball pits, while they probably aren't super productive, they are communicating something. I would say you want to use personality as a tool. Position that personality in the right places in the office space and combine it with those other principles, then you're going to really be in the sweet spot of performance.

Katie: You took all these principles that we just talked through and then you put together this series of applications. Talk a little bit about how you approached that, and then maybe for our listeners who can't see them, what they look like.

Mary Elaine: Yeah. Really when I think about using the performance principles to design a space, there's two approaches that you can take. The first is designing really from the ground up with a clean slate. If I'm looking at all of my shared spaces, I'm going to think about the varied posture and the varied work behaviors that I want to support.

I'm going to look at the work behavior as a starting point. What is it that I'm trying to support? And then I would go through the principles and think about what's the right level of privacy? What's important when I think about proximity? Am I designing more for the people to people interaction or the people to technology interaction? What's right in terms of the posture? That's one approach.

The second is really this thinking, there's a ton of these shared spaces that are out in office space today that are potentially under-utilized. Take a walk around, see what spaces are being used, see what spaces aren't being used, and for the ones that aren't, do a little digging. This is what we started to do. We played a little bit of detective to say, okay, why is this space working, and this other is not?

Katie: What's missing here? It was really interesting, because it feels like, if you build it, they won't come. It's the opposite. You do have to think scientifically and really intentionally about what you're building.

Mary Elaine: It's really combining the science with the art and we feel strongly that these principles can help you have your shared spaces be utilized and have your people be productive.

Katie: Make them better. That's great. Well thanks for joining us Mary Elaine.

Mary Elaine: Absolutely. Thank you.

Katie: I love how she talks about there being an art and a science, because you can feel that when you're in these spaces.

Rebecca: That's so true. One of our most popular podcasts from, almost a year ago now, was this one where we talked about why are some spaces empty and others are busy. I feel what she's done, and what her team has done, is really advanced that conversation to now there's some actual principles that you can walk around and say, okay, people aren't spending time in that space let's actually review these and see what are we missing?

Katie: You can't when you go to another space and it's empty. I might want a place to plug in my computer.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PERSONALITY

Rebecca: But the art part of this is also really fun.

Katie: It is. One of the best parts of these spaces is how unique they are and/or can be. At Steelcase, we've been bringing together and working with these new partners for a couple of years now and it's really just bringing more choices to the workplace with a variety of aesthetics. I was able to reconnect with Brian Shapland, who's the General Manager of Ancillary Partnerships, and he talked about how some of our partners and how they fit into what Mary Elaine just shared with us.

Rebecca: I want to get to that chat with Brian, but before we do, we do have some new news to share.

Katie: Breaking news.

Rebecca: Breaking news. Steelcase announced recently it's expanding its partnership with Uhuru, which is now going to offer its full collection through Steelcase dealers. If you don't know Uhuru, they have just a really cool studio in Red Hook Brooklyn.

Katie: They are so cool. Uhuru has established itself as one of America's most innovative design firms. They make custom well crafted furniture from inspired materials with lots of history, things like reclaimed wood from a Coney Island boardwalk or teak salvaged from a decommissioned battleship.

Rebecca: Yeah, really cool stuff, lounge chairs that look like they have a bridge mosaic underneath them. Let's get to your conversation with Brian and hear about some of our other partners as well.

Katie: Well, welcome to What Workers Want. Brian,

Brian: It's so great to be here. Thanks for having me, Katie.

Katie: As General Manager of our Ancillary Partnerships, you've led the teams that have slowly added more companies to the mix that are bringing some really unique elements that are helping us to be able to get work done in these ancillary, or away from the desk spaces.

Brian: It's really a blast. It's a delight to work with each of these brands. It really started a few years ago when we acknowledged that we had some gaps in our portfolio from a posture perspective, from an aesthetics perspective, from a performance perspective, and so we began looking for companies that were doing really interesting things and companies that might value what we bring to the table.

Katie: We've had a bunch of great additions to our portfolio, but most recently we announced a partnership with Moooi and Moooi Carpets and they are such a fun brand. I'm wondering if you can tell us, in addition to being really fun and cool and being in a lot of our work life centers, what attracted Steelcase to them to bring them on as a partner, this new relationship?

