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Spring 2026

A New Mindset

Designing spaces to create a cognitive advantage

Inside This Issue

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"The brain health of your employees is the engine for your company's productivity."

Harris Eyre
Brain Capital Alliance Lead

From the Editor

Creating a Cognitive Advantage

Keeping our brains healthy in the age of AI

I'm starting to wonder about my relationship with AI. I mean, it definitely came through for me when I needed a complex research paper summarized fast. And it never complains when I ask for rewrites. But as someone who really likes other humans, I worry about spending even more time with my new AI "coworker." Research from Forrester found that 45% of frequent AI users experience burnout, and MIT found a decrease in our ability to retain information when using AI.

Yet every day we see stories extolling the virtues of humans working alongside AI agents, ushering in a new dawn of increased productivity. McKinsey Quarterly practically gushed about the future hybrid workforce made up of people and AI agents — it will lead organizations to rethink "the very nature of the corporation," they said.

Recently, LinkedIn reported on a new, AI-agents-only social media platform called Moltbook. Yes, AI bots are posting and commenting on a variety of topics. Humans can observe, but not participate. It all sounds very sci-fi and unsettling (I can only imagine their humblebrags, like "I'm so exhausted from taking over the work of an entire department!"). While I wonder what they're chatting about, I have bigger questions. Do I trust them? Are they here to help me, or eventually take my job?

It's within this context that the World Economic Forum, in collaboration with the McKinsey Health Institute, released its report, titled "The Human Advantage: Stronger Brains in the Age of AI."

Human brains were a hot topic at the Forum's annual meeting in Davos because of the growing realization that investing in AI alone is not enough — it's the capabilities of healthy human brains combined with AI that create economic advantage.

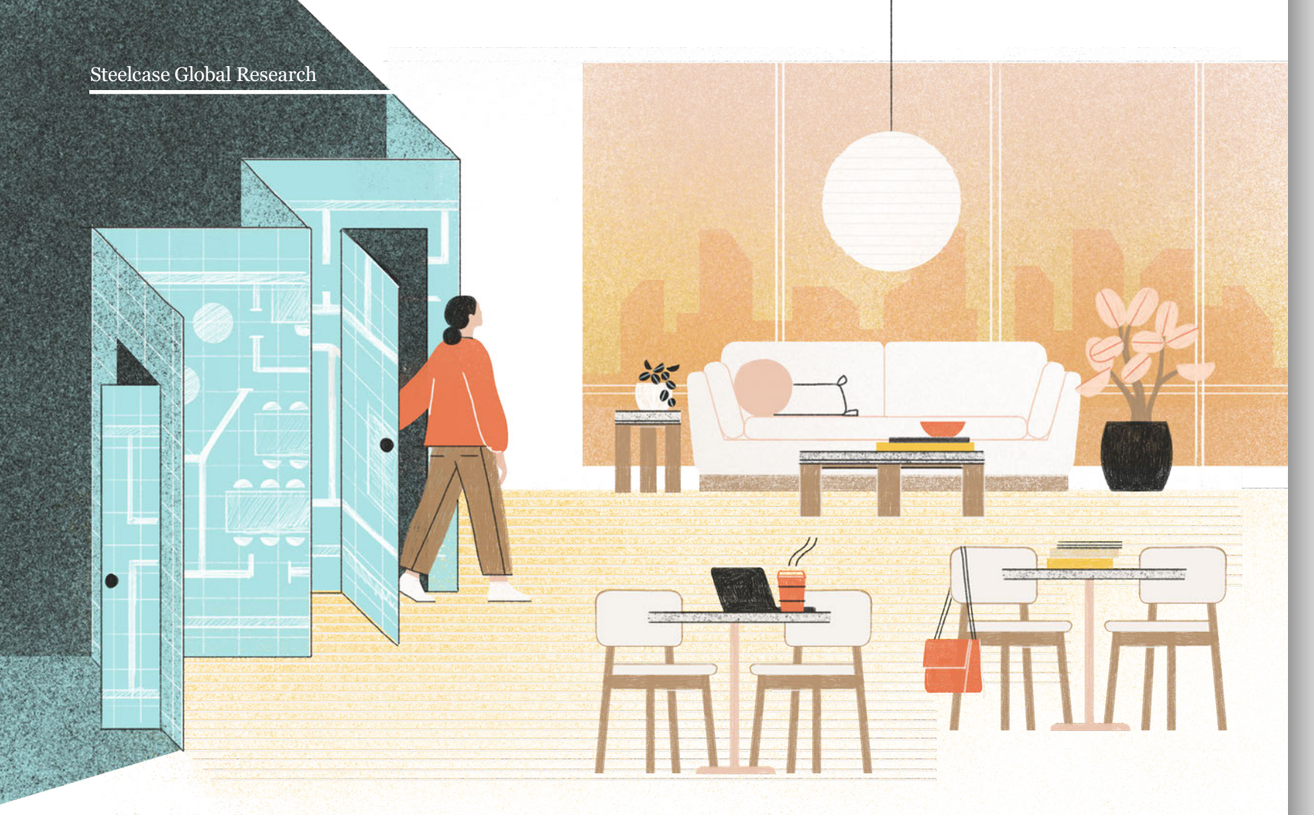
Yet we fight an uphill battle as more people struggle with mental health and neurological issues. According to the World Health Organization, one in four people globally will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives. We are faced with non-stop distractions that have eroded our ability to pay attention. No wonder there is a growing call to invest in building brain skills and a brain economy in which human intelligence and creativity are the main drivers of value and growth.

There are many proven ways to support and foster brain health, but one of the most underrecognized and underleveraged is the physical spaces in which we work, learn and heal. The growing field of neuroarchitecture explores how environments shape human behavior, emotions and cognitive abilities. It studies how spaces can be designed to help our brains regulate attention, think creatively, solve problems and manage stress. Moreover, places that foster a sense of community benefit people even more — when people have stronger social connections, they have better cognitive health and slower cognitive decline. Feelings of community increase oxytocin and dopamine, which support learning, memory and emotional regulation.

It's time for a new mindset about the role of space in helping organizations and people achieve more.

In this issue of Work Better, we explore a new mindset for designing workplaces, learning spaces and healthcare environments to support humans' ability to think alongside our new AI coworkers. We showcase new types of spaces to help individuals and teams interact with AI, redesign underperforming spaces to help them work harder, and introduce ideas for spaces that help people be at their cognitive best — think of it as ergonomics for the brain.

By Chris Congdon
Editor in Chief, Work Better Magazine



Blueprint for a Better Office

A workplace can look great. But what really defines a good day is whether it helps people get work done. Most U.S. leaders (96%) say they're making changes — or plan to — in the next few years to improve their spaces and better support their teams. But new Steelcase research in nine countries reveals those efforts aren't landing where they matter most.

Employees identify four critical gaps holding the office back. Targeted improvements in these areas, even subtly at first, can make a meaningful difference right away.

The obligation office

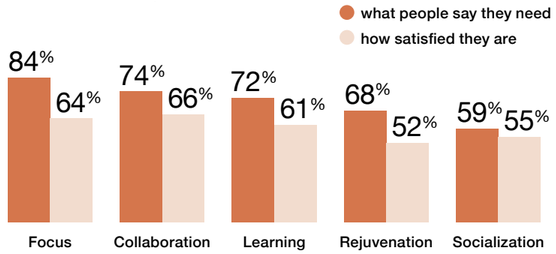
Globally, the number one reason people say they go to the office isn't to do their best work — it's because they're required to.

Top 5 reasons to be in the office:

1. Work requirement
2. Focus
3. Collaboration
4. Access to tools + technology
5. Sense of belonging

The office needs to support what matters

Across the board, people are not happy with how their spaces support the work they think is most important. Gaps are sizable and have a real impact.



Enhancing spaces to address four specific gaps – wellbeing, focus, screen time and privacy – significantly improves how people feel about the workplace.

1. Address wellbeing: The biggest need

When asked what they most want improved in the office, employees overwhelmingly cite wellbeing as their #1 request.

Wellbeing Priority: 46% — say wellbeing is a top workplace priority

Poor Satisfaction: 17% — are satisfied with wellbeing spaces

Big Impact: +26% — increase in office satisfaction when people have access to wellbeing spaces

2. Fix focus

On average, people spend two-thirds of their day working alone, yet they are not happy with spaces available for focus work.

40% are dissatisfied with access to spaces for focus work

For the majority of people who don't have a private office, finding access to privacy is tough.

54% don't have access to individual, enclosed spaces

2x **Workplace satisfaction doubles** with access to individual enclosed spaces.

3. Manage the screen effect

Screens now dominate the workday, with people reporting **71% of their screen time is spent alone.** And too much screen time leads to lower engagement.

Engagement drops ↓12% when people spend 80% or more of their time on screens alone.

4. Add more privacy

Privacy is key to addressing wellbeing, focus and screen time.

58% cannot get privacy when they need it

Employees point to a range of privacy needs beyond being able to just shut a door.

Employees who don't have certain kinds of office privacy:

- 52% Acoustic Privacy
- 48% Visual Privacy
- 40% Territorial Privacy

What People Need

Early signals point to a powerful lever: People with access to a variety of spaces (3 or more) that support different kinds of work report:

- ↑ **Higher engagement** +14%
- ↑ **Stronger sense of community** +16%
- ↑ **Improved wellbeing** +13%

The message is clear: when workplaces support how people actually work in different ways throughout the day, people perform better and feel better. And that's what turns the office into a place people want to be.

Source: Steelcase Global Employee Research December 2025

How Inclusive Design Redefines Parkinson's Care + Community

Baseball legend Kirk Gibson's defining moment came in 1988: injured and barely able to plant his feet, he stepped to the plate in the World Series and launched a walk-off home run that became an iconic symbol of raw grit.

