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The F-Word @Work: Flexibility

This is the second in a three-part series on how people, workplaces, and cities can work better post-Covid. Follow the Work Better Project on LinkedIn.

Work is a team sport. That means we need to be together, at least sometimes. And that means we'll continue to need places to work together - online and in-person.

This article focuses on organizations - how they are rethinking and redesigning teams and workplaces to work better. The future won't be one-size-fits-all. Your office space and configuration should be based on your organization's values, needs, and employee input.

What you'll learn:

- Why the f-word, flexibility, is the key to working better.

- The five root questions that are more important than where people work, and will guide you in redesigning a more connected, aligned, and highly functioning organization.

- What to ask employees and managers about how to work better.

- How innovative teams and organizations are "trying stuff" and learning to work better.
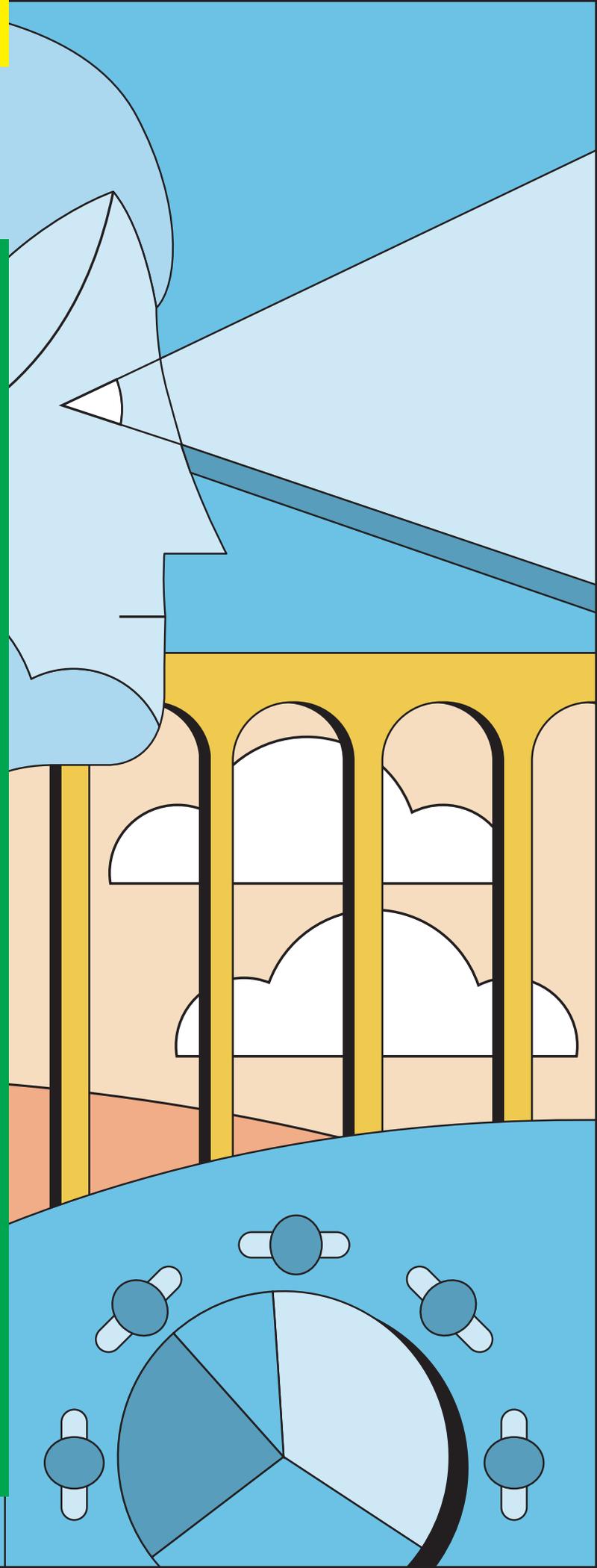
Leaders, Start Here

Remember when the Covid vaccine was rolling out, and you were deciding when you'd bring everyone back to the office? It was a comfort to think that everything could go "back to normal," wasn't it.

But it didn't work out, did it?

That's because too much had changed - for employees, for families, and for society.

(Pssst, our first article lays all of this out.)

