NURA·SPACE



The evolution of workplaces: Activity-Based Working models in a hybrid world

What we have learned and where we are headed

Nura Space
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CONTENTS



Introduction 3

Workplace design strategies over the decades 4

Insights from the experts 5

Countries at the forefront of workplace innovation 6

Unpacking Activity-Based Working 9

Hybrid workplace design strategies 10

How the new World of Work influences design 13

Modern workplace challenges and technology 15

Nuances across sectors and business units 16

The future of Activity-Based Working 19

Key success factors for the next phase 21



INTRODUCTION

The workplace landscape has evolved significantly over the past few decades, with different models rising to prominence as organisations seek to optimise both employee needs and operational efficiency.

As business needs shift and we learn more about employee wants, needs and behaviours, the design of the workplace adapts to accommodate them, giving rise to different workplace strategies.

Dating back to the Industrial Revolution of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the emergence of office work and the rise of the white-collar workforce created a workplace vastly different from what we know today. Back then, workplaces demanded loyalty and productivity, while workers fought for an eight-hour workday, fair wages, and better working conditions. Fast forward to today, and the landscape has transformed dramatically. With advances in technology and employee-centric strategies enhancing productivity, employees now demand flexibility, remote work options, and a strong focus on work-life balance. In response, employers emphasise innovation, digital collaboration, and employee experience as key elements of modern work culture.

One such model, Activity-Based Working (ABW), promised a flexible, dynamic environment that would reduce costs and enhance employee engagement. As time went on and hybrid working rose to prominence, the shortcomings of ABW became more apparent.

However, advances in workplace technology and the shift towards hybrid models have addressed many of these issues, offering a more balanced approach that better meets both organisational needs and employee well-being.

This paper will explore the evolution of workplace design strategies right up to the journey from ABW to hybrid working, examining the new phase of ABW and the factors driving the adoption of hybrid models. Drawing on the experiences of major players in the industry, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape of ABW working in synergy with hybrid working.

WORKPLACE DESIGN STRATEGIES OVER THE DECADES

From enclosed cellular offices to hybrid models, eight workplace strategies have shaped how organisations use space.

01

PRE-1950S TO 1960S

Traditional Cellular Offices

Individual enclosed offices for employees, typically organised by hierarchy. Privacy and concentration were the focus, with each employee having a dedicated workspace.

02

1950S TO PRESENT

Open-Plan Offices

Large, open spaces with minimal partitions to encourage collaboration and flexibility. Issues with noise and lack of privacy became apparent over time.

03

1960S TO 1970S

Action Office

The precursor to the modern cubicle. It was designed to be flexible and adaptable, with semi-enclosed workstations that provided some level of privacy while maintaining an open feel.

04

1970S TO 1990S

Cubicle Farms

Individual workspaces in an open environment. The cubicle system offered more privacy than open-plan offices but was criticised for being impersonal and monotonous.

05

1980S TO PRESENT

Hot Desking

Unassigned seating, where employees choose a workspace on a first-come, first-served basis. It was designed to maximise space efficiency but often led to issues with employee satisfaction and the sense of belonging.

06

1990S TO PRESENT

Team-Based Workspaces

Focused on creating spaces where teams could collaborate closely. This model often included a mix of open areas, meeting rooms, and designated team spaces, fostering communication and teamwork.

07

ABW) (LATE 1990S TO PRESENT

Activity-Based Working

ABW introduced the concept of different spaces for different activities, allowing employees to choose where they work based on the task at hand. It aimed to combine the best aspects of open-plan, private, and team-based workspaces, but often faces challenges in practice.

08

2020S TO PRESENT

Hybrid Working Models

Combines remote work with in-office presence, allowing employees flexibility in where and when they work. This model leverages digital tools and flexible workspaces, often as a response to the limitations of ABW.

WHAT HAS DRIVEN THIS EVOLUTION?

