

How to

MAKE THE OFFICE WORK FOR YOU

E-BOOK # 02 – September 2021 – BY **extremis**



*A workplace to keep good
people on the job and to
find pleasure in working.*

extremis[®]

What if we were to get rid of the things most people hate about the office and turn it into a place we look forward to going to?



PICTURE & LOCATION / Peter Würmli & PwC Lucerne



Carefully written by Dirk Wynants,
head designer at DWDW and big boss at Extremis,
for all who are interested in adapting our living
and working spaces to improve life quality.

How to make

E-BOOK # 02

the office work for you



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As we dare to visualize a post-pandemic world, an opportunity arises to review the office. Sure, people might continue to work from home, but the “new normal” isn’t necessarily a world without offices, it’s a world where workers know what they want and have the power of choice.

In the office, workers will find a place to meet nature, a shared culture, healthy habits, and human interaction. Providing a human-centric experience for employees will be the rule, rather than the exception.

This guide explores the office of the future and how you can feel at home at work.



PICTURE & LOCATION / Skinn & Extremis

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Introduction

The office is dead. Or at least that's what we keep seeing in headlines. And, while many workers might have enjoyed the extra time at home at first, after the initial shock the truth of the matter has emerged: the workplace is changing, yes, but its relevance and centrality to the success of an organization persist.

Workplaces have changed a lot over the years and the pandemic has further accelerated many pre-Covid workplace trends like mobility, choice, and well-being. Working remotely has not just affected how we work - it has also shaped our future expectations for the office. As we look to a better future and a post-pandemic world, an opportunity arises to rethink the physical workplace. The new office should support new ways of working, new ambitions, and new reasons for coming into the office.

Today, office work is more sedentary and more mentally demanding than ever before. With the average US employee spending more than 43 hours a week in the office, we would better make the most of it. Employees aren't willing to commute for hours to be stuck in a sterile room all day just to get paid, they want to feel cared for and at home, and with good rights.

The evidence that the office environment has a significant impact on people in ways that may either impair or improve their health, well-being and productivity is well recognized. Concept offices understand that employees are more than disposable workers and that offices are more than just places of work. With a growing war for talent, companies do their best to attract the best minds in the world, which has compelled them to improve the work environment.



PICTURE & LOCATION / Carol M. Highsmith & An American office space of the 1980s

*Office design can influence, even shape,
the productivity of our economy.*

The pandemic has reshaped many aspects of our lives, including where and how people want to work. It has caused people and organizations to think about our shared humanity and what we want to achieve together. The “new normal” isn’t necessarily a business world without working in an office, it’s a world where workers know what they want and have the power of choice.

When the dust settles and people return to the workplace, the office will feel much different than the one we left. Let’s use this moment as a catalyst for reinventing an office that is not just a container for work, but a place that creates a community where people can feel a renewed sense of belonging, resilience, and purpose.

Using design, the new office will embrace healthy behaviors and put people’s well-being at the core. Throughout this e-book we dare you to think about what was good in the office, what didn’t work or isn’t longer required, and what might make your office work for you.



Work hard, play hard?

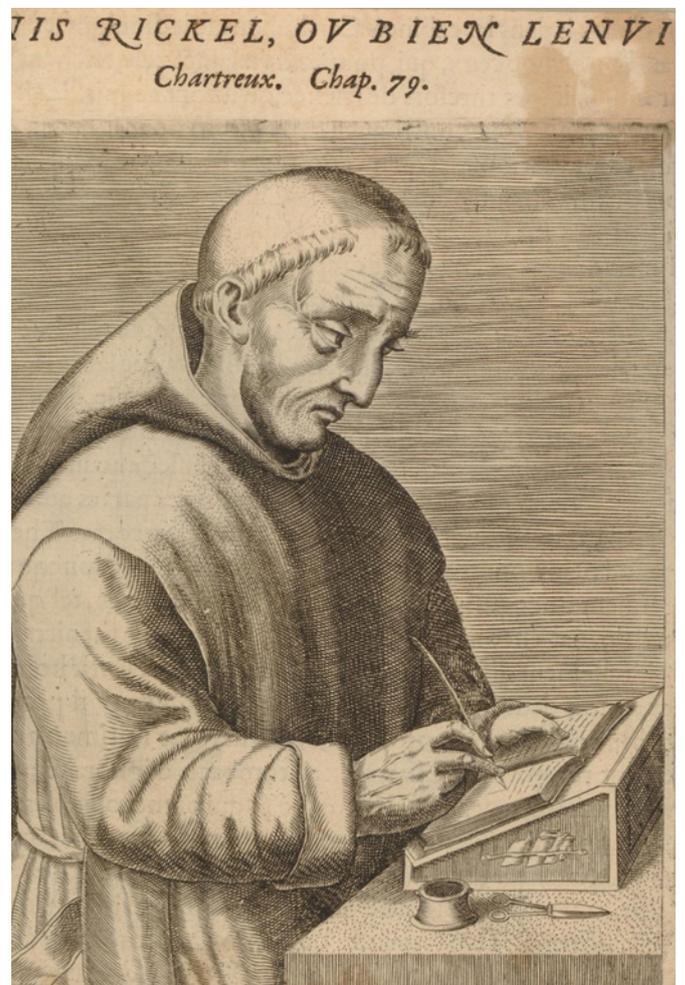
We all try to establish meaning and legitimacy around what we do with our lives. For many of us, maybe more than we might like to admit, work may be our primary identity. And it often feels as though we never stop working. We work at work, in our free time, on our bodies, our relationships, and ourselves. But what is work? What might be a hobby for one, take fishing, painting, or running, might be work for another. So what is work, and maybe more importantly why do we work?

Some say that work is work when it has a purpose and when you have to put effort into it. For other people, work is simply a means to stay busy, to channel energy. Some people are lost without their job, and become a different person after retiring, while others even perform pointless tasks just to have something on their hands.

Economists might suggest that work is the act of solving scarcity. We work because raw materials and food are scarce, and we try to make more. However, our desires are infinite while the source is finite. The solution is to work as efficiently as possible. Basically, people try to gather the most wealth possible in the most efficient way.

Whatever the reason may be, today most people work. They work for themselves, for a boss, paid or voluntarily, in an office or at home. And although work plays a crucial role in most peoples' life, not everybody is content with their job.