Now consider this: It's physically impossible to go backward and move forward simultaneously. This article is for those of you who want to move forward, who accept that - as we wrote in our first article - the toothpaste is not going back into the tube.

You'll probably never, ever again have all employees in the office every day. If you can accept this, you're ready to move forward.

Many things are more important than where your people work, like why you work together, what your clients value most, the kind of organization you're striving to become, and the kind of culture you want to create.

These are the root issues. When you clearly understand these, the decision about how and where your teams work will become self-evident.

Root Questions for Leaders and Managers

Instructions: Reflect on these five questions. Talk with your Board, leadership team, and high-potential employees about them. When you have clarity on these, you're much closer to figuring out your organization's future of work.

Why does our organization exist? What is our noble purpose? (If we didn't exist, what would the impact be?)

How do we create value for our clients, customers, residents, or members? Where is that value created? Is our value to clients changing, and how?

What are our core values? (This is not what's written on a wall or in the employee handbook. What values-in-action are people rewarded for. When push comes to shove, what do we care more about than anything else?)

What kind of culture are we trying to create? How are we fostering connection and empowering contribution?

If we offer remote-first, remote-friendly, or hybrid work, what does that offer us, and what is required to do that well?

What will make the workplace equitable between those who commute to the office and those who work remotely?

If you can't see your employees daily, how do you know they're being productive?

What must happen for employees to trust each other in a hybrid or remote environment?

After you've completed your answers to each question, ask "How can our workplace reinforce this?" Here's a sample of how one organization did this:

Table 1: Root Answers and Workplace Applications

Root Answers	How our workplace reinforces this
Purpose: To leave the world better for future generations	A mural of our employees' and clients' kids, grandkids (and great grandkids!), with birth years, and their ages in 2100, to personalize and humanize our work.
Value to clients: take the long view, connect them to their legacy. That takes place during in-person and remote meetings, but most of the value unfurls over time as they implement the long range plans that we've created together.	- Weekly "Headlines" at all-hands meeting to share client news - On LinkedIn, track our clients' successes, and share them in our LinkedIn updates and newsletters - Annually: Send all clients our favorite book about long term futures, e.g. The Good Ancestor - Annually: Client-only "Long View" meeting, to share our perspective and discuss their questions about long term futures
What are our Core Values: Wow! - We give clients 9s and 10s We go the extra mile We are positive We have a growth mindset We use the power of teamwork	Annual all-hands staff meeting includes partners/spouses. At the opening dinner, we do "Five Toasts" - any employee or spouse/ partner can make a toast to share a time when they saw our five values in action.
The culture we're trying to create: a calm company, where people have the autonomy, collaboration, and tools to do great work that leaves a positive, lasting impact	- Minimal disruptions, e.g. One weekly all-hands meeting on Mondays at 10 AM - Office hours by appointment only - Five-six weeks paid time off, because well-rested employees are more productive
Remote/hybrid? We are remote	**Opportunities:** - Recruit talent from anywhere (global reach) - Minimal overhead - Employees have more autonomy over their work and schedule **Requires of us:** - More intentional onboarding opportunities to get to know teammates - Annual all-hands & partner/spouse meeting to deepen relationships $1,000 one-time home office set up or optional honorarium for coworking space/stipend - Clear timelines and work expectations - More time invested in clear communication, including Q&A,work sessions to hammer out issues and ideas

Responding to the Root Questions helps you clarify whether, or how, an office serves your organization's core values and purpose.

How your office is used should also inform its design. For this, we turn to employees and managers.

What to Ask Employees - 9 Questions

The following questions will help you understand how employees work and how they feel at work, to reveal how in-office or remote options can help them make a greater contribution and feel more connected.

Connection questions

1. What are your organization's values? Where do you see them at work?

2. On a scale of zero (embarrassed/not proud at all) to 10 (completely proud), how proud do you feel to work for your organization?

   a. If less than a "6," - what would it take for you to feel greater pride at work?

3. Do you feel connected to your coworkers and/or managers?

   Please explain.