INSIGHTS FROM THE EXPERTS

Peter McCamley

Founder, StudioP3

A self-professed 'veteran designer', Peter's workplace design career dates back to 1992. He project-directed Westpac Place, Australia's largest integrated workplace of 75,000sqm, whilst at renowned workplace design studio, Geyer.

Peter has not just witnessed the workplace transformation but has been part of it for more than three decades, so his insights are fascinating.

Peter's take on the stark difference between the workplace at the beginning of his career in the 90's to today can be attributed to a few factors which have brought us to the new World of Work as we know it today:

Breaking down of hierarchies in the workplace. At the beginning of Peter's career, space allocation was more based on job title rather than the actual role someone was performing. Peter reflects on one of his first projects for Bankers Trust, completed in 1992, which incorporated 1800x2400 workstations with a complete wrap-around style and high screens. Another milestone project that followed was Campus MLC by BVN Architecture in the late 1990s. This project advanced the thinking beyond traditional open-plan offices, as the screens came down and the focus shifted to creating settings based on the functions being performed, rather than one's job title.

Shifts in technology. As technology aids us in our job functions; the nature of the desktop has significantly shrunk. Put simply, we no longer need the big deep screens, fixed PCs and ample space for paperwork that limit our agility. We cover this in more detail in the next section.



TEAM-WORK MAKES THE DREAM WORK

"The evolution of how we think of space really took a turn with the cultural shift towards teamwork in the early 2000s. Around this time, workplace settings deliberately became a lot richer and more diverse for the purpose of bringing people together for greater interactions,"

Peter McCamley
StudioP3

Changing leadership attitudes towards culture. Arguably the most influential in this evolution, according to Peter, is the maturing of the way leadership thinks about their culture and the importance of fostering an organisation that's purposeful and connected. This became most pronounced in the early 2000s, where the work environment became more dynamic to encourage meaningful interactions, coinciding with cultural shift towards a team-oriented way of working over individual tasks.

The adoption of Activity-Based Working (ABW). Right up until 2017, there was an emphasis on space based on occupancy and square metres per person, typically 10-12 m^2. Then as ABW took hold, the focus moved away from space per person to the breadth and depth of resources available for employees to perform various tasks. According to Peter, ABW seemed to work well until things got a shake-up when Covid came along and caused us to reevaluate the purpose of the office once again.

Post-pandemic Return to Office (RTO) strategies. Coming out the other side, many organisations are still grappling with how comfortable they are with RTO policies that work best for them, while others are mature enough to go forth and take decisive action.

In effect, hybrid working has seen ABW evolve to become team and activity focussed and less about the individual.

> *"The way I see it, ABW is predominantly based around a work point. They may not own it, but they still have a desk. Whereas with hybrid, the premise is that you come in to work for what you need to do and that may not involve a desk," says Peter.*

COUNTRIES AT THE FOREFRONT OF WORKPLACE INNOVATION

Progressive European countries like Sweden and the Netherlands tend to be automatically considered the most progressive for workplace design. However, all the way on the other side of the world, Australia is making its mark with an arguably more innovative approach to workplace design.

This theory was put to the test when two Australian architects from Hassell toured companies across the globe just before the pandemic hit. Visiting cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Seattle, London, and Amsterdam, they reported in a 2019 article in the Australian Design Review that none of these global hubs surpassed Australia in terms of workplace innovation. This was despite visiting some of the world's most prominent startups and established companies, including Microsoft, Amazon, Airbnb, and WeWork.

According to the 2019 ADR article, Silicon Valley companies sought to compensate for their rows of grey workstations and lack of amenities by tacking on free food, table tennis and beanbags. Australian companies, on the other hand, recognise that attracting and retaining top talent requires more than these add-ons but rather a different proposition altogether.

While the US and UK have historically shaped workplace design trends, recent years have seen these nations increasingly draw inspiration from the more open and flexible work cultures of Australia and the Netherlands. As highlighted in a 2019 article from Workplace Insight, this evolution can be attributed to the shift towards single-tenant buildings that support agile, employee-centric workplaces prioritising collaboration and well-being.

