Key Trends
Field Notes

Key Trends Shaping the Post-Pandemic Workplace

As organizations continue to re-evaluate when, where, and how we work, accelerating existing trends and originating new ones, workplace planners and designers face new challenges.

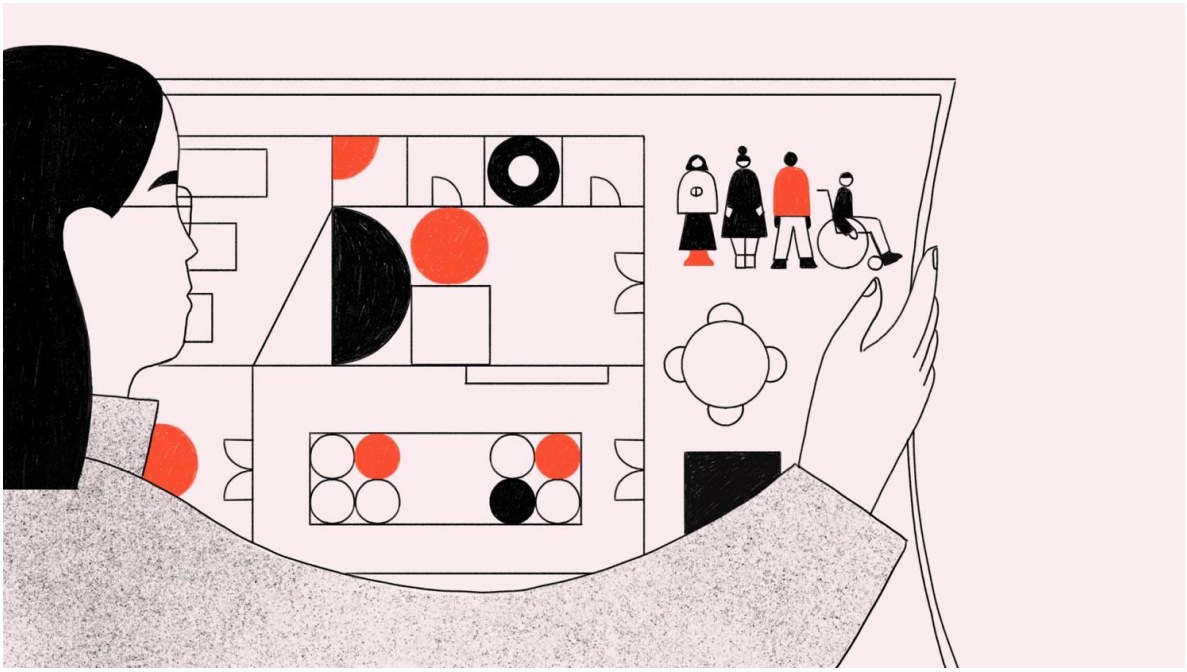

Illustration by Abbey Lossing

In October 2022, MillerKnoll and Pivot Interiors convened a series of conversations with 18 design and workplace professionals based in San Francisco and Los Angeles to share observations about how the workplace was transitioning. Here are the highlights:

1. **Employee as consumer.** The evolving user experience is driven by employees empowered by choice.
2. **Measure what matters.** An era of distributed teams and remote work as a norm calls for more meaningful measures of productivity.
3. **Acknowledge what we've lost. Appreciate what we've gained.** We have lost rituals, work friends, and mentorship while working away from each other, but gained humanity, and new levels of equity, freedom, and flexibility in the process.

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4. **Generational and economic dichotomy of work.** The pandemic's impact differed depending on one's age and socio-economic status.

5. **The future of work is about change.** Definitive answers are in short supply as we navigate continued uncertainty. Change will be the only constant, and a test and iterate approach can help us usher humanity back to the workplace.

Employee as consumer

The freedom to work from anywhere has led to a fundamental shift in mindset. No longer expected to be on-site on a daily basis, many desk-based employees have been granted agency in where, when, and how they work.

Because they now have choice, we can no longer look at office occupiers as simply end users, but as consumers. Their behavior -- in this case, reluctance to return to the office -- can be explained by the economic theory of revealed preference, related Tracy Wymer, vice president strategy at MillerKnoll.

Sharing insights from Stanford economist Nick Bloom, who has studied remote work for years, he said, "If people are always choosing product A over product B, product A has to be, for the price, just a better deal. You don't need surveys if everyone's voting with their feet— you know that's really the best outcome."

"With the end-user-as-a-consumer mentality, we could look at the office almost like a restaurant: an experience with better technology, more services, and more resources than at home," said Katie Buchanan, design director at Gensler, San Francisco. "If we provide a richer experience, then individuals may make the conscious, willing choice to work from a workspace instead of their dining room table."

"There's no such thing as lip service to human-centric design," emphasized Annie Chu, founding principal, Chu & Gooding. You have to do it like you really mean it."

Panelists considered the various levers they could pull to drive that choice. How can they leverage new space ratios – specifically the smaller footprint achieved with unassigned spaces? As real estate is freed up that can be devoted to more amenities and improvements, will that move the needle on whether individuals make the conscious choice to work from an office? Such a strategy could achieve greater value – perceived and actual – for the client while building out a more flexible space, designers related.