4. What spaces in your office foster connections for you and those you're connected to?

5. What spaces limit or prohibit connection?

Contribution questions

6. Think about the contributions you make in an average week at work. You may want to refer to last week's calendar.

   a. *What percentage of your work is heads-down/ individual work?*

   b. *What percentage is heads-up/collaborative work?*

   c. *When you work with others, what is the normal size of the group? Does this group need a dedicated office space for its collaboration, or is it hybrid (some in-person/some remote) or is it completely remote?*

   d. *Do you need a quiet space to work?*

   e. *Do you need privacy or a place to have a private phone or zoom call?*

   f. *Do you need privacy when meeting with others? A soundproof conference room, for instance?*

   g. *Do you need technology that's only available at the office?*

   h. *Which areas in the office do you use most, and for what tasks?*

   i. *Which areas do you never use and could do without?*

   j. *Do you need a dedicated workstation or office to come to when in the office?*

7. Think about others you know, e.g., your family and friends, and how they're working - whether in-office, hybrid, or remote. Is there anyone whose set-up you really envy? What do you envy about their situation? Is there anything your organization could adopt or adapt from your example?

8. Remote and hybrid work

   - *What percentage of time would you prefer to work in the office, and what percentage would you prefer to work remotely?*

   - *As technology advances:*

     - *What tasks could you do remotely, and how often do you perform those tasks, i.e. daily, per week, or per month?*

     - *What tasks are better suited to an in-office setting and how often do you perform those tasks?*

   - *When we were in High COVID, most people were forced to work from home.*

     - *What (if anything) do you miss about your WFH situation?*

     - *What (if anything) did you miss about coming to work and working in the office?*

9. Would you be willing to serve on an employee task force that will design new ways to work better?

Additional Questions for Supervisors and Managers

Supervisors and managers work "in the middle" - between top-level leadership and frontline employees - and have a unique perspective of each party's wants and needs.

1. What level of trust do most employees have in leadership, from a scale from zero (distrust) to ten (complete trust.)

2. What level of trust do most leaders have in employees, from a scale from zero (distrust) to ten (complete trust.)

3. If you could wave a magic wand and immediately implement ONE idea that would have a positive impact on employees' connection or contribution, what would it be?

4. What spaces in the office could be added, changed, or eliminated to foster more trust, connection, or contribution?

After managers and employees have responded to their surveys, an organization can start to plan wisely for their office use.

Questions To Figure Out How to Use Your Office

1. Do we need a space all our own? If so, does it need to be branded to our purpose and core values? What could that look like?

2. If we have more space than we need:

   - *Could this be a sharable space that we could sublet to partners or vendors or to those who could bring a "spark" to our office, e.g., startups, creatives, nonprofits, artists?*

   - *Could unused space be hospitality space that we could rent, or we could use to host partners, clients, etc.?*

3. If we downsize or eliminate office space, what can we do with that savings?

   - *Use it to help employees outfit their home offices?*

   - *Subsidize monthly memberships at coworking offices, for employees who want or need dedicated workspace, e.g. WeWork or Radious?*

   - *Invest it in monthly, quarterly, or semi-annual all-hands meetings?*

4. How does our office serve our work? Looking at the employee and manager survey results:

   - *How do employees want and need to gather? How often? How big are the groups? Does our office accommodate that?*

   - *Do we collaborate here?*

   - *Do we need space to spread out and do our work?*

   - *Do we entertain clients here?*

   - *Do we socialize here?*

   - *Do we need to check in with other humans here?*

At its best, your workplace is a physical representation of your culture, values, and aspirations. A great work environment makes people feel more alive and connected, a place where people want to be.

CASE STUDY: Chicago Law Firm

In the word of the Chief People Officer

How often do you get to redefine how you do everything?

Since March 2020, my job has been to guide the firm through Covid, and now post-Covid. There is no "going back." The question is, "How are we moving forward?"

Our "Office Presence Plan" was simple: no one would be forced to come back into the office. By 2023, we'll have half of the square footage we had pre-Covid. We've redesigned an atmosphere that will attract people to the office.

Tuesdays and Wednesdays are when teams in two of our practices meet at the office. Tuesdays and Thursdays, two other practices use the office. The message is, "Please come in if you'd like to interact with people."

We have six Firm Investment Days throughout the year when we have no client work between 10 and 3. We fly everyone in, host one anchor event in the morning, and then have team meetings the rest of the day.

2020 and 2021 were the firm's two most successful years. Why? We have great people with creative mindsets and we trust each other. We are a culture-forward firm, and it's my job to help define that.