For example, Macquarie Bank's Sydney headquarters in 2009 and Deloitte's The Edge in Amsterdam in 2015, still stand as pinnacles for how corporations can foster social interaction and build strong communities within the workplace.

> **Amanda Stanaway**
> Global Head of User Strategy, ERA-co

As the lead designer of the 2009 Macquarie Bank project in Sydney as Principal at Woods Bagot, Amanda took those learnings to help hundreds of other organisations understand how ABW could fit into their workplace; from NAB to Google to GPT, Fujitsu, GE and more.

Once Australia's major banks transitioned to ABW, this paved the way for other Australian organisations to jump on board and further evolve this concept.



HOW DID AUSTRALIA BECOME A HOTSPOT FOR 'PROGRESSIVE WORKPLACES'?

Australia has emerged as a leader in creating innovative, forward-thinking work environments, with many companies pushing the boundaries of office design. But what exactly has driven this transformation? Several factors contribute to Australia's reputation for progressive workplaces.

01 Shorter lease cycles drive innovation

Firstly, lease cycles in Australia and Asia tend to be shorter than those in Europe and the U.S., where it's not uncommon for large tenants to remain in the same location for over 30 years (Australian Design Review, 2019). This high volume of workplace projects accelerated transformation as companies seek to challenge the status quo, leading to more dynamic and forward-thinking designs.

Donna Wheatley, workplace strategist at Gray Puksand, agrees that a key trigger for rethinking office space often occurs when a lease comes up for renewal, typically every 5 to 10 years. This period prompts property managers and businesses to assess how the space is being used and whether it meets current needs. During this time, they gather feedback, conduct observation studies, and evaluate the effectiveness of the workspace. Based on these insights, they may choose to stay in the existing space but adjust the footprint or layout, or relocate and redesign the office from scratch to better align with new work models and employee needs.

02 Competitive talent market raises the bar

Other theories suggest that talent shortages in Australia, due to our smaller population compared to other Western countries, play a role. The struggle to attract and retain top talent is real in Australia, which raises the bar in workplace design as companies strive to create more appealing workplaces in a competitive environment. The need to create spaces that not only support productivity but also foster collaboration and well-being pushes companies to adopt cutting-edge design strategies that appeal to a modern workforce.

03 Egalitarian workplace culture

Amanda has extensive experience in workplace design across the globe, including the UK, US, and Asia. One aspect that distinctly sets Australian workplace culture apart is its comparatively low emphasis on hierarchy, which has significantly shaped our office spaces and built environments.

In contrast, in regions such as North America and China, where workplace hierarchies are more deeply entrenched, tend to be more resistant to space-sharing concepts like ABW. The cultural emphasis on rank and structure in these regions influences not only how spaces are used but also how they are designed.

UNPACKING ACTIVITY-BASED WORKING (ABW)

Activity-based working (ABW) was originally coined by Dutch consultant Erik Veldhoen, who introduced the concept as a design approach offering diverse work settings tailored to different tasks and activities. Veldhoen expanded on this idea in 2004, leading to its global adoption.

After emerging in Northern Europe in the late 1990s, ABW quickly gained traction in Australia in the early 2000s. Combining the open-plan office concept with its promise of a flexible, dynamic environment, ABW aimed to reduce costs and enhance employee engagement. It soon became the go-to strategy for many large organisations, especially in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, which intensified the focus on cost-saving measures.

While ABW initially promised flexibility and cost savings, it was not without its challenges. Employees grappled with the lack of dedicated workspaces, especially on busy days, while companies struggled to balance employee demands with the right mix of resources.

Then along came the work from home (WFH) directives of 2020 to 2022, and then the return to office (RTO) strategies that followed, changing how we interact with the office and causing us to rethink ABW.

