



Second Edition

THE NATURE OF THE POST-PANDEMIC WORKPLACE

By the Silverado Roundtable



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The coronavirus pandemic sparked significant reconsideration of the functionality and utility of America's workspace environments. Now, more than two years into its existence, its influence continues to force a profound rethinking into multiple aspects of American life.

COVID-19 virus pressed employees to transform homes into offices. A majority found the experience surprisingly beneficial. As a result of this massive economic experiment, most employees now report they would not consider working for an organization requiring a full-time return to an office environment.

Employers caught in the crossfire of hiring shortages understand the appeal of remote work, but prefer employees return to the office at least several days per week if not full time. The hybrid work environment is by far the most attractive model and realistic compromise.

In 2020 and into 2021, the primary concern was preventing disease transmission. Studies addressing changes to the workplace focused mostly on stopgap measures against the spread of the virus. Plexiglass barriers. Temperature checks. One-way hallways. Space markers on the floor. Tools so you don't have to touch elevator buttons.

Now, these concerns have been overtaken by a more difficult challenge. Human resources professionals and facilities managers must create a functional hybrid post-pandemic workplace, marrying the advantages of remote work with the need to foster organizational culture and enable collaboration.

The design community envisions the opportunity to improve form and function. Employers worry how it will impact the bottom line. Employees want workplaces to foster their sense of health and wellbeing – or they'd rather stay home.

The Silverado Roundtable, composed of America's top workplace greenery design and installation experts,

published its first white paper in January 2021. It explored the challenges facing employers to create a safe and productive working environment emerging from the pandemic. It offered answers for architects, interior designers, and human resources leaders based on principles of biophilic design to use commercial space productively and profitably, pushing back the pandemic's economic threat.

The authors never anticipated these same questions remaining in play one year later in 2022, as new COVID-19 virus variants continued to postpone the effort to restore workspaces. In late 2021, dozens of American companies including Ford, Google, Apple, Wells Fargo, Lyft, and CNN canceled their scheduled 2022 return to the office, with no new date on the calendar.

RETHINKING THE ROLE OF THE OFFICE

After nearly two years of the mass work from home (WFH) experiment, enough time has passed for quantitative data to be measured. It allows more thoughtful conversation and conclusions about future expectations of employees and employers. These expectations have converged in some areas and diverged in others.

Workplace design professionals offer to make offices appealing spaces for employees to gather and collaborate by choice, which is what most employers hope to achieve without return-to-work mandates they feel powerless to enforce while their employees have the upper hand in a tight labor market.

Members of the Silverado Roundtable offer an affordable solution using plants and natural elements to transform the post-pandemic workplace into an oasis for teamwork and creativity to flourish, with enough flexibility and practicality to reimagine its purpose for everyone's benefit.

INTRODUCTION

When workplaces and schools closed in March 2020 forcing a mass “work from home” (WFH) experiment, employees reinvented their surroundings to better suit their new reality. They scrambled to create dedicated workspaces and make them functional.

Relieved from long commutes, distractions, and workplace politics, many employees found themselves happier and more productive than expected. People discovered an opportunity for deep work with creativity and initiative.

We assumed this would be temporary. Employers wanted people back in the office. Facilities managers strategized how to implement barriers and mask mandates and left it to human resources managers to write new policies.

In the first edition of this white paper, the authors encouraged a deeper discussion about the opportunity to reconsider workplace design. As 2022 begins, the pandemic continues to disrupt modern working life. With an additional year of experience and survey data, the economic and human imperatives to embrace positive changes underway are greater than ever.



THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORKPLACE

Competition for top employees is fierce as unemployment rates plummet. The so-called “Great Resignation” has put labor in the driver’s seat. Employers can better compete for their skills by providing an elevated working environment.

What will the post-pandemic workplace of the future look like? What should it look like?

It will fall largely to human resources professionals in partnership with architects, interior designers, and facilities managers to influence and revolutionize workplace design. Workplaces built only to maximize space efficiency are no longer desirable.

The reconsidered workplace will foster collaboration and communication in environments with a focus on creativity and inspiration in a healthier way. Women and ethnically diverse employees find themselves benefitting from a more inclusive, less hierarchical model. Companies must cultivate their culture, creating a place where people choose to gather and contribute toward a greater purpose.