Brian: That's right. Well as many listeners might know, Moooi was started about 10 years ago by a gentleman named Marcel Wanders and might be familiar with his work prior to starting that brand. But it's really just a stunning and exquisite catalog of lighting, carpets, furniture and accessories. I think they say it best when they describe the heritage of their name. Moooi is the Dutch word for beautiful. They're a Dutch brand and the extra, O, so it's M-O-O-O-I, is added for extra emphasis on how extraordinarily beautiful their collection is. And we couldn't agree more.

Katie: I love their stuff. The Moooi carpet where I work in Chicago, it's this big beautiful round carpet where you walk in, you know what I'm talking about.

Brian: Absolutely.

Katie: It has florals, it's bold, it's colorful, and it just makes a statement right when you walk into Work Life. We have a lot of their stuff here in Grand Rapids too. For listeners who don't know what we're talking about, you can check out our website. We have all of the images and lots more information about the partnership on our website too.

Brian: Yeah, it's really straight from the fashion pages of your favorite periodical. You really just get a sense and feel like it's a different environment when you walk into a space and look at the Moooi carpets.

Katie: Yeah, I had a chance to ask their CEO Martien Valentijn, how design is changing when it comes to thinking about what you're walking on and why their carpets are so different.

Martien Valentijn: They are quite different and actually this is based on the fact that we started creating a new printing technique and now we are able to print without any limitation in colors. Because of the fact that we can print photorealistic designs on our canvas, it creates a whole new area and a whole new field for designers to be creative.

In the past, flooring was often the last thing to do. Creating new spaces, at the end of the line there was always the question, we do need something on the floor as well. In the situation, people look at offices right now, we start with an old different attitude. Things like flooring, but also lighting and wallpaper, etc, are more important from the beginning.

Brian: Well, that's so well said. I just love how Martien suggests that you look down into a space as much as you look around and it reminds me, Katie, of your conversation with Jack Schreur from Floss, their CEO, several months ago where he talked about looking up when you enter space to look at the lighting that surrounds you. I love looking at the Moooi Carpets to suggest the vibe you get when you enter a space.

Katie: That's so true. Another cool new partnership we have is with [Bolia](#). They're a Danish design company. They're also really cool. We're now selling their products for workplaces here in North America. Tell us about what makes Bolia so special.

Brian: Well, there are so many things it's hard to know where to start. A few of us had a chance to travel to Denmark a couple of months ago and really be surrounded by their brand. They actually have their primary retail store on the first floor of their headquarters. So you really get a sense for what Lars, their CEO, talks about. I think when he spoke about it with you, they have such an appreciation for all five senses that when you walk into a Bolia store, you're really enveloped in their scent, in their taste, in their touch and feel of their products. We can talk about more of those in a second, but it's really the Bolia brand is articulated so nicely in each of the five senses.

Katie: And Lars, their CEO, he's a super interesting guy. He climbs mountains and he makes music. And he has a job running a furniture company.

Brian: Yes, certainly in the running for most interesting man in the world. Lars does a bunch of really cool things and he's just surrounded by a terrific team. When you're in their space, they partnered with an elite coffee brand, that you have access to their coffee and it's like nothing you've ever tasted. When you walk into the store you can smell a custom scent. Their approach to patterns and finishes with woods and fabrics, and even to some of their other things, like linens and towels, throws and pillows, all of the spaces that increasingly find themselves in corporate settings or in third party spaces. Bolia has just been a wonderful addition to our portfolio of partners.

Katie: We asked their CEO, Lars Lyse Hansen, how they balance being a digital first design company and why they design for the five senses.

Lars Lyse Hansen: If you really want to make sure that the customers perceive the brand as you like, then you have to ask the really weird questions. How does my brand sound? How does it taste? How does it smell? How does it feel? And stuff like that.

We did that exercise and we came up with a certain sound, we came up with a certain feel, a certain fragrance, and then we just started designing it. It was a piece of furniture basically. Did a lot of errors and tried again.

When people ask me, what kind of company is Bolia, always we are half design, half tech company. Technology and design. The imagery comes from the same place. That is the creativity.

That creativity can go either into design and product development, but it can also go into tech development. So we are always looking at how can we make things smarter with technology. It's blurring creativity with the technology.