Overcoming Challenges: "Our Work Cannot Be Done Remotely"

Some business owners and leaders are skeptical about hybrid or remote work. They say, "Our work cannot be done remotely." When we ask, "Why?", they say:

- "People need to know that our doors are always open, and they know where to find us."

- "Our work hinges upon the value of being able to read the room, to pick up and react to body language. These are things that younger people in our firm don't know yet, partially because of lack of experience and partially because they haven't worked in an in-person environment yet."

These heartfelt responses aren't wrong. And they're also not right.

Management by Intention

Whether you have a real office door in a real office, or you do office hours on Zoom, your office door can always be open.

"Being open" has more to do with one's posture towards others. If you're open and accessible, it means you respond to texts and slack messages. It means you show up and listen actively during one-on-ones or team meetings. You're present with your people, not distracted or distracting.

In fact, putting some structure around your "open door" can be good for you and others.

- For you, it helps you structure your time, so you can make your highest contribution and do deep work.

- For others, they know when they can reliably drop in and see you, without worrying that they're interrupting your other work.

Idea: Office hours

In college, professors had office hours so students could drop in and ask questions. Rebecca's team - and many other teams - do the same thing. Here's how it works: Rebecca hosts office hours every Tuesday and Thursday from 1-4 PM CT. Anyone can schedule time directly in her calendar using calendly. If these hours don't work (international meetings require early mornings), she'll work directly with those special cases.

The benefit to Rebecca is that her mornings are preserved for creative, focused client work. The benefit to others is that they can find a time that works for them and book directly into Rebecca's calendar, saving time going through an intermediary. This has saved over 1,500 emails in the years since Rebecca's team implemented the system.

What about you? Imagine if your organization had "Office Hours:"

- "Office hours are Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday 8-4, Monday and Friday, by appointment only"

- "To schedule your appointment, click here". You can give your clients the option to schedule an online appointment or an in-person appointment.

- "To ensure the person you need to speak to is in the office, make an appointment with us!"

This is a friendly way to be available, putting control in the hands of the person who wants to meet with you. Most people understand Office Hours and appreciate clarity about when and how they can get ahold of you, even remotely. (Heck, people have visits with their DOCTORS online!)

Proximity and Employee Life Stage

There are times, especially during new employee onboarding and orientation, when proximity to mentors and teammates greatly impacts the new employee's sense of connection and contribution, and the longer term, will impact their career development and growth. This sensitive period in an employee's life needs consideration and intention.

Idea: Intentional Onboarding

Some companies and organizations ask senior staff to take shifts during certain months (even years in some professions) and be a person or group's primary mentor(s). This is designed intentionally.

Questions for Mentors:

- What's the right rhythm and duration for employee onboarding? Does in-person training or mentoring have to be every day? Can you target three days of the week for 3 weeks for onboarding training? Available the other days via Zoom or Teams?

- What parts of mentoring or onboarding are best done in-person and which can be done effectively remotely via Zoom or Teams? Remember, sometimes work benefits from not having to commute to see each other, in person.

- What can you learn from recently onboarded or mentored staff? What doesn't work well, in-person or remotely? What doesn't work well, in person or remotely? What have they heard from other young professionals about this work that is traditionally done in-person? What tools or technology could help the team communicate, connect, learn, and contribute most effectively?

At the core of all high-trust teams are clear communication, compromise, and flexibility. Although more experienced staff often appreciate the ability to work remotely, they also understand the need for in-person meetings at crucial times. And new employees who see their mentors and supervisors make the effort will notice and pay it forward when their time comes. Finally, being intentional about designing onboarding and mentoring that works for both parties demonstrates your commitment to work-life integration, flexibility, and mutual respect that builds sustainable, high-performing teams.

When are the critical times when your people need to be together, when people need to be in a room to read the room? How can you be intentional about building those experiences?

IDEA: Trailblazer Ranch

Salesforce is committed to a "Success From Anywhere" culture, and knows that being together matters. When they announced Trailblazer Ranch in February 2022, they took employee onboarding to a whole new level.

"We need to bring back the spontaneity and joy that comes from being together in person, now. [...] Trailblazer Ranch is an exciting new gathering place where employees can forge trusted relationships with their colleagues, learn from one another, get inspired, grow in their careers, get trained in the company, and give back to the community in a fun and safe environment. [...] located on 75 acres in the beautiful Redwoods of Scotts Valley, California. We will host onboarding, training, skills building, and talent development, bringing our employees together to connect in person."