A worldwide survey indicates that only a mere 15% of the population finds fulfillment in the job they do¹. Not everybody gets the chance to land the perfect job, and we, as a furniture



PICTURE & SOURCE / Denis the Carthusian & "True Portraits" by André Thévet

company, cannot help in that matter. What we can do is give the tools to make the workplace a place to look forward to being in.

One size does not fit all, not everybody needs the same surroundings, and making good money is not the only incentive to getting and liking a job. Keeping good people on the payroll and finding pleasure in working is achieved by making the workplace people-centric. By placing more emphasis on purpose, providing places for social interaction, engaging people, and providing healthy opportunities at work, we hope to give more people a workday they look forward to.

Finding the right way to organize office work has been a struggle ever since it was

PICTURE & LOCATION / Harris & Ewing & An American office in 1936



invented. From having monks copying manuscripts in scriptoria, and the early merchant bankers literally exchanging money on a bench, to Thomas Jefferson creating a portable lap desk, or later seeing rows of typists hitting their typewriters, and open-plan offices making place for cubicles that in turn became landscape offices. Century after century, or today even decade after decade, the office keeps evolving reflecting management style and the visions of society on life and work.

Bit by bit the workplace became more human-centered, today offering more natural daylight, indoor plants, possibilities for working from home or decorating your office. In the past year, that evolution has accelerated dramatically due to the global health crisis we're currently experiencing. The last year and a half has had an impact on companies and made people ponder over what work entails for them and how they want to organize it.

Let's use the momentum of the current moment to dare to look into the office. We can take this moment of disconnection from it to pause, reevaluate and reinvent it for the better so that when we return to the office, we won't be stepping back in time but moving forward.

We'll explore how we can create this upgraded workplace. Using design, we can create a place that embraces healthy behaviors and puts people's well-being at the core. An office that is not just a container where people work, instead it will harness the advantages of flexibility, personal preferences, nature, company culture, and community building all at once.



PICTURE & LOCATION / *Extremis & Majestik*



PICTURE / George Walker & The Costume of Yorkshire

The (pre)history of work

For the majority of human history, work did not exist. As hunter-gatherers, people only worked when necessary. Many think that life was an eternal struggle of finding shelter and food. But research shows that some 15 hours per week was spent on finding food and wood while the rest of the time was spent on household tasks like preparing food and leisure activities like drawing, dancing and sharing stories.

Ever since people evolved from living like hunter-gatherers to a sedentary farmer life, we started to work more and more. Having to think about the future – when to sow the crops, how to keep food to last through winter, how to harvest the crops – entailed working more and planning the work ahead. You could also say that work was invented together with the concept of private property.

The Ju/Hoansi tribe, who still lived a hunter-gatherer lifestyle in the '60s, only worked 15 hours a week, making weapons, hunting animals and gathering food. The rest of the time was spent on making jewelry, cooking, dancing or other leisure activities. This tribe lived day by day, sharing everything they owned, not planning their meals ahead and living by what their surroundings offered them daily.

Covid changes in the office

The coronavirus changed the world of work – maybe forever. We don't know when, or if, our societies might return to normal, and what kind of scars the pandemic will leave.

For employees, the shift was massive and very consequential. Millions of people have lived through lockdowns and made the abrupt shift to working from home, they created new expectations about flexibility, working conditions, and work-life balance.

We've tried to adapt to Covid-19, but what about the long term? Is work-from-home overhyped or here to stay? Will we go to the office again – and, if so, how often? What impact will a 'hybrid' office have on colleagues? And what will work mean in virtual offices without day-to-day social interactions?

Flexible working hours

Working 9-to-5, what a way to make a living, right?

Well, not for everybody. The traditional pattern of working, introduced along with the conveyor belt in the 1900s, is starting to show cracks.

In Ford's days, maximum output was the key to success; today, though, we know that people aren't like machines. Not everybody's rhythms and skills mesh with a 9 to 5 schedule. Many companies are already experimenting with flexible working hours where employees can choose when to start and finish work to improve their work-life balance.

This flexibility has enhanced over recent years and is not limited to the office alone.

“The idea that employees are like machines - if they put eight hours in you'll get x dollars out - is absurd.”

Ryan Carson, CEO of Treehouse.²



PICTURE & LOCATION / Beeldcollectief & Renson Boshuis

Work from home

Thanks to technology and with increasing commuting times, some employees started to take work out of the office and into their homes. Although practiced almost exclusively by upper management, or occasionally put to the test, many office workers, who were yet to discover working from home, suddenly were thrown into the 'home office'.

With the sudden widespread of the Covid-19 virus, many offices were closed and entered a virtual world to limit the number of hospitalizations and deaths³. For some, the new office offered advantages like Skyping the boss in a pair of boxers. Others had to endure disadvantages like interrupting children, pets, or roommates, the allure of a midday nap on the couch, or lacking a quality desk and promoting the kitchen table and its dishes to personal office.

While nobody asked for this sudden change, many found the home office to be surprisingly useful. No

more facing traffic jams, setting your own working hours, finding a better focus for cognitive tasks, dreadful meetings that turned into e-mails, and of course not worrying about the correct outfit. For many, it sounds like the dream: exchanging the suit and desk for pajamas and the couch.

So what happens when working from home is no longer obligatory? Will everybody simply return to the office or is the home office here to stay? Now that working from home has been put to the test on a large scale, it's time to evaluate it.



PICTURE / Canva Studio



PICTURE / Tina Witherspoon



PICTURE & LOCATION / Beeldcollectief & Think Tomato

Advantages of working from home

Disadvantages of working from home

<p>Productivity increase</p> <p>Due to a quieter work environment, employees take fewer breaks and fewer sick days⁵.</p>	<p>Non-stop work</p> <p>Due to the lack of physical barriers with work, some employees struggle with ending the workday.</p>
<p>More saved time</p> <p>Without commuting times, people have more free time before and after the workday⁶.</p>	<p>Inequality increases</p> <p>The office acts as an equalizer. At home not everybody has the same circumstances and physical infrastructure to work through the day⁷.</p>
<p>Additional saved money</p> <p>Saved fuel costs mean more money at the end of the month⁸.</p>	<p>Salary decrease & inequality</p> <p>Employees spend more money on electricity, water and internet than they would in the office⁹.</p>
<p>More exercise</p> <p>Saved commuting time has been shown to be spent on healthy habits and exercise¹⁰.</p>	<p>Feeling of isolation</p> <p>Due to fewer moments of socialization with colleagues, more people feel isolated and cut off from colleagues¹¹.</p>
<p>No more presenteeism</p> <p>A good workday isn't measured by the number of hours spent on a chair but by the tasks completed.</p>	<p>Collaboration difficulties</p> <p>Due to a physical distance in the digital realm, it gets more challenging to truly collaborate on tasks¹².</p>

To work from home or not to work from home?