Katie: Gosh. So, the way Bolia looks at design in even their retail experience is so interesting.

Brian: Absolutely. From what I've heard, it makes for a perfectly well thought out, or maybe even a last second, Mother's Day gift. Their scent, their blankets, from what I hear and I've seen, people love that stuff.

Katie: Yeah. Good. Okay. Our listeners will take note of that.

Brian: But I also think it's, on a more serious note, I think it's a perfect example of what you were speaking about earlier with these different dimensions of defining performance and some of these things that are tougher to put your thumb on. Is it the personality of a space, or the psychological comfort of a space? I think each of the things that Lars spoke about is indicative of you decidedly feel like you're in a different space when you're in products from Bolia.

Katie: As we also talked about these six Ps, personality and proximity come to mind when we think about our great friends at Extremis.

Brian: Absolutely.

Katie: These guys are so fun. They make really cool furniture for the outdoors, also indoors, and they also make really great beer.

Brian: So I've heard.

Katie: Yes, they have two founders who we've met and we've spent a lot of time with them. Tell us what makes them so cool, Brian.

Brian: Well, there's no question that people make it cool. Dirk and the entire family who often find themselves in their photo shoots, those are friends, family members, and neighbors in all of their stunning photography that showcase their collection.

But you're right, there's no question their products have a personality and there's no question that they give you a sense of psychological comfort when you enter their space or where you have some of their umbrellas overhead.

But actually it's all about proximity too. We see a lot of our customers asking for outdoor spaces or to bring the outdoors indoors. I know we've talked about biophilia in the past, but we feel Extremis products really took off a number of those Ps.

And it's really interesting, we actually just heard about a company in the Bay Area that moved a bunch of Extremis products outdoor for primary work as a place for their individual users and employees to go do primary work. Not just meet and have a conversation but do heads down laptop work. It's really interesting what Dirk and the family are up to.

Katie: Only in California am I having a primary work station outside.

Brian: Absolutely.

Katie: This is not happening in Grand Rapids, Michigan. That's so cool. We talked to CEO, Dirk Wynants, who calls himself the Big Boss, about why he calls their products tools of togetherness.

Dirk Wynants: I like to say that furniture doesn't interest me that much. What interests me much more is the interaction between people. That is what a furniture is made for. If you can improve this interaction between people, then I have a nice result.

Tools for togetherness means that these things that we make, whether it's furniture or something else, are intended to stimulate people to get together, to improve the conversations. Our products do not have a aesthetic signature, because they're never originated from a nice line on a piece of paper, which then results in a new design. We never start from the aesthetics. We always start from the reason of existence of a certain piece of furniture, how we can improve it, what problem we can solve.

I strongly believe that if you design in that way, that you end up with ideas that have a much better potential to stay relevant for a longer time because it's not fashion that we design. I'm trying to make stuff that stays relevant for a very long time because this is, for me, a key factor when it comes to sustainability.

Brian: Well, I just love that sound bite. I love what he and his wife, Hilda, have been thinking about from the inception of the Extremis brand, as Dirk says, they're looking for problems to solve. It's an old Shaker quote. And they're not hesitating to make the products beautiful.

I think there's a lot of shared DNA when we think about how Steelcase looks for problems to solve and how users are working or how students are studying and looking for ways to solve the problems. But when you see the execution and the nods to sustainability, durability, and quality that Dirk and the family have, you really know that you're sitting in and surrounded by excellent products.

Katie: We're not able to get to talk to all of our partners today, but we do have a lot of other podcasts with founders and CEOs of some of our other partners and those have been meant to fill gaps that we've had too, or solve something that wasn't solved for before.

Brian: Yeah, you and Rebecca have had some really cool conversations with John and Maurice from [Blu Dot](#). They started the brand coming out of college about 25 years ago, seeing the things they wanted coming out of school they couldn't afford and the things they could afford, they didn't want. Our relationship with Blu Dot is hitting on all cylinders right now. We love what those guys are up to.

You've also spoken with Mitchell and Bob of course from [Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams](#). We're really seeing their approach to comfort and quality for all resonate in the marketplace. We're cloaking many of their products with our subsidiaries, our brand design text patterns, so you really get the essence of the home, but built for a contract environment with Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams. We're loving what we're up to with each of our partners.