HYBRID WORKING: FROM A SURVIVAL STRATEGY TO A WORKPLACE PHILOSOPHY

Whether by choice or necessity, the pandemic catapulted knowledge-based companies into remote work. Some were prepared, while others had resisted until that point. As time went on, management realised they could trust employees to deliver results remotely, and workers became accustomed to the flexibility it allowed.

As the world began to emerge from the pandemic, for many, there was no turning back to a five-day office routine. At the same time, the return to the office was still a welcome change, helping to bridge the gaps in connection and collaboration. Some companies adopted hybrid work models to appease their employees, while others viewed it as a win-win solution for both productivity and employee satisfaction.

According to all our interviewees, hybrid working is more than a mix of remote and office working, rather it is a workplace design philosophy underpinned by a culture that embraces it.

When viewed as merely a philosophy around workplace attendance, companies miss the raft of benefits stemming from a workplace designed around a hybrid workforce.

> After all, people are a company's biggest cost, real estate second, and both are heavily impacted by hybrid working.

HYBRID WORKPLACE DESIGN STRATEGIES AND THE ROLE OF THE PHYSICAL OFFICE

Sue Solly
Workplace strategy expert, Swinburne University

We sat down with Sue Solly, a workplace strategy expert from Swinburne to discuss how ABW and Hybrid working come together in the new world of work.

Sue's impressive career includes consulting for Deloitte where she helped companies from a variety of sectors map out their workplace design strategy to now consulting at Swinburne University where she works predominantly with HR managers who are transitioning to a permanent hybrid model post-2019 and are focussed on the workplace experience.

Over the years, Sue has seen companies of all sizes roll out their workplace strategy and one key takeaway she has observed is that there is no "one-size-fits-all": what might be true and work for one company, might not suit another. Here are some of the key workplace design strategies she has seen put into practice.

01

Remote first: the office is the "cultural heart" of the business

In this model, employees work predominantly remotely and come into the office to socialise and collaborate in a relaxed setting.

Therefore, the office may be set up more like of a "club lounge" than a traditional office, with fewer formal workstations or meeting rooms. There are more informal meeting spaces and fewer desks because the expectation is that asynchronous tasks are completed remotely, and office time is used as an opportunity to connect and brainstorm with colleagues.

Companies with this model were typically already working this way prior to 2019 and built a strong culture off the back of it, so when the pandemic hit, they were not impacted in any significant way.

02

Office first: the office is the “operational hub” of the business

In this arrangement, employees are either expected to work from the office for a set number of days or mandated to work from the office on certain days as determined by their teams. Or in more rigid settings, remote working is reserved for special circumstances.

In line with ABW, the office offers a mixed array of resources allowing for both focused work and teamwork. In some cases, it may be slightly easier to manage utilisation of these resources due to the predictability of attendance on mandated days. From a cultural perspective, lack of connection and collaboration on these days may lead to feelings of ‘wasted time’ in the office, when time would be better spent at home.

03

Fully flexible: the office is the “collaboration hub” of the business

In a fully flexible working environment, employees are free to work from home or the office as required by their teams or as individuals. It accommodates different personal circumstances, personalities, and ways of working. In this model, it is crucial that the office entices employees to come in by offering resources they wouldn’t find at home, such as meeting spaces, breakout areas and better technology.

The busiest days of the week tend to be Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, with Fridays and Mondays being quieter. So, the challenge then becomes managing resource demand on peak days. With the provision of bookable smart furniture, utilisation can be easily managed by allowing employees to book necessary resources and co-locate with colleagues.

> The physical workplace remains the cornerstone of an organisation; it is what it is used for that differs.

USER FEEDBACK ABOUT ABW IN A HYBRID WORLD

When consulting employees at various companies, Sue has encountered the following feedback:

Noise and distraction

Employees frequently mention the lack of available quiet spaces for focused work and tasks that require concentration. If not adequately addressed, this can lead to the home becoming the preferred environment for such activities.