We can conclude that home offices offer benefits, but can hardly be right for everybody. Seeing colleagues, holding some watercooler talk, or sharing the same lunchroom fosters friendships with colleagues that facilitate maintaining a good work-life balance. Slacking, Zoom meetings or Teams discussions just aren't the same.

Many interactions can be transferred online, but not all. After the pandemic, people will choose to work from home more than they did before, but most employees want to return to the office⁴. Some people will go to the office daily, others might pop in a few times a week, while another group might never make use of it anymore. Not allowing employees to work from home will no longer be acceptable for companies competing in the war for talent and the physical workspace will become a conscious choice. Employers will have to adapt to this new change and allow people to work wherever and whenever they see fit - even if it's just to stay in pajamas all day.



PICTURE & LOCATION / You X Ventures Studio, Toronto

Most of us can cook a decent meal, but we still like to go out to a restaurant. Don't we feel the same about our offices? Everybody has a table and a chair at home, but still, we'd like to go to the office.

Testimonial

The office: a love/hate relationship

The office seems to be in extinction: too expensive, too dangerous, too old-fashioned. I'd care to disagree, the office is our backbone.

For years, I looked down on the office. Why commute hours to the office to use technology that I can find at home? The place is overcrowded, full of distractions, encourages presenteeism, and worst of all, infantilizes people with post-its, kitchen curfews, and bean bags. I used to shiver at the thought of wasting a whole day in dull meetings. But now, the thought of sitting around a table with real people – and some cake; a colleague's birthday treat – seems pretty attractive from where I sit.

Come to think about it, the office has given me a lot. It provided me with a place to work, it gave me routine, structure, amusement, purpose, and also refuge in times of trouble. It is the place where I passed my days. Without the office, it's hard to find the culture and fellow feeling with colleagues – and let alone loyalty to the work cause. The office keeps me sane.

Even the least organized person can establish habits in the office. It acts as a barrier between work and home, and helps you escape from the chaos of life. And it even helps me to escape from my usual self. Having two selves, with two different wardrobes, is better than having just one. When I get tired of my work self, I just return to my home self.

Peeking through tiny Zoom windows and comparing cramped cupboards with sleek glass façades, has shown that the office is also a great leveler. Although my boss does have the best office view, everyone uses the same common spaces and has the same work gear.

And lastly, though not for everyone, the office is a great replacement for Tinder. People who haven't yet met a partner via friends or at university may pick one up at the office. After grabbing a drink at the end of the day and flirting around the coffee machine, one thing leads to another.

I have missed the office and I'll gladly return to it. If not for the above, then definitely for the coffee that tastes better than the one I make at home.



**Manon Dupont,
Employee of Extremis
& new found office lover**



PICTURE & LOCATION / Beeldcollectief & CCV Belgium

The best of both worlds: a hybrid reality

With employees being offered the possibility of working in the office or from home on any given day, the office will become a hybrid reality with both remote and in-office workers. Employees can opt to carry out focused work at home while supporting a healthy work-life balance, and also meet face-to-face, collaborate, mentor, and feel connected in the office.

Though the office as we have known it won't be replaced entirely by working from home, it will have to adapt to this new reality with some spatial changes that embrace and recreate remote benefits such as privacy, flexibility, and autonomy to offer the best of both worlds.

Post-pandemic, most office workers are looking forward to returning to the office and prefer to spend the majority of their workweek there too. The office will become a place where like-minded people get together on their own terms, sharing ideas and building energy for the larger goal. It will be the place where you experience belonging to the company, bring together clients, staff, and guests, and feel the social and collaborative aspect of your job.

However, the office will have to prove to be worthy, it will have to meet the expectations built up during the extended period of working from home. Employees will question what the office has to offer them compared to their home situations. If conditions at home are poor for work, returning to the office becomes more attractive, and vice versa. The office of the future will compete with the quality of the home.

*If we don't give them a reason to commute in,
they'll go back home to do the work.*

Spatial changes

With employees only coming to the office a handful of days a week, an opportunity arises to rethink the spatial organization of the workplace. Instead of filling up opened spaces with private offices for upper management and rows of open desks for other employees, spaces could fulfill new functions for employees who can choose their ideal work setting for the day to suit what they have to do.

At home, employees can self-manage their breaks and move from the desk to the kitchen table, the couch, and even the backyard or the park. Offering similar levels of choice and flexibility in the office, with a range of workplaces and the ability to choose when to use them, is a token of trust that employees will value greatly¹³.

You can't create a perfect work spot for all people at all times, but you can provide the best environment for each task. By offering creative spaces, silent rooms for focused work, social hotspots to restore the weakened connection between colleagues, a lounge that resembles a living room with writable surfaces for brainstorming, and outdoor spaces that offer fresh air, employees can adapt their work station according to the nature of the task they are completing.

Instead of being pinned down on a chair for 8 hours straight, employees can self-manage their desired workplace based on noise levels, posture, distance, temperature, and personal feeling¹⁴. The idea behind this 'activity-based working' is that employees will be more productive when they have the right space for the task they want to accomplish. To step into the future of work, workspaces should be treated as living, breathing organisms that adapt to employees' needs, putting them at the center.



PICTURES & LOCATION / Beeldcollectief & Creax

*Nobody is coming back to the office just for a desk.
It has to be an exciting place to connect with the company
spirit, to get inspired, and to get work done.*



Nature is a friend

Although it evolved as the most efficient, productive, and pleasant way of working, office work still has several negative effects on both mental and physical health¹⁵. Instead, the office should actively search for ways to counteract work-related side effects and create a pleasant atmosphere that promotes health at the workplace, improves social climate, and brings out the best in both employees and employers.



PICTURES & LOCATION / *CPG Consultants, RMJM & Khoo Teck Puat Hospital*

One way that has been proven numerous times to enhance health, overall wellbeing, productivity, and to decrease absenteeism in the office¹⁶, is including more nature in and around the office. Research shows that nature relieves stress, makes people think positively, and improves productivity, creativity and overall health¹⁷. This is a major insight if you realize that more and more people live in cities, suffer from stress at work, and are affected by burnout on an unprecedented scale. With more nature around, employees could feel more at ease, perform better and be healthier.





