

Places to belong: Practical considerations for creating inclusive and impactful places of work

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ABSTRACT

This paper is designed to help corporate real estate (CRE) leaders create spaces that improve employee experiences and the impact of their workplace on organisational outcomes. With heightened interest in the role of post-pandemic corporate offices, home workspaces, flex spaces and other environments for supporting and connecting employees, now is an opportune time for CRE leaders to elevate the role of their workplace strategy by focusing on belonging. The paper draws upon years of research and exploration conducted by MillerKnoll brands and our customers. If desired, the foundational elements listed within it can be directly imported into an organisation's existing workplace strategy



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while using this paper as a guide and catalyst to help team members, consultants and end users better understand the impact of the workplace in strengthening community, promoting a positive culture, and ensuring equitable opportunities for all employees to succeed.

Keywords: *diversity, equity, belonging, inclusive design, hybrid work, workplace strategy*

INTRODUCTION

For many within the corporate real estate (CRE) world, the concept of workplace inclusion has implied a duty of compliance to accommodate the special needs of a few within office spaces. The topic is, however, broader and far more consequential. The workplace can be a powerful tool in helping to create a sense of belonging through improved work experiences for the individuals that form highly diverse communities within organisations — and it should be recognised that community is the foundation of how organisations function.

Diversity, inclusion, belonging: these words are often used interchangeably, but they have distinct meanings. ‘Diversity is a fact, inclusion is a behavior, but belonging is the emotional outcome that people want in their organisation. What’s fuelling it is a desire to have a sense of purpose at work and a sense of community’, Christianne Garofalo, head of the Diversity & Inclusion Practice at the global executive search firm Heidrick & Struggles shared with the *Washington Post* in 2019.¹

CRE teams have the power and opportunity to set new goals and higher standards for how their work can have a positive impact on organisations, elevating the role of their contributions while moving beyond the mentality that CRE teams are primarily asset managers. By creating workplaces that reinforce belonging, they unlock the potential of an organisation’s most important investment:

its people. These practical workplace interventions can also help organisations improve performance on environmental, social governance (ESG) measures.

Leading organisations recognise that raising the bar on ESG targets is not only the right thing to do, but also increasingly expected by investors, clients, customers and employees alike. By introducing a set of guiding principles into their workplace strategies and collaborating with partners throughout and beyond their organisations, CRE leaders can advance their strategic impact and the value of their team’s work moving forward. With a global re-evaluation of ‘post-pandemic’ working underway, now is the time for CRE teams to act.

OPPORTUNE TIMING

As a result of roughly two years of working as fully distributed teams due to the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations are amid a broad re-evaluation of their places of work and the role of specific work locations including corporate offices, home workspaces and co-working locations. Gone are previous assumptions that work must be done within the office, that employees cannot be productive or collaborate while working remotely, and that attendance is an acceptable foundation for gauging the performance of employees.

At the same time, there is a heightened understanding of people’s need for belonging. Recently, Professor John A. Powell, who leads the Othering and Belonging Institute at University of California Berkeley, shared with the listeners of Herman Miller’s ‘Looking Forward’ podcast that the political and social divisions within our culture, combined with the speed of change happening in the world, has left many people feeling anxious about their sense of belonging. He shares:

‘The pandemic showed us how profoundly connected we were. Ground all

the planes, close the doors, build walls, and the virus just keeps spreading. So, I think the challenges of the world demand that we get our act together as all people (on) belonging.²

While these changes in our work and social conditions may be confusing or even threatening for some CRE teams, we believe that now is an opportune time to redefine the concept and value of the workplace. Offices must find their unique value within a continuum of places where work should be supported, and their designs should move beyond traditional planning approaches that assume all work must be done there. When the rigid expectation of a uniform desk for each person is removed, it frees up time, space and money to be reinvested in a broader range of meaningfully varied work experiences that help to connect communities and deliver greater value over time. This new approach and reallocation of resources can provide real metrics that are beneficial in ESG reporting, indicating how an organisation is responsibly managing resources, consuming less or improving support for underrepresented groups.