Compromised video calls

Surprisingly, a persistent issue in ABW hybrid workplaces is the absence of suitable areas for videoconferencing. Often, at least one meeting attendee will be working remotely, requiring the meeting to take place in a space that accommodates remote participants. Conversely, if fewer employees are present in the office and some dial in from their desks, this can distract others. Over time, this leads to a culture where everyone joins video calls from their desks, missing out on in-person interactions and contributing to workplace distractions.

Creating Purposeful In-Office Days

In hybrid workplaces where office attendance is mandated, a common complaint is that coming into work feels like a "tick-box" exercise. While this isn't necessarily a failure of ABW itself, it often stems from poorly implemented workplace policies and a lack of meaningful integration between ABW and hybrid work strategies.



WHAT GEN Z WANT

"Contrary to popular belief that Gen Z prefer working remotely, they actually enjoy coming into the office, provided the environment is conducive to their professional development and need for connection through meaningful interactions."

Sue Solly
Swinburne University

HOW DOES THE NEW WORLD OF WORK INFLUENCE WORKPLACE DESIGN?

Donna Wheatley
Workplace strategist, Gray Puksand

Over Donna's 20-year career, the workplace has changed vastly and continues to evolve at a rapid rate and her lived observations offer an interesting glimpse into our approach to space.

Less quantitative; more investigative

Donna recounts how workplace projects 'back in the day' were predominantly focussed on the quantity of desks and meeting areas they could fit into a given space. It was somewhat of a mathematical process, where the number of people dictated the amount of resources required. Nowadays the approach is more investigative, driven by how people interact with their space.

> *"Rather than fitting in pieces of the puzzle, we are far more curious about how people work together most effectively", says Donna.*

DESK SHARING RATIO

1.2

people per desk

Both Peter and Donna agree that a desk sharing ratio of 1.2 is the most widely accepted in the modern workplace: one workstation for every 1.2 employees. In effect, this would mean that in an organisation of 120 employees, there would be the availability of 100 traditional work points.

Donna noted that a ratio of 2 people per desk (desks for 50% of staff) would be the most "aggressive" she would see but it needs to be well executed to avoid friction. Under such a sharing ratio, most companies would reduce the number of desks but increase other spaces for collaboration and briefly 'touching down' for emails etc.

SPACE PER PERSON

10–20 m^2 → 8–10 m^2

per person in the early 2000s

per person in the early 2020s

According to Donna, around eight years ago, the space allocated per person in offices shrank from 10–20m^2 to just 8–10m^2. This shift aligns with the broader move away from the 'ownership of space' mindset. Previously, workspace ownership was not only linked to status but also driven by the limitations of the technology at the time; i.e. fixed landlines at every assigned desk, restricting employees to their specific work point for communication.

In today's agile workplace, wireless connectivity allows us to move freely. Assigned desks have been replaced by flexible touchdown spaces, first adopted by sales reps frequently on the road or contractors who don't require a permanent workstation. This evolution reflects how both technology and workplace culture gave rise to the agile workplace and thereby redefined our relationship with office space.

A truly optimised hybrid workplace encourages collaboration with less time spent at individual desks. If focussed work can be completed at home where there are fewer opportunities for collaboration, then the office becomes a hub for connection, brainstorming, and teamwork. The hybrid workplace isn't just about providing a space to work; it's about fostering a dynamic environment that maximises the strengths of in-person collaboration.

People-centric design that encourages, rather than mandates, office attendance

Before there was a choice given on whether to work from the office or remotely, less thought was given to the layout and mix of resources in the office. Now property landlords and companies are reimagining office spaces to better align with the new hybrid work model. They are focusing on creating environments that offer a balance of collaboration areas, quiet zones, and flexible workstations, ensuring that when employees choose to come into the office, the space is tailored to support different work styles and maximise productivity. The emphasis is now on making the office a destination that adds value to the work experience, rather than just a place to complete tasks.