Biophilia and biophilic design

So how do you bring nature to the office? Hoping that some plants or animals wander in by themselves is not the answer, the answer is biophilia.

Biophilia builds on the idea that humans have an inborn connection with and need for nature¹⁸. For thousands of years people relied on nature for their survival; nature could mean the difference between life and death. And today, nature is still a part of and a necessity in people's lives. It explains why we put huge windows in buildings, why we love to listen to birdsong or babbling water, and why we like to fill our houses with plants. It's not that surprising actually, we all descend from nature and it's only in the last few hundred years that we have started to live in artificial, efficiency-driven, concrete cities. The early human instincts are still present in people, even today.

A fairly easy way to incorporate nature into our lives is by integrating parts of it into our architecture, furniture, and objects. With biophilic design, people try to incorporate the great outdoors into the built world. This way people's inborn need to be connected with nature is satisfied, allowing them to live and work in this present-day world without feeling the disadvantages of big city life.

Nature narrows down stress and strengthens health and well-being²⁰

A 2016 study shows that nature in the office affects people positively. It blocks negativity, has a restorative effect on stress and increases health and well-being of the employees..

PICTURE & LOCATION / *Beeldcollectief & AFAS*



PICTURE & LOCATION / Jürgen de Witte & Kasteel Brouwerij Vanhonsbrouck

Benefits on people

Countless studies have shown the benefits of nature on people's health. Plants in the office reduce requests for sick days, a green space adjacent to the workplace contributes to healthy behaviors, and having nature in or around the office decreases health complaints and stress¹⁹.

Being in contact with nature has cognitive benefits, it enhances creativity, gives clarity to thoughts, strengthens memory, and builds up the attention span²⁰. Psychologically, it affects people's moods and reduces emotions like anxiety, anger, fatigue, and confusion²¹. Furthermore, biophilic design offers physiological benefits such as lowered blood pressure, fewer stress hormones like cholesterol, expedite healing, and the prevention of sickness²².



PICTURE & LOCATION / Zac Wolff & Bosco Verticale

Economic benefits

In an office setting, time is money; productivity is a key factor in the workplace. Research shows that an office with greenery increased its productivity by 15% in three months and reduced absenteeism²⁴. Another economic benefit could be saving on energy costs, by, for example, using more daylight²⁵.

Often, biophilic design is regarded as a luxury for those who want to showcase their green credentials. But in reality, it's an economic investment in health, productivity, and profit with a solid scientific basis²⁶.

Benefits to the environment

A carefully planned biophilic design is also beneficial for nature itself. It seems clear that added vegetation filters the air and reduces the urban heat island effect, as well as reducing noise pollution²⁸. But there's more, as technology improves and our exposure to nature is lessened over time, people become less likely to care for and preserve this very thing they depend on. It is therefore even more important to establish a change in attitude.

It has been proved that spending more time outdoors instils a passion for nature and a desire to protect it. Incorporating this biophilia in the spaces we occupy every day can be a tool to change existing attitudes and to preserve the environment: a reciprocal interaction in which nature helps people and people help nature.

A window view to success²⁷

A study overwhelmingly showed the influence of the office environment on worker performance. Having a window view, and particularly a better window view over vegetation rather of a wall, leads to a 10 to 25% increase in cognitive performance. Workers also reported health benefits and less fatigue.

PICTURE & LOCATION / *Georgios Sfakianakis & ENA Campus*



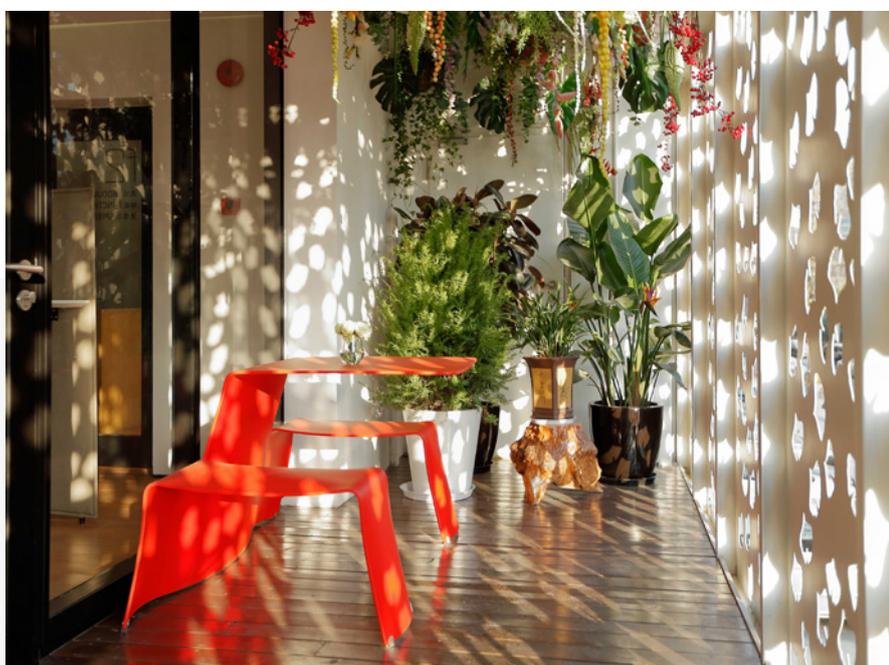
PICTURE & LOCATION / *Ewout Huibers & Harrison Urby*

How to apply biophilic design

Knowing why you need nature in your workplace is important, but knowing how to do it is just as crucial. Adding a plant or a picture of a plant is a good start, but a good biophilic design is multiple layers that lift a space to both help the environment and nurture people.

Throughout the following parts, we will highlight multiple ways of bringing nature to the office. For more details on biophilic design and how to apply it in your daily life, we gladly refer to our [complete guide on biophilic design](#) that explains this concept with examples from present-day architecture.