Global CRE Leaders: Flexibility is now mission critical

"Organizations need to transform their workplace model because flexibility is not a passing phase."

77%

agree/strongly agree that offering remote/hybrid working will be critical to attracting and retaining talent

45%

consider collaborative working to be one of the primary purposes of office space

42%

plan to invest in increasing the amount of flex space in the portfolio

57%

say their #1 strategic objective is to operationalize hybrid work models to support agility and flexibility

MillerKnoll

Insights

Key insights from our customers

Flexibility in where and when people work has become an employee expectation.

Virtually all organizations want to **encourage collaboration** and community.

Employee preferences are often **in conflict** with leadership's priorities.

People-focused concerns are driving the next-phase of offices.

With an uncertain future, **piloting is a popular strategy** to test incremental changes.

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Your Office as Proof of Your Commitment to Climate Action

The way you rethink and redesign your office can send a strong signal about your organization's commitment to healing the planet. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- R3: Reduce, Reuse and Recycle.

    - *Offer and promote onsite recycling, composting, and reuse*

    - *Choose recycled everyday office materials, e.g. the paper in your copier, the compostable forks and plates you use at lunch*

    - *Use things longer, i.e. if you're currently replacing computers every year, switch to every two or three years*

- Partners: Choose vendors, designers, and contractors knowledgeable in sustainable design practices and materials

- Materials: Specify, procure and use sustainable finishes, furnishings, and equipment

Buildings can now recycle and reuse up to 98% of the building. Choose partners who will move construction and demolition waste to reuse and recycling centers.

"The hardest thing is to change our way of thinking. We need to imagine the city as a material bank, conducive to re-use. There are no significant changes. It just takes a little agility and will."

Mathilde Billet, technical director of reuse at Bellastock (footnote 4)

EXAMPLE: Unity Gospel House of Prayer

Unity Gospel House of Prayer (UGHOP) plans to build a new Gymnasium and Community Center on their property, in the Inner City of Milwaukee

In a recent Public Health Panel, the Health Commissioner of Milwaukee gave statistics about the City of Milwaukee demographics: the population of Milwaukee is 577,222 people, the average median income is $46,637 and those graduating with a bachelor's degree or higher was just 27.3%. The City of Milwaukee has the highest concentration of Black or African American population in the greater Milwaukee area and UGHOPs' members are 99% Black or African American.

UGHOP seeks to improve the median income, increase property values, and increase the percentage of people graduating with a bachelor's degree or higher by providing a safe, state-of-the-art facility whose programming consists of education, fitness, mental and physical health, elder care, childcare, community events, and the well-being of all people.

They will do this sustainably by demolishing, recycling, and rebuilding their new facility using ecological design and construction methods, finishes, and furnishings that are sustainable. The center will also create and provide many jobs and be a beacon for the community it serves and Milwaukee at large.

Exciting Pilot Projects Organizations are Trying in Order to Work Better

Corporate America has developed some interesting new concepts. The idea of a "Hubquarters" is often doing away with the traditional headquarters and developing smaller footprints in more locations. A trend initially reserved for the Googles of the world has grown in popularity among corporate clients, because of COVID.

In an article Allwork.Space wrote, "One example is Amazon, which has opened offices in 17 U.S. cities with plans to open six more, while Fujitsu intends to reduce its office footprint by 50 percent while giving employees the option to work from home, a hub or satellite offices closer to where they live." (footnote 2)

According to the Small Business Association of Michigan, (footnote 3), "some benefits of the hubquarters model include:

- Avoids having a large, empty office with only a few employees occupying the space on any given day

- Offers employees various places to work in-person with colleagues or independently

- Hubquarters take up less space and require less energy thereby

- Reduces the organization's carbon footprint by reducing commutes

- Offers increased flexibility for workers

Smaller businesses are also looking at this idea of a hubquarters, but on a smaller scale. It does not even have to be an actual branded space, shared workspaces work well for this concept as they often offer a variety of workspaces and can grow or shrink in square footage, as needed, often on short notice.