Years later, that same determination would be tested again; this time against Parkinson's disease, a neurological disorder that affects movement, balance, speech, and even mood and cognition. Everyday tasks become harder, and environments that once felt simple can suddenly feel overwhelming or inaccessible.

"People need help fighting the effects every single day," Gibson says. "Since my Parkinson's diagnosis, it has become clear that exercise and movement are critical to my overall treatment."

That belief inspired the creation of the Kirk Gibson Center for Parkinson's Wellness in Farmington Hills, Michigan. The first-of-its-kind, community-focused facility offers free activity-based and educational programs for people living with Parkinson's and their care partners. To bring the vision to life, the foundation partnered with Steelcase and its inclusive design practice — designing with people rather than for them.

The communal table at the Kirk Gibson Center for Parkinson's Wellness is intentionally designed to welcome people at every stage of their disability. A mix of seating options supports different heights and postures, offering the right balance of stability and adaptability so everyone can participate comfortably and confidently.

From the start, the team listened to those living with Parkinson's, hosting a workshop with them, their caregivers and center employees. Their lived experiences guided every decision, influencing layout and furniture to meet a wide range of mobility, sensory and comfort needs.

Kirk Gibson Foundation CEO & Managing Director Steve Annear, an amputee, says he entered the process skeptical. "I wasn't sold on the idea that we needed to do the inclusive design workshop, but it changed everything," says Annear.

Lived experiences like those shared during the workshop sparked important design changes to the space: swivel seating to reduce strain, chairs with strong armrests for sitting and standing, and a range of seat heights for everyone.

Kirk's son, Cam Gibson, says Parkinson's brings new anxiety for their members. Inclusive design reduces those fears, allowing people to better connect and feel a sense of belonging. "People can come here and just be themselves; this new version of themselves. Creating this community setting where they feel comfortable enough to leave that shell is everything."

The result is a space shaped by the people who use it, honoring their resilience and reflecting the spirit of Kirk Gibson, a champion now helping others find their own grit and determination to overcome Parkinson's.

At a Glance

Kirk Gibson Center for Parkinson's

Location
Farmington Hills, Michigan

Industry
Healthcare

Size
40,000 square feet

Design Intent
Create an accessible, community-focused social gathering space for people living with Parkinson's and their care partners

Support various activity-based programs

Key Features: Inclusive Design

Swivel seating to reduce the need for trunk flexion

Strong, stable armrests to support independent sitting and standing

Multiple seat heights to accommodate varied mobility needs

Project Partners
Design Firm: Gensler

Dealer: NBS Interiors

Steelcase Workplace Innovation Design Studio

Children's Nebraska: Innovating Access to Care

It's a typical morning in Omaha, Nebraska and inside the Mammel Innovation Center at Children's Nebraska, ideas are already taking shape. A cardiologist strides through the open layout — a space that encourages spontaneous connection.

Nearby, a respiratory therapist and technologist huddle in a breakout nook built for quick collaboration while a surgeon leans over a prototype, taking advantage of the flexible surfaces designed for hands-on exploration. The space hums with possibility, exactly as it was designed to.

The Mammel Innovation Center opened in 2024. The 10,000-square-foot facility is intentionally a non-traditional hospital. Designed with global engineering and design firm HDR, Steelcase and its dealer, Sheppard's Business Interiors, it's filled with natural light, flexible furniture and social spaces that encourage people to linger. It's where ideas come together and where one idea in particular is reshaping pediatric behavioral health across Nebraska.

Dr. Jen McWilliams, who leads Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, spent years watching families drive hours across the state for short appointments. "What if you could make access to care so seamless, people didn't even think about it?" she asks.

"We wanted the experience from the moment you walked in the door to feel inspired and empowered."

Ryan Cameron
Vice President of Technology + Innovation

"You can't dream big sitting all alone at your desk," says Ryan Cameron, vice president of Technology and Innovation. "We built the Mammel Innovation Center so those conversations could happen and people could share big ideas." One exploration there gave Children's Nebraska the room to reimagine statewide pediatric access.

Virtual care that feels personal

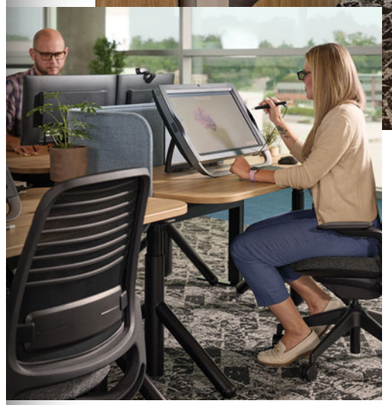
Cameron was searching for new ways to connect Nebraska families to care, and he remembers the moment he came across Ocular View, an immersive telepresence pod created by Steelcase and Logitech. "I thought, 'What if we could use this to make virtual care feel more human?'"

That curiosity sparked a partnership and a new model for delivering care across long distances.

Ocular View was co-developed by Steelcase Health and Logitech to create an extended reality experience. It creates a sense of presence that traditional telehealth can't match. Camera placement mimics natural eye contact. Warm lighting softens the experience. Crisp audio captures subtle cues. For McWilliams, those details matter.

Thanks to Ocular View's human-centered and one-on-one experience, a child in Kearney, Nebraska, can now sit down, look up, and feel like their psychiatrist in Omaha is right there with them — even though they're nearly 200 miles apart. "When I started doing telemedicine, I was in a broom closet with a cart the size of a mini-fridge," says Dr. McWilliams. "Now it feels like I'm in the same room. I can see how a child is sitting, body language, how they breathe — even the adolescent eye roll. Those things tell you what's really going on."

Today, two Ocular View pods, one in Omaha and one in Kearney, are already connecting families with specialists hundreds of miles away. A third is on the way, with school-based programs under exploration. For Children's Nebraska, this is just the beginning.



The Mammel Innovation Center at Children's Nebraska brings clinicians together to explore big "what if" ideas in a space built for easy shifts between solo work and collaboration.

Children's Nebraska uses Ocular View to create a more connected, face-to-face experience for families — even from miles away.

At a Glance

Mammel Innovation Center

Location
Omaha, Nebraska

Industry
Healthcare

Size
10,000 square feet

Design Intent
Create a dedicated space for cross-disciplinary collaboration and rapid prototyping in pediatric healthcare

Encourage spontaneous collaboration between clinicians, technologists and researchers

Create an open, flexible and inspiring environment

Serve as a testing ground for new ideas in care delivery and space design

Key Features
Natural light and flexible layouts

Informal and formal brainstorming zones

Prototyping areas for new technologies and workflows

Designed to feel distinct from traditional hospital environments

Ocular View for virtual care

Project Partners
Design Firm: HDR

Dealer: Sheppard's Business Interiors

Furniture + Technology Partner: Steelcase Health, Logitech + Zoom

Creating People-Centered AI Spaces

AI moved past the early adoption phase and is now a key medium through which work happens. It's changing people's behavior as they work individually and in groups, creating an urgent need to rethink the office. Leaders are ready: 78% in the US* believe AI will lead to an office redesign within the next few years.

Industries are shifting unevenly: frequent AI use is highest in technology, followed by professional services and finance, indicating where pressure to change work settings may be felt first.

Leaders use AI to consolidate and automate; individual contributors lean on it to brainstorm. The "how" matters: treating AI as a creative, strategic partner saves 105 minutes a day vs. 53 minutes** when it only speeds existing tasks. Still, the pace and learning curve take a toll — 37% of AI users report stress or burnout,*** and heavier use correlates with more strain.

Teamwork is also shifting to a new rhythm: solo with AI, in-person synthesis, then digital follow-ups. Nearly half of AI users tell Steelcase it changed how often they connect with colleagues (78% more, 22% less***). As people toggle between AI dialogues with agents on screens and human moments to build context and make decisions, workplaces must adapt or risk becoming a barrier to productivity and wellbeing.

New Steelcase research finds 35%*** of AI users say it changes how they use their physical workspace. Across the day, AI accelerates flow: triaging inboxes, drafting, summarizing, synthesizing. Focus sessions now include back-and-forth with AI to explore possibilities and refine ideas. Team time is used to build on, challenge, verify ideas and develop a point of view. Social moments become crucial for relief from screen intensity and vital for building trust.

This shift raises practical questions:

- **Where does critical thinking happen?** AI can hallucinate and introduce errors; teams need visible, shared spaces to review outputs together without hijacking attention.
- **How will we support wellbeing?** Burnout risks and increased screen time make rejuvenation and genuine human connection essential design criteria, not extras.
- **How do we integrate tech and space?** Camera angles, acoustics, lighting and cable management influence how AI "sees" and "hears" work, affecting equity for remote colleagues and the accuracy of AI-enabled capture and summarization.

As AI changes the workplace, the opportunity isn't just to adopt new tools — but to shape the behaviors that help people work better.

Three Ideas to Support Emerging AI Behaviors

The most effective response is not a single "AI lab," but a coordinated ecosystem that supports focus, collaboration, socialization, learning and rejuvenation. The Steelcase Community-Based Design approach treats the workplace like a resilient community, with mixed-use "districts" that flex as teams shift modes, each equipped with the right technology and sensory conditions built in.

Steelcase WorkSpace Futures researchers and designers developed design concepts to help organizations evolve their workplace — and better support critical thinking, wellbeing and the integration of technology and space — as people and teams expand their use of AI.

1. Focus: AI dialogue, human review

Behavior to support: Today, people may seek a quiet, private space to focus and open areas for spontaneous teamwork. AI is shifting that pattern. Someone may need privacy to work with an AI agent, followed by deliberate human collaboration for critical thinking and verification.