As such, offices are now designed to support spontaneous interaction, team projects, and the kind of innovation that thrives when people come together. By optimising the physical space for these activities, businesses can ensure that when employees are in the office, they are using their time in the most productive and engaging ways possible. This shift from individual-focused workspaces to collaborative zones reflects the ongoing evolution of work culture in the hybrid era.



THE UNSEEN BENEFITS OF ON-SITE MEETINGS

"Creating an office environment where employees voluntarily favour your premises for meetings with external parties, such as clients and suppliers, is advantageous to your organisation, as research shows that meetings conducted on-site are more productive than those at an external location. Not to mention time saved commuting back and forth."

Donna Wheatley
Gray Puksand

MODERN WORKPLACE CHALLENGES AND THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

Human nature vs. new ways of working

Even as new ways of working emerge, human nature remains the same: we are creatures of habit. Although we're encouraged to mix things up and sit with different colleagues, the reality is most people still prefer to sit near familiar faces or those they enjoy socialising with. This is why hot desking felt disruptive for many at first. But with the rise of workplace booking technology, employees can continue their old routines, sitting near their preferred colleagues, while still enjoying the flexibility of a modern workplace.

Far from complicating things, technology has made it easier for us to stick to our social habits within a more dynamic office environment.

Gaps in utilisation data

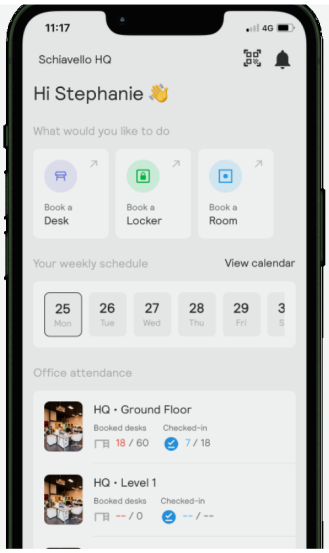
While check-in data is readily available, true utilisation data is often lacking. Many Nura Space clients, along with our interviewees, have noted that while companies gain reliable insights into office attendance through booking data, they still struggle to measure real resource utilisation. It's not just about who's in the office but how resources are being used and how employees interact with the space. Smart furniture and room sensors are helping bridge this gap, offering a clearer picture of usage without relying solely on manual bookings.

Difficulty interpreting data

Where there is an abundance of data available, some clients also express the challenge of having more than they know what to do with and grappling with how to extract meaningful insights from it.

REDUCING FRICTION IN THE HYBRID OFFICE

Workplace management tools let employees book desks, lockers and rooms, see who is in, and check in on arrival, giving property teams true utilisation data rather than bookings alone.



WORKPLACE DESIGN NUANCES ACROSS SECTORS AND BUSINESS UNITS

Our respondents were of the view that workplace design and the approach to Activity-Based Working in the modern workplace doesn't differ all that greatly across the different sectors but more across the different workplace cultures. That is, the level to which a company is open and inclusive, and the type of hybrid strategy implemented, including the remote first, office first and fully flexible models outlined earlier.

However, there are some subtle differences between sectors:

Banking and finance: early adopters of ABW

From the early 2000s, our financial services industry was already considering the types of spaces needed to support a variety of tasks and work styles. This thinking led to the rapid adoption of 'Activity-Based Workplace' (ABW) as we know it today, a concept that had already gained traction in Northern Europe.

According to Donna Wheatley from Gray Puksand, this sector has been practicing agile desking for well over 10 years and many of their employees know no different. She attributes this to two key factors: it's proven effective, or they wouldn't have continued with it, and larger organisations have much more to gain from real estate savings. A 20% reduction in space makes a significant impact on overhead for large companies, whereas smaller organisations tend to adopt ABW and desk sharing for performance benefits rather than cost savings.

Consulting firms: prioritise the client experience

Consulting firms that are client facing such as agencies, design studios and the like tend to prioritise the employee and client experience and seek to offer a 'workshop environment'. Their sharing ratios tend to be higher and more experimental, with a greater focus on collaboration spaces and places to 'touch down' for emails in lieu of traditional fixed workstations.