As a founding member of Future Forum,³ a research-based consortium that includes Slack, Boston Consulting Group, Management Leadership for Tomorrow and MillerKnoll, we have been tracking shifts in employee sentiment and organisational support of work since the beginning of the pandemic. With 58 per cent of over 10,000 workers surveyed across six countries already splitting their time between locations and a majority of large organisations intending to support hybrid working, we must begin with the understanding that ‘office’ and ‘workplace’ are no longer synonymous, and the opportunity to promote inclusion and belonging must be considered within the context of flexible working, and in partnership with other organisational leaders in information technology (IT), legal and

— perhaps most importantly — human resources (HR).

ESTABLISHING PARTNERSHIP WITH HR

As organisations rethink their planned support for work in the future, it is becoming clear to many HR leaders that workplace experience is a subset of the broader employee experience. As such, their interest in connecting the experiences that people have within and beyond the walls of the office has greatly increased, and with it the opportunity to connect workplace strategy to larger talent-related outcomes has also increased.⁴ In some organisations this has resulted in a shift for CRE leaders who may now report into HR instead of finance or other functions,⁵ but for most CRE leaders it simply means a new opportunity to partner more closely with HR as collaborators to jointly improve workplace experiences for employees.

For those organisations that have most fully embraced hybrid working, the link between supporting more flexibility in where and when work happens and their diversity, inclusion and belonging goals is becoming clearer. Groups such as working parents and people of colour have expressed a stronger desire to work more flexibly than non-parents and white knowledge workers (see Figure 1), and in the midst of ‘the Great Resignation’, organisations are actively seeking ways to deliver it.

As organisations better understand these needs, it is becoming clear that traditional office-first approaches to working and standard practices of workplace design have favoured the needs of those in control, typically white men, while overlooking many people’s needs.⁶ Unless these approaches are corrected, offices will be viewed as increasingly less desirable places for underrepresented groups to work (see Figure 2), hindering the diversity and inclusion goals of organisations and exacerbating power imbalances based

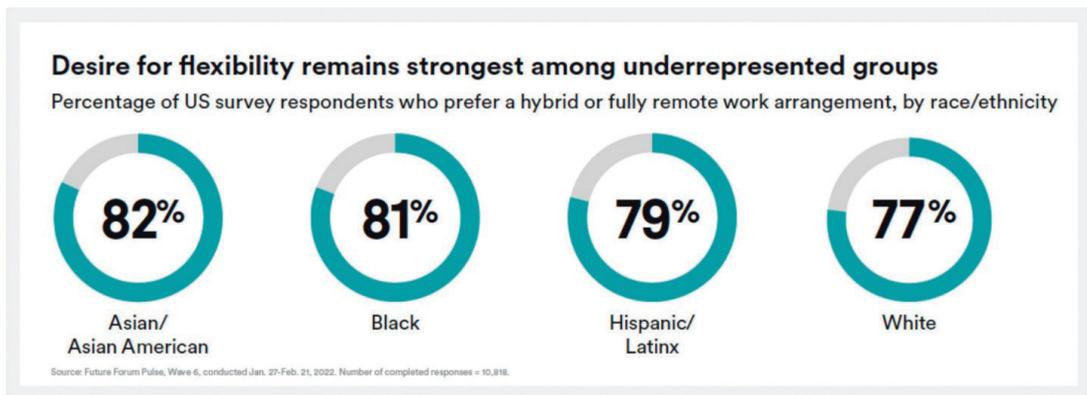


Figure 1 Desire for flexibility remains strongest among underrepresented groups

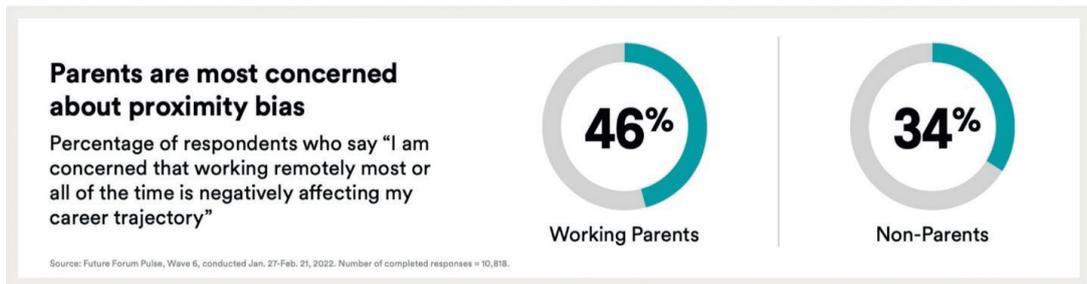


Figure 2 Parents are most concerned about proximity bias

upon proximity bias, which has become the top concern among executives about hybrid working.⁷ These disconnects negatively affect the collective feeling of belonging within organisations, ultimately threatening their performance, ability to recruit and retain talent and long-term viability.