How it works: An enclave provides privacy and dual monitors for chatting with AI agents while creating content. Task or lounge seating lets people to change postures and stay energized. An all-in-one docking station offers quick technology setup. An auto-framing camera and noise-reducing microphones improves remote meetings. An adjacent front porch encourages collaboration with colleagues (see top image).

*Steelcase U.S. leader research, 2025, **Atlassian, 2024, ***Steelcase global employee research, 2025*

2. Collaboration: Flexible project rooms with microzones

Behavior to support: Temporary project teams spin up quickly to keep pace with work. People need spaces where they can switch among informative, evaluative and generative collaboration — sometimes with AI capturing notes and surfacing insights, sometimes with remote colleagues joining.

How it works: Collaboration rarely stays in one mode for long. A reservable, multi-week project room with microzones gives teams flexibility to move between different types of work without breaking momentum. Instead of forcing activity into a single meeting setting, the space adapts as collaboration evolves.

Informative collaboration happens when teams share updates, align on context or onboard new members. Large digital displays enlist AI to update progress, timelines and action items. Settings prioritize clear sightlines and consistent audio so everyone can see and hear each other. Individual workspaces have visibility to digital displays, making it easy to immerse new team members. Plus, these spaces allow for quick ad-hoc connections (see top image, left zone).

Evaluative collaboration turns the team's focus to comparing options and making decisions. This area (see top image, upper right zone) balances visibility between people and content, enabling the review of multiple sources at once. Thoughtful acoustics and lighting reduce cognitive load. Integrated AI supports content capture, transcription and summarization, helping ensure information is shared equitably even after the session ends.

For **generative collaboration**, teams need to explore, iterate and build together. Writable surfaces, large shared displays and reconfigurable furniture support movement between divergent and convergent thinking. Ideas flow effortlessly from analog to digital, with AI helping synthesize inputs while preserving the group's creative energy (see top image, right zone).

Together, these microzones create a project room that supports how collaboration really works — fluid, layered and deeply human.

3. Socialization: Human connection counters screen intensity

Behavior to support: Heavy AI and screen use can increase stress and isolation; design spaces to maximize face-to-face moments to keep teams resilient and refreshed.

How it works: As people spend more time working on screens, spaces designed for social interaction should promote eye contact and meaningful moments together without digital interruptions. Ambient AI is integrated into this social hub to support how people engage. A coffee bar invites casual chats, spontaneous exchanges and group conversations. People can choose from a range of postures and settings to relax, recharge and reconnect in a calm, nature-infused environment (see bottom left image).

Bringing It Together: A Community-Based Workplace

As AI reshapes tasks and teams, these design ideas work today and allow organizations to adapt as technology advances. The goal is not to build an "AI office," but a human-centered workplace where technology amplifies curiosity, creativity and collaboration — the enduring sources of competitive advantage.

Finding Balance in a Screen-First Workday

Work today is shaped by screens. Video calls, digital chats, shared documents and AI tools now mediate much of how people collaborate, even when they are physically together in the same office. According to a 2025 Steelcase global study, 85% of people say they have some meetings that involve at least one remote participant, signaling hybrid work is here to stay.

This shift has brought undeniable benefits. Technology expands access, enables flexibility and makes it easier for teams to work across time zones and locations. Work can happen faster, more inclusively, and in many cases, more efficiently. But, as screen-based work has increased, some new habits and routines have also crept in that need to be understood and addressed in the workplace.

Screens reshape the workday and fragment attention

Modern work is no longer bounded by office walls or traditional hours. Microsoft researchers describe an “infinite workday,” marked by frequent interruptions and extended activity into early mornings and evenings. Steelcase research confirms this. 64% of respondents conduct moderate to significant amounts of work outside normal work hours. Digital tools now intrude on moments that once allowed focus and recovery.

Screen-based tools allow work to move faster. But speed comes at a cognitive cost. Research by Dr. Gloria Mark at the University of California shows attention spans have shrunk from 2.5 minutes in 2007 to just 47 seconds today. Workers are interrupted roughly every two minutes by emails, meetings or messaging pings. Constant task-switching increases stress, slows thinking and leaves employees drained. Fragmented attention has real costs, psychologically and cognitively, stifling deep thinking and adding stress.

More screen time, less movement

People now spend 59% of their total working time on screens — a combination of both individual and collaborative work — according to Steelcase research. That share increases to 71% when they’re working alone.

59% **of total working time is spent on screens**

As screen time increases, movement drops. Walking to meetings has been replaced by hours of sitting and taking calls at desks. Yet studies show that physical movement boosts cognitive performance, so less movement leads to reduced focus and creativity. Prolonged immobility is also tied to musculoskeletal problems and chronic disease.

Screens strain our brains

The rapid spread of AI tools is reshaping work. Used well, AI can streamline tasks and accelerate decision-making. But it also increases cognitive load. “It’s a way [of working] that strains the brain a lot more…you’re thinking all the time,” says Thomas Seitz from the McKinsey Health Institute. People who say they frequently use AI report higher levels of burnout (45%) compared to only 38% who use AI infrequently (Quantum Workplace, 2024).

Video calls also contribute to that strain. Research on video conferencing fatigue shows that the brain works harder during virtual interactions, processing flattened facial cues, slight audio delays and reduced body language. This heightened cognitive effort can lead to mental exhaustion, irritability and reduced concentration.

Convenience is replacing connection

Steelcase research found that 39% of people take video calls at their desks, even when coworkers are close by. But only 19% say that’s their preference.

For most, it’s not a choice — it’s the easiest or only option. Meeting rooms aren’t available, calls are scheduled back-to-back, and staying put feels more practical. Over time, that convenience comes at a cost: fewer shared moments where relationships can form naturally, eroding culture and trust and contributing to loneliness. Convenience, it turns out, is crowding out connection.

When screens help — and when they don’t

Screens are not the enemy. The problem arises when screens are asked to do everything. They excel at sharing information and coordinating across distance. They struggle with trust-building, mentoring and creativity.

In response, some organizations are rethinking how technology and space can work better together (see Designing Better Connections, pg. 39). This reflects a growing recognition that screens and physical space must work together.

Offices that work well today offer choice and balance technology with human needs, while encouraging people to move throughout the day. They provide spaces for video calls that don’t isolate people, hybrid meeting environments where in-person and remote participants can participate equally, areas for quiet focus without interruption, and inviting places that encourage informal, face-to-face interaction. They are also embedding technology seamlessly into spaces, so it’s no longer a barrier, but a bridge between people.

Reclaiming What Screens Can’t

Work will continue to happen on screens. That reality isn’t changing. What can change is how offices support people alongside technology. Workplaces that adapt best are reclaiming the office for what screens can’t provide: movement, presence, face-to-face connection and shared experience.

A New Mindset

Designing spaces to create a cognitive advantage

Every morning, we bring our distinct human potential to work. It is the engine of our creativity, our resilience and our ability to connect with others.

But too often, we treat the mind like software. We expect it to be limitless and always ready to run. The reality is the human mind is a biological organ. It tires and reacts to its surroundings, to noise and visual chaos, just as our lungs react to air quality.

We're attempting to do 21st-century work — AI-enabled, fast, synthetic — with a brain built for survival. But AI can't replace the human mind's capacity to solve problems and create new ideas. We need a new mindset, focused on helping people think better in the age of AI.

We are now operating in the "brain economy," which, according to a recent report released at The World Economic Forum with the McKinsey Health Institute, "represents a new frontier where human intelligence and artificial intelligence work in partnership, allowing for greater productivity and resilience." The report advocates for building "brain capital," which combines brain health — the functional ability of the brain to perform the many tasks it's responsible for — and brain skills, such as the ability to think clearly, learn, manage attention, make decisions and solve problems. Basically, everything we do at work.

As neuroscientist Harris Eyre, lead of the Brain Capital Alliance, notes, this era demands a transition "from the current state of our economy, which is depleting brain capital, to a place where we are building brain capital." There are many routes organizations can take to build brain capital, and one that is often overlooked is the built environment. The growing field of neuroarchitecture seeks to build brain health by researching the best ways to design physical spaces that help people mentally, emotionally and physically.

This raises the stakes for our workplaces. The office is no longer just a place to work – it must evolve into a cognitive support system.

Cognitive crisis

In the modern workplace, our experience can feel like animals in the wild. We are stuck in a state of hyper-vigilance, constantly scanning for information and threats (or Slack notifications). This reactive state makes deep, resonant thinking nearly impossible. Our brains can't process all the information they're flooded with each day, and screen-based technology increases the volume. Our average attention span has declined from 2.5 minutes in 2004 to 47 seconds, according to research by Dr. Gloria Mark at UC Irvine. Smartphones accelerated the decline.

Attention Span Decline

2.5 minutes
2004

47 seconds
2022

Our attention has become a precious resource and a form of biological fuel. Researchers distinguish between two types of focus, a concept explored in the Steelcase report Think Better: Neuroscience as a Competitive Advantage. "Controlled attention" is high-octane, expensive fuel used for deep work and strategy. It is finite and drains quickly. "Stimulus-driven attention" is cheap, reactive fuel used when a loud noise or a moving object grabs our focus.

Poorly designed open offices force us into a permanent state of stimulus-driven attention. We burn precious energy filtering out distractions, leaving little fuel for actual work.

For years, Steelcase has studied neuroscience to understand how space shapes thinking — insights explored in our 2015 Think Better article.

Additionally, the biological need for cognitive offloading is often overlooked. The brain cannot hold everything at once; we need physical environments to "hold" our thoughts for us. When you sketch on a whiteboard or pin to a wall, you offload working memory to the room, freeing your brain to process information rather than store it. A laptop screen cannot replicate this spatial canvas. It restricts our field of view, forcing us to scroll through isolated pieces of information rather than seeing them together. To untangle complex problems, the brain needs to see the whole picture at once to connect the dots effectively.