The Silverado Roundtable represents a group of workplace greenery experts each with more than 25 years of experience working with design professionals and business clients to improve the places people gather and collaborate by introducing greenery and plants into these environments.



THE WORKSPACE REVOLUTION

Long before the pandemic hit in early 2020, businesses and organizations experienced growth in remote work.

Fueled by the dramatic impact of COVID-19 on working arrangements, economists and behavioral scientists at Stanford University, the University of Chicago, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México founded the Working From Home Research Project (WFH Research) and the Survey of Working Arrangements and Attitudes in May 2020.

Since March 2021, WFH Research has tracked the preferences of 78,000 U.S. employees ages 20 to 64 working full time. In a comprehensive report published early in 2022, it found:

- Work-from-home will account for nearly 28% of full paid working days after the end of the pandemic
- **A clear majority* would prefer hybrid** (three days on premises, two days at home) over full-time in-person work.
- 42% of all employees would either look for a new job or quit if their employer required an immediate full-time return to the office; this increases among women and minority employees.
- The larger the employer (500 employees or more), the more workers want to work from home.

*Among workers whose jobs permit remote work, excluding so-called “frontline employees.”

The reasons for these attitudes became apparent early into the pandemic and have only become more entrenched.

In a comprehensive survey by the Washington DC based global data intelligence company Morning Consult of 1,123 remote workers in August 2020, six months into their work at home experience:



SAID THEY SPENT MORE TIME OUTDOORS, MORE TIME TAKING WALKS, MORE BREAKS



SAID THEY WERE SATISFIED WITH REMOTE WORK



SAID THEIR PRODUCTIVITY WAS THE SAME OR BETTER



SAID WORKING AT HOME IMPROVED THEIR HEALTH



SAID THEY WANTED TO GO BACK TO AN OFFICE FULL-TIME

American business must embrace workplace design supporting comfort, safety, and the human need to be part of a collaborative culture to remain competitive and to retain its top talent.



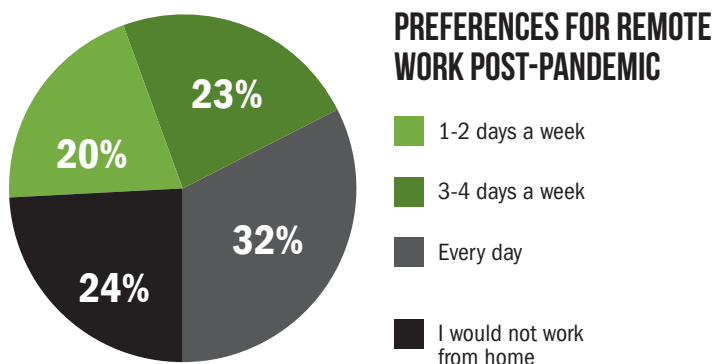
VALUE OF THE COLLABORATIVE WORKPLACE

The “all or nothing” return to the office proposition declared by employers such as financial giants Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley - once believed to have the power to make it stick – appears dead on arrival.

While the death of centralized office space has been exaggerated, its function is undergoing a mass overhaul. Strong preference for the hybrid model relies on workspace optimized for the collaborative, creative teamwork so difficult to replicate remotely.

Stanford University economics professor Nicholas Bloom of WFH Research says his data finds the optimal workplace efficiency model has employees splitting the workweek roughly equally between home for individual work and the office to engage in collaborative tasks. Several days a week at each location is the magic number to maximize the benefits of both options.

According to Morning Consult, 47 percent of those working remotely say the ideal arrangement would be to continue working from home one to four days a week.