Katie: We'd be remiss if we didn't talk about [West Elm](#) as well. West Elm has been such a great partner to us and it's been really cool to watch how that partnership has evolved, grown, and changed, and some of the cool products we've been able to pump out really quickly with them.

Brian: That's right. It's really a testament to the nimble and agile nature of the West Elm team that really has their finger on the pulse of fashion, but also to the robustness and rigor of our product development team. It's really fun to watch the marriage of the two brands come together where West Elm is designing this collection and we're co-developing it.

Our engineers and our supply chain team is in the room with Paulo and his team when they came up with great products. I know we've spoken a lot about ancillary over the last little bit here, but it's also a collection of primary products for benching and for private offices, because we know that people want that vibe of West Elm throughout the floor plan. That's really the impetus for the West Elm Work Collection. We can talk about some of those cool products here in a sec.

Katie: A little while ago I was able to connect with Paulo Kos, the West Elm Vice President of Work and Contract Design, and we asked him how they stay so connected to what people want and how that translates into the office. Because they really have a huge following, especially on social media, and they're so in touch with their customers, they really have that connection with them. Paulo let us in on how they have such a strong customer connection, and how that translates to the office.

Paulo: I think we have a direct line to the customer, whether it's through their interactions in the stores, their online purchases, or just social media and digital experiences in general. There's so many different ways that we interact with a customer. We can see what they're responding to as they respond to it. These are the same people that work in offices too. We can see what they like in their homes and we're able to bring that into the office as well.

I think we're trying to create spaces that people want to be at, where people feel comfortable and at ease. With more and more people working both from home and the office, there is this spectrum in between the two. So it's not really like work is one place, office is the other, they're connected at all times. For us, it's really interesting to see what kinds of things work in both environments, what things we can take from the home and bring into the office to create a very inviting space.

Brian: Was so glad you guys got a chance to connect with Paulo. Like you said, it's been a busy spring. We launched a half a dozen new products at NeoCon this year. Now we're up to about 40 products together in the [West Elm Work Collection](#), but these new ones, Belle, Brighton, Boardwalk, Greenpoint and Sterling, they're all passed BIFMA testing as well as are backed by the Steelcase warranty.

We think that's a really big deal. People still though, they want a sense of fashion and they want a sense of current, they don't want to throw the sense of permanence away. They don't want to have something that's just disposable and that's why we're so excited about our West Elm Work Collection.

Katie: Right. Well, thanks so much for joining me today, Brian. It was great to talk about West Elm and all of our partners.

Brian: It was really a pleasure to be here. Thanks so much, Katie.

CONCLUSION

Katie: I love how our partners, they span every design aesthetic. We have so many iconic, cool products. There is something for everybody in there, and what's great about all that is beyond these designs, the furniture and the science of it all, there's this operational story, which we haven't even touched today. How do you bring all these companies together, deliver it all in the same truck, at the same time? How do they operationalize all this stuff today?

Rebecca: That's a really good question. It's one that they're going to tackle in the next issue of 360 Magazine. In fact, I think I know the writer of that article, but there's a lot that goes into it, I can tell you. It's taken years of work to figure out how to make that all happen really smoothly. We want everybody to go to steelcase.com/openofficetruth and sign up for the 360 newsletter because then they're going to be the first to know when that magazine comes out.

Katie: Truth. Our fourth episode of The Open Office Truth is coming to an end.

Rebecca: What?

Katie: But there's one piece of this puzzle that we have not covered. And what is it?

Rebecca: I know the answer. It is the thing that the open plan was, in a big part, created for which is collaboration. We had an awesome conversation with the former CEO of Steelcase, Jim Keane, and with Panos Panay, Chief Product Officer from Microsoft, in New York, and we're going to share that conversation about how teamwork is changing and how the open plan has to change to support collaboration.

Katie: Well be sure to subscribe to get that episode sent directly to you and make sure you're rating, reviewing, and sharing these podcasts with people who might also be interested in them. If you're interested in any of the previous episodes or seeing some of the images of the beautiful designs we talked about in this episode-

Rebecca: Please go see the images.

Katie: Go see the pictures of our beautiful partners and their furniture. You can find all that at steelcase.com/openofficetruth. Thanks for joining us today.

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