The WorkLab Guide

How to Make In-person Time Count

Leaders want to see people on-site, but employees don't know when and why to come in. Here's how to make the most of your time together.

Illustration by David Sparshott

This guide covers how to make the most of your in-person time.

In-person time is essential in a hybrid model. But leaders must balance stewardship of the organization with employees' need for flexibility.

- That means intentionally defining the role of in-person collaboration and creating a program for where and why to come together.

The crux: Employees need clear guidance on how to balance remote and in-person in a hybrid world. In the 2022 Work Trend Index report, 38 percent of employees said their biggest hybrid-work challenge is knowing when and why to come in to the office.

Here's your guide to intentionally redefining what in-person time is for and making the most of in-person time together.

A note on the WorkLab Guides:

Hybrid work is a work in progress—and no one has all the answers. At Microsoft, we take a learn-it-all approach, looking to the data and research where we can; talking to our customers; and learning from our own employees as well. We've informed these guides with as much data and research as possible. But there's still much to learn—and we're committed to share new insights and discoveries as we go.

Make the Most of Time in the Office: Five Use Cases

Microsoft chairman and CEO Satya Nadella has said that the office is the original collaboration tool. But it should be used intentionally and specifically. These five critical "use cases" point the way.

1. Team Building and Bonding

Connections between team members effect productivity, creativity and innovation, and wellbeing. Strengthen those bonds by spending time together in the same place.

What leaders can do:

- Design on-sites that no one at the company wants to miss, like opportunities for professional development and in-person time with sought-after speakers.
- Build in-person rituals that connect people and teams—a weekly taco lunch, an annual concert.

What managers can do:

- Make sure to balance on-site planning and brainstorming with activities that build trust and encourage collaboration—like an escape room or a cooking class.

What individuals can do:

- Work with your manager and collaborators to reschedule deadlines and non-urgent meetings so you can focus on connection and collaboration.

2. Re-establishing "Weak Ties"

People's connections to "weak ties"—those contacts at the outer rings of our networks—were often lost in remote work. The office is often the best place to strengthen those kinds of relationships.

What leaders can do:

- Schedule regular in-person events that include cross-org teams and departments.
- Use tools like Viva Insights, which can help you identify broad collaboration patterns across the organization.

What managers can do:

- Before an on-site, use one-on-one connects to help individuals develop a network plan they can use to prioritize in-person time.

What individuals can do:

- Build back connections with the "five more" approach: every time you make a new contact, ask them for a list of five more people you should meet.

3. Reconnecting People to Mission and Culture

The workplace is the physical embodiment of company culture—it's particularly important for new hires to experience this firsthand.

What leaders can do:

- Redesign meeting spaces to optimize the workplace for hybrid collaboration. (The 2022 Work Trend Index reported that 54 percent of leaders are currently redesigning meeting spaces for hybrid work, or plan to in the year ahead.)

What managers can do:

- "Re-onboard" those new hires you brought on during the pandemic—especially remote employees or those new to the workforce—by providing small group tours and opportunities for informal connections.
- Make sure all new hires have an onboarding buddy.

What individuals can do:

- Reserve time to explore the office on your own and meet with on-site experts—a representative from the operations team, a company librarian—who can help you make the most of your time.

Designing a Hybrid On-site
In-person days are great for bringing local employees together. But in a world where, according to LinkedIn, one in six job postings is open to remote employees, it's important to bring everyone together a few times a year. Here's how to design a hybrid on-site.

Before the on-site:

1. **Schedule well in advance** so hybrid employees can plan to travel or commute and solve potential conflicts like childcare or planned personal activities.
2. **Ask people to prioritize in-person attendance**, and tell them why. Include assets that will help people plan their trip.
3. **Include an agenda** that communicates how in-person time will be used. If people know you're including a coffee and pastry break mid-meeting, that helps communicate the value of attending in person.
4. **Schedule social and networking time during working hours.** An optional post-session happy hour is fine too, but prioritizing these activities during working hours reinforces the importance of coming together.

4. 1:1 Connects

Sensitive conversations can benefit from being physically together. A 2021 survey by Glint and LinkedIn Market Research showed that 48 percent of employees prefer to give or receive feedback in person.

What leaders can do:

- Allow managers to personalize individual feedback systems—one employee may thrive with frequent, formal reviews while another may prefer a walking meeting or a check-in over lunch.

What managers can do:

- In-person syncs are a great time to discuss career development, team dynamics, and personal wellbeing. Consider leaving laptops behind and go for a stroll or find a relaxing nook.

