



Insights

The Balanced Workplace and the Office of the Future



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Over the past year, our expectations around work have fundamentally changed. It's transformed from a location to an activity we can do almost anywhere. Individuals have adapted to the pandemic and become accustomed to integrating their home and work lives. They've had breakfast with their children, which their old commute might never have allowed them to do before, they've been able to reduce corporate travel and spend more time with their loved ones, and they may have found themselves more productive as a result.

As individuals and organisations start planning their return to the office environment over the next few months, the workplace needs to reflect people's changed priorities. The post-pandemic office needs to be a balanced workplace which supports people in all aspects of their lives. Organisations which fail to adapt and create the right balance will struggle as their people vote with their feet.

What is a balanced workplace?

Balance has two meanings. It can be defined as a situation in which different elements are equal or in the correct proportion, or as the even distribution of weight enabling someone or something to remain upright and steady. Both are relevant to the working world.

A balanced workplace will support people to lead lives where all aspects of their existence – work, family, friends, hobbies and personal values– feel supported and co-exist. The pandemic has highlighted the negative impacts of an unbalanced workplace – enforced working from home has been difficult for many people resulting in poor mental health, a lack of connection with colleagues, difficulty in collaborating, trouble focusing on concentrated tasks and a range of other stresses.





Balance between office working and home working.

Research we carried out in January shows that 88 percent of people are keen to return to the office with most people wanting to come to their workplace two days (22 percent) or three days (21 percent) a week. Their key reasons for being in the office are to get team work done (52 percent), meet and socialise with colleagues (51 percent) and to create and share ideas with their team (43 percent). However, a solid 20 percent want to get to the office so they can focus on individual work, indicating that while many people have missed the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues, others are desperate to get back to a dedicated and ergonomically-designed environment to help them to concentrate. Different generations also have differing needs. Younger people may be in shared accommodation where finding a quiet space to work can be a challenge, and they may also need to physically work alongside more experienced colleagues to learn. Older

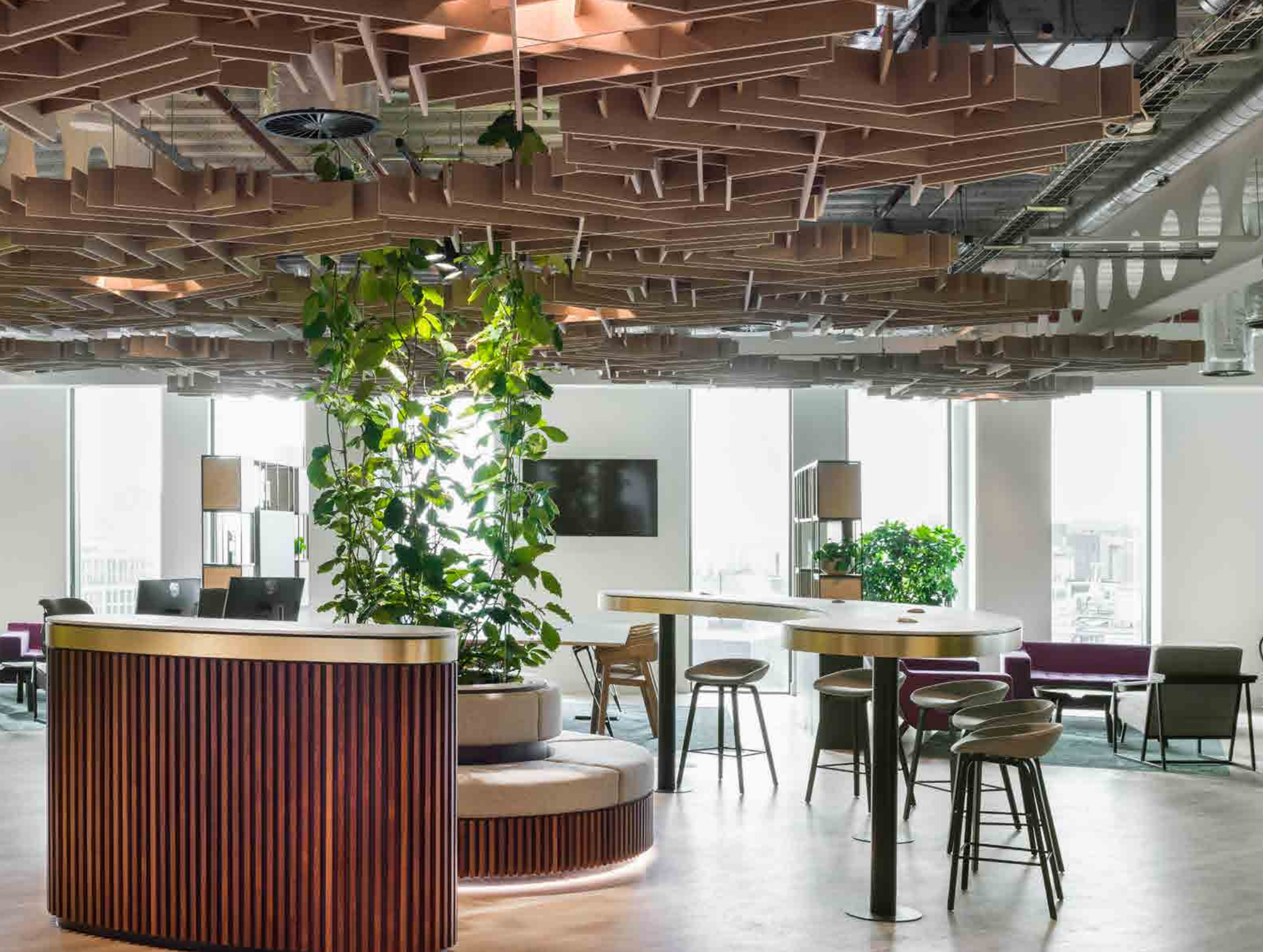
people may have dedicated study areas at home and enjoy the peace and quiet of the home environment. It's clear that a balanced approach to the workplace will see a continued option to work from home for at least some of the time, but a balanced workplace is far more than just a balance between office and home working.



