



Whitepaper:

Social Capital and the Office of the Future

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Social capital has never been so important. Defined as the combined value of your people, their networks and their interactions, social capital is the glue that brings people together. It's the ability of your people to create positive interactions with one another, to relate in different scenarios and, most importantly, to foster a deep sense of trust throughout your organisation.

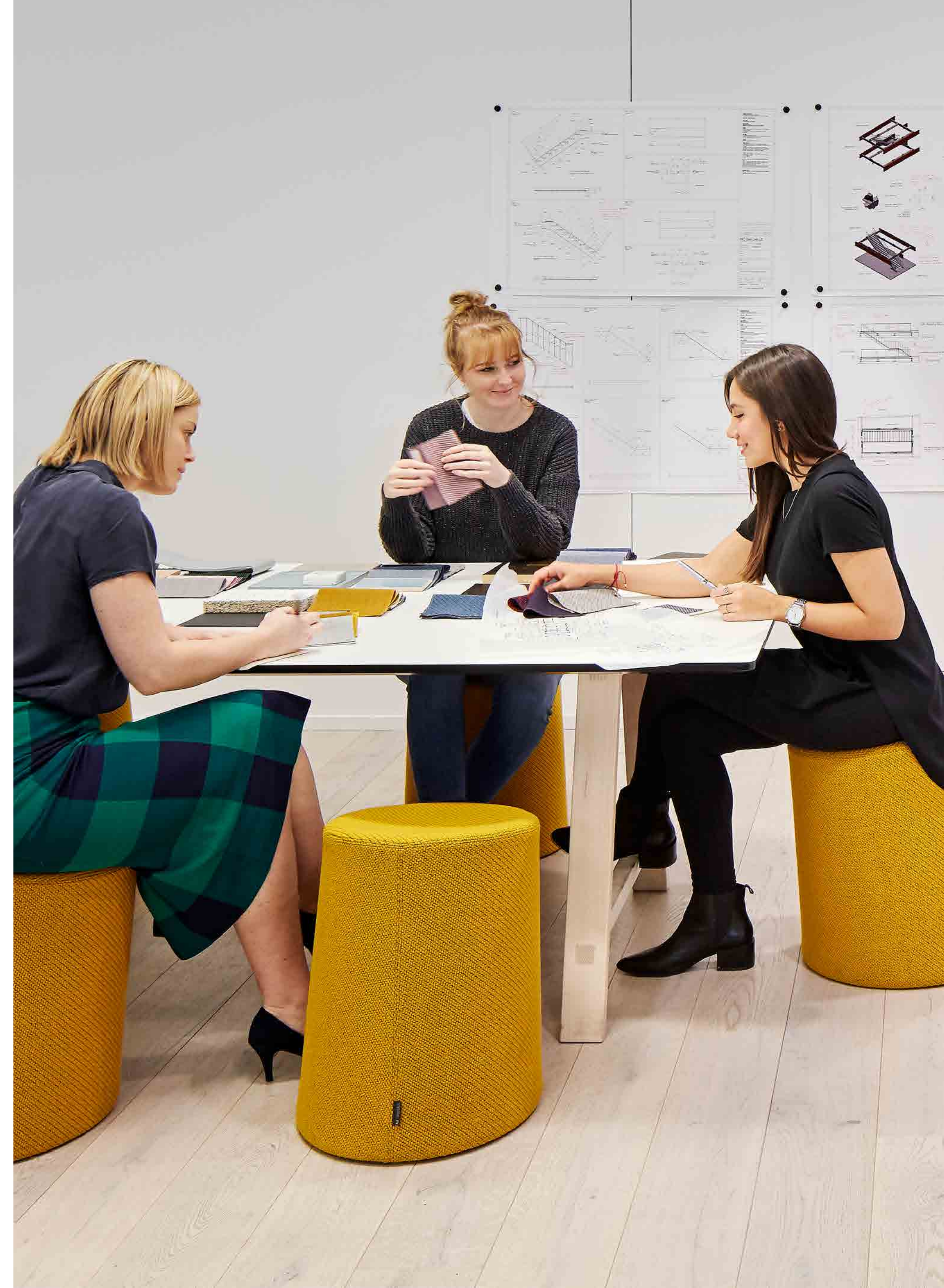
In the workplace, a culture rich in social capital is evident by a team that communicates fluidly and collaborates extensively — going out of their way to help one another and to draw on each others' opinions and experiences to produce a better output for the organisation. It improves productivity, enhances wellbeing, and is attractive to new talent. If you walk

into a business that has a large quantity of social capital, it's going to be a place where you want to stay.

Since the emergence of the knowledge economy in the 1960s, the workplace has become a space where people come together, share ideas, solve problems and innovate. It's where social capital is created allowing organisations to flourish, making the workplace a key ingredient to business success.

Social capital comprises **'the three C's'**:

- Community
- Collaboration
- Camaraderie





The three C's

Community – An effective organisation is made up of individuals who are connected by more than just a company name. They share the same values and embrace a common culture that manifests in the workplace. These values are crucial to cultivating the interpersonal relationships and sense of belonging that hold communities together.

Collaboration – The act of coming together to work towards a shared goal. It is the main driver behind collective decision-making.

