Insider
[In an era of broken office design, experts reveal how to create spaces workers will want to return to](#)
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- COVID-19 revealed many flaws in office designs, both from a health and productivity standpoint.

- Experts predict that in the long term, offices will mainly be spaces for collaboration.

- Significant changes like creating activity-based workspaces and incorporating nature will be needed.

The office has gone through dramatic transformations over the past several decades.

Once upon a time, cubicles and Xerox machines were the norm. Many years later, those were replaced with open offices and laptops.

Of course, it wasn't long before the flaws of the open-office model became apparent. Research shows that they tend to make workers more stressed and exhausted due to the lack of privacy and constant distractions. A 2013 Stockholm University study also revealed that those who worked in open offices were more likely to take sick leave than those who had their own office due to the increased risk of infection.

This risk forced many companies to send their staff home when COVID-19 became a threat. But as workers continued to work from home into this year, awareness increased about the limitations of modern office structure from both a productivity and health standpoint.

These insights have led companies to rethink the role of the office. And many business leaders, architects, and designers predict that it will primarily function as a place of collaboration in the future. They spoke to Insider about what that means in practice and what companies need to do to get it right.
The limitations of a pre-pandemic office

The open-office trend started in Silicon Valley during the dot-com boom. Not long after, much of corporate America followed.

What was intended to be a structure that encouraged collaboration and productivity turned into a subject of ire for many workers. But despite an abundance of research pointing to the open office's failure to create a collaborative environment, companies continued to adopt the structure — primarily because it's cost-effective.

The pre-pandemic modern office also came with elements that were problematic from a health standpoint. Lack of ventilation and insufficient access to nature and daylight have all negatively affected people's physical and mental health.

"You really want to have people that are thriving," said Joanna Frank, the founder and CEO of Center For Active Design, a nonprofit that uses design in pursuit of fostering healthy and engaged communities. And a person's health and ability to thrive are directly correlated to an organization's financial ability to thrive, Frank added.
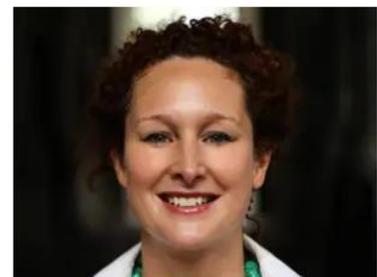
Joanna Frank. Courtesy of Joanna Frank

Designing for an activity-based workspace

Now more than ever workers expect to have more autonomy around when and where they work. According to a 2021 survey by the World Economic Forum, 66% of employees believed companies should allow

flexible work, and 30% expressed that they would look for another job if they were required to go back to the office.

Designing for this reality means that companies should be "always moving toward activity-based design," said Lise Newman, director of workplace practice at SmithGroup, an integrated design firm with 15 offices across the US and China.

<mark>Frank agreed, saying that companies need to design with the "understanding that you need different physical spaces to support those different types of work."</mark>

That's likely to translate to more booths, pods, and cafe-like environments with seating arrangements similar to coffee shops. "The work cafe will serve two purposes — socialization and relationship building — but it will also serve as overflow seating on the days when 30% of the people are typically there, or on Fridays everyone is going to be there," Newman said.

Incorporating individual workspaces

Despite being of the view that the office will be a primarily collaborative space, Newman doesn't believe that individual spaces will go away any time soon. After all, one of the many inequities that the pandemic has brought to the forefront is that not everyone can transform their home into a safe and productive working environment.

There are also a "subset of employees that would prefer to do their work in the office than at home," Newman said. "Gen Z, in particular, are the ones that want to build relationships the most, and they want to be visibly present."

From a design standpoint, that means introducing individual rooms and enclaves rather than partitioned tables and cubicles. One of the themes that Newman consistently hears from clients is that many still want the ability to focus in the office but that the "old office wasn't cutting it."

Making nature and outdoors part of design

There's numerous pieces of research that illustrate the link between nature and creativity.

A 2012 study found that hikers — after spending four days on the trail — performed 50% better on a "creativity problem-solving task" than those who weren't exposed to nature. Being in nature allows them to rest their prefrontal cortex, the researchers found, which allows creativity to flourish.

Businesses can tap into this benefit in the workplace, too, by incorporating more greenery into their office design. Newman said she's heard from clients that they would like their office space to open onto a terrace, but with Wi-Fi, monitors, and working spaces.

Incorporating health tools and tech

Air quality is another element that has a significant effect on workers' productivity and creativity.

In a 2016 study, researchers from Harvard University and Syracuse University found that employees who worked in offices with improved ventilation and reduced carbon dioxide levels and emissions performed 61% better on cognitive tasks than those who worked in standard building conditions.

<mark>According to Frank, before the pandemic, healthy buildings were generally seen as "nice to have." From a design standpoint, they require businesses to invest in the right technology. Frank said that tools allowing for temperature control and shading would be helpful for businesses and employees.</mark>

<mark>Transparency around quality is also critical, and Frank said employers should tell employees specifically what is happening in the workspace.</mark>

Inspiring creativity

In a world where the office is no longer the default place of work — and where collaboration is possible with just an internet connection and a computer screen — businesses also need to think of designing offices that make people want to come in.

David Schwarz, a partner at the design agency Hush, said the workplace should be "the iconography of a company culture and its mission and vision. You see that from Apple's circular rings, Steve Jobs sending a particular signal, and you see that in many other places."

Schwarz gives the metaphor of a soccer stadium or a well-designed conference hub. "You enter and you're focused on a big clear gesture, " he said.

"It can be a flag in a stadium, or a certain type of light and window or architectural element that's so clearly put there," he added. "The programmatic element should beg interaction and collaboration. It shouldn't be something to observe without any kind of motivation. It should be something that's a touchstone where people gather."

After all, "collaboration doesn't go without inspiration," Schwarz said. And the workplace has been, and should continue to be, the "touchstone for that inspiration."