In a Nielson Audience Survey conducted in August 2020, 52% of all employees want the choice of working from home **or from an office supplied by an employer.**

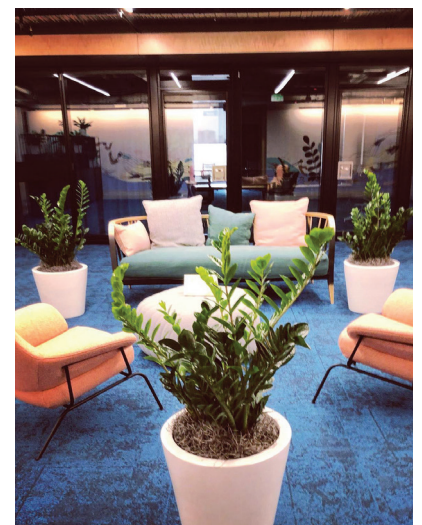
In its survey “The State Of Remote Work In 2021: A Survey Of The American Workforce,” the security firm GoodHire asked 3,500 American workers about potential return-to-office mandates. The survey took place several months into the emergence of the Delta variant of COVID-19 taking hold in the U.S. It found:

- Two-thirds of Americans would choose remote working options over in-office work.
- Sixty-one percent of Americans would be willing to take a pay cut to maintain remote working status.
- Forty-five percent of Americans would quit their job or look for a new one if they were forced to return to the office fulltime.
- Eighty-five percent of Americans prefer to apply for jobs that offer remote flexibility.

As employees gain leverage in the job market, the hybrid work model will help attract and retain talent. Offices must become a perk and a desirable destination option for employees – a place where people WANT to work, not HAVE to work.

“If it’s a good office and it’s smartly designed, it’ll be a perk,” said Maciej Markowski, Co-Founder of spaceOS, a tenant experience and management software provider. “Not everyone wants

to work from home. If you are forced to come to the office every day, a worker may not see it as a positive. But if people have the option to work from a great office, they may enjoy it.”





Surveys are missing the attempt to capture the health benefits and increased time spent outdoors enjoyed by people working at home and integrating them into the new hybrid fluid workplace.

Conservation psychologist and architect Dr. John Fraser, President and CEO of the design think-tank Knology, says we must rethink the modern American office.

“The collaborative nature of work is one of the conundrums of the economy. It doesn’t acknowledge the human benefit of tribal thinking,” said Fraser.

“Hotels and resorts, spas, even grocery stores place greenery in the entrance to present a good first impression,” notes Shane Pliska, president of Planterra in Detroit, Michigan. “Imagine if the cleaning product aisle greeted you at your grocery store door instead of flowers or fruit. How would it change your perception of the freshness of their products? Sanitation, hand cleaning stations, and

signs boasting powerful air filters may make us feel safer logically, but emotionally it’s dystopian.

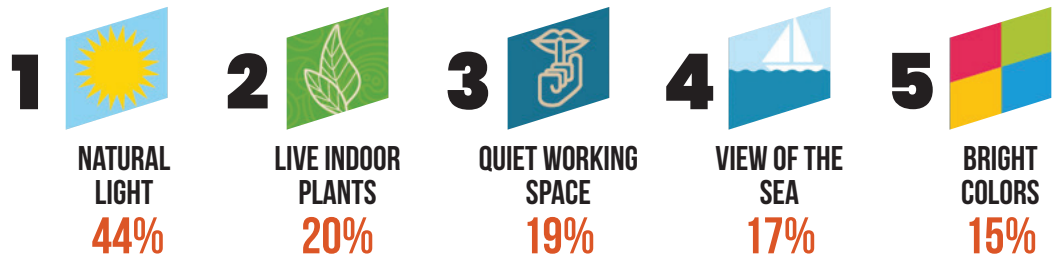
“Adding beautiful plants or flowers is an inexpensive way to signal your attention to a fresh, healthy environment and make your employees feel comfortable,” said Pliska.

“These are all human biophilic needs. Why do people bring cut flowers to work? Because they represent life. Our offices are suffocating us. Where is the fresh air? Sunlight? Plants? Why isn’t inside more like outside?” asks Fraser.



DESIGN CHALLENGES OF THE POST-PANDEMIC OFFICE

MOST WANTED ELEMENTS IN OFFICE SPACE:



American society has begun to accept COVID-19 as an endemic problem. Humankind faces the reality of living with coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) the near term. It accelerated the growing demand for healthy spaces, which drives workplace design.

Early in the pandemic, the focus was on safety in the work environment. Barriers, social distancing, and sanitation were front and center.

As scientists and healthcare professionals learned more about the nature of COVID-19 and how to manage it, the focus shifted to long lasting design elements conducive to workplace wellbeing from a mental and emotional health standpoint. Human resources professionals are tasked with keeping employees productive, motivated, engaged, and connected, all within the context of whatever the next iteration of the workplace facilitates these outcomes.