PICTURE & LOCATION / *Tistou Japan*



PICTURE & LOCATION / *MATSU Group & Matsu Shanghai Flagship*

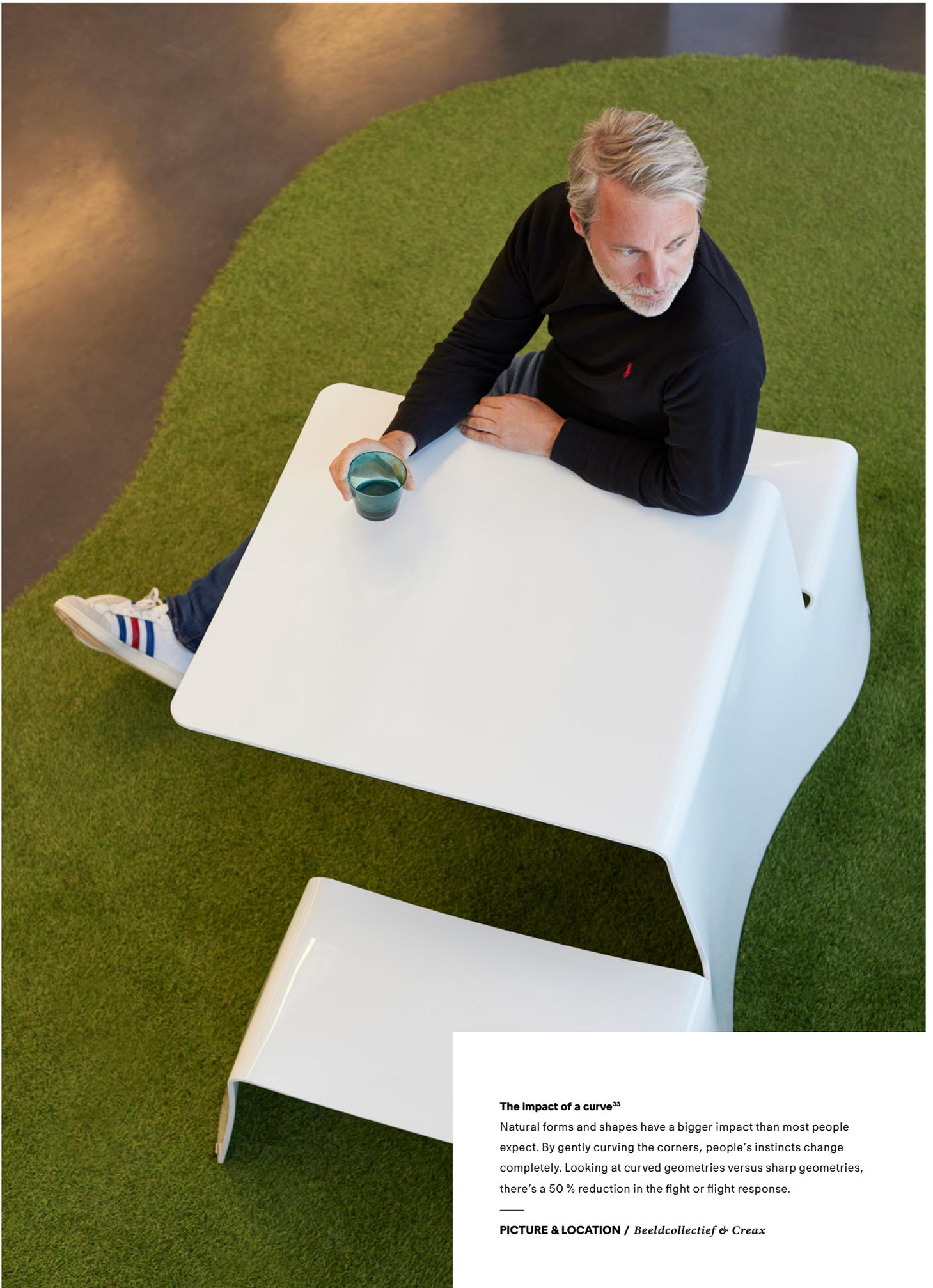


PICTURE & LOCATION / *Beeldcollectief & Tour & Taxis*

Bringing nature in the office

As important as it is to have a fruitful office to work in, many office workers daily endure poor indoor air quality, fluorescent lighting, sterile white walls, and few windows²⁹. Research even shows that 58% of workplaces in the world have no vegetation³⁰. By integrating more natural aspects in the workplace, the deep and fundamental need to be connected with nature is satisfied, which results in improvements in productivity, health, and well-being in the office³¹. By integrating more natural materials, colors resembling nature, patterns, natural forms, indoor plants, and views of greenery, the outdoor benefits of nature are replicated indoors as well³².

Some biophilic interventions are easy to implement and understand – providing indoor potted plants, rooms with natural sunlight, welcoming animals inside, allowing for outside air and sounds to get in, or displaying nature photography, art or videos throughout the office. Other interventions are less intuitive or entail more than one might think of at first sight.



The impact of a curve³³

Natural forms and shapes have a bigger impact than most people expect. By gently curving the corners, people's instincts change completely. Looking at curved geometries versus sharp geometries, there's a 50% reduction in the fight or flight response.

PICTURE & LOCATION / *Beeldcollectief & Creax*



PICTURE & LOCATION / *Beeldcollectief & Renson Boshuis*

A view on...

Windows are a first effective way of making a space feel more natural. Having a view out onto nature results in less stress, lower levels of tension and anxiety, greater job satisfaction, and greater overall subjective wellbeing³⁴. It is of course not possible to give every employee a window view, but even a short glance of just a few seconds provides restorative effects that impact well-being and job outcomes³⁵.

For many companies, it isn't possible to have a view of untouched nature, but even there, windows have a positive effect! It is shown that the presence of built features does not limit the potential for benefits. In other words, it is the presence (and extent) of vegetation in the view that promotes wellbeing, so even greening up a heavily built environment has benefits³⁶. Also, man-made efforts such as a green roof should be exploited fully as they prove to be beneficial both ecologically and psychologically for the city and its workers³⁷.

Having a window view in the office also offers the chance to become connected with natural systems. By seeing the weather and seasonal patterns, a deciduous tree, or wild animal behavior, you feel part of a greater whole and have more respect for the environment you live and work in³⁸.

Another aspect of windows is that you get more daylight in. The human eye is attuned to sunlight and (the lack of) natural daylight impacts many processes in the body such as circadian functions, sleep pattern, digestion, heart rate, attention span, and temperature³⁹.

