

Four Macro Shifts Organizations Need to Address

This is a continuation of the Global Report: Changing Expectations and the Future of Work

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People's experiences during the pandemic have caused new and heightened expectations that organizations will need to understand and address when their employees return to the workplace. Prior to the pandemic, expectations had already begun to change, and the crisis has accelerated the need to create better workplaces. The synthesis of Steelcase research identified four macro shifts leaders will need to embrace to create safe and compelling places where people can be engaged and productive.

Design for Safety

It's clear from the research that people's most pressing concerns about returning to the office are about safety. Employees will need to feel their employer is doing everything possible to keep them safe. To be inclusive, organizations will need a holistic safety strategy that considers everyone's safety, regardless of age, abilities or health issues.

Pre-pandemic, when organizations addressed safety in the workplace, their focus was primarily on occupational health and safety standards. Now, they will need to take a multifaceted, systemic approach that prioritizes mitigating the spread of disease. This will require well-documented behavioral protocols, such as mask wearing and social distancing. It will also require organizations to understand how airborne viruses move through an office environment and what happens when exhalations from breathing, talking or laughing encounter different structures and materials.

Even after a vaccine becomes widely available, by addressing these new safety elements organizations will be better prepared for any future crises.

This growing awareness of disease transmission will fuel an ongoing demand for workplaces to help detect, prevent and mitigate the spread of illnesses while also creating an inspiring environment where people will want to work.

New safety elements organizations should consider

Air quality

HVAC systems will need to consider more than just temperature. They will also need to control humidity, filtration, air dilution and air movement. When weather permits, organizations should consider the addition of high-performing outdoor spaces for focus and collaboration, and not just socialization, in addition to helping to reduce risk.

Density

New criteria for density should be adhered to. Flexible floorplans can meet the density requirements during the pandemic and then be adjusted post pandemic, as density requirements change.

Geometry

Desking should be reconfigured to reduce face-to-face orientation where there are no barriers.

Division

If distancing is not possible, research indicates workstation screens measurably reduce the range of forward projection of pathogens and can be a viable part of a safety strategy. Use hard or fabric barriers in locations where forward projection of exhalations are most likely.

Materiality

Cleanability and safety concerns are new performance criteria for materiality. Pure or engineered materials that allow for cleaning and disinfection without degrading over time will become the new standard, as will smooth surfaces that are easy to clean and fabrics that can be cleaned or washed and don't degrade with continuous cleaning. But keep in mind, many materials are available that offer both cleanability and inspiration and don't create a sterile environment.

Sanitation

Make cleaning highly visible so employees are assured that spaces are being cleaned regularly. Make cleaning wipes and sanitizer accessible to everyone everywhere, and ask employees to clean before and after using shared spaces. As a reminder, use signage to promote personal hygiene.

Sensors

Use sensor technology to better understand and control occupancy, cleaning frequency and see where, when and how often spaces are being utilized.

Hands-free

Introduce hands-free devices wherever possible (doors, faucets, room scheduling, etc.).

Feeling safe

Make efforts visible to give people confidence everything is being done to prevent exposure to disease. Also, give people more control over their space, including individual physical boundaries, so they can make personal choices about where they feel most safe.

Design for Productivity

Pre-pandemic, many organizations focused primarily on efficiency when planning their offices and designed spaces for single purposes and modes of work. In addition, some open plan offices were heavily criticized for not supporting people's need for focus.

Moving forward, organizations will benefit from creating multimodal spaces that support collaboration and focus work equally.

The workplace can't simply be a social hub that brings people together with the expectation that individual work will happen at home. Research tells us this is not an inclusive strategy since many people struggle to focus at home. It must provide places where people can work together, as well as places where they can do individual, focused work.

To meet the needs of all types of work, the workplace will need to support:

In-person collaboration

People need high-performing spaces that provide access to the tools and technology they need to collaborate effectively. They also need to be able to quickly switch between individual and group tasks. It's the ebb and flow between these two modes of work that results in innovation.

Virtual collaboration

The need to accommodate remote participation will become the norm, as people travel less and some team members continue to work from home regularly. People will need access to personal spaces that minimize disruptions from video meetings and large-scale collaboration devices to allow for more natural and equal participation.

Privacy

Prior to the pandemic, people were very vocal about the lack of privacy in open plan offices. While working from home has given some people the privacy they desperately needed to get work done, others have continued to struggle — unable to get away from other activities happening in their home. The workplace will need to provide individual and group spaces where people can control visual, acoustical and territorial privacy.