What individuals can do:

- Make the most of your time with leaders and managers by thinking through questions and challenges you'd like to cover.
- Prioritize in-person check-ins for sensitive subjects or areas that you feel require more context.

During the on-site:

1. **Follow best practices for hybrid meetings even when you're prioritizing in-person**. Some people will inevitably need to attend remotely or catch up later.
2. **Frequently encourage all attendees to participate**—a lively, inclusive gathering communicates the value of in-person time.
3. **Pick the right space and equipment.** A few chairs and couches and huddle areas in open collaboration spaces give people the flexibility to jump up and sketch out their inspiration on a whiteboard or easel. Modular furniture can be moved aside for team-building activities like hackathons.

After the on-site:

1. **Send out the meeting recap,** and be sure to thank everyone for prioritizing the on-site. Include highlights that communicate the value of the time together.
2. **Follow up with a poll or survey** to gather feedback on how the on-site went and collect ideas on how to improve on-site meetings in the future.

5. Brainstorming

Hybrid brainstorming is useful, but the classic free-form whiteboarding session benefits from the immediacy of being together in person.

What leaders can do:

- Stage day-long sessions for the whole team to spitball about long-range goals, overlooked opportunities, and potential obstacles.

What managers can do:

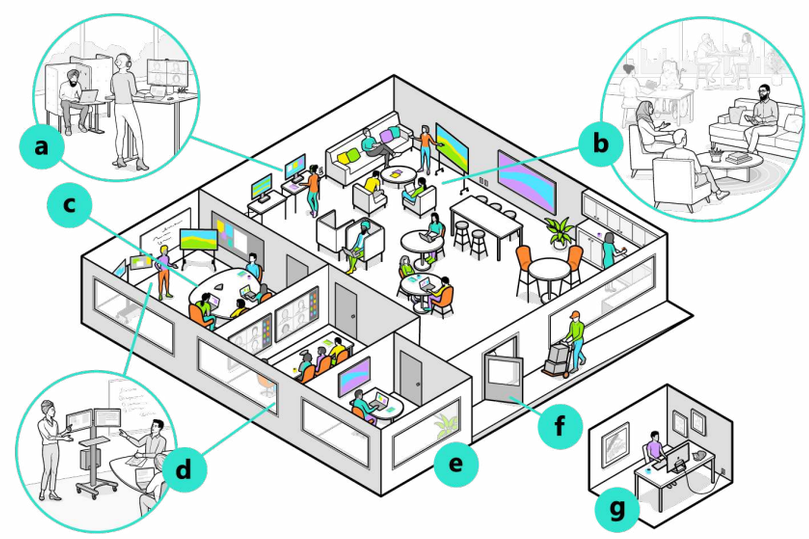
- Stress that brainstorming sessions are another instance where decisions to come in aren't just about individual needs but the needs of the group.

What individuals can do:

- Come prepared, stay focused, and make sure other tasks and deadlines aren't taking up mental bandwidth for the duration of this session.

An Office Designed for Hybrid and In-person Work

From large collaboration spaces to smaller conference rooms outfitted with the right technology, a few design updates can make office spaces ideal for the new ways we work.



(a) Flexible furniture (b) Open collaboration spaces (c) Guitar-pick shaped table (d) Hybrid-optimized conference rooms (e) Ample focus rooms (f) Touchless doors (g) Hybrid-first technology

Illustration by Brown Bird Design

Experimenting with On-site Team Time

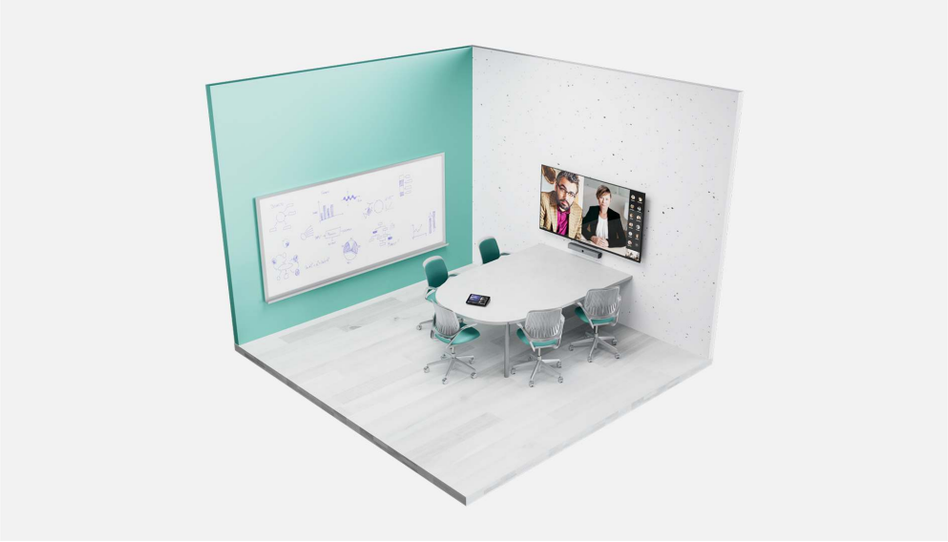
Research shows that just 28 percent of companies have implemented agreements between managers and employees on when to come in. (To help, we open-sourced Microsoft's approach to creating them.)

