



Insights

Workplace culture and the office of the future

Workplace culture

Culture is an organisation's character or personality. Created by its values, rituals, attitudes and behaviours, it's 'the way things are done around here'. It can be both a positive and a negative force and can shift with changes in the leadership team, financial performance, systems and processes, people and the design and use of the workplace itself. It's what makes one organisation different from another.

You can sense an organisation's culture the minute you walk into its workplace – in the way people greet each other and work together and in the way the workplace itself is designed and used.

Over the past year as most people have worked largely from home, organisational culture – sometimes built up over decades – has been significantly diluted. Without the opportunity to see one another face-to-face, to have ongoing shared experiences in a workplace environment, many people have started to feel disengaged from their employer. They may have forgotten what makes their organisation unique and why they chose to work for them in the first place.

As people start to return to their workplace over the next few months, leaders must reignite their individual organisational cultures in order to reinvigorate their people and their associated performance, and focusing on the design and layout of the workplace is a great place to start.



The benefits of a strong workplace culture



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Organisational culture may feel like an intangible thing but it can have a very real impact on both individuals and their wider organisation.

High levels of personal wellbeing

Organisations with a strong culture encourage people to bring their whole selves to work. They pay attention to their people's mental and physical wellbeing and support them through the difficult times. People are then happier, more motivated and engaged and less likely to call in sick, thereby lowering absenteeism levels.

Performance/ productivity

Organisations where people communicate fluidly and collaborate 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, tend to also have high levels of individual productivity and performance. Studies from the [Queens School of Business](#) and [Gallup Organisation](#), show that disengaged workers had 60% more errors and defects and 18% lower productivity.

Innovation

An organisation with a great culture will be rich in social capital – the combined value of people, their networks and their interactions. A number of research studies demonstrate a link between high levels of social capital and innovation. People not only share ideas and thoughts with others but the culture created allows people to look at things differently, try a new approach or take calculated risks which can often produce great results.

Increased staff retention and talent attraction

People who work for an organisation with a great culture will usually be the ones telling you about it. They'll share anecdotes of something funny that happened at work, or their latest project. They'll talk about how great their new workplace is, or how inspiring their CEO is. Those working for a company with a poor culture will be equally vocal about it, spreading negative

sentiments about the business. An **article** in Harvard Business Review showed that a poor culture leads to increased workplace stress and an almost 50% increase in voluntary turnover. People don't want to work somewhere which makes them unhappy.

Higher profitability

The pandemic has been financially difficult for many organisations but, according to research, a strong culture with engaged employees can result in up to a 19% increase in operating income, and a 28% increase in earnings growth. Conversely the **Queens School of Business** research showed that a poor culture with disengaged employees resulted in 16% lower profitability and 65% lower share price over time. A good culture equates to a positive bottom line. Culture is currency.



How can the workplace reignite organisational culture?

A photograph of a modern office interior. In the center, a woman in a yellow sweater is walking up a wide staircase with a glass railing. To the left, two women are sitting at a long wooden table, working on laptops. To the right, a man is sitting in a blue armchair reading a magazine, and a woman is sitting on a grey sofa looking at a tablet. The office has large windows, modern lighting, and a clean, minimalist design.

As people return to the office, organisations need to think differently about how their space works. The way it was designed and used in the past, is not going to work in the post-pandemic world. We need to adapt to changed realities.

A Balanced Workplace

After months of home-working, some people will have mixed feelings about returning to the office while others will be queuing to get in. Balance and flexibility is going to be key. A balanced workplace will allow for people to achieve an equilibrium between home and office working and a balance between their personal and professional lives. It may also provide alternative regional workspaces so people can benefit from an office environment closer to their home.

Once in the office, a balanced workplace will have a variety of different types of settings for people to work from to support them in whatever activity they're undertaking. In addition to desk space, this could include quiet zones for concentrated work; collaboration spaces for team work; refreshment areas for socialising; wellbeing spaces for fitness and mindfulness; outdoor

areas to improve that sense of wellness; anchor points to encourage people to move through the space; and even well-designed empty spaces such as corridors and staircases where people can meet unplanned.

A warm welcome

People should feel welcomed the minute they walk through the door to their office. After months of home-working, there is enormous anticipation about returning. Businesses need to capitalise on that and do everything they can to garner that enthusiasm from the outset. Well-designed and appealing reception areas set the tone for the whole space. The workplace should be an attractive place to be where people want to go rather than be at home.

Memorable moments

Office culture is based on shared experiences – the things we talk about when we get home. Every step of an employee's journey through their workplace should be

exciting and invigorating – whether it's new furniture, exciting workplace technology, new colours, different art or an interesting use of finishes. People need to feel inspired by their workplace to the degree that they want to share images on Instagram or tell their partner about it when they get home. Serendipity needs to be designed into spaces, so that people can meet on the stairs or in corridors and have those casual chats that are such an important part of creating great culture.

Bringing home to work

Covid has accelerated the pre-pandemic domestication trend. After a year of working from home, people aren't ready to come back to working at a desk for eight hours a day. They want a more homely environment where they can collaborate, feel creative, relax and perform at their best. Workplaces will increasingly become 'resimercial' environments blending home and office with more relaxed soft seating rugs, cushions, calm lighting and neutral tones reminiscent of homes.





Encouraging collaboration and socialisation

When we surveyed 1,000 office workers in December about what they most missed about the office, the social contact and the ability to collaborate easily were high on the list. After time apart, people need to come together both to work but also to socialise and rebuild that sense of culture. Workplaces need to provide a range of collaborative spaces: formal meeting rooms with integrated video technology to communicate with virtual teams or clients will be important; but so too will flexible collaboration space, refreshment areas and wellbeing zones, whether that's for a Pilates or yoga class or taking 30 minutes away from a desk to play ping-pong with a colleague. These spaces need to work to bring people together.

The sound of silence

While the majority (52%) of people we surveyed in December wanted to use the office to get team work done, a fifth (20%) were keen to come to the office to focus on individual work – not everyone has been able to work easily at home. In another survey 63% of people said they missed the ability to concentrate when they were working from home. Organisations will therefore need to create pockets of quiet zones, similar to library-style areas, where people can go to concentrate but not feel apart from their colleagues.

All together now

Bringing everyone together in the first few weeks and months will be an important part of reigniting culture. It's an opportunity to ensure everyone is working towards the same goals and has the same values, to understand people's collective emotions and mindsets and also to create more memorable moments. These town halls might take place in auditoriums, atriums or even in the local park if there isn't the right internal space.

FOMO workplace

While many organisations will be considering keeping some element of home working into the long term, ensuring that people are in the office for the majority of the time will be an important part of maintaining a great culture. The key to this will be to have plenty of impromptu workplace-based activities so that people have a fear

of missing out (FOMO) if they're not in the office. Whether that's a surprise drinks after work, free lunch in the staff restaurant, last-minute head and shoulders massages or something else entirely will depend on that organisation's culture, but its very spontaneity will ensure that people will want to spend the majority of their time in the office so they don't miss out.

Improving organisational culture is an ongoing journey, it's never something a CEO can tick off their to-do list. But while leaders might have a strong influence on company culture, true culture is created from the ground up by the employees, and that's done in the workplace. By creating a workplace environment which reflects the company's true values and encourages collaboration, socialising, and high levels of performance, leaders are setting the tone for a strong company culture which their people can then bring to life.





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