Sustained Attention Response Task Study

Steelcase research reveals a surprising result: visual privacy helps people manage distractions — even noise.

The most common complaint in the office is distractions, especially in open-plan layouts where people often sit at benches. While intended to foster interactions and collaboration, too much openness can leave people overexposed and unable to focus. But Steelcase research, conducted in partnership with the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, found an easy intervention to help people manage a range of distractions: visual privacy.

Researchers measured "sustained attention," or the ability to focus on a task over time. Participants performed cognitive tasks in two different settings: a completely open bench and a semi-shielded individual workspace. Both environments played the same track of background office noise.

The results: Participants with visual privacy performed significantly better on tasks requiring sustained attention than those seated at an open workbench — even with identical noise levels. They committed significantly fewer errors and demonstrated superior focus compared to people working at a bench.

The insight: When we are exposed to visual stimulation, such as seeing people laughing or walking by, our brains burn energy trying to filter out the distraction. Our peripheral vision is especially sensitive to motion, which helps us detect threats, but also creates a distraction that our brains have to process. But screens, shelving units, or other privacy elements help reduce that cognitive load, essentially giving the brain the extra "bandwidth" it needs to filter out noise and allowing people to perform better at work that requires higher concentration levels.

From badge swipes to brain power

For decades, we have operated in the Attendance Era. Presence measured success. If your badge swiped in at 8:00 a.m. and out at 5:00 p.m., you were considered productive.

In our new reality, AI automates routine tasks, and the premium asset is cognitive capacity — the uniquely human ability to navigate ambiguity and exercise critical judgment. We have entered the Attention Era, where brain health is no longer "just" a personal wellness goal but also a strategic business asset.

"We are moving from an era defined by where you work to one defined by how you think."

Patricia Kammer
Steelcase WorkSpace Futures Researcher

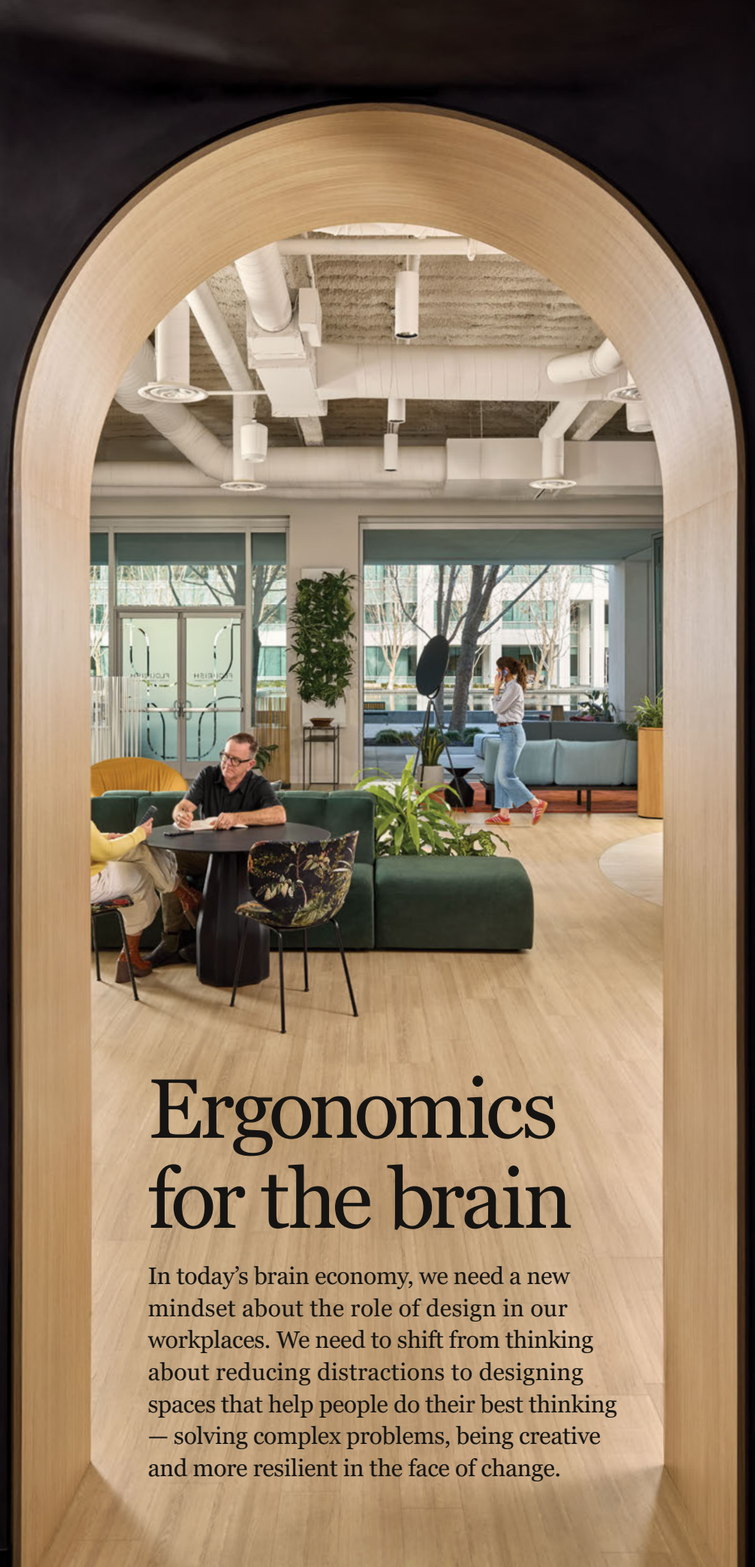
"In the Attendance Era, the office was a container for people. In the Attention Era, it must support concentration, collaboration and creativity. To solve complex problems today, we need environments that relieve the cognitive burden rather than add to it," says Kammer.

Many leaders are still optimizing for attendance mandates ("Are you here?") rather than enabling performance ("Can you think?").

Today's Workplace: A New Operating Model

Here's what changes when performance is defined by cognition, not occupancy.

	The Past: Attendance Era	The Present: Attention Era
Primary Metric	Badge swipes + occupancy	Cognitive readiness + output quality
The Core Question	"Are you here?"	"Can you think?"
Value Driver	Accumulating knowledge	Synthesizing data + creating
Office Role	A container for staff	A generator of innovation
Management Style	Mandate + control	Autonomy + stewardship



Ergonomics for the brain

In today's brain economy, we need a new mindset about the role of design in our workplaces. We need to shift from thinking about reducing distractions to designing spaces that help people do their best thinking — solving complex problems, being creative and more resilient in the face of change.

For years, scientists believed the adult brain stopped growing. We now know that neurogenesis, or the growth of new neurons, and neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to rewire or strengthen new connections (synapses), are possible throughout our lives. Designing sensory-rich environments, including our offices, can boost this process.

"Research suggests that environmental enrichment (social, sensory, physical and cognitive stimuli) can create new synapses in the brain, changing the brain physiologically," says Dr. Upali Nanda, global sector director of innovation at HKS and member of the Brain Capital Alliance. "Think of enriched environments as a direct, and powerful, pathway to brain health."

We readily accept that we need ergonomic chairs to support our spines. Today, designers can apply similar rigor to "cognitive ergonomics," moving from simply supporting the body's posture to understanding how the brain's performance relates to its surroundings.

This isn't about a single perfect room type. It's about a variety of spaces specifically designed to support the types of work people do while supporting what the brain needs to function at its best.

Community-Based Design, the approach Steelcase uses for its own workplaces, offers a diverse range of "districts," or zones, composed of spaces that give people greater choice and autonomy over how they work. This approach creates an infrastructure for building social connections that improves cognitive health and decreases cognitive decline. It provides places for people to better manage their attention and emotions. Ultimately, it helps people thrive and organizations to be more agile (see pg. 25).

"Flexible workspaces are a prime example of how design can support brain health," notes Dr. Debbie Beck, Principal, at Perkins & Will and a key contributor to The Building Brains Coalition's latest report. "These adaptable environments allow individuals to tailor their surroundings to fit their working styles and preferences, which can enhance focus and cognitive performance. By accommodating new technologies and work methodologies, flexible workspaces help keep the brain engaged and agile, promoting mental resilience and productivity," she notes.

There is a range of spaces organizations can explore to better support the brain:

Spaces for connection

There's no need to demonize the open floorplan, though. Open areas, such as cafe spaces, serve as a "city center" — a relaxed, alternative to individual desks and a place to make connections. It's a place for shared energy and informal knowledge transfer. "Loneliness triggers a 'threat state' in the brain," explains Patricia Kammer. "We cannot innovate if we feel socially isolated." The office provides a "collective identity" that virtual meeting platforms cannot fully replicate. This is partly because face-to-face interaction releases neurochemicals essential to building trust and psychological safety, which are the foundations of risk-taking and innovation.

Spaces for rejuvenation

The brain cannot sprint for eight hours. It needs "palate cleansers" to replenish resources. The answer lies in our biology. Psychological studies show that "positive affect" (feelinags of joy and comfort) increases dopamine levels, which in turn improves creative problem-solving.

NBBJ Fellow and molecular biologist Dr. John Medina reminds us that nature is a powerful trigger for positive affect. Specific cues tap into our biology: color palettes of blues, greens and oranges can aid focus, while rounded edges make us feel safer than sharp corners. Natural materials such as wood and wool are "organic" elements that help lower stress and reset cognitive capacity.

Spaces for movement

Bodily experiences and our physical surroundings influence cognition — including memory, emotion and decision-making. Movement engages areas of the brain that help offload working memory, freeing up energy for other areas to develop novel solutions to problems.