Previously, the focus was on creating a 'wow factor' at the front of house, such as the reception area. In the early 2000s, cool breakout areas became a thing. Now, these organisations aim to cultivate an experience throughout the office, integrating both collaborative and individual workspaces that are not only functional but also inspiring, reflecting the company culture.

Tech sector: leading the way in flexible hybrid working environments

As early adopters of digital tools and cloud platforms, tech firms have seamlessly integrated remote work, allowing employees greater autonomy to choose when and where they work. For them, the office is more of a collaborative hub, used for meetings and team-building, while routine tasks are often completed remotely.

Legal and other service industries: still requiring legacy ways of working

While ABW is embraced to an extent by legal firms, accounting firms, and other service industries, it is worth noting that desk sharing may be less suitable for some. These traditional service industries continue to value the concept of 'ownership of space'; private offices and fixed desks are often seen as essential for maintaining confidentiality, professionalism, and conveying status.

Having said that, Amanda from ERA-co, has recently successfully transitioned a major Australian law firm to a ratio of 1.5 people per desk, considered fairly aggressive for this sector and proof that the approach is more dependent on a company's culture than the sector in which they operate.

According to the Nura Space co-founder, Anton Schiavello, and our interviewees, the differences in workplace needs between sectors are often less pronounced than those between individual business units within a company. This is especially true in government, where each department brings its own way of working, and those variations are even more evident among the business units within a department. For this paper, we've grouped these business units into three key categories:

Administrative teams

Admin business units such as payroll, finance, HR and IT have different requirements when it comes to hybrid working and desk-sharing. These roles often need consistent access to desks, technology, and quiet spaces for focused work. Flexibility is more about optimising the office environment to support day-to-day tasks rather than frequent mobility.

Sales and field employees

On the other hand, employees in sales or field roles are typically more transient, spending significant time on the road or at client sites. For them, the office functions more as a touchdown space, somewhere to briefly connect with the team, catch up on emails, or attend meetings when not working remotely. Their workplace needs prioritise flexibility, mobility, and seamless integration of remote and office work.

Creative teams

Creative teams such as marketing and R&D often require space for brainstorming, collaboration and experimentation. While hybrid working is possible for focussed work, much of their work may involve on-site access to equipment and hands-on collaboration, meaning their workspace must accommodate both individual work and team-based creative problem-solving.



SCRAP THE 'ONE-SIZE FITS ALL' APPROACH

"Just as there is no 'one-size-fits-all' at an organisational level, the same is true for departments and business units. Involving team leaders in the hybrid working strategy, and in the roll-out of supporting tools and resources, not only reduces friction, but increases engagement."

Anton Schiavello
Co-Founder, Nura Space

THE FUTURE OF ACTIVITY-BASED WORKING: PREDICTIONS FROM THE EXPERTS

01 · DATA, DATA, DATA

According to Donna, observation studies and employee feedback have already given us valuable insights, like the fact that people aren't at their desks all day, leading to the conservative desk-sharing ratio of 1.2 without heavy reliance on data.

However, as we push the boundaries of sharing ratios and other space optimisations, data will play an increasingly critical role. "We've barely scratched the surface when it comes to data," Donna explains. "There's so much untapped potential, like patterns and behaviours to explore, almost like sociology. By studying the data, we can uncover new insights into workplace experience: what's truly working and where we need to make adjustments."



LOOK AFTER YOUR TWO LARGEST INVESTMENTS

"Property is a company's second largest investment, after people, and the two go hand-in-hand. So, the ability to harness data to monitor how the two interact would have a profound impact on business outcomes."

Donna Wheatley
Gray Puksand

Sue echoes this sentiment, highlighting the growing importance of data interpretation. As we become more adept at analysing and leveraging workplace data, the ability to make informed decisions around space utilisation and employee satisfaction will become a game-changer.