A healthy workplace used to be a luxury. Now in the midst of a stressed labor market, it is a necessity.

Ann Hoffman, IFMA, NCIDQ, LEED AP, Director of Workplace Strategies at FCArchitects, wrote in the article “The New Workplace Formula” for WorkDesign.com leaders who brush aside issues surrounding health and wellness do so at their own risk.

“Workplaces have embraced designs that champion natural light, biophilia and healthy habits for over a decade. The conversation must now shift to include C-Suite leadership and human resources to define the cultural hybrid for wellness in their office.

“Offering the unexpected can give employees the

sense that the company cares about them and has put thought behind what they will experience in the physical workplace. Experiences that focus on the individual offer the most opportunity for elevating the space,” writes Hoffman.

Within the last decade, workplace design has embraced bringing the outdoor environment indoors using light, natural materials, textures, views, access to outdoor spaces such as patios or terraces, and the integration of plants in containers and living walls.

In the 21st Century, workplace design began to integrate this approach. Access to nature is increasingly critical for employee mental health and overall wellbeing.

In 2015, “[The Human Spaces report into The Global Impact of Biophilic Design in the Workplace](#)” led by organizational psychologist Professor Sir Cary Cooper found employees who work in environments with natural elements report a 15% higher level of well being, are 6% more productive, and 15% more creative overall.

It concluded that office design was so important to workers that a third (33%) of global respondents stated it would unequivocally affect their decision whether to work somewhere.

According to the Human Spaces report, natural light is the most desired workplace element (44%). Live indoor plants are the second most desired workplace element (20%), followed by quiet working space, a view of the sea, and bright colors.

But more than half of all workplaces have no plants in them at all (58%).

LESSONS FROM ALTERNATIVE WORKPLACE MODELS

The coronavirus pandemic proved a dispersed, remote workforce could effectively meet business objectives. Lingering skepticism about remote work is quickly dissipating.

Meanwhile, the pandemic also revealed new value of the physical workplace: the collective culture its leaders create for their employees.

The worldwide global design firm M Moser Associates, which specializes in the co-working model, reports its clients are dramatically reducing individual workspaces. It told the New York Times in October 2021 its clients are reversing course, shifting individual space from 70% of the total to 30%, with 70% now dedicated to collaborative space. At least one client is dedicating just 10% of its workspaces to individual accommodations.

Fifteen years of experience with the coworking model and the work from home experiment offer field tests of design elements for learning what makes a workspace appealing and effective to the people using it.

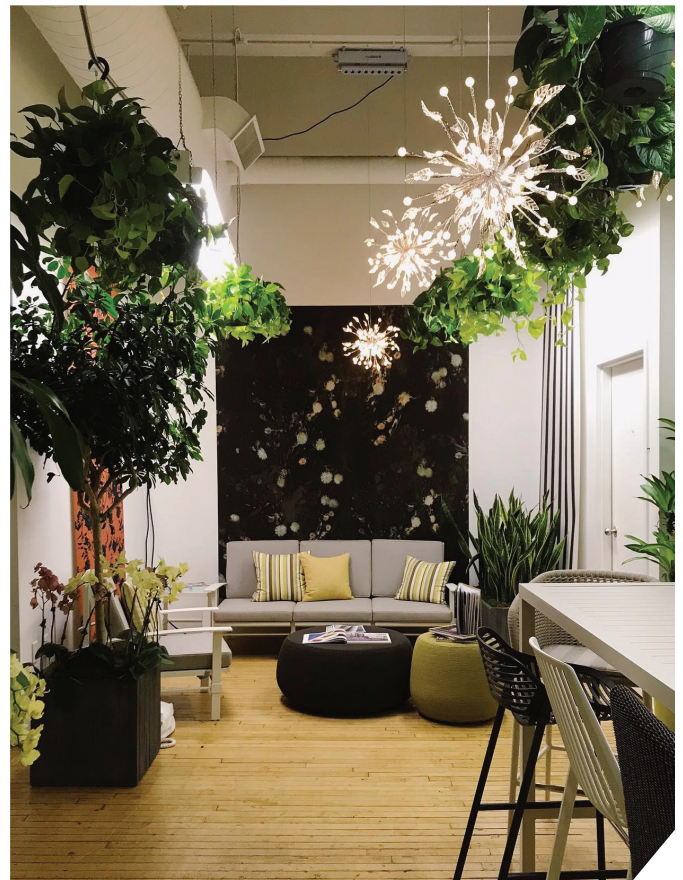
Workplaces can leverage a hybrid model using current space, focused on the most valuable uses:

- **Collaborative spaces**
- **Spaces for small work groups**
- **Individual space as employees move between home and work**

Why do people thrive in coworking spaces? In a 2015 Harvard Business Review article, researchers surveyed several hundred workers using dozens of coworking spaces across the U.S. They learned:

- People who use coworking spaces value being part of a community.
- Users value their autonomy, flexibility, and job control.
- Remote workers care more about their work and consider it more meaningful.

The success of coworking spaces depends on delivering a workplace experience preferable to the traditional office or the work from home model.



Design researcher Dr. Imogen Privett with the Helen Hamlyn Center for Design at the Royal College of Art in London examined successful aspects of coworking space design to determine whether they might be transferable to the corporate work environment.

Key findings from her study, “What Can The Coworking Movement Bring To The Design of the Corporate Workplace?”

- Borrow the model used by retail and hospitality providers to marry space and people management to create an experience extending beyond the physical walls to all potential iterations.
- Implement user-centered design based on behavioral evidence.
- Provide multi-functional, flexible space with the ability to make continuing small changes to adapt to unexpected users or unanticipated user behavior.
- Apply a bottom up approach to the design of space by giving the user community input into the process to understand their perspective on needs and values.

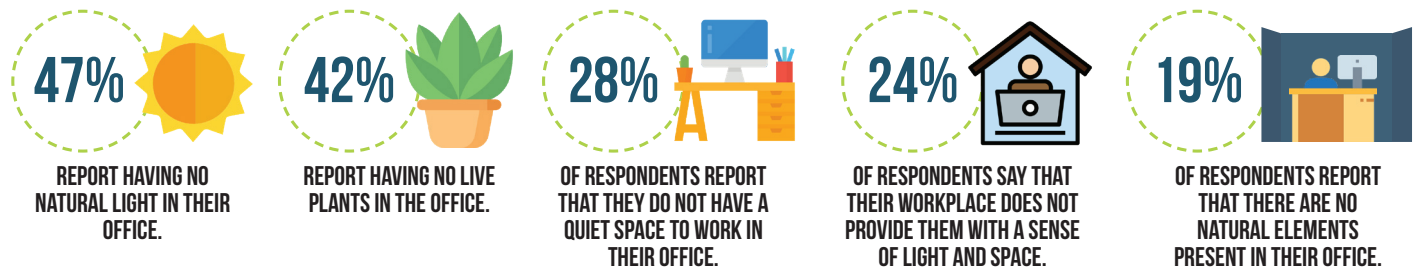
Draw on the hybrid model of design, borrowing from the best from hospitality, member clubs, educational spaces, retail, leisure and home environments.

One year after her study was published, its principles got a field test. The mass work from home (WFH) model now drives intense interest in retaining WFH as a desirable workforce option due to the quality of the user experience.



TOOLS FOR RETHINKING POST-PANDEMIC WORKPLACE DESIGN

In the 2015 Human Spaces report, employees were asked to describe the office space around them.



Getting employees back to the workplace is not merely a function of sanitation and satisfying government guidelines. Economists and organizational psychologists recognize it is a human resources challenge unlike any before.

Human resources professionals are scrambling to find solutions. They acknowledge needing guidance and inspiration using the best elements of good design to create new workplaces emphasizing community, collaboration, choice, comfort, and wellbeing as an economic lifeline and driver.

While employees believe they are productive in a remote working environment, they still need and value collaboration. If their employers can provide appealing, productive spaces, employees will enthusiastically return to the workplace to interact with their colleagues for at least a portion of the work week.

Biophilic design elements can provide a common language for discussion. It is essential to begin the conversation of incorporating biophilia such as plants and greenery into the process. Our environment has a direct impact on our psychological, biological, and sociological wellbeing – and our business wellbeing.

