

# HOW WELL-BEING CAN BRING VALUE BACK to In-Office Work



BSA

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In the mid-2010s, the debate on the benefits of hybrid work was in full swing. From the rise of third places like WeWork to the high-profile announcements by major companies to reverse hybrid work options kept the debate fresh and in focus.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, and what was once seen as a choice became a mandate.

Since then, the arguments over the value of hybrid work and its relationship with productivity have subsided little, with research affirming the benefits of work from home but anecdotes and stories fueling suspicions on the option's impact to culture, innovation, and creativity.

The one truth, though, is that four years on since the fear of spreading a deadly communicable virus closed offices and office buildings, hybrid work is a permanent fixture of the work environment. Even for businesses that have called employees back to the office, a 60-40 split between days in the office and out permeates many policies, especially for jobs in the knowledge economy.

The impact on the office real estate market has been profound. Stories of major-market office buildings selling for 45 percent less than their sale price in 2014 dot the landscape. An economic forecast for the U.S. real estate market suggests that office devaluation could reach 43 percent from pre-pandemic highs as long hybrid work remains a popular option for companies and workers.

Yet, reversing this trend for building owners and companies takes more than just a return-to-office mandate. While the threat posed by the Great Resignation has subsided, leaving companies in a better

position to impose such policies, achieving cultural, innovation, and productivity goals through such mandates could prove difficult with a workforce scarred by years of disruption and turmoil.

People's feelings of safety and stability have been shaken, and it goes beyond the threats of COVID-19. From social to political unrest and even recurring mass shootings, the past four years have taken an emotional and psychological toll on many. Working from home not only provides convenience, it also provides a sense of comfort and stability—an environment that they can control.

This is the competition for office space today. As companies bring employees back, they must create a sense of respect and community that recognizes the emotional well-being of staff who live in a normal much different than what they lived in before 2020. By focusing on staff well-being as well as professional needs, they can foster the creative and innovation desired from a vibrant office environment.

## Providing Choice to Promote Control

At the base of the pyramid in Maslow's hierarchy of needs lies food, water, shelter, breathing, and clothing. While the elements are physical, Maslow labeled them as psychological under the belief that people must first fulfill the need to survive before they can fulfill their other needs that range from safety to self-esteem and self-actualization.

In the design of space, the theory applies: "if you don't take care of the basic needs, then you can't foster the more complex needs, including creativity and innovation."



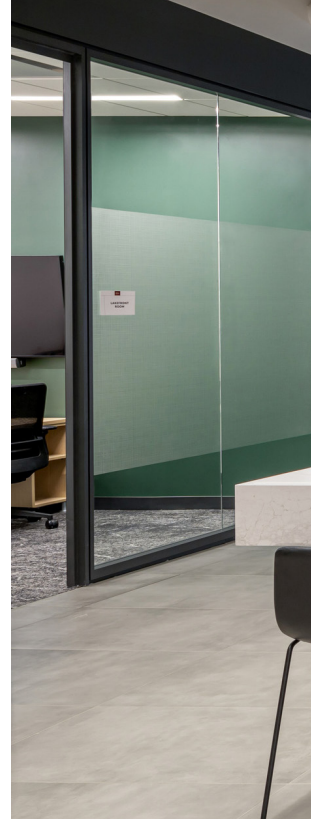
Supporting the need to feel safe in a space, especially emotionally safe, is pivotal in opening employees to collaboration, build relationships, trust, and innovate. From feeling safe expressing ideas to feeling comfortable expressing individual personalities, the psychological safety fostered by the office environment contributes to the collective spirit that supports staff taking risks and collaborating naturally.

Choice matters when creating the environment supporting the individual and larger team. Actual or perceived control is essential for an individual's well-being. Providing staff with choices about where and how to engage can make adopting policies for in-office interactions more palatable. Even when based

in science, policies promoting in-office work should be based on people's needs for choice and control, with spaces for interaction and the technology in those spaces speaking to that need.

The strategies that can promote a psychologically safe environment are both directive and physical:

- Recognizing which aspects of work can be conducted effectively virtually—supported by in-office technology—and which aspects of work benefit from in-person interaction, companies optimize productivity and job satisfaction empowering staff to choose where to work.



- Providing engaging spaces that encourage in-person interaction enable people to ideate more readily when physically present, nurturing organizational creativity and innovation.
- Featuring large welcoming spaces gives staff a place to gather and celebrate achievement, fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose while also promoting open communication among team members.

Choice about when to be in the office gives the sense of control that builds staff self-esteem and shows a respect for the employee. The sense of control also extends into the office through the design of the space.

### **Promoting Well-Being Through Respect**

Respecting a variety of work preferences is vital to creating engaging spaces. People are diverse, and the way they prefer to work reflects that diversity. By acknowledging and accommodating the variety of styles through which people accomplish their jobs, companies foster a culture of inclusivity and respect, creating an environment where employees feel valued for their unique contributions.

The strategy is to think beyond a static environment to see the office as something active and flexible. Modular furniture, movable partitions, and flexible meeting spaces allow for dynamic configurations tailored to specific activities, providing optimal space utilization.

Creating designated collaboration zones with comfortable seating, writable surfaces, and integrated technology encourages spontaneous interactions and fosters creativity and innovation. A visual connection to nature can improve engagement and attentiveness while circadian rhythm lighting can increase productivity in low sun times of the year.

Biophilic design principles can reduce stress, boost productivity, and enhance overall employee satisfaction as well as improve the aesthetic appeal of the space. Natural light, foliage, and organic materials like natural wood and stone can create a calming and inspiring environment that supports in-person interactions.

At the same time, the balance between feeding the extrovert while taking care of the introvert has taken on a new focus as people have spent many years working in individual environments. Clear sightlines to visual objectives, destinations, and pockets of refuge help



people take care of their introverted tendencies by pointing to space for time away to cocoon and recharge physically and mentally.

WELL Building principles integrate many of these holistic strategies that promote physical, mental and emotional well-being. The post-pandemic-developed WELL Health-Safety Rating also gives organizations and building owners a tool to demonstrate their focus on well-being to staff and clients.

### Generating a Sense of Ownership

From a policy-development perspective, involving employees in the decision-making process fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment, leading to increased adherence and understanding of in-office guidance. This collaborative approach enhances safety and strengthens workplace culture and employee satisfaction.

The inescapable fact is that the people coming back to the office today are different than the people who came to the office pre-pandemic. They bring with them a creative energy influenced by years of building resilience, but they also come with concerns and

suspensions, whether that is about air quality, others' views, and what the future holds. Companies focusing on indoor air quality, acoustics, thermal comfort, access to healthy food options, and spaces for relaxation and meditation send a clear message that employee well-being and health are a serious focus.

Companies and building owners face a daunting future in this new environment where work is permanently dispersed. Examining the needs of today's workforce who want a partner in supporting their well-being as much as an employer providing engaging and exciting work, organizations can nurture a desire among staff to come back together, and in that, also protect the investment they have made in the spaces to facilitate such work.

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