Inclusive Placemaking as a Piloting Strategy

The best spaces, small or large, are those that reflect the values and beliefs of the organization. Earlier in this article, we talked about listening to your team, providing the opportunities and flexibility that will respond to their needs and wants in the workplace, and the space that responds to those comments. Below, we outline (2) workspaces that we've completed and how we collectively tried something different.

In both case studies, we conducted surveys and opened them up to the entire company. We recorded this into a research-finding report that tallied up answers but also recorded what people said, which varied from general to specific preferences. When the project was completed, participants saw themselves in the end result. This collective sense of ownership is a profound part of inclusive placemaking. It is the physical manifestation of differentiating your brand. The goal is always for us to create a space and place that all are proud of. It needs to reflect your unique brand, values, and beliefs. And it is a space where all in the organization feel welcome, safe, seen, and encouraged to do their best work.
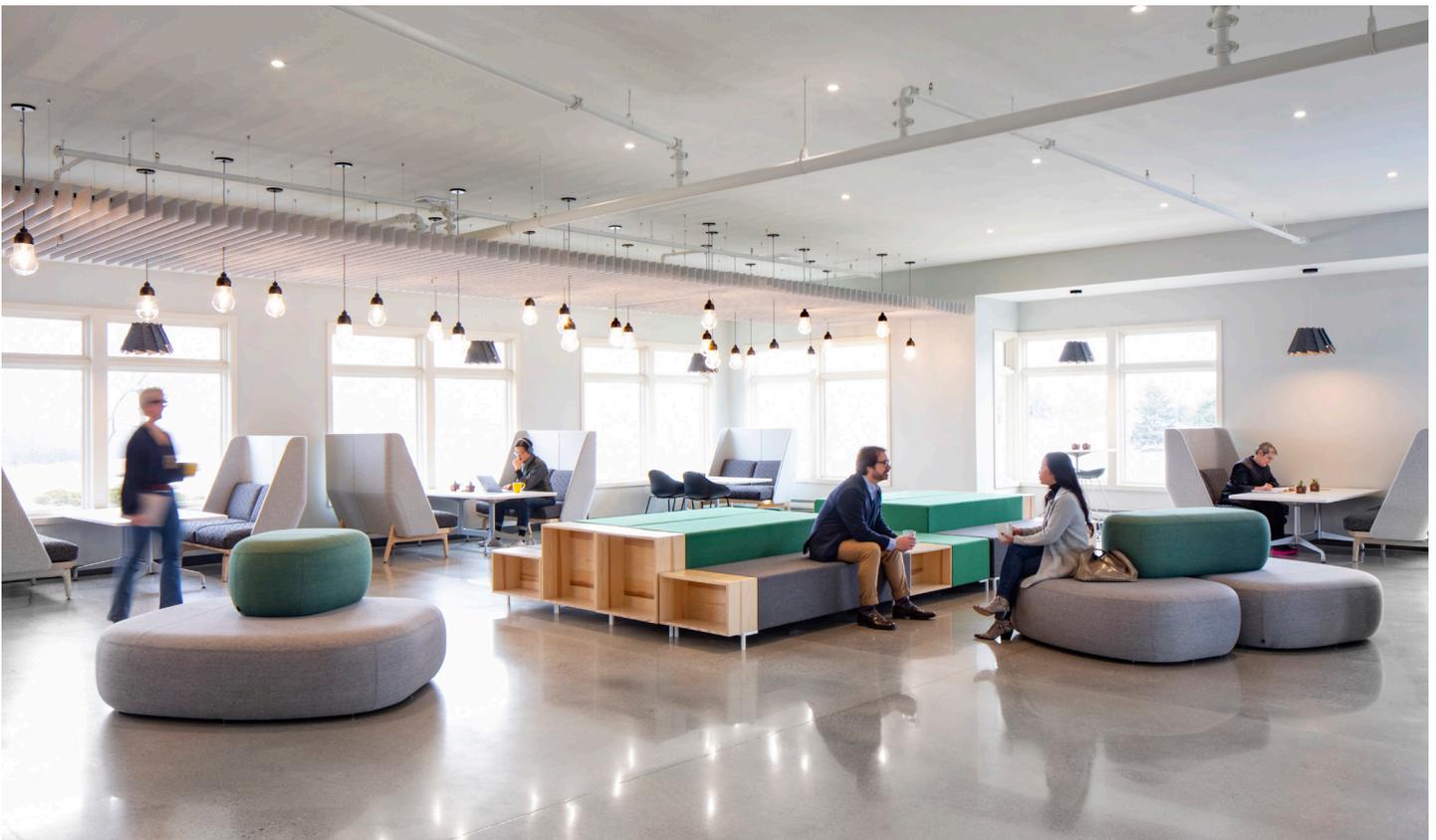
Headquarters:
Grafton, Wisconsin

Employees:
500 across four locations

What problem was the client trying to solve?

