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How Office Design Drives a Genuine Return to the Workplace

By [Elizabeth Lowrey](#) May 23, 2025 10:52 am



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As organizations navigate the post-pandemic workplace, many leaders face a familiar challenge: Despite clear policies and mandates, employees remain hesitant about consistently returning to the office. Countless hours have been spent debating the “right” model — hybrid, remote or fully in-person — yet attendance and engagement continue to lag.

The problem isn’t just the policy itself, but what employees encounter when they come in. When the environment doesn’t offer something better or different than home, resistance is inevitable. Workplace strategies succeed not through mandates alone, but also through the quality of the in-office experience.

The real question isn’t “How do we get people back?” but “How do we create spaces people genuinely want to return to?” As a designer and workplace strategist, I’ve seen the most successful organizations treat the office as a strategic asset.

AEW, a client of my firm [Elkus Manfredi Architects](#), approached its headquarters redesign with this strategic mindset. Rather than rely on mandates, AEW focused on building a

workplace that reflects the company's collaborative culture and actively draws people in — not because they must be there, but because they want to be.



Elizabeth Lowrey. Photo: Trevor Reid

Successful transformations rely on human-centered design and co-creation, balancing business goals with employee needs. By engaging employees throughout the process, AEW created a workplace that genuinely supports how the firm's teams want to work and serves as a destination that reflects both its values and vision. AEW's transformation highlights several core design principles any organization can learn from.

Before the pandemic hit, AEW used a traditional design of perimeter offices surrounding work cubes in its Boston headquarters. This layout reinforced workplace hierarchy, blocked natural daylight from reaching most employees and left little in terms of flexibility.

AEW's new layout turns this convention inside out. Offices were relocated to the building's interior with glass fronts preserving light flow, while common and shared spaces were positioned along the windows, giving everyone access to natural views and light.

In post-occupancy research sessions, employees repeatedly emphasized the value of these changes. As one employee noted, "I think humans by nature want to feel part of something. If you're in an office where you feel relegated to your corner, stay there and do the job asked of you, I would not find that fulfilling. The openness here makes you feel part of something bigger. It's a huge part of why people come here and stay."

The most effective workplaces recognize that employees engage in many different types of work throughout the day, and this was another crucial consideration. "It's how we do our

best work,” Jon Martin, the North American CEO of AEW, told me. “Working together to share ideas and collaborate in real time creates a certain energy. At the same time, we recognize that the way people use the office has changed, and offering flexibility has tremendous value.”

At AEW, this flexibility is reflected in the diverse range of spaces available to employees and the trust that is placed in individuals deciding where and how they work, whether solo, in small groups or collaboratively as a team. This approach ensures that the workplace supports a variety of needs, from deep concentration to dynamic interaction.

These areas support collaboration through adaptable meeting rooms, encourage connection with naturally placed gathering spots and foster innovation with spaces that can shift based on project demands. Transparent design makes leadership more accessible, promoting mentorship, while dedicated areas support learning.

Perhaps the most significant advantage of in-person work is the sense of community and connection it can foster. AEW’s design actively supports this through thoughtful placement of shared spaces and amenities that encourage spontaneous interaction and relationship building.

Employees highlighted this organic connectivity during research sessions. “You see people interacting and constantly opening up to each other,” a team member said. “What starts as a back-to-back conversation expands into a five-person discussion. It happens naturally in the quad areas, connections form across aisles and conversations flow organically.”

The results of AEW’s transformation speak to the effectiveness of the firm’s approach. For instance, 94 percent of employees offered positive responses regarding the workspace’s appeal and functionality. Employees consistently described the office as an attractive destination that effectively balances productivity with well-being.

The most successful workplace strategies go beyond attendance policies, focusing instead on environments that actively enhance productivity and engagement. When aligned with clear leadership vision, strategic workplace design creates spaces employees genuinely want to experience, driving collaboration, innovation and competitive advantage.

In the end, it’s not about forcing people back to the office. It’s about creating offices worth returning to — and enjoying the business outcomes that naturally follow.

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