

Right

A learning space
with stadium seating
and video wall at
the Draper HQ in
Cambridge, MA.

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Good intentions

The conversation about workplace flexibility needs a new component to make it all work

WORDS —ELIZABETH LOWREY AND DR. VANESSA RUDA

One fateful day in 1997, a research professor and her boss had a chance encounter standing over a photocopier. Though they had not worked on a project together before, the researcher spoke up and told her boss she could “make anything” with messenger RNA. The conversation sparked an innovation that ultimately led to the use of mRNA in vaccines, the tech underlying many of the world’s COVID-19 jabs.

After months of working from home, top of mind for companies is bringing people back to the office to collaborate and recreate the chance encounters that once sparked the sort of ambitious

innovation that makes headlines. To this end, the office will remain a fixture of working life for many, but it will be different than it was.

Business leaders and HR professionals tout flexibility as they key ingredient of the future workplace. However, if the goal is bringing people back to the office to socially engage, innovate, share knowledge with one another, then more guidance is needed.

Flexibility will be a crucial component, but equally important is the intentionality around the management and design of the office to ensure that colleagues and teams face minimal barriers to culture-building, collaboration, and learning. This

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reimagination is something we call the “intentional office.”

CULTURE

First and foremost, companies should prioritize the reinforcement of community, relationship building, and other elements of workplace culture. Though video conferencing and virtual tools have enabled teams and people to stay connected, distance and digitalization have had deleterious effects on people's connections. This makes sense. Culture is a difficult thing to support at a distance because, among other things, it relies on norms and values consistently on display.

For example, one crucial aspect of culture is trust – something management science calls psychological safety – where new ideas are de-risked and contributions are equitable. High levels of psychological safety are shown to increase cognitive processes associated with problem-solving and divergent thinking. Trust can be engendered through the consistent physical presence of others and various supportive cues from the environment.

To support relationship-building, community spaces can be celebrated and designed around employee experience. Namely, they can have abundant light

and biophilia, and exude the feeling of a café lounge through comfortable and welcoming amenities. A helpful rule of thumb is to imagine the sort of spaces people lack while at home. Ultimately, the most successful spaces will engender feelings that cut across the digital divide and leaves employees as connected to their colleagues whether they are in the office that day or not.

COLLABORATION

It's no surprise collaboration suffered during the pandemic and teams became more static and siloed. As the world increasingly moves towards project-based work, workers will need to become their own silo-busters and cross-departmental bridges. Collaboration will rely on socially embedded relationships and coordination skills. The theory goes: collaboration can be understood as a process of “skill trading,” where people coordinate where to best apply skills to different tasks and objectives. Higher social coordination skills benefit collaborative work because friction points and other hinderances can be actively addressed and mitigated.

These social coordination skills are particularly important when it comes to so-called weak ties, which are the



Above

Zoom rooms at Draper enable people to connect with colleagues wherever they may be.
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Left

A great example of an intentional office as an open, activity based work space.
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relationships people have with members of a group with whom they are less connected. In business, weak ties can play an unexpected positive role in problem solving and innovation because there less likely to have the same expertise and skills as close team members, and will offer differing perspectives and knowledge.

Recent research has come to support this theory. In a set of global companies, those who shifted to 100% remote working during the pandemic experienced more trouble bringing new products to market and saw more innovative projects falter compared to companies that retained in-person workers. Analysis discovered that although remote workers communicated more with close colleagues, they did so far less with their weak ties. The authors suggest that a reduction in face-to-face communication eroded typical channels workers would use to exchange knowledge or brainstorm around difficult or ill-defined problems. An internal study at Microsoft saw similar declines of cross-functional collaborations, as did a recent study of scientists in the United States and Europe.

Approximately 60 to 80 percent of pre-pandemic offices were composed of fields of individual assigned work stations for most employees. Today, workplace design must reflect a shift from solo, heads-down work to collaborative, project-based work that allows people to make informed decisions around their own workflows and workstyles. Ultimately, as a matter of both business need and real estate efficiency, the spaces that support collaborative work are where the biggest reimaginings and reconfigurations will occur.

Incorporating flexibility and collaboration tools into these reconfigured areas can create differentiated work spaces; whiteboards, moveable work tables, and flexible screening partitions can become commonplace. The increase in digital communication means a suite of acoustically private rooms will be required. These rooms will be of varied sizes, from single-person rooms to large team rooms, and filled with technology to support on-site teams communicating with remote teams and clients.

LEARNING

In a recent survey, nearly nine in ten executives said their company either faces skills gaps or expects them to >



Left

Private rooms offer acoustic privacy for teams, virtual calls and focused work.
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An internal study at Microsoft saw a decline in cross-functional collaboration

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Team spaces at Publicis Groupe in Boston are magnets for employees.
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develop in the next five years. Moreover, most workers under 40 rank skills and knowledge acquisition as the primary means to advance their careers.

Intentionality enables companies to provide learning opportunities for people to refine skills, increase coordinative capacity, and tap into the knowledge of senior colleagues and mentors. As technology becomes more ubiquitous and employees learn to use more tools, they also become faster and more nimble learners in a quickly-evolving business environment, increasing the competitive edge of a company's talent.

Learning spaces can be organized around learning styles, which tend to impact both individualized and group approaches to problem-solving. For example, visual learners are "big picture first" and benefit from presentations and whiteboards to work through problems. Auditory learners thrive in small discussion or ideation groups, and benefit when physical and psychological barriers are removed. Tactile learners learn by doing and benefit from open activities and hands-on problem-solving.

“ Intentionality helps companies provide learning opportunities



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Environments for learning can be designed to help learning objectives flow with work. Interaction spaces are one possible venue. Already embedded into the fabric of contemporary offices, these spaces are often found in peripheral or connective areas serving as ideation and brainstorming zones for teams. These are ideal sites for discussion groups or even mentor sessions. Designing inviting spaces with plentiful comfortable, informal furniture will be key their success.

THE FUTURE

We find ourselves at a unique moment. Company leaders and employees are willing to experiment with their working lives like never before. There is now an opportunity to reimagine the physical workplace around the functional forms of work and the needs of employees. By approaching these changes with intentionality, companies can ensure that norms, emerging workflows centered around culture, collaboration, learning become permanent and energizing qualities of their workplace. ●