Spaces that promote movement and physically engaging in collaboration — standing, perching and reorienting — help circulate dopamine, which improves attention, creativity and problem-solving. Spaces equipped with whiteboards and vertical pin-up areas foster physical participation in group work sessions and also enable “cognitive offloading.” By making information persistent and visible, we free up working memory for processing rather than storage. The room itself becomes the external hard drive.

Spaces for focus

Deep work requires protection. “Inhibition control” is the biological energy required to stop impulsive actions and ignore distractions. When we are exposed to constant noise and visual stimulation, our brains subconsciously monitor the room. For open plans to work, they must be balanced with high-privacy spaces, such as pods or shielded workstations, that reduce distractions. Gaining focus doesn’t always require fully enclosed spaces.

About the Photography

We captured photography for this story at Flourish, a social hub in the San Francisco Bay Area. Flourish is part of Bishop Ranch, a connected live-work development. In collaboration with Steelcase dealer One Workplace and design firm AP+I Design, Flourish created an inspiring destination where people can gather, work or recharge by combining the comfort of hospitality with spaces that help people get work done.

The Leadership Pivot: From Efficiency to Capacity

Design is not the sole answer to brain health. But it is “an underleveraged intervention that can directly impact cognitive performance,” says Dr. Nanda.

For leaders, this requires a shift in metrics. We have spent decades measuring “operational efficiency” (how cheaply we can house employees). Now, the brain economy asks us to measure our “innovation capacity” (how effectively we can support their minds).

We can’t slow the velocity of information. But we can design workplaces that protect attention, reduce cognitive load and empower us to perform at our highest potential. In the brain economy, the ultimate competitive advantage isn’t your real estate footprint. It is your people’s collective ability to think deeply and solve complex problems. “The brain health of your employees is the engine for your company’s productivity,” notes Eyre.

Embracing the Spirit of Co-Creation

Work Better asked design journalist Adrian Madlener to reflect on the value of co-creation on behalf of Coalesse, a Steelcase design brand dedicated to helping people create brilliant work together.

Co-creation in material form: Sharp lines meet soft curves in Tom Dixon's metallic-inspired textile for Coalesse.

"Our spaces can serve as the framework for co-creation."

Four years ago, I had the opportunity to visit Mexico City's La Laguna, a former factory turned creative hub where the spirit of co-creation thrives. In 2017, architecture firm Productora turned the block-wide industrial site into a creative complex. Now home to a diverse group of 20 or so independent studios, people gather, connect and end up swapping ideas. The act of sharing a meal at an on-site eatery inevitably gives rise to new concepts. I witnessed people sharing creative visions and then deciding to work together to make those a reality.

As I experienced in La Laguna, simply being in a shared space creates a canvas that encourages people to interact. It's a lesson our offices can exploit. Compared to overly controlled video meetings, in-person decision-making moves faster. Spur-of-the-moment solutions are quickly introduced. With physical proximity, there's resource-sharing and cross-practice collaboration. But for people to fully co-create, they need to do more than lend a tool or share advice.

People need to be willing to speak up. Share different perspectives and messy new ideas. It's not always straightforward. When we ask: What is it that co-creation actually achieves? I'm drawn to the benefits we experience from having conversations that take us to unexpected places and lead us to novel concepts.

As a freelance design journalist, I find myself drawn to co-working spaces. My favorite in SoHo, New York, attracts creative professionals who rely on one another. Creativity is not a solo pursuit, after all. Impromptu social interactions take place at all hours, nudging the open exchange of ideas. I've found that the stranger who sat next to me for months has valuable insights about one of my projects. Co-creation stems in part from the willingness to be vulnerable, which only comes about once we've built a trusting rapport.

Tapping into another trusted partner can reveal unexpected potential. Celebrated designer, Tom Dixon, brought his outside perspective to the Jean Nouvel Seating Collection by Coalesse for Miami Art Week. Dixon is internationally recognized for his pioneering use of materials and techniques. Jean Nouvel's designs are reminiscent of natural forms found in landscapes. The surprising collaboration resulted in reupholstered organic designs paired with a contrasting crinkled metal-foil textile. A fresh aesthetic take, neither designer would have come up with on their own.

It may seem like co-creation happens behind closed doors with a final unpredictable reveal. In fact, it flourishes in spaces that invite meaningful conversation and collaboration, which makes carefully considered design indispensable. For workplaces to work well, architects and interior designers are adopting a more comprehensive yet nuanced approach. They are seeking a balance of open areas — communal spaces for open exchange — with secluded alcoves — pods for individual reflection. When we get up and move throughout the day, not only do we energize our bodies and brains, we make it much more likely to connect, collaborate and co-create.

The environments I've experienced that best support co-creation are balanced, accommodating and inviting; not visually imposing or spatially prescriptive. There needs to be literal and figurative room for adaptation; incentives for people to make their mark. Our spaces can serve as the framework for co-creation. When designed well, they can encourage us to let go of individual authorship and open our minds to new viewpoints, possibilities and co-created innovations.

By Adrian Madlener, freelance design journalist and curator

Adrian covers the architecture and design industries and has for over a decade. He's written for Curbed, Cultured, Dwell, Elle Decor, Galerie, Monocle and Wallpaper*.

Community Drives Performance

Research shows it improves engagement, productivity + wellbeing

Organizations are ramping up investments in the workplace, but most employees aren't feeling the improvement — yet. In the past year, 21% of employees say their primary workspace was updated, according to recent Steelcase research, yet when asked to give their overall workplace a grade, they only give it a C.

The issue: Many offices fall short because they don't offer a range of spaces that truly support how people work or foster the sense of community and belonging that draws them in.

The global study of almost 5,500 office workers examined how workplace design impacts people's performance and wellbeing. A key finding — and opportunity for improvement — is that employees do not feel their workplace is highly effective in supporting the essential work activities they do every day: focus, collaborate, socialize, learn and rejuvenate (see Blueprint For a Better Office, pg. 2)

The data shows that while offices offer some support, it isn't enough to fully meet employees' needs. The research also points to what will make a difference. When people have a range of spaces dedicated to the different types of work they do throughout the day, they perform and feel better. These spaces, designed as zones or "districts," support a primary way to work (i.e. focus, collaboration, etc.) but can also support other behaviors. They offer people a variety of ways to work, based on the tasks they need to do and their preferences.

When workplaces have three or more districts dedicated to different types of work, people experience better work outcomes.

More choice, better results

Steelcase research found that employees with access to a variety of spaces* experience:

- ↑14% **higher engagement**
- ↑8% **higher productivity**
- ↑13% **higher wellbeing**
- ↑16% **higher sense of community**
- ↓8% **lower likelihood to leave**
- ↓3% **lower burnout**

** 3-5 workplace districts*

Employees with access to three or more districts report stronger outcomes in key areas, such as engagement, which, in turn, impacts performance, such as productivity. But most employees lack meaningful choice in where and how they work. Globally, only 37% report access to three or more districts; 63% report access to two or fewer, according to the research. While availability varies, the broader pattern is consistent: **most offices offer a limited set of environments to support the range of activities people perform throughout the workday.**

Designing for the full workday

Creating a workplace with a diverse range of spaces or districts is an essential part of the Community-Based Design approach that Steelcase uses for its own workplaces.

"We think of employees as members of a community at work, and we need to design workplaces for them that address how they actually work — their rhythms, their challenges and their moments of connection," says Meg Bennett, Steelcase global design principal. "When we design spaces to respond to these patterns, we draw inspiration from vibrant cities where a diversity of places — retail, homes and public spaces — coexist to support the needs of a thriving community. Similarly, in the workplace, we create an ecosystem of spaces that reflect the different ways people work. These environments enable people to build trust and drive meaningful progress together."

Community-Based Design is grounded in research that shows how vibrant neighborhoods evolve and thrive over time. Communities with diverse, mixed-use spaces naturally foster relationships, belonging and shared purpose — much like a city that grows stronger as its people interact, support one another, and co-create its future. Bringing these urban-planning principles into the workplace can help employees build trust, strengthen community and work together more effectively.

The research suggests that when workplaces support the full spectrum of work activities, organizational culture and the employee experience also improve.

The impact on employee experience

Steelcase research found that employees with access to a variety of spaces* are:

- ↑18% more likely to agree their company fosters inclusion + supports different perspectives
- ↑17% more likely to say their company adapts + responds to change
- ↑14% more likely to report shared accountability within their teams

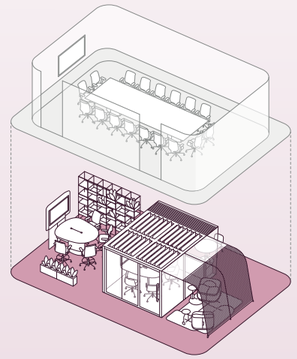
** 3-5 workplace districts*

Changes that matter

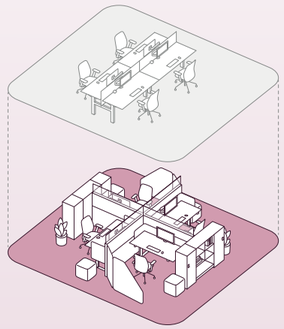
Organizations have an opportunity to make research-backed improvements to their workplaces that give people what they need to build trust and work better.

Discover how common underperforming spaces can be transformed into places where people can maintain their attention, think creatively and feel a sense of community.