Workplace design must support health outcomes, not just physically but behaviorally. Early in the pandemic, the focus was on safety from disease. Now that COVID-19 seems headed for a lengthy endemic phase like seasonal flu, employers are turning their attention to the biggest issue confronting them: attracting and retaining employees.

After two years under the weight of enormous pandemic stress, working adults have been forced to make their emotional and mental health a priority. Many joined what's been called "The Great Resignation." Three times as many employees over 60 retired in 2020 and 2021 than anticipated. Service industry workers said no to difficult working conditions for low pay. Millennial and Gen-Z employees sought better jobs.

Workplace wellbeing is no luxury. It must be a priority. Without healthy employees, there is no innovation, collaboration, productivity, or profits.

Human resources professionals can turn to partners among the greenery professional community who can help with cost-effective solutions to create appealing, comfortable, collaborative workplaces drawing employees back to the office.





Inspiration Borrowed From Hospitality and Coworking

As employers make offices more inviting for a returning workforce, look for inspiration from hospitality and coworking.

This so-called “resimercial” approach applies home-like hospitality in an office setting. “Our clients have a new sense of urgency to make employees enjoy their surroundings,” said Jim Mumford, owner of Good Earth Plant Company in San Diego, California. “Before, the goal was how efficiently you could add worker cubicles. Now, we’re asked to create a comfortable, plant-filled collaborative workspace people choose to work in.”

American Assets Trust (AAT), Inc., a full service, vertically integrated and self-administered real estate investment trust based in San Diego, California, develops and manages premier office, retail, and residential properties throughout the United States. AAT is embracing this approach.

Marcelle McAfee, AAT senior property manager, said “There’s a lot of desire for tenants and tenants’ employees to have a place where they want to come to work and feel comfortable coming to work. We did an overall renovation to make our headquarters building seem a lot more contemporary. We decided to incorporate plants because incorporating plants really softens a property, which makes it feel more homey, and more welcoming.”

The transformation is dramatic. “Having people come back into the property is not only important for our restaurant tenants, but just in general to get people together again. I find that plants really associate an environment with health. I hope that what we’re doing here helps make people feel comfortable with coming back into an office environment, and want to be someplace that looks nice, and also has a good feel to it,” said McAfee.

Christina Keegan, AAT construction property manager, added “It’s a completely different feel than what was originally here. The plants really kind of elevate it to the next level.”

Greenery and plants can become part of a resimercial post-pandemic design plan:

- Position plants at the entrance for a welcoming, friendly first impression.
- Use portable plants for flexibility in quickly and easily defining and re-defining collaborative meeting spaces.
- Plants are for employees, just not visitors. Move plants into areas and make them visible from the places where employees do the most amount of work.
- Place plants in restrooms and break rooms.
- Desktop plants can upgrade the hoteling or hot-desking model by enriching the space.

People Crave Connection, Community, and Comfort

When people choose to gather socially, where do they go? They gather in homes, restaurants, cafes, lounges, and parks.

Mandates issued by employers for a return to unappealing workspaces will have unintended consequences. Skilled employees will find new jobs providing flexibility in how and where they work.

Former Harvard Business School dean Dr. Nitin Nohria proposed in the Wall Street Journal that today's office should be reimagined as a "clubhouse," where people gather to socialize, interact, and share ideas.

The benefits of biophilic design in the built environment provide proven tools businesses desperately need in the post-pandemic era environment to encourage their employees to return to the collaborative work environment.

Research into the benefits of biophilic design through more than 50 studies provides newly useful evidence for employers and HR managers searching for solutions.

"Our findings emphasize the dramatic impact that even simple changes to incorporate nature in the workplace can have on how employees feel when they come to work, and how happy, creative and productive they feel when they are working. This should encourage organizations to consider these effects and take action to incorporate biophilic design practices into the workspace."
-- Human Spaces, 2015

In a 2014 study using field experiments in large commercial offices in The Netherlands and the U.K. by Dr. Christopher Knight and his colleagues for the American Psychological Association, enhanced worker performance outcomes were observed when offices were enriched by plants.

Knight reports plants, natural light, and giving people the ability to tune into the normal changes in light as the day progresses makes them happier. Employees are psychologically engaged and better able to perform. When people are locked away from the natural rhythms of the day, they feel disoriented and suffer negative effects on their circadian rhythms.