- Most teams will need to experiment, and keep experimenting, to find the model that works best for them.

> ### Three in-person experiments to try with your team:
>
> - **Two days in the office per week,** with one "team" day optimized for team bonding, and one "people" day optimized for one-on-one connections between teammates and broader networks.
> - **A team on-site day followed by a meeting-free workday or work block.** This model can help people focus their on-site time on team building, collaboration, and connection since they know they'll be able to catch up the day after.
> - **Several on-site days, with in-person meetings built around core hours** (say, 10 to 2) so that people can avoid rush hour and schedule their workday around school pickup and other commitments.

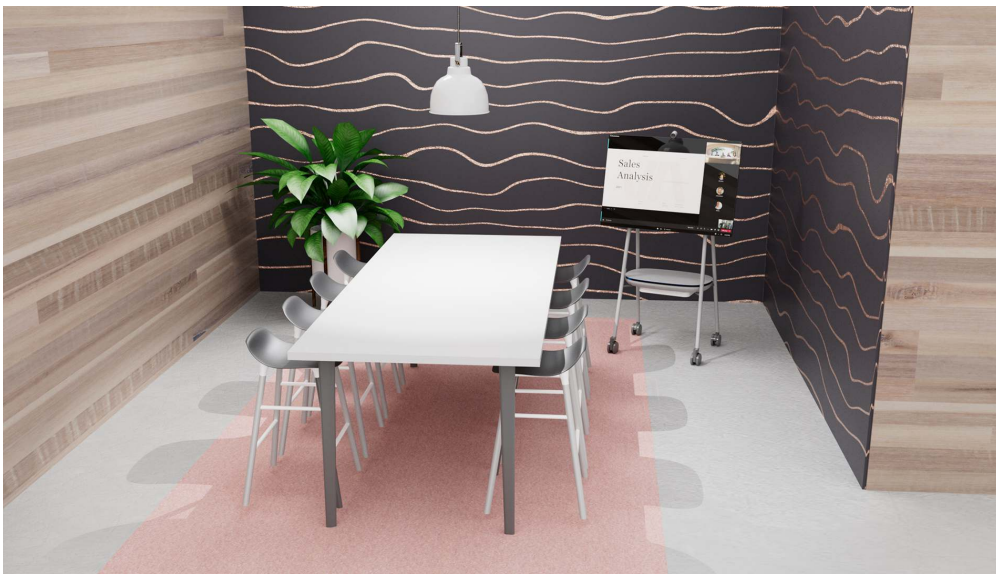
The Right Tech for the Right Room

Different types of rooms require different technology setups.



Small Conference Room: 2 displays; 1 integrated camera / speaker / mic; 1 content camera

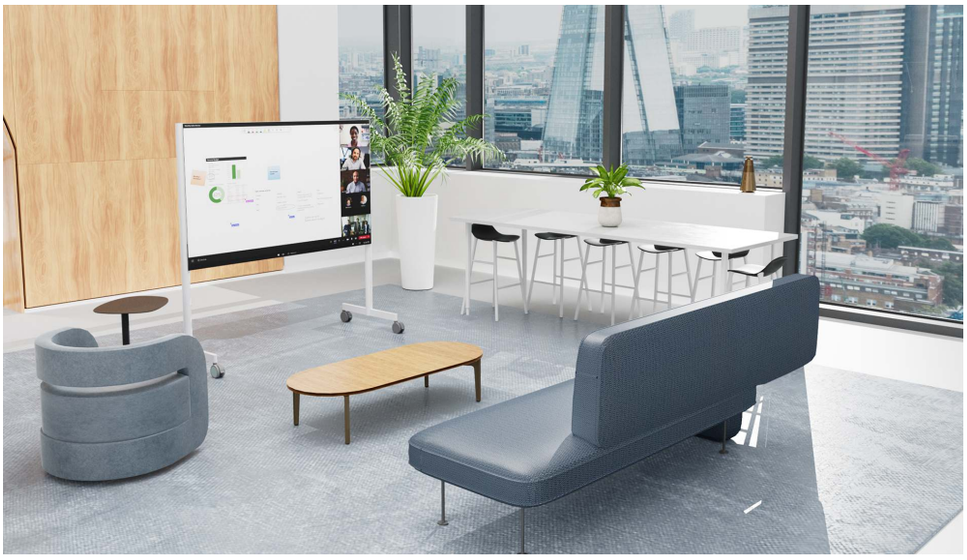
Medium Conference Room: 2 displays; 1 camera, 1 content camera; 2 speakers, mics