Multi-sensory reactions

It's not only visual interventions that lift a space though. Integrating natural fragrant smells, sounds of birds or water, or textured fabrics have significant benefits on people. By also adding unpredictable stimuli, a place feels fresher and energizing. Being suddenly distracted by a bird song, a passing cloud or falling leaves works wonders for restoring attention during the workday.

Materials that feel warm and easy to the touch also feel more natural than synthetic, cold surfaces. Natural feeling upholstery, carpeting, and curtains feel pleasant but do accumulate dust. In the light of concerns about communicable viruses, using natural materials like wood that are easy to clean plays an increasingly promising role.



PICTURE & LOCATION / *Germain Herriau & Delta Dore*



PICTURE & LOCATION / *Beeldcollectief & Creax*



PICTURE & LOCATION / *John Smith & Steelcase*

Breeze or blast

Spaces need fresh air, a suitable temperature, and the right humidity. This makes a room feel alive and refreshing. Operable windows, fans, and heaters are one way to give office workers control over airflow variability. Another is with proper ventilation systems. The best is to opt for a mixed-ventilated system instead of air-conditioning. Studies show that people in air-conditioned offices show higher concerns about health issues whereas a mixed-ventilated office forms a bridge between indoor and outdoor

environments which enables people to connect with nature⁴⁰. By hearing birds, feeling the wind, and seeing a change in the weather, the instinctive affinity between humans and living systems is established.

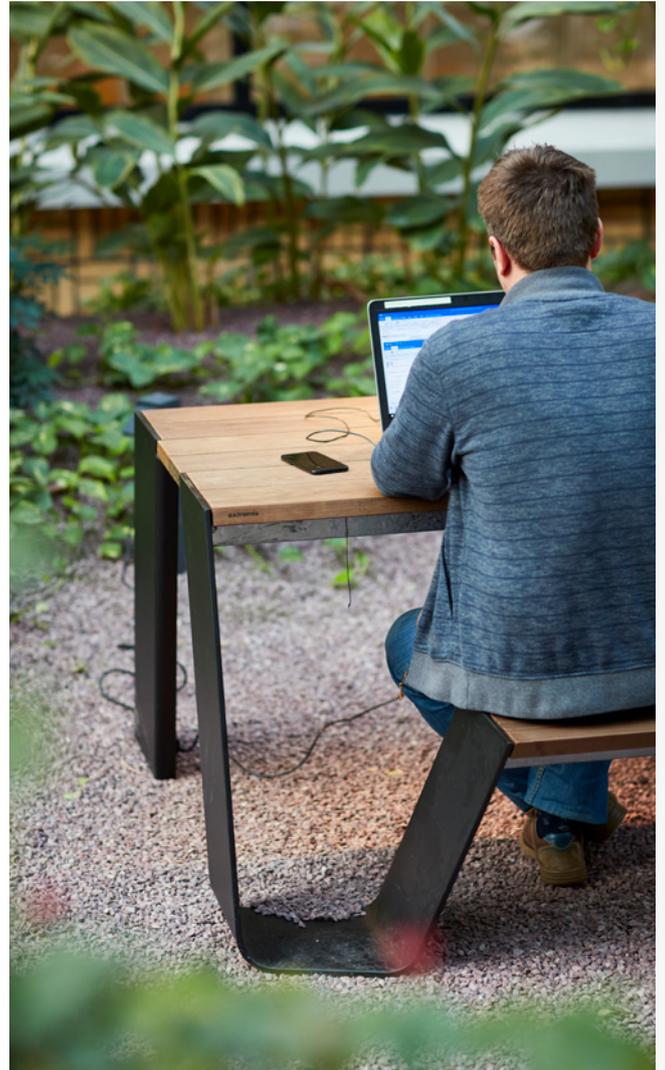
Spaces with high ceilings create more air movement making people feel outside. In nature, people will then seek shelter to feel safe again. In the office, an indoor parasol can give that shelter while also creating an acoustic solution.

Safety and control

Another aspect to highlight is the feeling a space can give you. Humans feel for example safe and in control when there is a distant view, this reminds us of the African savanna where our roots lie. Important in office settings is to also allow for these spatial features by using transparent materials, oversized windows, open floor plans, and ensuring that seated people can also view across space.

However, having a 'prospect' view is not everything, people also search for safety and refuge. A place that offers protection from behind and overhead acts as a safe space to escape in. By installing high-back chairs or creating a reading nook by the window, you give office workers a place to retreat to.

For an extensive list of each possible biophilic intervention, seek out [our complete guide on biophilic design](#) in which more ways are highlighted to bring the outdoors indoors.



A green office⁴¹

A study showed that the introduction of plants and daylight stimulating light in the office significantly reduced fatigue, heavy-headed feelings, dizziness, concentration problems, job stress and the amount of sick leave. On top of that, productivity and performance rises by 5 to 15%.

PICTURE & LOCATION / Beeldcollectief & Tour & Taxis

Surrounding the office with nature

While bringing nature into the office with plants, big windows, atriums, and green walls is beneficial, it's no substitute for the real thing. Why not go the extra mile and rather than bringing greenery into the office, give office workers access to nature? Blur the lines between inside and outside with office terraces, decks in natural surroundings, accessible rooftops, gardens, and outdoor workrooms.

Many people have rediscovered the physical, mental, and emotional benefits of being outside during the Covid-19 period. Green outdoor environments have been found to offer quite a range of benefits to people: they motivate physical activity, promote social contact, offer mental rest, increase attention, and reduce stress levels⁴². Even more, exposure to nature in the workplace has significant effects on stress outcomes such as burnout, job dissatisfaction, and depressive symptoms⁴³. And access to greenery, sunlight, fresh air, smells, colors, and sounds from nature have a positive impact on the immune system and lowers the risk of chronic illnesses, cardiovascular diseases, and diabetes⁴⁴.



PICTURE & LOCATION / *Andreas Balon & Refugium Hochstraß Austria*

*Who has their best ideas in the shower?
On a hike? Or when they are busy doing
something else? Humans are most creative when
standing, moving, or being mildly distracted.*



The more natural, the more benefits⁵¹

A study conducted in Northern Florida indicates the difference between contact with nature indoors and outdoors. Employees who took outdoor breaks in natural surroundings had a significant incidence of reductions in both stress and general health complaints. Staff who only had indoor contact with nature such as access to a window with an outdoor view, only showed a reduction in general health complaints.

PICTURE & LOCATION / Ronald Tilleman & PWN Netherlands

A growing body of research shows that outdoor contact with nature at work affects stress levels even more than having visual access to nature alone⁴⁵.