How to create a post-Covid learning center where employees at any level - from the shop floor to the corporate offices - would feel safe, welcome, and be in an environment of learning and growth

Workplace Feature	Benefit to Employees
Fireplace upon entry No reception desk - technology-enabled access	Welcoming, inviting No barrier/friction to using the space
Large, open spaces with flexible furniture that can be reconfigured according to need	For plant workers, used during breaks, before and after work For office workers, another place to work
Pocket and Fireplace Lounges	Still part of the open space, but quieter and easy to configure furniture for collaboration or viewing something on a large monitor
Studio	Multipurpose room for yoga, stretching, meditation and other uses
Kitchen	Large, collaborative kitchen where employees can learn about nutrition health, host events and socialize with mentors and peers
Training Room	Perfect for lecture, classroom-type learning or large conference-type meeting
Computer Lab	Access to a computer if you don't have one at home
Coaching rooms	For one on one counseling or advice
Wellness rooms	Self-care and nursing mothers

Headquarters:
Waukesha, Wisconsin

Employees:
500+

What problem was the client trying to solve?

The main headquarters was bursting at the seams and the Human Resources, Accounting, Safety, and Claims Departments needed a new home. Since all new employees come to this building, onboarding training occurs here. This is the first of many buildings on this campus to be renovated during COVID, so the company embraced the post-COVID considerations and this will serve as a pilot for future renovations and reorganizations on campus.

Workplace Feature	Benefit to Employees
Branding: Feature walls using rebar, a much-used material in this case study's work Branded walls with photos of employees on the job Large graphic walls with company values	Sense of belonging Company pride Security in knowing they are in a professional and competent place Employee retention - this company cares about my well-being
Collaboration Spaces: Work Cafe Collaboration Lounges Conference Rooms	All employees (regardless of where your dedicated work-space is on the corporate campus) are allowed to use the collaborative spaces.
Lowered cubicle walls	More inclusive environment
Dedicated workspaces or offices	Show of appreciation, have a place that is their own
Phone booths	Place to have a zoom call or phone call where privacy is needed in a collaborative environment
Wellness rooms	Self-care and nursing mothers
No reception desk - technology-enabled access	No barrier/friction to using the space
Lighting that mimics daylight	In the company-wide survey a majority of workers said they appreciated access to natural light when the world was forced to WFH during High COVID

In Closing...

This article is full of ideas to help you re-think and re-design workplaces that work better for more people. In the midst of all this change, remember these three things that should never change, if you're committed to building an organization that lasts:

- a relentless commitment to your customers, clients, residents, or members

- a fierce commitment to your employees' connection and contribution, i.e. connecting their work to the organization's purpose, connecting employees with each other to build strong bonds; and helping employees make their highest contribution

- an atmosphere of growth. Organizations that are always learning are always getting better.

Endnotes:

1. Note: JLL conducted research among 1,095 senior CRE decision-makers across 13 global markets in April and May 2022. All respondents have responsibility for making or influencing decisions regarding corporate real estate within their organization.

2. Allwork: Hybrid Work Gives Rise To A New Type Of HQ: The 'Hubquarters' Remote, hybrid work has given rise to a new kind of flexible workplace: 'hubquarters.' By Jo Meunier November 29, 2021 in CRE

3. A New Kind of Hybrid – Hubquarters December 15, 2021 By Mary E. Corrado, courtesy of SBAM Approved Partner ASE

4. The industry creating a third of the world's waste Extracting materials is wreaking havoc on the planet. Could the world's growing mounds of waste hold the key to sustainable construction? By Norman Miller 15th December 2021 for Future Planet

Gratitudes - The authors thank the following folks for their insight and inspiration:

Dr. Charlie Grantham
Jason Lauritsen
O'Brien McMahon
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