Focus room: Bring your own device, or 1 display; 1 integrated camera / speaker / mic

Large Conference Room: 1 4K projector; 1 camera, ceiling mounted speakers, and mic; 1 Surface Hub 2S, or 1 content camera

Enhanced Meeting Room: 1 ultra-wide projector; 1 integrated camera / speaker / mic; 1 Surface Hub 2S



Open Collaboration Space: 1 Surface Hub 2S

Jump-start Your Time in the Office

Here are three reasons people aren't coming in, and how to address each.

People want control over where, how, and when they work

In the 2022 Work Trend Index, 51 percent of global employees said they were considering going hybrid in the year ahead. And nearly half of today's employees are millennials or Gen Zers who've spent their formative professional years in a flexible, digital-first, hybrid setting.

Leaders need to show individuals how their in-person time contributes to the greater good.

- **Recommend, rather than enforce, in-person time.** Leaders need to build a culture where people want to come in to support their team. If they feel forced, top talent will eventually opt for a more flexible option elsewhere.

- **Be clear about when and why you're asking people to attend an event in person,** and include a social element that offers both individual and organizational benefit.

Commuting is stressful and time consuming

In a 2021 survey of Microsoft employees, 61 percent said their primary reason to work from home was skipping the commute.

Communicating the value of in-person goes a long way in making travel time "worth it." Some other ways to help:

- **Encourage managers and individuals to keep flexible hours** that allow everyone to avoid rush hour and help make travel time more efficient.

- **Offer public transportation discounts** or other commuter perks—it's good for the environment and your employees. Carpooling can be another good way to help lower carbon footprints and create new bonds.

- **Remind employees that a commute can play a positive role in work-life balance** by providing liminal time in which to shift into and out of work mode. (That time is so valuable that Microsoft researchers developed a virtual commute to try to recreate the experience for remote and hybrid workers.)

People feel that they get more focused work done at home

In the 2021 Work Trend Index, 58 percent of people cited "focused work" as a reason they wanted to work in the office, but the same number cited "focused work" as the reason they wanted to work from home. Leaders need to find a way to accommodate both.

- **Equip the office with small focus rooms** where people can take a quiet meeting or catch up on heads-down work.
- **Invest in on-sites.** In a culture where teams are valued, people are more likely to understand that creating connection is as important as focused work—and they need to make time for both.
- **Give people autonomy over their schedule** so they can follow a meeting-heavy on-site day with a meeting-free day from whatever location works best for them.

What Else?

Be accessible:
Accessibility upgrades benefit every employee.

- Doors that open automatically help those who need to lug heavy boxes or are recovering from an injury, as well as people with permanent mobility impairments.
- Adjustable desks, spread-out spaces, and low-slung seating ensure that people using wheelchairs can easily navigate an office; they also increase comfort and safety for everyone.

Encourage people to cross paths:
Random encounters can catalyze collaboration.

- One study found that academics are 20 to 30 percent more likely to get a grant for every 100 feet of additional overlap in common paths they travel in the office.
- Another study found that sharing a building increases collaboration. So create central paths where people can intersect and interact.

Encourage people to take it outdoors:
If your company has grounds or green space, take advantage of it, and encourage people to as well.

- Microsoft offers a series of outdoor options—themed conference rooms, Wi-Fi–enabled seating areas, and "treehouse" spaces—to encourage movement and spur inspiration.
- Your teams could benefit from an outdoor meeting in an office zen garden or by a fountain or water feature, or even just a weekly meeting that takes place in a nearby park.

Takeaway

By making in-person time productive, essential, and even fun, leaders can encourage their teams to return to the office space to the benefit of all.