The benefits cited above show that an outdoor workspace is a valuable asset for a traditional office⁴⁶. Another positive aspect however is that an outdoor space promotes socialization and a sense of community at work. It has been shown that being in nature and having access to nature at work has positive impacts on socialization, communication, relaxation, and recreation⁴⁷. Post-Covid, this can help re-establish connections between colleagues and a positive workplace attitude⁴⁸.

In an era where city dwellers have limited access to outside areas, the best trick to make employees still want to come in to offices could be to create opportunities for escape from enclosed spaces⁴⁹.

Lastly, an outdoor space complementing a traditional office setting can spark new ideas and creativity. Who has their best ideas in the shower? On a hike? Or when they are busy doing something else? Humans are most creative when standing, moving, or being mildly distracted. Moving between different work settings provides for interaction and engagement, and an outdoor space literally provides a breath of fresh air⁵⁰.

Incorporating courtyards, green terraces, public plazas, sky gardens, rooftops, balconies, patios, and wooded parks, instead of just a single building contributes to better health perceptions⁵². It is also important to plant native greenery to attract birds and butterflies around the office.

Despite the many benefits of an outdoor extension to the office, employees often consider themselves too busy to go outdoors during the working day. By making the outdoor spaces visible, more people will be attracted to use them because seeing other people in the outdoor environment will encourage them to go outdoors as well⁵³. Corporate managers should also encourage employees to go outdoors if they want to develop a working culture that includes the outdoor environment.

PICTURE & LOCATION / *Extremis & Deltalight*



PICTURE & LOCATION / *Jeff Goldberg & Yale University*

Taking the office into nature



The fact that nature nurtures is well established. Closed office spaces with their stifling air conditioning and metal and glass structures often become a burden. No amount of artificial landscaping can provide the soothing effect and solace of nature.

Five in six companies report the same three outdoor activities as common: having lunch, talking to colleagues, and enjoying nature⁵⁴. "Work" is cited to be the biggest barrier to spending time outside⁵⁵, so why limit outdoor time to leisure activities? Every office wants to get the maximum output from its workers and to provide them with

an atmosphere where they will thrive and be happy. This is where an outdoor office is increasingly coming into the picture.

Why not work outdoors as well? Create an outdoor workspace that's not just meant for dining or short coffee breaks, but for real heads-down working.

PICTURE / Beeldcollectief



By installing rows of desks in a room with little access to nature, you block creativity, productivity, and contentment. So why not take the place where people spend most of their day, and bring it outside?

Some might immediately consider this as an absurd suggestion, others see an opportunity yet to be explored, while others again have already flirted with the idea once or twice on a sultry summer's day – though without great success. However, with the right equipment, it is very much possible to combine work with nature in an outdoor office where you can feel the fresh air blowing.

Thanks to modern technology, flexibility is on the up in office life. Today, people have become all-hours employees. Every mail, file, and colleague is just a click away at any time of

Recognize this?

You take your work into the garden in a frantic attempt to spice up the workday and take in some vitamin D. You soon discover that the garden bench isn't fit for real heads-down working, you lack power for the laptop and the sun is a bit too bright...

A pity, you say, as you grab everything and head back inside.

A pity indeed, because this way outdoor working never stood a chance. Would you call a space with just a chair and a laptop an office? Then why would it be enough for outdoor working? What you need to succeed is proper outdoor office equipment.

day. And yet, the idea of not working at your regular desk, but instead outdoors startles most people?

Outdoor education exists in every continent – kids and students have class indoors, but also in the schoolyard, forest, park, or playground⁵⁶. Increasingly, outdoor schools are popping up where children are taught outdoors every day of the year. But apparently, the idea of staying outdoors is reserved for children only, and not for adults.

During the extended period of working from home, many office workers have become accustomed to picking their preferred workplace on the basis of their personal feelings. Some people have taken their work outdoors to the terrace, park, garden, or rooftop and hope to be able to self-manage their workday in the office too⁵⁷.

While outdoor air pollution is often in the headlines, indoor air pollution is four or fifteen times greater⁵⁸. It contributes to "sick building syndrome",

*Post-Covid, office
workers expect
outdoor space –
the more option-rich,
the better.*

respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, and declining cognitive response. With communicable airborne viruses, an outdoor office space is also a safer option than a shared indoor space.

In the ever-growing war for talent, an outdoor office can make all the difference. If you want your employees to love their job and to keep working with you, create an office that truly puts them at the center. Instead of being restricted by ceilings and walls, you're working under the wide-open sky, a safe and healthy extension to the traditional office. Not only do you get to enjoy your work more while being in the lap of nature, you also become more creative, happy, and productive. Increasingly

larger numbers of offices are recognizing this need.

The fact that workers might be in a happier place if they are in an outdoor office space is a pertinent factor to ponder and act upon. It is naturally true that not every job can be moved outdoors, and that not every region in the world is suitable for an all-year-round outdoor office. But in situations where it is doable, it is indeed worth the effort, even just for a while.

Whether you're creating a safe place for brainstorming sessions or offering a healthy spot for work in the open air, consider the following elements to create the ideal outdoor workspace.



PICTURE & LOCATION / *Extremis*

True outdoor furniture

Consider using outdoor furniture rather than taking indoor furniture outside. Good outdoor furniture is designed to stay out all year long without negative side effects. That way, you don't need to carry each piece of furniture back inside at the end of the workday, just leave it out!

Opt for furniture that suits your climate. In a warmer climate, you might consider colors that minimize heat absorption, while in colder areas you'll need seating that doesn't soak up water and stays warm to the touch.

When you're working outdoors for an extended period you'll need light for when it gets dark and power to charge your electrical devices or to plug in a heater or a fan. Some furniture has built-in lighting and power that is designed to stay outdoors.

PICTURE & LOCATION / *Beeldcollectief & Vlamertinge*



*Don't drag your furniture
outside and inside each day.
Choose furniture that can
stay outside, all year long.*

Throw some shade

Working outdoors has many benefits, but looking ridiculous by constantly squinting during your online meeting isn't one of them. Add some shades to protect your eyes and skin from the sun or to keep you dry from light drizzle.