Work-life balance.

People used to talk about work and life as if they were two different realms. Even before Covid, the discourse focused more on work-life integration and it's clear that the pandemic has further blurred the lines between our work and personal lives. While people will be glad to see the back of some of this blurring – trying to home-school children while working full-time, for example – there are other areas which will continue beyond the pandemic. Why shouldn't people be able to have breakfast with their children, or pick them up from school sometimes and still have a fulfilling career? The positive impact on those children and their attitude towards work will benefit everyone. Why can't they work longer hours on some days so they can have a shorter day to pursue a hobby or care for an elderly relative? Everyone is different. Those in their 20s and early 30s often have a social life which revolves around the workplace, while those in their late 30s and 40s may have caring responsibilities which require them to be at home more. A balanced workplace will allow people to bring all aspects of themselves to work.



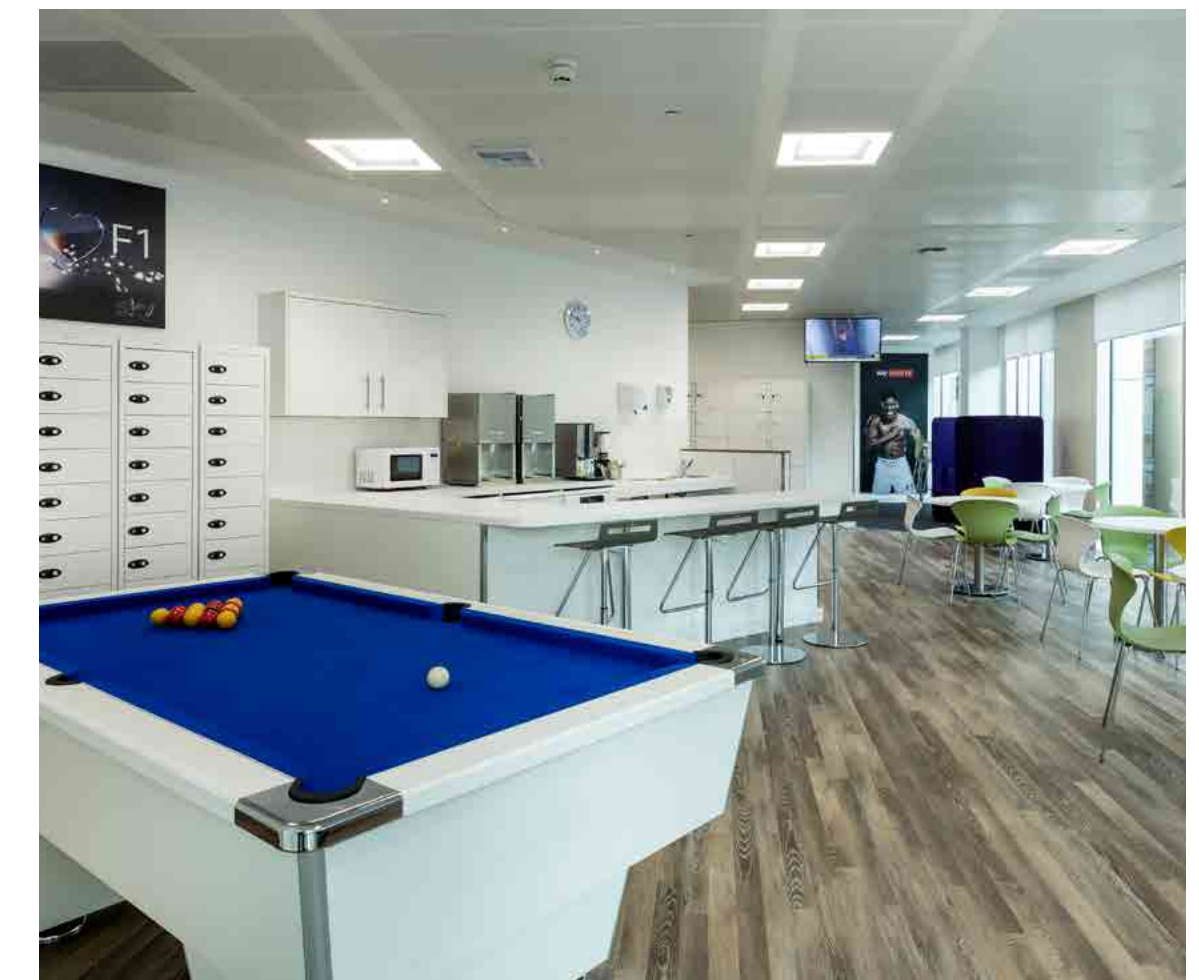


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Balance in corporate values.