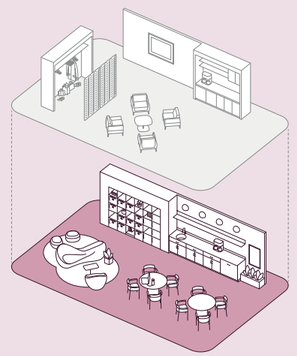
The Underused Conference Room



The Overexposed Bench



The Blasé Café



See the transformations →

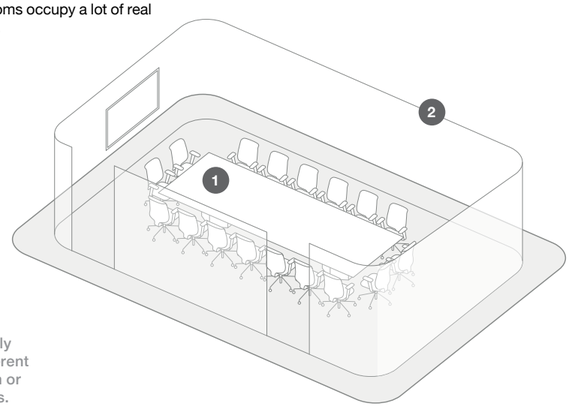
The Underused Conference Room

Transform a single, large conference room into multiple spaces where people can collaborate, focus, rejuvenate and socialize.

Before

What's not working: Large conference rooms account for nearly 60% of all meeting space, but 80% of meetings involve only one-to-three people. These more traditional rooms occupy a lot of real estate yet often sit empty.

2) Large enclosed meeting spaces often use drywall, which is costly to reconfigure.

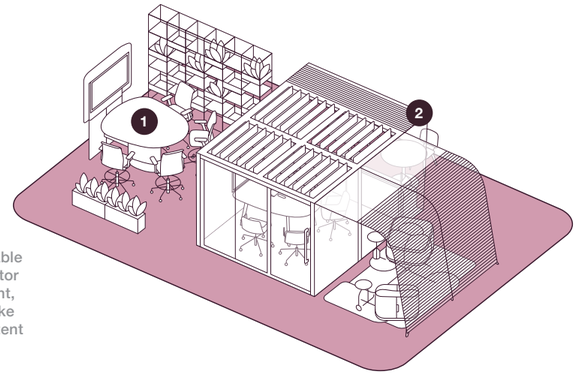


1) A single large table or other more formal furnishings don't easily adapt to support different types of collaboration or diverse work activities.

After

What to do: Shift from a single enclosed space to multiple workspaces that support a range of activities, giving people more choice and control over where and how they work.

2) Flexible architectural products allow for easy reconfiguration and can create a mix of open and enclosed spaces.



1) A standing-height table and integrated monitor encourage movement, connection and make it easy to share content in the open plan.

How it helps create community

Large, formal boardrooms can feel intimidating, often discouraging people from speaking up or fully engaging. In contrast, smaller, more welcoming spaces create a sense of comfort and equality that encourages participation. These spaces make it easier for people to interact naturally, share ideas and collaborate openly, while also supporting a wider range of work activities and team dynamics.

Shelving creates territorial and visual privacy in an open collaboration space, reducing distractions and helping people stay focused.

A private, acoustically controlled room eliminates distractions and supports both in-person and hybrid meetings.

A variety of collaboration spaces support connection, creativity and knowledge sharing. These smaller spaces can support a range of activities: hybrid meetings, quick huddles, informal collaboration and rejuvenation.

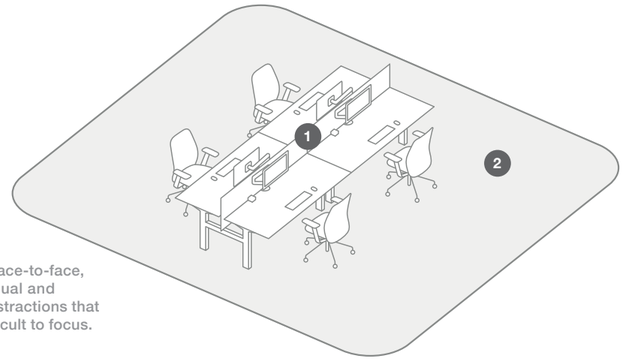
The Overexposed Bench

A pinwheel configuration creates a more private, comfortable and adaptable workspace that limits distractions and helps people focus.

Before

What's not working: Traditional benching applications lack privacy and personal space, with no buffers or borders between workstations.

2) The absence of boundaries leads to more frequent distractions.

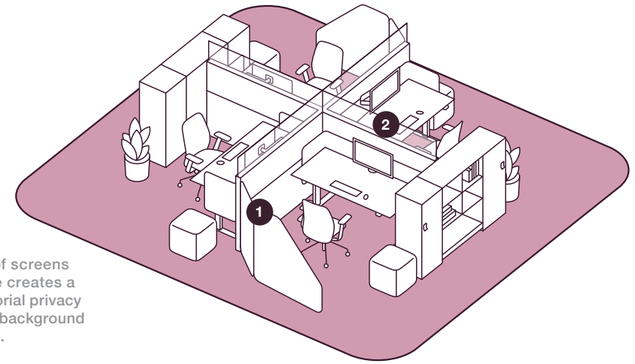


1) People sit face-to-face, causing visual and acoustic distractions that make it difficult to focus.

After

What to do: A pinwheel configuration and the addition of boundary elements gives people higher levels of shielded privacy to mitigate visual distractions.

2) Changing the orientation of the workstations so people face away from each other minimizes distractions.



1) The addition of screens behind people creates a sense of territorial privacy and a suitable background for video calls.

How it helps create community

This workstation pinwheel configuration supports individual privacy in an open office setting, while keeping people connected to their teammates. Employees benefit from increased privacy, personal storage and flexibility, supporting both individual and team work without sacrificing comfort. Privacy gives people the comfort and security they need to recharge, focus and confidently re-engage with others.

Glass-topped panels define personal space while maintaining openness and access to natural light.

Nearby pods provide everyone with access to acoustic privacy when needed.

The workstation pinwheel configuration supports individual comfort in an open-plan environment. People no longer sit face-to-face, and panels provide additional shielding, eliminating visual distractions.

Height-adjustable desks encourage people to change their posture throughout the day.

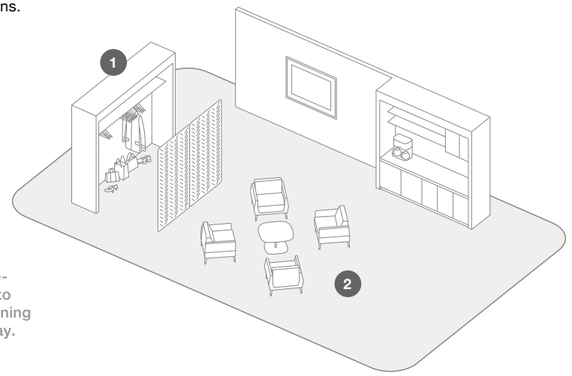
WorkValet lockers provide additional shielding, as well as a place for people to safely store their things.

The Blasé Café

Many café spaces offer basic hospitality and are used primarily for brief interactions or dining. It's functional but not inspiring.

Before

What's not working: Furnishings support conversation, but don't encourage lingering or collaborating. Storage space takes up a larger footprint that could be used to promote more connections.

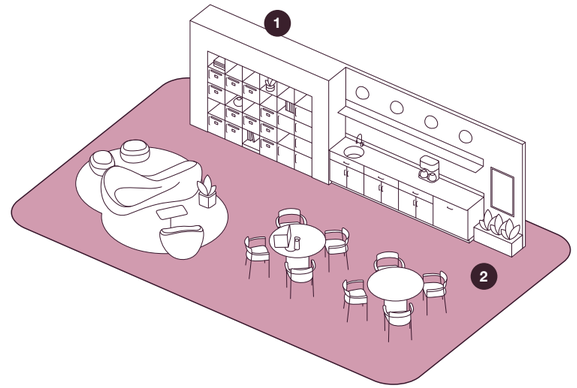


1) An uninspiring single-purpose space fails to draw people in, remaining empty most of the day.

2) Limited seating options and furniture do not support socialization or allow people to use the space for collaboration and individual work.

After

What to do: Create a versatile café that provides a welcoming touchpoint and encourages chance encounters that can build trust and culture.



1) Lockers give people a place where they can start their day and safely store their belongings.

2) Steelcase research shows the presence of social hubs can increase engagement and belonging by 10%.

How it helps create community

This vibrant hub blends the comfort and energy of a café with the functionality of a workplace. As more organizations move to shared workstations, this space supports people's new routines. At the start of their day, it provides them with a place to store personal items, grab a coffee and socialize. It also draws people together throughout the day — for casual conversations, dining, focused work or impromptu collaboration.

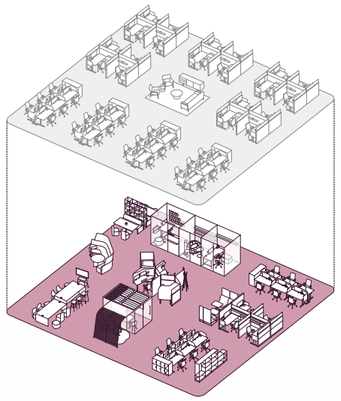
A wall of lockers creates a central spot where people begin their day, store belongings and build connections. Open cubbies display company artifacts and branding, strengthening the sense of belonging.

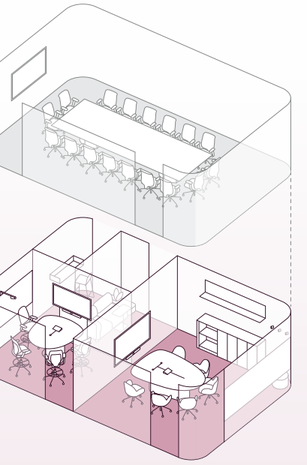
Lounge seating supports an alternate posture and creates a welcoming social space where people can connect.

