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Four Ways You'll Need to Shift Your Office Design in 2021

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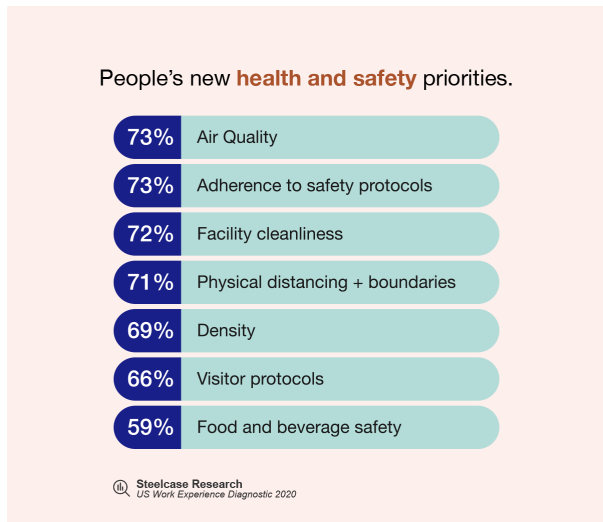
Crises are times when people naturally reflect on what's truly important to them. And this pandemic will bring lasting changes to what employees need to stay engaged and productive.

Before the pandemic sent millions of people to work in their home offices, living rooms, and kitchens, employee expectations were already changing. The pandemic accelerated those trends and brought to light new needs in the workplace.

Steelcase research across 10 countries, engaging over 32,000 employees, uncovered four macro shifts that leading organizations will have to embrace to meet their staffs' new needs and expectations, designing for safety, productivity, community and flexibility.

Design for Safety

People's level of comfort in the workplace will depend on a set of safety standards to help mitigate disease transmission in the office.



Because 73% of U.S. employees said their top concerns are air quality and adherence to safety protocols, understanding how pathogens move through an environment can help companies develop systemic strategies to reduce the spread of Covid-19 and other airborne viruses. Behavioral strategies such as mask-wearing and social distancing need to be augmented with changes to the built environment. Workplace design can help reduce **density**, change **geometry** (the angles and orientation of furnishings), and increase physical **division**

to limit how far pathogens can travel.

Design for Productivity

Before the pandemic, employees were frustrated with workplaces that didn't give them ways to control their privacy and focus. During the pandemic, working from home didn't solve those issues for everyone:

Productivity dropped 12% and **engagement declined 14%** among employees who were dissatisfied with remote work, especially the longer they did it.

So what do people need from their workplace to stay productive? The top three features they cited were effective collaboration, easier access to tools and resources, and the ability to focus. To be effective, people need workplaces that support both collaboration and individual work and are designed to easily shift between the two modes.

Design for Community

The top two reasons people say they want to be back in the office are to connect with colleagues and to feel a sense of shared purpose within the organization.

Connection and purpose are attributes of a strong community, as are trust, inclusivity, and resilience.

These are not simply “feel good” cultural traits. They have a strong correlation to business outcomes, specifically engagement, productivity, innovation, and retention.

The workplace can be designed as an **infrastructure for people to build social capital**. It can intentionally foster meaningful and both planned and serendipitous interactions. It can signal that change and adaptation are parts of the culture and something to be embraced.

Design for Flexibility

Historically designed for permanence, buildings and offices have long been dominated by fixed architecture, power, and furnishings. As leading organizations explore flexible work policies, allowing people to choose their hours and locations, the built environment will also need to be flexible to adapt easily to the changes in where and how people work, as well as changing business circumstances.

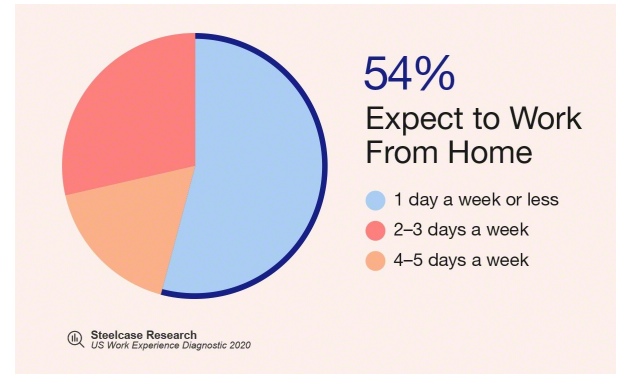
Workplaces in the future will embrace multi-use spaces that can support diverse types of activities. Furnishings will easily move to allow spaces to expand and contract to support distancing needs or simply to accommodate different-size groups and activities. Physical and digital experiences will be seamlessly braided to support distributed collaboration as people work in a variety of locations.



Return to the Workplace

The pandemic's impact on how people will work in the future is a hot topic around the virtual water cooler. Some headlines suggest that the office will go away as people embrace working from home almost exclusively.

That hasn't happened. The vast majority of people expect to work in the office, and **54% say they only expect to work from home one day a week or less**. But when people return to the office, they will expect it to be different from what they left.



Organizations can use this moment to move forward and reset the places and ways they work to create a fundamentally better work experience.

To learn more about Steelcase research and how to reset your workplace, [click here](#).