Movement

Studies prove movement enhances creative ideation and allows for more equal participation. When people can physically move around in collaboration spaces and have the ability to move tools such as whiteboards, tackable boards or digital devices, they are better able to solve complex problems.

Design to Inspire Community

For many years, organizations have realized the power an aesthetically pleasing workplace can have to attract and retain talent.

But moving forward, the workplace will also need to do a better job at inspiring people and building a strong community. It will have to provide the touches of humanity and warmth people are seeking to counter safety precautions organizations have needed to deploy.

Working from home has been an isolating and lonely experience for many people, and the need for community has never been more critical.

According to the research, people say the top two reasons they want to return to the office is to see work friends and interact with teammates, citing video meetings are not enough to overcome loneliness and isolation. They also want the workplace to help them feel a sense of belonging and give them access to a range of inspiring workspaces.

Organizations will need to rethink the purpose of the office from simply a place to work to becoming the infrastructure for building social capital and fostering a sense of purpose and belonging.

Spaces will have to be designed to support:

Vitality

While design elements will have to respect physical distancing requirements, the overall vibe and atmosphere of the workplace needs to create positive energy and be vibrant.

Inclusivity

The workplace will need to consider people's diverse needs and workstyles (physical, neurodiverse, introvert vs. extrovert, etc.), as well as support distributed work, as more people have the ability to work remotely.

Trust

Communication between employees and leaders has never been more critical. The workplace will need to foster transparency and make leaders more visible and accessible.

Resilience

Workplaces will need to communicate to people that change and adaptation are key elements of their organization's culture and they are ready to adapt to any future crises.

Environmental and social impact

People want to feel their organization shares their values. Commitments to the environment, a belief in social responsibility and support of strong governance principles (ESG) will impact priorities and actions.

Design for Flexibility

The pre-pandemic office was based on long-standing paradigms with spaces that were mostly fixed and designed for permanence. But this approach is problematic; these spaces cannot adapt easily when conditions change, such as when a pandemic happens or new ways of working emerge.

Going forward, organizations need to design spaces that can be easily adapted, especially as more flexible work policies are implemented.

The workplace must be designed to provide individuals and teams greater control over their environment so they can change it on demand.

When people return to the office, they will expect greater control, more choices, and access to the right tools and technology that will help them be more engaged and productive.

To allow for greater flexibility, the workplace will need to be:

Multi-use

Flexible architectural elements, rather than permanent walls, allow building interiors to support a greater variety of uses.

Multimodal

Maximize real estate by designing spaces to support more than one mode of work. For example, a cafe can also become a high-performance collaboration space and a training room can be transformed into a meeting space for large team functions.

Movable

Furnishings that easily move, such as mobile whiteboards, digital displays, freestanding privacy screens, and tables or desks on casters allow spaces to expand and contract to support distancing and accommodate individuals and groups of all sizes.

Designing a Better Work Experience

When we consider what people need, and how the work experience is shifting moving forward — old planning paradigms will need to change. Before the pandemic, designers were asked to create spaces that attracted the best talent, supported greater collaboration and maximized efficiency — now they'll need to solve for an even more diverse set of needs.

Steelcase designers have identified a new set of design principles to create safe and compelling environments that will provide a better work experience. A new workplace design approach will include these principles:

Me + We

The workplace needs to equally support the need for teamwork (“we”) and the needs of individual (“me”) work, recognizing that both modes of work are critical to the creative process.

Fixed to Fluid

Offices have historically been built for permanence, with architecture and furnishings that are fixed and difficult to change. To be more resilient, spaces will be designed for greater flexibility and mobility.

Open + Enclosed

People who often did individual work in more dense, open spaces desire more enclosure or shielding to control privacy and safety. Teams who frequently worked in enclosed conference rooms will want more options for open settings both for a sense of safety and flexibility.

Braiding Digital + Physical

Teams will need spaces and technology to create inclusive experiences for remote and physically present team members. Smart, sensing technologies need to be embedded in the infrastructure to support increasingly data-driven and AI-driven experiences.

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Five Critical Elements

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Employee expectations have changed. Is your workplace ready?

People want a fundamentally better work experience. A vast majority expect a hybrid approach with more flexibility in where and how they will work. It's time to reinvent the workplace to meet people's new needs and expectations.