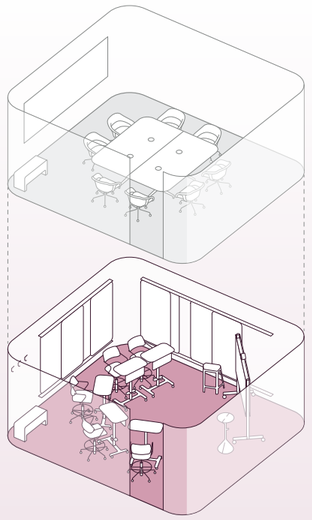
Diverse settings and seating options create a welcoming space where people can work, eat or socialize — no matter the time of day.

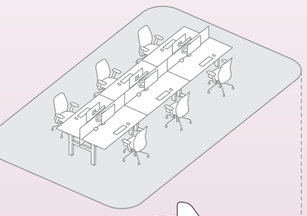
See More Before-and-After Transformations

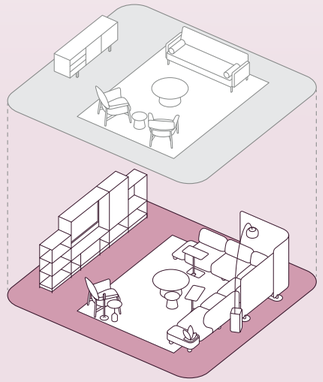
Explore additional examples of how to transform underperforming spaces that offer more choice, support different types of work and strengthen community at work.











Getting Started

Chances are, most organizations have spaces that just don't work as well as they should. These underperforming areas are easy to spot — people vote with their feet. Understanding why they're underutilized is often more challenging. These applications are examples of ways to help address these common problems. But there are many ways to design these types of spaces, depending on an organization's specific needs and culture.

Every organization is unique, so it's essential to examine your own spaces closely. Start by evaluating how they're used to uncover what's missing. This means digging into the unique aspects of your workplace and listening to a variety of voices across the organization to ensure the space truly supports everyone's needs.

Steelcase offers several tools and resources to help:

Workplace Readiness Assessment
Measure the in-office experience to shape the right workplace strategy.

Guided Discovery Workshop
Identify needs and align on priorities together.

Concept Reviews
Visualize planning concepts to bring workplace goals to life.

Pilots
Test new ideas on a smaller scale before making big investments.

Ready to learn more? Connect with your local Steelcase representative to get started.

Why Mattering Matters With Zach Mercurio

Work Better Podcast
Part One (S6:E10)

People want their work to matter, yet they're often expected to care without being shown they are cared for. Researcher Zach Mercurio, author of "The Power of Mattering," joined the Work Better podcast to explore how "mattering" — feeling seen, valued and needed — is a basic human need and a powerful performance driver.

Work Better: What is "mattering" and how is it different from belonging or inclusion?

Zach Mercurio: Belonging is being welcomed into a group and inclusion is being invited to participate. Mattering goes a step further. It's the lived experience of being significant to those around you. It's everyday interactions that help people feel seen, heard and essential, not just present. That distinction matters: Mattering is foundational, a primal human need that fuels motivation and wellbeing.

WB: Why should leaders care about mattering when they're under pressure to drive productivity?

ZM: You can't get sustained productivity without people feeling they matter. When people feel valued first, they build the confidence and energy that power quality and quantity of work — the outcomes organizations seek. Treating these skills as "soft" has led many teams to overlook the rigor required to cultivate them.

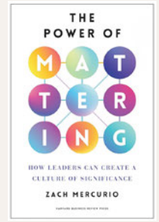
WB: What are practical ways to build a culture where people feel significant?

ZM: Think in moments. Three repeatable practices are key: notice, affirm and show people they're needed. Ask better questions that invite real answers ("What has your attention today?"), then affirm with specific, meaningful gratitude that names the situation, behavior, person's unique gifts and impact. Finally, make the impact visible. Collect stories, photos or customer feedback and say, "Look what you did," so no one has to guess how their work helps others.

WB: How can the workplace reinforce mattering?

ZM: Design visible links between daily tasks and bigger outcomes. One example: NASA sketched a "ladder to the moon," mapping each unit's work to mission goals so people saw why their role was indispensable. Also, create places for caring conversations that build trust. Make it easier — not harder — for leaders to notice and support people.

Read more from Zach Mercurio



Keep Listening:
Hear two full episodes with Zach by searching "Work Better" wherever you get your podcasts, then follow or subscribe.

Powering Progress

Renewable energy and new technology create a more sustainable workplace.

If you visit the Steelcase manufacturing plant in Kentwood, Michigan, today, you'll notice something new before you even step inside. In a nearby green space, rows of solar panels stretch across the landscape; an 800-kilowatt array now generating clean energy for the plant and all of the products it makes. It's the largest solar installation across the Steelcase global footprint, and it signals something bigger: the latest effort in an organization-wide strategy to design and make products in ways that dramatically reduce their carbon footprint.

Designing for the planet means looking at every stage of a product's life: how it's made, what it's made from, how long it lasts and what happens when someone is done using it. This mindset guides teams across Steelcase as they work to reduce embodied carbon, keep materials in circulation longer, and create products that help customers meet their sustainability goals.

"Our biggest opportunity to help customers meet their sustainability goals lies in the products themselves," says Kaila Bryzgalski, product sustainability marketing manager. "When we improve how we make things and what we make them from, the impact multiplies."

Rosenheim, Germany

A rooftop solar array in Rosenheim, Germany helps power Steelcase manufacturing with clean energy. It is part of the organization's global effort to consider renewable energy everywhere it operates.

Kentwood, Michigan

The new Kentwood solar array was installed by a local contractor on preserved grassland adjacent to the plant. The array supports biodiversity while generating power onsite.

Solar energy powers lower-carbon manufacturing

The Kentwood solar array is a major step in that direction. It builds on earlier solar projects at Steelcase facilities in Sarrebourg, France; Pune, India; and Stribro, Czech Republic. Each installation strengthens the company's ability to manufacture lower-carbon products and accelerates progress toward long-term climate goals. It's all part of a global effort to consider renewable energy wherever the company operates.

"After installing solar roof panels in Europe and Asia, we've been working to scale those successes in other parts of the world," says Elizabeth Girgen, who managed the U.S. project. "This latest installation is a significant step forward."

Girgen believes Kentwood is the ideal place to expand renewable energy. The plant produces a high volume of tables, wood products and storage: categories with substantial energy demand and strong potential to reduce embodied carbon. "The array produces enough electricity to power roughly 125 homes annually, covering about 5% of the plant's total energy consumption," Girgen says.

Generating renewable energy onsite means all products made there are more sustainable for customers who buy them.

This work supports the company's broader climate goals: reducing operational emissions 50% by 2030 and laying the foundation for a 2050 net-zero future, which includes cutting value-chain emissions more than 90%. Renewable energy plays a critical role in reducing the carbon intensity of manufacturing.

Circular design keeps materials in use

Clean energy is only part of the sustainability story. Steelcase is also rethinking materials and product lifecycles to reduce emissions tied to the materials used to make products. Circular design is central to that effort.

Circular by Steelcase: Remade is just one example. The program transforms popular used task chairs into high-quality, remanufactured products. Instead of sending materials to landfills, Remade gives them a second life, offering customers beautiful, durable, lower-carbon alternatives while keeping valuable resources in circulation.

A relentless circular design mindset also drove the push for significantly more recycled content in Steelcase high-performance chairs. Across the task seating portfolio in the Americas, the recycled content has doubled, reducing reliance on virgin resources and lowering the carbon footprint by 35%, on average.

These chairs are built to last, easy to repair, and designed to be remade at the end of their use — key parts of a circular system.

When you combine circular services, circular design and lower-carbon manufacturing powered by renewable energy, the impact compounds.

"All of these efforts add up. Together, they create a ripple effect that gives our customers products with smaller footprints, longer lifespans and more circular pathways."

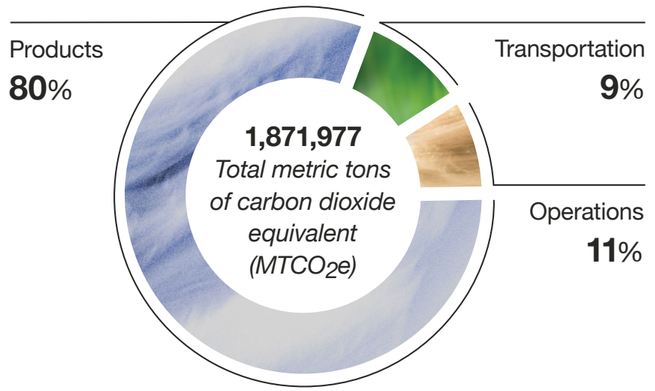
Kaila Bryzgalski
Steelcase Product Sustainability Marketing Manager

"We're committed to keep improving, measuring each step along the way and sharing our progress to continue the momentum."

Steelcase is committed to a net-zero future — transforming our products, operations and transportation to eliminate over 90% of emissions by 2050 and build a more resilient world together.

Our Sources of Carbon Emissions

(FY2020)



Student Success + Sustainability: Inside George Brown Polytechnic

For George Brown Polytechnic, Limberlost Place reflects an ambitious yet practical vision: create one of Canada's most sustainable academic buildings while improving how students learn, gather and succeed. The building houses students in the school's Architectural Studies program, making it both a place to learn and a living example of sustainable building practices.

What distinguishes Limberlost Place is the way its two core ambitions come together. Design choices that reduce carbon emissions also foster healthier, more engaging environments for students.

Designed for better learning

Located on Toronto's waterfront, the 10-story mass-timber facility brings together academic spaces, student amenities and community services in a compact footprint designed around how students actually spend their time. "We wanted a building that supports the full student experience, not just what happens during class time," says Nerys Rau, executive director, facilities and sustainability at George Brown and Limberlost's project director.