Nura Space works closely with property managers to define what they need from their statistics and evolve the analytics feature accordingly. Custom-built dashboards take the guesswork out of data and allows companies to review space utilisation in real time. Those which have smart furniture and sensors can drill down even further into workplace behaviour.

02 · THE RISE OF GEN Z

When we think about the shift to new ways of working and change management, the initial focus often falls on the challenge of transitioning employees from traditional office setups to more agile models. However, for Gen Z, the concept of assigned seating can feel jarring and restrictive. In Donna's first-hand experience, some Gen Z struggle with the notion of allocated seating, likely because they've worked in agile environments like banking and finance, or have been exposed to other more fluid, collaborative settings at university and community libraries.

This generation demands the flexibility offered through hybrid working and places high value on a culture of trust. In fact, 86% of Gen Z employees say that trust between managers and employees is crucial to their job satisfaction (Deloitte Global Millennial Survey, 2020). However, as mentioned, office attendance must be purposeful, not just a tick-box exercise. For Gen Z, being in the office should facilitate collaboration, innovation, and connection; otherwise, it feels unnecessary.

As this generation moves up the ranks and older generations transition into retirement, this trend will only gain more momentum. Companies that prioritise flexibility, trust, and meaningful in-office experiences will be better positioned to attract and retain the next wave of talent. In turn, the workplace itself will continue to evolve, shaped by the preferences of this new generation of leaders.

03 · WORKPLACES PURPOSEFULLY DESIGNED FOR HYBRID

While Activity-Based Working (ABW) originally focused on creating spaces to accommodate a variety of tasks, the future of workplace design will hone in on defining the purpose of the physical office itself.

In hybrid work environments, offices are no longer just places to complete tasks; they are hubs for connection, collaboration, and culture-building. As such, future office design will be driven by the specific needs of a hybrid workforce, ensuring that the space enhances the in-office experience and serves a clear, valuable function for employees.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS FOR THE NEXT PHASE IN WORKPLACE DESIGN

We asked our interviewees about the key success factors they look to implement when designing for a hybrid workforce and they came up with the following recommendations:

1 **Design in line with hybrid policies**

Whether the policy is office-first, remote-first, or fully flexible, design should reflect this. Drill down into average weekly attendance levels to determine what types of resources employees will need access to and ensure the space aligns with their working patterns.

2 **Define the purpose of the office**

If the office is primarily used for fostering culture, connectivity, and collaboration, the layout should prioritise these aspects. However, if the office serves a broader range of tasks and working styles, a more traditional Activity-Based Working (ABW) approach might be the most suitable.

3 **Reduce friction through workplace management tools**

Implement tools that allow employees to easily book resources such as desks, meeting rooms, or quiet zones, ensuring they have what they need to be productive without unnecessary hassle. If wellness is a priority, you can also add value by allowing employees to book wellness facilities such as a yoga mat, locker and bike rack.

4 **Make half of your resources bookable and the other half ad hoc**

Some employees prefer spontaneity, while others thrive on planning and certainty. By offering a mix of bookable and non-bookable resources, you cater to both working styles, ensuring everyone can work in a way that suits them best.

5 **Create team zones and neighbourhoods**

Designate areas where teams or departments can work together, fostering collaboration and a sense of belonging. These zones can also help build stronger interpersonal connections and improve team dynamics.

6 **Allow old habits to prevail through co-location**

While new ways of working bring flexibility, it's important to acknowledge that many employees still value sitting near their colleagues and work buddies. Providing booking tools that allow for co-locating enables teams to maintain these familiar, collaborative habits, helping ease the transition to hybrid work without losing a sense of connection and teamwork.

7 **Make it flexible and adaptable**

Companies can run into trouble when they design spaces only for current needs. Ensure the workplace is flexible enough to adapt to future changes, whether in management styles, company growth, or shifts in how people work. A versatile design will support long-term success.



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