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> More progressive organizations recognize the new landscape and seek more meaningful measurements that are less about efficiency, and more about engagement.

Measure what matters

While economists measure productivity as a simple ratio of economic outputs to inputs, reliable measures of desk-based work remain elusive, and in an era of remote work, add complexity to the process organizations already struggle with to understand their level of productivity.

“How do you measure productivity – is it the completion of a task? Everyone has different capacity and ability,” said Sarah Devine, managing principal, Revel Architecture, San Francisco.

Previously, managers could observe whether their people were working. Once no longer physically together, some organizations resorted to software to track keyboard and mouse movement, websites visited, or other data points.

More progressive organizations recognize the new landscape and seek more meaningful measurements that are less about efficiency, and more about engagement.

The group considered how to re-evaluate the contributions of place, looking beyond space utilization data, toward a balance of aesthetics and other drivers.

Technology, such as sensors that document the work settings that see the most traffic, can facilitate decision-making. Data measurement surveys can help organizations assess the success of a design, with tools that poll employees on what types of work they complete, how well their space supports the work, and what drives their overall productivity and success.

Whatever the instrument or process, the methodology should be test, measure, and iterate and repeat.

“This is a time of such constant and consistent change we are constantly adjusting, redesigning based on what works and what does not work,” said Edward Woodill, creative director of Pivot, who hosted the series.

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What have we lost? And what have we gained?

During the pandemic, our “loose ties” -- daily interactions between a barista and her customer, for example – took a hit, and we transitioned to more direct and scheduled meetings. As our practices became even more highly connected, thanks to technology, we slipped into a more isolated existence. We lost formative work friendships, camaraderie, and mentorship.

“Almost overnight, many people were stripped of their rituals,” recalled Woodill.

Another loss: the boundaries between work and home became blurred. For some, the commute functioned as both a ritual and a divide, providing physical and psychological separation of work versus home, as well as an opportunity to reflect on the day.

“It all depends on how you define freedom, whether it is having your phone off while driving or using your time on public transit to respond to emails, phone friends or relatives or catch up on podcasts,” said Bill Bouchey, design director, Gensler.

Recent Leesman research revealed that lengthy commutes were one of the highest-ranking factors keeping employees from working in the office.

Thus whether or not an office is truly “commute-worthy?” has evolved into an important criteria driving the decision on whether or not employees choose to work from home.

However, the impact of the pandemic wasn’t all negative. Introverts and neurodiverse individuals, for example, were often the beneficiaries of the greater sense of equity that remote work and virtual meetings provided, and their needs are increasingly factored into today’s design plans.

“This leads us to the need for respite and quiet, private space,” said Joanna Heringer, senior associate, Huntsman Architectural Group. Such an inclusive approach not only supports well-being but the needs of anyone who has had difficulty transitioning back into the physical work environment.

For many organizations, a flexibility strategy is the best option for meeting the diverse needs of people while delivering more equitable experience for all. In addition to the freedom more flexibility provides, it also creates greater equity between in-office workers and field workers. Technology showed us it can bridge distributed teams and connect to leadership, peers, and resources while improving accessibility for those with physical or other limitations. But panelists struggled with creating equitable solutions for those who cannot work remotely.

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Generational and economic dichotomy of work

The pandemic exposed an ugly reality about work.

Despite much talk about freedom to work when and where they choose, true flexibility is a privilege afforded primarily to white collar professional workers who comprise about 40 percent of the workforce, the panelists discussed.

“The freedom to choose a remote or hybrid work-lifestyle is not available to everyone, least of all the working class. The freedom to choose this is a privilege,” emphasized Joey Shimoda, principal of Shimoda Design, Los Angeles.

In addition to a split within economic strata, disparity cut across all generations.

More established workers often had few issues with transitioning to working from home. They were typically older, likely an “empty nester,” living in a comfortable home environment with a dedicated home office, access to reliable strong Wi-Fi, and no worries about childcare.

It was a dramatically different picture for parents of young children who had to manage childcare, as well as remote learning, along with doing their own job, often in the same limited space.

Similarly, many recent graduates not only missed official onboarding, mentorship, and connecting activities that previously nurtured lifelong friendships and improved their future career opportunities, they also faced having to work, eat, sleep, exercise, and socialize in the confines of their bedroom, whether it was in the family home or an apartment shared with a roommate.

The future of work is about change

“We need to rewrite the value proposition of what good design is,” emphasized Katy Mercer, principal at Woods Bagot.

In the past, when the office was considered an expense, the answer centered around economic viability. Today, the office can be an investment in a human-centric environment that drives an engine of engagement.

Panelists concluded that it’s a shift in mindset and approach that will make the most difference.

Is our energy better spent getting people back in an office five days a week? Or is it improving the overall employee experience and how an employee works? The latter, panelists agreed, can yield a sound foundation on which to build.

“Going back to an office just for the sake of going back should not be the end goal,” said Ben Wrigley, principal, SCB, San Francisco.

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Thank you to the participants who shared their insights and ideas with MillerKnoll and those who chose to remain anonymous.

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