Rather than organizing the building around corridors and isolated classrooms, Limberlost is structured to support a range of learning modes. Classrooms, studios and labs are positioned along the perimeter to maximize daylight, while informal social and study spaces sit immediately outside them. Every floor includes a mix of settings: open collaboration zones, enclosed booths and quiet study areas. The intent was to support different postures, personalities and learning preferences.

"Flexibility is critical," says Kayley Mullings, senior interior designer at Moriyama Teshima Architects and a part-time instructor at the college. "Spaces need to evolve with curriculum changes and new teaching methods." Designed as active learning environments, classrooms easily shift between lecture, discussion and group work, with mobile furniture and integrated technology enabling quick reconfiguration.

Shaped by sustainability

Equally central is the building's environmental performance. Designed as a net-zero carbon facility, Limberlost is constructed primarily from mass timber, significantly reducing embodied carbon. "We wanted the building to reflect our commitment to climate action," Rau says. "Students can see and feel the difference."

Sustainability guided interior decisions as well. Materials and furnishings selections prioritized a lifecycle lens, emphasizing durability, transparency and reuse.

"Maintaining material authenticity was especially important in a timber building," says Mullings. "Using real veneer, wool and other natural materials reinforces the health and sustainability project goals."

"It's not sustainability for sustainability's sake," says Rau. "It's about creating a place where students can do their best work and see that the institution is walking the talk on sustainability. This building demonstrates that commitment in a very real way."

At a Glance

George Brown Polytechnic

Location
Toronto, Ontario Canada

Industry
Education

Size
225,000 square feet

Design Intent
Advance net-zero carbon and low-embodied-carbon design

Improve student engagement and academic outcomes

Support flexible, future-ready learning environments

Create a living lab for architectural design students

Key Features: Sustainability

First building to meet Toronto Green Standards Version 3 Tier 4 (the highest, voluntary tier of environmental performance in Toronto, aimed at near-zero emissions)

95% of products are BIFMA Level–certified

89% achieved the highest Level 3 rating

97% of products are SCS Indoor Quality Certified or Equivalent

Project Partners
Design Firm: Moriyama Teshima Architects

Dealer: POI Business Interiors

Access to a range of spaces gives students choice in how they study and keeps them on campus longer. Their willingness to stay is tied directly to student success, says Executive Director Nerys Rau.

Designing Better Connections

When technology breaks down, so does your workday. That connection raises the stakes for how technology and the physical workplace operate as one, driving interior designers and IT professionals to partner in ways they rarely did before.

In the past, designers only connected with IT when their computer needed fixing. Today, a company's digital roadmap impacts its design roadmap — leading to new conversations and better types of workspaces.

With IT as a strategic partner, organizations now create workspaces that are both hard-working and flexible. Directors of digital transformation, AI, IT strategy and data analytics are designing the future of workplace technology, influencing how and where people do their best work. When these teams work closely with facilities, design and workplace strategists, the places they create enable more productive and engaged employees.

"Years ago, we started to collaborate with leading technology partners because we knew how important the integration of technology and space is to the future of work," says Christina Vernon, Steelcase general manager of technology partnerships. "We seek out companies committed to forward-thinking, research-driven design, just like we are. The relationships we've developed are unmatched in our industry. We share information and roll up our sleeves together to pressure test ideas and design new integrated solutions to create a better work experience for people."

Steelcase recently announced Spaceti as a new technology partner to deliver real-time occupancy, bookings and environmental conditions such as air quality. Spaceti works seamlessly with existing partners to enable smarter, connected spaces that respond to common workplace needs.

These partnerships help close the gap between what people need and what spaces can do. Together, integrated technology and innovative design give employees more control over their workday.

From finding the right space to understanding how it supports collaboration, focus and wellbeing, these partnerships design better connections across the workplace.

A Robust Partner Ecosystem

Steelcase intentionally collaborates with technology partners to create enhanced work experiences. Together, we work with organizations to integrate space and technology seamlessly, while also co-developing innovative solutions to support how work is changing.

Microsoft

How can meetings be more inclusive of everyone, in-person and remote?

Microsoft's AI-powered collaboration software (e.g., Copilot) and digital ecosystems (e.g., Teams Rooms) enable real-time engagement to boost productivity.

logitech

Where do your teams struggle most with the quality of virtual meetings?

Logitech helps deliver crystal-clear meeting experiences and flexible workspaces that make remote participants feel present and engaged.

zoom

How do you enable spontaneous collaboration across locations?

Zoom's dynamic, inclusive and accessible hybrid communication platforms enable spontaneous collaboration and equitable participation anywhere.

CRESTRON

How do you make desk sharing easier and more comfortable?

Crestron's desk reservation systems offer visual indicators and intuitive booking tools that clearly signal availability, enhancing utilization and efficiency.

VERGE SENSE

Do you know how your spaces are actually being used?

Vergesense provides real-time occupancy analytics and data-driven space optimizations to help organizations make informed decisions and minimize wasted space.

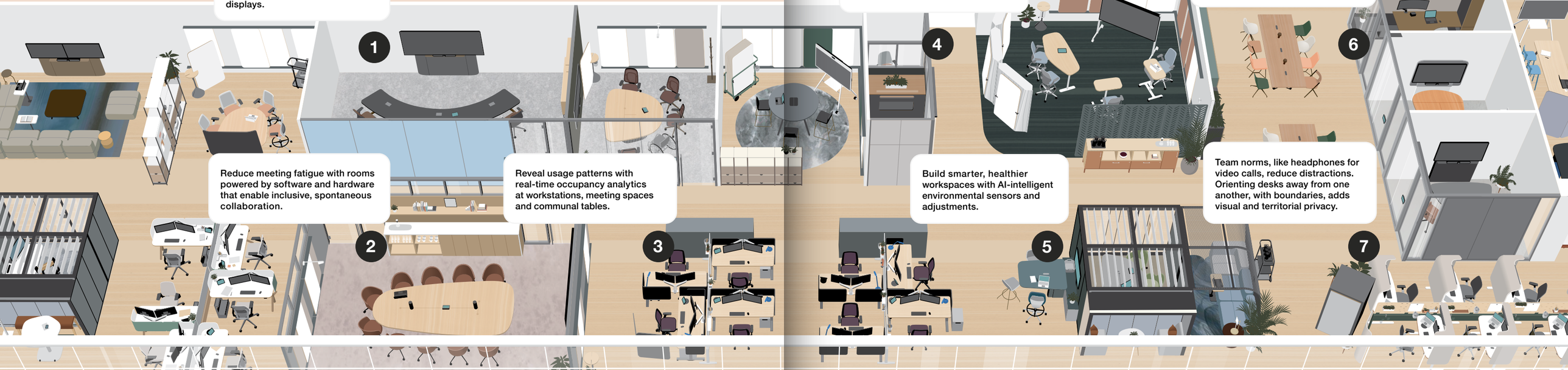
spaceti

How do you measure and manage workplace wellness?

Spaceti creates healthier, more responsive workspaces by combining sensor and building management data, such as air quality, for comprehensive and predictive analysis.

Support more human connections with immersive collaboration solutions co-developed by Steelcase and Logitech.

Designing Space + Tech Together



Making Space to Think

Solutions designed to help people focus, collaborate and create

Designing workplaces where people can do their best thinking requires a diverse range of furniture and technology solutions that help reduce distractions. People need a variety of privacy options so they can focus. Promoting movement supports creativity and problem-solving. Spaces that are physically and emotionally comfortable can help reduce stress. Explore ideas for creating spaces that help people do and feel their best.

Think® Chair
Steelcase

New!

Ocular™ Frame
Steelcase

Ocular Frame quickly and seamlessly integrates AV technology into any setting, creating adaptable, connected spaces where collaboration feels effortless.

On the QT™
Orangebox

Fat Sofa
Tom Dixon

Sticks Divider
Extremis

Manto Lounge
Viccarbe

Verlay®
Steelcase

Designed to endure. Made to comfort.

Healthcare environments are built for performance, but without comfort they feel impersonal. The Apprise Collection supports the physical and emotional needs of patients, families and caregivers across the care journey.

New!

Apprise™ Collection
Steelcase Health

With lounge and guest seating paired with occasional tables, Apprise works seamlessly across a variety of healthcare spaces. A consistent design language and shared forms create cohesive, high-performing environments that bring comfort, connection and durability to every moment of care.

Lagunitas® Lounge System
Coalesse

Air³
Orangebox

Potrero415® Table
Coalesse

Cubow Collection
Viccarbe

Ocular™ View
Steelcase

Co-developed by Steelcase and Logitech, Ocular™ View is an immersive, realistic and personal hybrid meeting experience that creates meaningful connections and enhances wellbeing.

Marien152™ Lounge Chair
Coalesse

Steelcase Flex Mobile Power
Steelcase

With advanced battery technology and a refined design, Steelcase Flex Mobile Power keeps you connected and productive wherever work happens.

Campers & Dens
Orangebox

Ocular™ Coupe 5 Table
Steelcase

New!

Brin
AMQ

Brin combines modern style with durable performance. Its reinforced shell, steel frame options, and subtle perforations offer long-lasting strength in a clean, contemporary silhouette.

New!

Migration™ Desking Collection
Steelcase

The Migration Desking Collection now features new basic height options, offering cost-effective solutions focused on ergonomic design for all the ways you work best.

About the Cover

At a time when our ability to think at work is being disrupted, stretched and fragmented, this image captures the experience of being immersed in thought, supported by an environment designed to reduce distraction and restore focus. It reflects a growing understanding that enriched spaces can help protect brain health and provide the conditions people need to think deeply and do their best work.

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