But the good news is that a proactive approach to rethinking workplace strategy can flip this narrative, enabling CRE leaders to be active contributors towards a more inclusive future. As a means of promoting belonging and inclusion, we recommend the following concepts as foundational elements of future workplace strategies.

FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS

Building universal goals

We recognise that the topics of diversity, inclusion and belonging can feel controversial

for some and at times risk alienating critical collaborators. For that reason, many within the business world have unfortunately steered clear of elevating these conversations, despite their importance.

To overcome this, diversity and inclusion professionals have increasingly used the concept of ‘targeted universalism’ to help build bridges and improve alignment, and we believe that the concept can also be effectively applied in shaping workplace strategy. In essence, it involves setting universal goals for all employees to be achieved through targeted practices.

The Othering and Belonging Institute at University of California Berkley describes targeted universalism in this way:

“Targeted universalism means setting universal goals pursued by targeted processes to achieve those goals. Within a targeted universalism framework, universal goals

are established for all groups concerned. The strategies developed to achieve those goals are targeted, based upon how different groups are situated within structures, culture, and across geographies to obtain the universal goal. Targeted universalism is goal oriented, and the processes are directed in service of the explicit, universal goal.⁸

In other words, instead of starting with the unique challenges of a particular group while ignoring the needs of others, the practice begins by aligning on important aspirational goals that are shared by all. Then, organisations can look at the unique challenges that must be overcome by specific groups in order to enjoy that standard of experience.

For CRE teams, this practice begins with setting and documenting universal workplace experience goals within their strategies for all employees. Examples could include:

- Employees should enjoy safe places of work that support their physical, social and cognitive well-being;
- Employees should feel that they are valued members of a community and enjoy spaces that welcome them and connect them with others;
- Employees should have access to spaces offering natural light, good indoor air quality and nutritious food;
- Employees should have access to places that comfortably support times of concentration and focus;
- Employees should have access to technology that supports their individual and group work;
- Employees should have knowledge of, and be able to easily navigate to, spaces that support their various work activities.

To further unpack this concept, let us focus on the last one as an example.

Why is it important for an employee to be able to easily navigate to a space that

suits their needs? Because not doing so may cause them to feel disoriented and frustrated, diminishing their productivity or it may hinder their ability to find the location of a meeting before it begins. These experiences send subtle yet lasting signals that they do not belong.

And how might different people need support in finding the right space? For a new employee, it may require providing them with a map of locations unfamiliar to them. For an employee who uses a wheelchair, it may require providing them with a ramp instead of stairs. For an employee who speaks English as a second language, it may require using iconography instead of words on hallway signage. But the key to creating equitable and inclusive experiences for everyone is to set the standard and evaluate it through various lenses.

It may seem overwhelming to establish such a list, but this process is not one-and-done. It is a journey that should develop over time, becoming a core responsibility of the workplace strategy/experience team and be pursued through a participatory design process that includes input from diverse user groups before and after project completion. Communities grow and change just like the individual people that comprise them; the workplaces that support them should be just as dynamic.

Equity through choice

Equity is another important consideration for building belonging. It is a function of diversity and inclusion initiatives, addressing how those efforts are advanced successfully. Equity is different from equality. In the context of the workplace, equality might involve providing each person with the same space, such as a standard desk layout, whereas equity would consider the broad range of unique needs within a group and instead provide access to a variety of spaces that enable each person an opportunity to be successful.

Leading into the pandemic, organisations generally viewed their employees as either ‘office workers’ or ‘remote workers’ and the distinction was largely based upon their role and their geography. While today most organisations have moved beyond this binary view of working location, many still cling to the belief that a person’s role indicates where they will do their best work. That is not the case. The range of factors affecting a person’s productivity is far greater than is often understood and involves factors beyond work. As an example, if we were to study a group of employees and ask, ‘Where will they do their best work next Tuesday?’, what factors would we need to consider?