The researchers hypothesized plants represented a symbolic commitment to a clean office environment, even outside any measurable data. Because people understand plants can improve air quality, workers may believe they're breathing cleaner air and working in a healthier environment. A workspace with plants may also give employees the belief their company's management cares about their wellbeing.

While it might have been easy to dismiss wellbeing as simply a personal matter in the past, employers would do well to embrace the comforts its employees value working at home with the community and collaboration they crave in the office, gaining the best performance from the best of both models of work.

Installation of workplace greenery within an existing project adds less than one percent of your interior buildout budget.

**One month
of professional plant
care costs less than
buying lunch for
employees once
a month – the
equivalent of a
single premium
espresso coffee
per day.**





HUMAN RESOURCES AND DESIGN PROFESSIONALS CAN LEAD

Healthy places support healthier people. Healthy people fuel a healthy economy. Supporting the American workforce is vital to the nation's ability to thrive. It can be argued it is also vital to prevent a national mental health crisis.

Healthier workplaces are front and center. Access to fresh air, natural light, and comfortable spaces encouraging collaboration will give employees confidence in their work environment's safety.



ERIC COREY FREED

Architect Eric Corey Freed, RA LEED Fellow, EcoDistricts AP, LFA, Senior Vice President and Director of Sustainability for the global architectural firm CannonDesign, is enthusiastic about the opportunity ahead. "Can you think of a better

time in modern history than to rethink the office, transportation, commuting, and work life balance than right now?" said Freed.

"The pandemic has thrust this upon us, but it's giving us the chance to redesign. Forcing everyone to work from home has been a boon in productivity. Now we're trying to find a way to get them to work less and find work-life balance. If we imagine the office as a respite from home, it will be relief to go in one or two days a week... plus it has that cool living wall and better coffee."

Freed says human comfort must be a priority. "Biophilic design can do a lot of these things. It's a nascent, emerging field."

"I've never had anyone say, 'ugh, get these plants out of here.' Biophilic design ideally incorporates nature throughout the design. This is an investment in their space. You'll be able to do more with less space. You'll see a boost in productivity."

Freed says architects and allied design professionals have changed into roles as facilitators for the process. "We are facilitating those discussions for our clients right now. We are building their 'Back to work after COVID' plans because we understand the space and material needs they have. We are creating road maps of whatever this new normal needs to be for them."

CONCLUSION

Psychologist and architect John Fraser points to the survival tactics of the restaurant industry, designed for the purpose of encouraging people to gather together.

“If you look at the way restaurants are evolving with use of outside space and plants, workspaces can do this too. The more we think about office space reflecting the environment we’re in, this future is possible,” said Fraser.

“The real thing is to get those conversations going about what we do in the aftertimes,” says Fraser. We need to come back different.”

Creating a nature-based environment with plants and natural materials encouraging employees to gather and collaborate in workspaces they enjoy is not only feasible, but essential to business survival.

“People overwhelmingly prefer workplaces with natural light, but plants require it for their survival,” said Shane Pliska, president of Planterra in Detroit, Michigan. “So, I think of the plant as the canary for the healthy modern workplace. If there is enough light for plants to thrive, then people will thrive, too.”

Fraser advises, “Using light, air, and nature; these are the things we need to start over. Start again because we can.”

The American Institute of Architects (AIA) embraced many of these principles in its 2020 Policy Platform.

“Plants can be luxurious, but they are not extravagant,” explains Pliska. “In my experience, most overestimate the cost to maintain live beautiful plants in a typical office. For ordinary office plants, the cost to maintain your greenery for an entire month is less than buying your office lunch once per month.

“When you look at these new beautiful co-working spaces, they all have plants. And of all the fixtures and furnishings, the plants are the least expensive design element.”

Working with design professionals and facilities managers, human resources managers can lead their companies in create working spaces with a renewed emphasis on personal wellbeing.

Workplace culture based on wellness contributes to a robust economy and improved lives for everyone involved. A well-designed space with natural elements makes it easier to recruit talented employees in a competitive environment by providing a workplace that is energy lifting, instead of soul-draining.

Companies have a chance to develop the culture employees have always craved. There is no turning back from this transformational experience we have all experienced from the pandemic.



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