The pandemic has seen a massive fall in individual and organisations' carbon footprints. A lack of commuting and closed corporate buildings have had a positive impact on the environment. At the same time, there's been a focus on people's health and wellbeing with conversations around mental health taking place for the first time in many businesses. Business leaders have realised the importance of being kind to one another. The pandemic has been a great leveller and as a result, many organisations are focusing more on environmental and wellbeing issues and these will be reflected in the balanced workplace. In addition to reduced travel through some homeworking, the balanced workplace will see more use and integration of outdoor spaces where possible, and if this isn't available then bringing the sense of nature inside through the use of plants, textures and natural fabrics instead. When we asked 850 office workers

in March how they would change their office after the pandemic, almost half (48.5 percent) said they wanted an environment which offers enhanced wellbeing and health facilities – the most popular option – while a third said one with sustainable / environmentally-friendly working practices and construction methods, the third most popular option.



Balance in the physical office space.

The pre-pandemic office was heavily focused around the desk and the meeting room – a somewhat binary way of working – but the post-pandemic workplace needs to be more balanced and take into account all the different activities that happen within its walls. Just as people don't typically cook in their bedroom, or have a shower in their kitchen, workplaces need to provide a variety of settings for different activities. In addition to desk space, this could include quiet zones for focused work; collaboration spaces including formal meeting rooms and more flexible spaces; refreshment areas for socialising and refuelling; wellbeing spaces for fitness and mindfulness; outdoor areas to improve wellness; anchor points such as auditoriums to encourage people to move through the space; and even well-designed empty space such as walkways and staircases where people can meet serendipitously. A good variety of these areas will help to support the balanced workplace concept. In a somewhat damning indictment of our current workplaces, 87% of the 850 office workers we surveyed in March believe their workplace needs to change after Covid. Change needs to happen in the physical workplace in order to bring about the concept of the balanced workplace.





Community balance.

Many corporates play a central role in their local communities and that will be an essential tenet of the balanced workplace. City centres have suffered enormously during the pandemic and will need corporate and individual support to revitalise them again.



Balance in locations.

In addition to offering their people the choice of working in a central office or at home, some larger organisations provide the option of working in regional offices. Often referred to as a 'hub and spoke' model, this enables people to benefit from the buzz of an office but with a reduced commute. Offering several different locations, including other areas such as co-working spaces and client sites, can provide a good balance of option for employees.



Why creating a Balanced Workplace matters for businesses



The past year has refocused people's minds on what really matters in life – family, friends and community, health and wellbeing, personal fulfilment and individual values. The people returning to the workplace may have a different attitude to when they left last year. Companies that understand they need to adapt to people's changed expectations and values by creating a more balanced workplace will be the ones which are most successful in the post-Covid world, attracting and retaining the best talent.

Everyone has had a different experience over the past year and they all need something different for them to work at their best. The balanced workplace approach supports people of all types and backgrounds including different generations, introverts and extroverts, people at different stages of their career and those with differing caring responsibilities. It helps the new graduate who might be keen to learn by working alongside more experienced people and develop a social network in a new town, as much as it helps the new parent who wants to be able to share the nursery drop-off with their partner so they can see more of their child while also developing their career.

Some people may be reluctant to return to the office. But the promise of a more balanced workplace will help organisations entice staff back to the workplace, enabling companies to re-establish their culture, as well as fostering collaboration – which has struggled thanks to the prolonged period working from home. The office is the place where companies build their social capital, where people network, build relationships, mentor one another and come up with great ideas. But that will only happen if people come back.

A balanced workplace will be a place where people want to come, where they fear missing out if they're not there. It's an environment where people are highly engaged and productive and where absenteeism rates are low because people feel supported. It's a place which considers its impact on the environment allowing an organisation to contribute to their environmental, social and corporate governance (ESG) responsibilities.





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Organisations which move away from treating their workplace as a cost centre and see it as a business and people enabler, a physical manifestation of their brand, will be the post-pandemic success stories. After a challenging year, businesses have a responsibility to reinvigorate the culture and community within their organisation. A balanced workplace is balanced at many levels – both physically in how the office is designed, but also in how it supports people bringing their whole selves to work, whenever and wherever they work. The pandemic provided an opportunity for people to pause and consider what really matters to them and they will return to the office with a refined mindset. Organisations need to respond accordingly and create an environment which delivers the latest evolution in our way of working. A balanced workplace approach is a great place to start.



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