In terms of their work, we would want to understand the nature of their tasks on that day, their team dynamics, their use of technology, their external collaborators and their personal work styles. But beyond that, we would need to understand if they had any unique physical, sensory or cognitive needs. We would need to understand their state of mind, their homelife situation, their responsibilities as a caregiver, their personal travel schedule, the strength of their Wi-Fi at home and a host of other factors.

We would justifiably conclude that we cannot determine their best location, particularly since those factors may change on a daily or weekly basis. Only the employee themselves, if equipped and empowered to do so, can choose the most productive and healthy place for them to accomplish their work on a given day or in a given hour. As a result, for organisations to provide equitable opportunities for employees to succeed, they must provide them with a well-curated choice of locations. This can include choices within a corporate facility or across a range of corporate facilities, but also beyond them to include working from home and elsewhere.

In practical terms, this means moving away from offices featuring generic floorplans filled with rows of open desks and

basic conference rooms towards a workplace design that offers greater variety. That variety should prioritise experiences that are not well served when working from home or elsewhere, including spaces for community interaction and team immersion, as well as individual focus and reflection. In this way, they complement experiences working from home, which also deserves consideration. While home workspaces have traditionally been viewed as outside of the remit of CRE, for organisations that intend to adopt hybrid working, creating purposeful strategies to support equitable and productive work from home (WFH) experiences — likely 20–60 per cent of an employee’s week — is critical.

Furthermore, organisations should assume that the work itself will continue to become digitalised and untethered from specific locations. This consideration is a prime opportunity for collaborating with IT teams; we need to increase use of technology that does not differentiate between remote and collocated workers. By enabling work content and conversations to live in the cloud, equitable access for all is ensured, and the nature of our physical workspaces becomes focused on how to help people connect with each other, either virtually or in person, and supporting the use of mobile technologies, which have supplanted resident technologies as people’s primary tools.

Inclusion through design

Beyond setting universal goals and ensuring equity through choice, the design of physical workplaces is an important priority as it can either promote or hinder inclusion. The process by which spaces can encourage inclusion, known as inclusive design, is a participatory one that helps inform a design with specific constraints that yield better solutions for all. While efforts to improve inclusion are not new, it is time for organisations to broaden their view of the practice and to use it as a fundamental lens through which all design is assessed. The practice can

address a much broader range of needs than physical disabilities, and it can be applied well beyond building architecture to extend to furniture planning, wayfinding, audio-visual technology, the use of textiles and wallcoverings and beyond.

At its core, inclusive design considers all variations of the human condition as natural. It acknowledges that no person is average, opening the door to consider the unique circumstances of all an organisation's employees. These include physical, neurological and sensory processing differences, as well as other needs related but not limited to individual workstyle, gender, language, sexual orientation, personality type, racial and ethnic backgrounds.

As an example, data analytics organisation FiveThirtyEight featured an article in 2021,⁹ based upon the Future Forum Pulse Survey findings, highlighting how people of colour have preferred working remotely due to the demands of code switching (the need to modulate modes of interaction to fit in with multiple groups) within the office. While this is a complex topic that requires a multifaceted solution, providing offices with spaces for natural social interaction balanced by an abundance of private, quiet spaces for reflection and to escape the social demands of working can help.

Likewise, recent investigations into the impact of menopause in the workforce by the UK government¹⁰ and others has discovered that as many as 10 per cent of menopausal-age women leave the workforce due to the challenges encountered during these years. Some of the ways that effective office design can help are by providing thermal control or places of varying indoor temperatures to help address thermal discomfort and by providing places of focus to address what is sometimes referred to as the 'brain fog' accompanying menopause.

Once a greater range of needs are understood, inclusive design moves beyond an 'accommodation mindset' to instead use

these design constraints as the basis for innovation at scale. As we saw from the examples above, providing a greater range of choices and greater control over the environment can support more than one need. In many cases, elevating the quality of experience to support the needs of a specific group creates better experiences for all. As an example, one might create spaces for both hyper- and hypo-sensitive people specifically to accommodate the range of needs for those who are on the neurodivergent spectrum, but the availability of spaces to support quiet reflection or enjoy stimulation and buzz can also support other employees doing either focused or collaborative work.

