



SOL Harris/Day Architecture



Future OF Work

Join us as we discover how the workplace is evolving in Northeast Ohio and beyond.

Part 1: Workplace Series

How the pandemic has accelerated shifts in office work.

When organizations sent their “non-essential” office workers home in March of 2020, most didn’t believe that remote work would still be holding on an entire year later. While some organizations were able to shift back to in-office work in 2020, many office workers remain remote today, with ever-shifting plans of return later in 2021 when the vaccine is more widespread. As virtual meetings and work-from-home have prevailed over the last year, conversations are happening in businesses everywhere, including our own region, about what the “return to work” will look like. Some of these conversations are related to the pandemic (when is it safe to bring everyone back, what modifications to the physical workplace must be made to ensure safety, etc). But others involve bigger questions of how the pandemic has accelerated fundamental changes to work, and what that means for their business. In a world where obsolescence lurks around the corner, many leaders are being pressed to confront transformations to a workplace that has stayed largely consistent for decades. New work habits that were already in place pre-pandemic are now at our doorstep. Here, we’ll break down four topics that are confronting business leaders today about the future of office work.

TECHNOLOGY IS IMPROVING IN LEAPS AND BOUNDS

The transition to remote work last March was relatively easy for some organizations. For others, particularly those that had not supported remote work in the past, it was more challenging. True agility was put to the test. Employees suddenly had to embrace video meetings – whether it had been a normal part of doing business pre-pandemic or not. But after some tech struggling, videoconferencing and “virtual meetings” have become a new norm (is Zoom actually a verb now?!) – even for businesses that have returned to office work. While larger, global companies were already utilizing this technology pre-pandemic, smaller businesses had to get up to speed. Now, Microsoft Teams is just another tool that office workers use in their daily work. Could we have seen this coming even one year ago? No way! But here we are, committed to the change in some form or fashion, as many are coming to the realization that virtual meetings will be here long after the pandemic has subsided.



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Even businesses that have returned to in-person work feel the impact of this shift – having meetings where some parties are virtual, and some are in-person have forced companies into addressing ill-equipped conference rooms, in an attempt to join all parties and keep meetings productive – and help remote participants feel included. Beyond virtual meeting software, many organizations have had to rush to digitize many processes in their own business, or at least accelerate their digitalization efforts. From restaurants to tele-health, office workers are not the only ones having to advance their processes to perform in a digital world. It's no surprise that business leaders are investing heavily in technology in 2021, according to a recent study. The need to increase investment in tools for virtual collaboration was reported to be the biggest priority, with 72% of business leaders reporting planned investment in that area. Other areas of investment include IT infrastructure to secure virtual connectivity, training for managers to manage a more virtual workforce, equipping conference rooms with enhanced virtual connectivity, and hoteling applications.

WORKERS DESIRE CHOICE AND MOBILITY LONG-TERM

The concept of mobile work is not a new one. Many companies have supported mobile work long before the pandemic with company-issued laptops, phones, and other devices to help make their teams more productive. While some leaders have steered away from supporting mobile work, their employees have no doubt expanded their work into mobility with their own personal devices. It's no surprise that most everyone with a mobile device is using that device for their work in some way, regardless of whether it is company-issued – responding to emails, communicating with colleagues, corresponding with clients, and a variety of other functions. Remote work, in many ways, has been gradually creeping into the workplace, whether intentionally or not.

Then, along came 2020 and flipped our previous notions of work upside down. “Remote work” became the new way, and still is for many businesses, as the pandemic carries on. Processes have had to flex and adapt to the new virtual world. Many studies emerged showing that a vast majority of workers desire a “hybrid” work arrangement going forward, where they work in office some days, and remote other days. As the pandemic wore on, employee preferences shifted numerous times, as employees settled into their remote work routines. A study conducted in January of 2021 by workplace consultant WKspace shows only 15% of workers want to work in the office full-time and 37% would prefer to keep working at home on a permanent basis, with the remaining half wanting a hybrid work schedule of some kind. A recent study by JLL shows that 66% of employees expect to be able to work from different locations post-pandemic. Company leadership that surveyed their employees quickly became aware of this trend.

Other data suggests that when asked how many days workers would prefer to work at home, their answers varied according to how positive their overall experience was in their workplace. According to a recent report by Leesman, workers who reported their workplace as “outstanding” wanted to work at home for one day or less. On the flip side, of those in a “suboptimal” workplace, 72% of employees said they would rather work from home most of the week.

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Preferences also seem to be largely generational. Not surprisingly, the youngest members of the workforce value the freedom and ability to work on their own time and in their own space. According to a 2020 study by Deloitte, approximately 64% of Millennials would like the option to work from a remote location more frequently post-pandemic. Those with children value the work-life-family balance that having mobility brings. The older generation of workers value in-person interactions the most and may feel frustrated by technology, which drives their desire to get back to the office as soon as possible.

What all of these studies seem to have in common, however, is that hybrid work is the most desired – that is, the ability to work remotely AND in the office. A year of fully remote work proved that business can still be successful while team members are remote, and most employees desire the flexibility of choosing where to work going forward, post-pandemic.

BENEFITS TO ORGANIZATIONS THAT SUPPORT HYBRID WORK

There are clear advantages for employers of having a functional, mobile workforce. With remote work becoming a norm, accessing a seemingly infinite new pool of talent could be a huge advantage, particularly for businesses in smaller cities and towns, that may not have had the “draw” on their own to attract the best and brightest young talent. With employees valuing remote work, they will be more inclined to take a position with a company, with no plans to relocate. Another advantage to employers could lie in reduced travel expenses as the virtual possibilities of their work expand. Gone are the days of having to fly across the country for a one-hour meeting, when you can easily meet face-to-face virtually anytime.

One of the biggest hurdles for traditional management is recognizing that their team can be as productive and engaged working remotely as they are when they're working in the office. In a recent publication, Gallup found that remote workers (or “hybrid” workers) can have higher engagement than in-office workers, if they receive frequent feedback from their supervisor. Intentional, regular communication is key. From a workplace culture standpoint, having the ability to offer hybrid work as a “benefit” to employees could be appealing, especially given that the cost to their business is comparatively low. Investing in the work/life balance of your employees during a pandemic and beyond could have large paybacks with employee retention and investment in culture.

While health and wellness has been long supported by companies, mental health is an issue that is growing in prominence, especially as it relates to work. Many headlines have focused on this important issue that has no doubt been heightened by the pandemic and its accompanying financial loss, strain on families, feelings of isolation, loss, etc. Many leaders see the need to get remote workers back into the office for this reason. Others are looking at new, unique ways to make sure their employees are healthy both mentally and physically.

COLLABORATION IS MORE CRITICAL THAN EVER

The place (or places) where we work must nurture creativity and innovation. While creative thinking may surge at home from some workers, collaboration may suffer. For many businesses, fostering collaboration when everyone is in a different location has been the biggest challenge. Keeping employees engaged, involved, and immersed in projects from afar could be daunting without the right systems in place. Internal processes, such as on-boarding, training, and mentoring could have some severe challenges in a remote environment, so workplace will likely remain of vital importance, particularly in the absence of virtual tools to assist with those functions. Companies who have adopted remote work or hybrid policies are tasked with figuring out how best to address these issues if members of their organization are not all together every day.

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So what do these shifts in work mean about the future of the office? Experts predict the function of the workplace, although evolving, is more critical than ever, and will be the key to bringing organizations face-to-face to collaborate and innovate into the future. Stay tuned as we uncover how the physical workplace will evolve to support the needs of workers.

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