

15 Reasons Why the Office Matters

Here's why the workplace is more important than ever before.



By Allan Smith, vice president of Global Marketing, Steelcase

After working from home and collaborating at a distance, the importance of the workplace and all that it offers has become clear: An office is more than just a place to work. The workplace drives innovation and growth and fosters culture and sense of community, while providing the tools and resources people need to be truly productive. There are countless benefits to having a physical place that brings an organization's people together. Here are just 15 reasons why the workplace matters.

1. Growth: The post-COVID economy has introduced a season of survival for companies, but the pivot back to growth mode will be here soon. Growth depends on innovation, and that's fueled when creative people come together to collaborate on design sprints, prototyping and testing. At the same time, as leaders shift and change strategies, war rooms and in-person strategy camps provide places to establish new priorities, rally around a vision and set the stage for growth.

2. Innovation: Research shows that successful innovation is place-based and incorporates a variety of business functions, issues and actions from adjacent or connected internal organizations. Workplace design fosters these connections and promotes innovative activities like building models, sharing content, testing prototypes, iterating in real time, collecting annotations and ideas and building on the collective efforts of the team. Two-dimensional technology simply cannot move the needle like three-dimensional interactions can.

3. Culture: Experiences shape behaviors, and behaviors over time is culture. The collective behaviors and norms of an organization, from both leaders and employees, create an ethos distinct to that group of people. The coalescing of diverse points of view, spontaneous hallway meetings and lunch with coworkers provide opportunities for storytelling, relationship building and teaching — things that can't be replicated through a screen.

4. Resilience: COVID-19 has proven resilience is more important than ever. Having a strong cultural foundation and spaces outfitted to promote in-person decision making is key to an organization's ability to shift gears and resources to support unexpected disruptions. Strong, decisive leadership and healthy teams are the backbone to an innovative, flexible and resilient workplace that can bend but not break.

5. Creativity: Creativity is the innate and uniquely human ability to generate ideas, solve difficult problems, identify opportunities and imagine something better. In contrast to a siloed, stilted, solo experience lacking the right tools, creativity flourishes when technology and space come together to support thinking and doing at every stage of the brainstorming process.

6. Collaboration: Collaboration is a key, place-based business behavior with direct ties to growth and innovation. Laddering on each other's ideas, using sticky notes to brainstorm and bringing others along through discussion and whiteboarding helps evolve, distill and solidify new concepts. Body language and other unspoken behaviors provide social cues that can be easily missed when not in person. When every meeting starts and ends on time, there is no room for serendipity.

7. Digital Transformation: If companies weren't thinking about digital transformation before COVID-19, they certainly are now. Organizations have been forced to compete and manage a range of disruptions — internal and external, domestic and global. They're launching new business models, establishing war rooms and equipping team rooms with a bias for face-to-face interactions. Especially in times of stress or crisis, there's no substitute for coming together to quickly address, assess and solve problems.

8. Connection: While working from home provides a certain measure of privacy, it can also lead to isolation, loneliness and depression. Without the support teams and group work provide, people are left feeling disconnected and disengaged. Attrition rises, leaving the company scrambling to identify new talent and quickly fill key roles. At the same time, people who don't interact with others or participate in the workplace risk becoming irrelevant, undervalued or overlooked. These factors don't just impact the individual and his/her career path, they impact a company's ability to fill the talent pipeline, make contingency plans and identify future leaders. Having a place to create meaningful connections is more important than ever.

9. Agility: Agile work helps teams adapt quickly with rapid learning cycles, but this requires both an ecosystem of spaces to support different steps of learning and a level of iteration and collaboration that happens best in person. As ideas evolve and prototypes emerge, the ability to flex and move furniture is critical to helping teams come together in ways that support their fast-paced, ever-changing work.

10. Communication: It's true communication can take place over technology, but we believe something is lost in a constant two-dimensional world. Online platforms, texting and an array of apps designed to support teams is necessary infrastructure, but there are dangers, too. Constant screen or phone use can lead to fatigue, zoning out and even reduced productivity. Staying in touch is vital for forward momentum, and there's no real substitute for face-to-face communication.

11. Attract & Retain: The workplace is a key tool to help organizations attract, retain and engage talent. Not only is space an expression of the company, it sends important cultural signals about what new talent can expect in your organization. Is there choice and control? Are there social spaces to meet with teammates? While technology can help with some elements, like onboarding, it's hard to build community and nurture the kinds of relationships needed to engage talent and strengthen teams.

12. Wellbeing: Spaces make us feel cared for, can promote a sense of calm or communicate the need to get to work. The floorplan of a space can promote movement and offer ergonomic support, and a well-designed space can provide emotional and psychological protection. A strategy to promote employee wellbeing should include attention to space and its impact on people. Leaving "work at work" is a healthy way to create much needed work-life balance.

13. Distributed Work: Working across time zones, intruding into people's homes and managing noise and visual distractions creates presence disparity and challenges a team's ability to focus. Voices are cut off, people inadvertently talk over each other, don't realize they're muted or one person dominates the conversation, unable to detect body language cues or cultural norms. Space provides a richer in-room experience that supports and equalizes teamwork, making the office a collaborative destination.

14. Technology Integration: Immersive ecosystems designed to bring people and technology together in one place not only boost productivity but support new ways of working. Integrated technology and high-performance products provide additive qualities without the clunky features of afterthought spaces with hastily added, non-optimized technology.

15. Change Management: While communicating change can be done over technology, the best change management practices come through modeling new behaviors and reinforcing expectations together. Unplanned hallway conversations, storytelling and time before and after meetings are valuable opportunities to make connections during a time of uncertainty. Demonstrating desired outcomes, learning together and "walking the walk" will always be more powerful than words alone.

A workplace is so much more than the sum of people, technology, architecture & furniture. A well-designed space supports all the different ways we work and brings people and technology together to boost productivity, enhance wellbeing and build trust through face-to-face interactions. As organizations adapt to the changes they face while working through this pandemic, we have an opportunity to bring people together at a time they most need human connections and to help businesses move forward.



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