At MillerKnoll, our research and exploration into inclusive design began many years ago, and we have had the pleasure of working with a wide variety of customers who seek to create more inclusive workplaces. This has included the creation of the landmark Tom and Ruth Harkin Center at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa (see Figure 3). The institute is named after retired US Senator Tom Harkin, who was one of the original sponsors of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and his wife, with whom he has passionately advocated for greater inclusion throughout their lives. To honour this legacy, the Harkin Institute embarked upon creating a facility in partnership with BNIM architects, Herman Miller and Piggott Interiors to exceed ADA-standards and pilot new architectural and sub-architectural designs for inclusion.¹¹

More recently, MillerKnoll has begun using three lenses, which are in many ways still evolving, to help us ensure more inclusive place designs and to communicate these goals with internal stakeholders, customers and partners who may be less familiar with inclusive design practices. These include:

- *Go beyond 'barrier free'*: Spaces that are welcoming to all help build belonging. They facilitate positive experiences by



Figure 3 Tom and Ruth Harkin Center

eliminating real or perceived cognitive and social obstacles in addition to the physical barriers. As an example, while an organisation might already focus on physical accessibility by providing ramps and clear floor area for mobility, they also might consider the value of well-being rooms that address the needs of working mothers, those struggling with anxiety, or any employee who otherwise would not feel comfortable coming into the office because of their mental or emotional needs. Each of these practices promote inclusion by eliminating different kinds of barriers;

- *Make it intuitive and desirable:* Our senses subconsciously read the world around us. Ensuring that spaces are designed for intuitive, consistent and desirable use can help people find enjoyment in their work

(see Figure 4). As an example, while an organisation may already provide access to a variety of meeting room types to help employees find a space suitable for their needs, they might also ensure that the audio-visual controls within those spaces are planned consistently between rooms, and that they are easy to read and intuitive to control. This helps to ensure positive experiences for those with visual impairments, but also creates a better experience for all employees using those spaces;

- *Advance autonomy and achievement:* An environment can strengthen the resolve or improve the abilities of people. Purposefully designing multiple modes of engagement within a space allows people to take control of their experience without seeking special accommodation (see Figure 5). As an example, while



Figure 4 This setting for community socialisation offers a variety of scaled furniture groupings that range from multiple seats facing each other to single seats with privacy built in. Carefully mixing open vistas with partially shielded hideaways makes it easy for people to find the best place for their needs while providing a sense of orientation and safety. Making the space appeal to all users avoids stigmatisation and fosters a sense of belonging



Figure 5 This setting for group collaboration relies on furnishings that clearly communicate their function, from task-oriented stools and soft seating to mobile objects that can be reconfigured in the flow of work. Vertical screens that support digital and analogue tools can easily be repositioned to create multiple zones offering a range of choice for auditory and visual control and mitigating sensory overload

an organisation may have already moved away from allocating private offices based upon title or rank within an organisation, they can ensure that all employees have shared access to places to focus while also providing them social spaces where, regardless of title or tenure, they can interact and grow their internal network. A design approach that promotes autonomy ensures that all employees are better equipped to achieve their goals (see Figure 6).

Ultimately, these lenses reinforce what we already know about good design, but do so in a manner to ensure that all voices are heard and that needs are met. By coupling inclusive design practices with universal goals and improved choice, an organisation's workplace

strategy can transform the concept of workplace inclusion, from doing the minimum required to accommodate some to helping achieve the maximum for all.

CONCLUSION

The changes happening in the world today should be understood as powerful opportunities for improvement. For CRE leaders, this involves collaborating with others to focus on the most pressing and impactful talent-related goals of their organisation. Doing so will involve forging deeper partnerships with HR, inviting employee participation, establishing experiential goals, and reaching those goals through greater choice and better design. This journey towards inclusiveness has no defined end but elevating it as a key



Figure 6 This setting for individual focus allows people to choose from a range of work points to help them find and sustain their own productive flow. Several distinctly different options are available: lounge chairs for reading, tables for studying, high-performance chairs for sustained deep focus, seats with visual privacy for contemplation and fully enclosed booths for acoustic isolation

workplace priority enables CRE teams to create places of belonging that strengthen communities and improve people's lives.

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