Camaraderie – The sense of fun that comes with developing relationships with colleagues and achieving things together. This is crucial to employee wellbeing. Employees who lack the trust of a social network are more likely to feel a higher level of psychological distress. Numerous studies suggest that low social capital in the workplace can increase employees' stress levels and even lead to depression.

Organisations can encourage social capital in their physical workplace in a number of ways:

Office design to foster spontaneous interaction

Ensuring your space plan promotes interaction between different teams will help to break down silos and divisional barriers. This can be achieved through team proximities and ensuring shared spaces, such as tea points, cafés, communal working spaces and even staircases, are situated at a crossroads between different teams. Even reducing the number of tea points on a floor, so people have to move further away from their desks and meet more people on the way, can help.

Collaborative furniture

If you want to promote a culture of collaboration and inclusivity, you'll need furniture that supports people working together and helps to break down traditional organisational silos. Small,

unbookable meeting pods are great for providing somewhere for colleagues to easily collaborate. This makes it easier for people across teams to work together and share ideas, boosting the important relationship and trust elements that contribute towards social capital. Organisations should encourage the use of these areas by different teams so they aren't seen as being designated just for a particular division. It's also essential for senior executives to lead by example.

Creating a community

Since social capital is built by increasing our trust and emotional ties with one another, providing a space where you can foster this community and celebrate success together is key. Make sure your workplace is built around a communal hub, or shared space where you can easily host divisional meetings, town halls, or even monthly team events and breakfasts. This is a great way to promote an open and inclusive culture where your colleagues feel connected to one another.



90% of respondents of 1,000 workers in our OnePulse survey said that they miss “the social contact” of the office.

What happens to social capital when people work from home?

The pandemic brought the value of social capital into sharp focus. In March 2020, millions of organisations were forced to close their workplaces and switch to a full-time remote working model. Despite initial fears about how they would cope, the general consensus is that most organisations and individuals adapted well initially.

Leesman, the global independent assessor of employee experience, has surveyed more than 145,000 home workers since March last year. Its findings show that 83 percent of home-based employees agree that their home environment enables them to work

productively but home workers don't feel as well supported as their office counterparts in areas such as informal social interaction and connection to their colleagues and the organisation. Likewise, research by CBRE found that 38 percent of the workers it surveyed miss random interactions with colleagues.

In our own survey of 1,000 office workers in mid-December, nine out of ten cited “the social contact” as the thing they missed most about the office, while 47 percent said “the ability to collaborate easily”. People miss the social capital.





With offices closed, lots of organisations have put a great deal of effort into social and collaborative activities. Many have found workarounds to support their people during the pandemic. Virtual coffees have replaced tea breaks. Virtual trivia has replaced the pub quiz. Workplace and HR managers have booked virtual wine tasting sessions, virtual comedians and even virtual magicians.



But this raises an important point about over dependence on digital tools. Without them, there is little hope of maintaining social capital while remote working. There is also the phenomenon of “Zoom fatigue”. Employees are spending multiple hours every day on video calls to colleagues and clients and its starting to have a negative effect. A study by [London South Bank University](#) found that communication via video calls is more tiring to deal with than other forms of digital communication, and that daily fluctuations of different forms of communication between employees harms the overall wellbeing of the workforce.

Zoom may also be destroying the social capital that organisations have spent years cultivating in their buildings. Virtual meetings will always struggle to match the serendipity of an in-person meeting – the chat between colleagues before and after the meeting that has little to do with the agenda but everything to do with deepening that sense of community and social cohesion.

Our OnePulse survey results backs this up. The percentage of people who said that “the social contact” is the thing they miss the most about the office has increased from 67 percent in June 2020 to 90 percent when we asked the question again in December 2020. Meanwhile, though the percentage of people who miss “the ability to collaborate easily” has increased from 34 percent to 47 percent in that same period, other challenges have superseded it, such as “IT infrastructure” and “a quiet space to concentrate”. This suggests that while employees may be getting a little more used to the collaborative tools at their disposal, the isolation of lockdown is impacting their need to socialise.

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The social capital workplace of the future

The challenge now is to get organisations thinking about their post-pandemic workplace strategy and the long-term implications of this period for factors such as social capital. The shift to balanced – or hybrid – work is inevitable. Organisations that have been listening to their employees throughout the crisis will almost certainly provide them with more choice and flexibility when it is over.

Our survey found that 91 percent of workers would like to work in the office for at least some of the week after the pandemic, with 68 percent preferring at least two days. This will not spell the death of the office as many commentators have claimed, but merely its reincarnation. When we asked respondents what they enjoy about working in the same physical space as other people, 73 percent said “the social aspects of having people to talk to while I work”. Crucially, when we asked employees what they would include if they could redesign their office post-pandemic, the second most popular answer was “more relaxation areas for socialising with colleagues”.

Organisations that give their employees greater choice and flexibility around when and how they work after the pandemic need to think carefully about what their offices will offer. They need to create a “FOMO” (fear of missing out) workplace. If you don’t create a destination, people will continue to work from home because they’ve proven they can and social capital will suffer.

It would be remiss to think that post-pandemic workplaces will become wholly dedicated to socialising and celebrations. The principles of workplace design and strategy still hold true. It’s never a one-size-fits-all approach, and you still need to ensure that however the workplace looks in the future, it supports the process, operations, work styles and social capital unique to your individual organisation.

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