



Supercharging innovation while futureproofing the post-pandemic workplace

BY LINDA MACLEOD FANNON | AUGUST 2021

After collectively holding their breath since the early months of 2020, company leaders are breathing a sigh of relief. Employees are returning to the office, eager to be with their colleagues in the community that we've all been missing in our remote cyber bubbles. During the pandemic, businesses learned just how important that in-person community is – while individual productivity went up, innovation suffered significantly without the creative collaborations that research shows rarely happen without physical proximity. We know that innovation is the lifeblood of business, so there is good reason to be relieved.

But hold on. No one's going back to business as usual. Things are not the same as they were before the

pandemic. The biggest shift? Hybrid working. Even if a company decrees that its own employees must be in the office five days a week, clients and partners might be working remotely. So, like it or not, hybrid working is here to stay, and that changes everything.

Why? Because now that people have more choice about where and when to work, the workplace is no longer the mandate it once was. A more flexible work-life balance is fast becoming an important driver of employee satisfaction, so for employers to attract and retain top talent, offering some type of flexibility is key. Which means that, in order to cultivate the in-person collaborations that produce innovation, companies must make sure that their workplace is a



Front page: Tampa's new Water Street community is grounded in classic mixed-use principles of city planning. Rendering by Strategic Property Partners. **Above:** To bring seven different brands together under one roof for the first time for Publicis Groupe, designers used strategies drawn from both hospitality design and urban planning to make this gathering place flooded with natural light and the best views in the office. Photo by Eric Laignel.

place employees want to go. For a company to thrive, its office must become a magnet – the place where the action is, where co-workers are, where employees feel they can do their best work.

Supercharge and futureproof the workplace

Right now, every company is in a period of transition, a time of trial and error as they test-drive new hybrid management strategies and different ways of working. This moment presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to bring the ways we work into the 21st century. Now that we better understand individual productivity and how collaboration works, it's time to ramp up the speed of innovation. Our workplace researchers, strategists, and designers have been hard at work helping organizations seize this moment to supercharge innovation and futureproof their workspace. Two design strategies we're applying are especially helpful.

Silo-busting

The first strategy is what we call "silo-busting." At Elkus Manfredi, we work with a broad range of clients and

projects, from higher education and city planning to life sciences and hospitality. We purposefully cultivate a cross-disciplinary design practice – our designers don't work in silos, but across all types of projects – and we pull strategies from every industry in which we practice to inform our workplace design. We're always looking for what's next in each industry, and we harness ideas from all kinds of projects and apply them to the workplaces we create.

An example of what we mean by silo-busting: we're currently designing a mixed-use community in an industrial area of Tampa's waterfront called Water Street Tampa. This project is grounded in the classic principles of place-making and urban planning that make active, vibrant places and build community. We're applying those same urban-planning principles to workspace, designing environments that encourage connection using inviting gathering spaces, intersecting common pathways, and multiple spots for spontaneous connection. We designed the workplace and laboratories of the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard using those strategies to bring together formerly siloed life scientists from different fields in a workspace made for connection. Facilitating the interaction and synthesis of some of the most gifted scientific thinkers of our time has had breakthrough results – the work of the Broad has helped transform our understanding and healing of the human body.

Another example of silo-busting draws inspiration from White Elephant Palm Beach, a boutique hotel that opened last November. As White Elephant demonstrates so well, the principles of hospitality design are focused intently on the guest experience and the hotel as the host of that experience. We take that focus and translate it to the workplace, reframing the workplace as the host of the employee experience, crafting how a place feels to employees, and building office environments that are welcoming and inclusive for all. We've even developed an employee-engagement process that we call "co-creation" to learn from the source what employees experience as welcoming and what they need in their workplace to do their jobs well. These hospitality-derived strategies

successfully brought 1,500 staff from seven distinct brands together in the new Boston headquarters of Publicis Groupe, the third largest communications group in the world.

Kit of parts

The second strategy we're using is the kit of parts. Hands-down the most flexible, cost-effective, and futureproof design strategy we know, the kit of parts creates innovative, resilient workspaces that can stand the test of time.

A kit-of-parts space is created with a specifically curated selection of dividers and flexible furniture components that shape reconfigurable "can-be" spaces adaptable for a multitude of uses. Workspace designed using the kit of parts gives organizations the flexibility and agility to grow and change in place as priorities shift, without the cost and disruption of tearing out and replacing permanent installations every time.

Our teams create a kit of parts for each project, incorporating existing components or starting from scratch with an entirely new workspace, depending on

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client needs. Either way, the approach is always rooted in what spaces "can be," always focusing on expanding options for uses. For furniture, cross-functional flexibility is the watchword. Universal shapes broaden the options.

Each organization has different spatial requirements – some need few walls, others may need semi-private areas, and others a high degree of privacy. Mobile



The lobby of the White Elephant Palm Beach is divided into a reception area, living room, and library. Featuring a long communal table suitable for a dinner party or work meeting, the library blurs the lines between working and residential space. Photo by Chi-Thien Nguyen.

or demountable dividers can take many forms and offer whatever degrees of acoustic and visual privacy are needed. The dividers become pieces of furniture themselves, easily movable and technologically enabled.

A key feature of any workspace kit of parts is employee control. Our experience and prior research have shown that an internalized sense of control can inspire more autonomy, creativity, and higher levels of employee performance, so it's important that individuals and teams are able to alter the physical aspects of a kit-of-parts space themselves, on the spot, to suit their needs.

Studies also show that the vertical hierarchies common to most organizations actually inhibit the exploration necessary for innovation; instead, the most successful collaborations happen horizontally, where diverse points of view are more readily expressed without fear of failure. The kit of parts removes hierarchical space – and the inhibitions that come with it – and replaces it with egalitarian, user-controlled workspace for all.

Blurring the lines between business and higher education

One of our most forward-looking examples of silo-busting and the kit of parts used together is a design we're currently working on with a well-known university that pushes the idea of flexibility and fluidity to the max. Our challenge is to develop a collection of interchangeable learning and work spaces that will be a resource for corporations as well as university students and faculty. The new space will be a kit-of-parts suite created for maximum flexibility.

The center is being designed to foster lifelong learning, a concept that we predict will become increasingly important for the future of businesses to maintain a leading edge. At the same time, higher education is transitioning from learning as a sequestered experience to one of lifelong engagement. Academic institutions are increasingly seeking to partner with businesses, and vice versa.

There are no lines between business and academia in the new center, with kit-of-parts spaces that draw ideas from both worlds and work equally well for both. In fact, secondary learning, the idea of learning through exposure and observation, is baked in. The center is intentionally designed so that all occupants will hear and see not only their own tasks, but the work of those around them, planting the seeds of different perspectives, ideas, and opportunities. During the pandemic, employees have been missing

those secondary learning experiences that can only happen in person. The impact of that loss has taught us how important this aspect of working is, and we're expanding opportunities for secondary learning in both corporate workplaces and higher-education learning spaces.

Bolder, more agile, more innovative

Companies are seizing this moment to reconsider their workplaces. Having experienced the changes brought on virtually overnight by the pandemic, company leaders want their organization and workplace to be more resilient in the face of future change. Most important, they know that to thrive in the volatile, hyper-competitive business arena that is emerging post-pandemic, they will need to be bolder, more agile, and more innovative than ever before. As companies return to the workplace, these two design strategies – silo-busting and the kit of parts – can provide them with spaces that maximize collaboration and the speed of innovation while giving them the freedom, agility, and flexibility to respond fluidly to change in the future.



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