Parasols are perfect for creating a spot of shade. There are numerous models to consider, from round or rectangular designs to cantilever-style structures. It is important, though, to opt for a model that is easily assembled, wind-resistant, and easy on the eye. Many parasols have a bunch of ropes, slats, and ribs hanging right above your head, while other models have optimized and reinvented the parasol to eliminate the nuisance.



PICTURE & LOCATION / Beeldcollectief & Afas

Leave your options open

A workday consists of more than working 8 hours straight – you need a range of spaces for a range of tasks: working solo, conversations, stand-up meetings, lunch breaks, brainstorming sessions... With different types of seating options, you break unhealthy office routines and long workdays never become something to dread.

Providing different postures will stimulate employees to take their work outside without losing efficiency. Whether it's a long table with benches and chairs, a collaborative setting for group meetings or a height-adjustable table for a few hours of responding to emails, explore various postures for the outdoor office to offer variety and choice.

Beautiful boundaries

Nobody likes to work in a huge open space. We like to have furniture, plants or even some colleagues with a fresh coffee nearby. It creates a lively space and a cozier environment to be productive in. So, in order to concentrate on the job, you'll need some boundaries.

Creating a somewhat private, yet inviting space is easily done using room dividers and planters. Opt for space dividers with a natural feel that also still let light through. Provide that secure cocoon to tackle your exploding inbox with ease, without losing touch with the space surrounding you.

Biophilic elements

And of course, don't forget about nature. Include trees, plants, water features, shadow play, animals... the more natural the better.

Now that you have your outdoor office all set up, it's time to get some work done. Enjoy the fresh air, get that creativity flowing, shoulders relaxed and focused. Don't hesitate to take a stroll around and look at those gorgeous plants or listen to the birds chirping. Even the distraction of a ladybird on your desk can't break your drive!

*When somebody asks, 'What was it like today?' you say,
'It was a beautiful day.' Because you were actually in the day,
you weren't in a box with a fluorescent light.*

A space for each task

The office should offer a palette of different workspace choices for different work modes. Employees can choose from a variety of settings according to what they are doing throughout the day. Just like having TV shows, food, music, and clothes on demand, the office will have to be adapted to the needs and activities of employees as an evolving organism.

A “traditional” workspace, whether cubicles or open-plan desks, often means “inflexibility”. Today, this office layout doesn’t make sense anymore – employees perform at their best when companies empower them to work when, where, and how they want to. Creating a more personalized experience in the workspace and empowering employees can be achieved by offering environments for particular types of work: individual, group, creation, concentration, and exchange.

The idea behind activity-based working is that employees will be more productive when they have the right space for each task. If employees have to sit or stand in one location all day, every day, they may start to wonder whether their employer values them for their performance or their presence in the office. A study showed that a worrying 78% of office workers would like more flexibility in their work options to be more productive⁵⁹. By aligning the surroundings to the task at hand, you also align your mindset to that task. Also, just getting up, moving to another space, and being more active that way, is healthier than sitting in the same place all day.



PICTURE / Beeldcollectief & Kortrijk

Shoes off, creativity on

Long before ‘activity-based working’ became a work philosophy, designer Dirk Wynants intuitively incorporated it in some designs. “A boring clean meeting room can be ideal to go through numbers, but this is not the ideal setting to have a creative meeting. In that case, it might be more useful to take your shoes off to let creativity flow freely. In the Behive, for example, you instantly switch your mindset.”

A workplace that supports activity-based working should offer a menu of different workspace choices...

Now that working from home is here to stay, employers will have to figure out which tasks are office tasks and flip the mental switch to thinking about how employees will use the space when coming to the office and trust them to use whichever space they see fit for as long as they need. Rather than owning a cubicle, employees will land at different spots throughout the day. Small private offices can be reserved with a phone app or a touchscreen on the door, but collaborative spaces where several people work together are much more popular.

A workplace that supports activity-based working should offer a menu of different workspace choices such as stand-up meeting spaces, seated places for focused work, collaboration settings, break-out spaces, silent areas, outdoor patios, team desks, sit-stand workstations, and lounge areas.



PICTURE & LOCATION / Skinn & Extremis



extremis
08.00 - 12.30 | 13.00 - 17.00

HER BEST TOOLS FOR TOGETHER
welcome



Testimonial

Always on the move

It must be said, I don't like to sit still all the time. Even though I'm working in the internal sales department at Extremis, my colleagues know that they won't find me sitting at my desk all day. Let me guide you through a typical working day.

8:30:

Good morning everyone, but first, let me grab my coffee. Around the coffee machine I bump in into colleagues from other departments and have some chit-chat.

8:35 – 10:00:

Work, work, work and rush, rush, rush to clear my whole mailbox at once. When I get a call, you can find me walking around with my headset. Belgium is not sunny California, but as soon as the weather is nice I'll be sitting outside in the Walrus. Hello great outdoors.

11:00:

I have a short meeting with my internal sales colleagues in the Kosmos in our showroom. While cocooning, we discuss work and can also shortly cover the less work related stuff. Hello team vibes!

11:30:

Let me take my ball chair to bounce a bit while assisting our clients. Changing up my seating posture helps me to stay alert – a quality that is indispensable for a sales person.

12:30:

Lunch! If the typical Belgian weather allows it, we sit outside, otherwise we sit in our lunch area. We always lunch together, it's the perfect moment to get to know each other. After lunch, I go for a short walk with colleagues.

14:00:

It's time for our daily meetings. If possible we do this outside – we have plenty of tables to choose from, if not we head into one of our meeting rooms

14:30 – 16:00:

After the meeting it's time for some more work, work, work. Also, don't forget about coffee breaks. Latte macchiato, doppio, cappuccino, espresso, what shall I pick?

16:00:

Ouf! I need some silence to really focus on a difficult task, let me grab my laptop and sit in a quiet place in our showroom. Preferably a spot where I can see the hop fields or the horses running around. Lovely!

17:00:

See you tomorrow!



**Tessa Geloën,
Employee of Extremis**

Sample office designs

Building on the idea of activity-based working, we've created three sample design applications built on what employees might want to achieve at work. These spaces will inspire workers rather than just acting as furniture in the office.



Rest and rejuvenation

This space offers a safe, calm place to rest, recover and be nourished throughout the day. Whether it is lounging around for 20 minutes with your face in the sun or gathering with a colleague over coffee, these spaces serve the function of “rest and rejuvenation” from more demanding parts of the workday.



✓ **Walrus:** Blankets out and feet up, get cozy for a while, and charge those batteries!

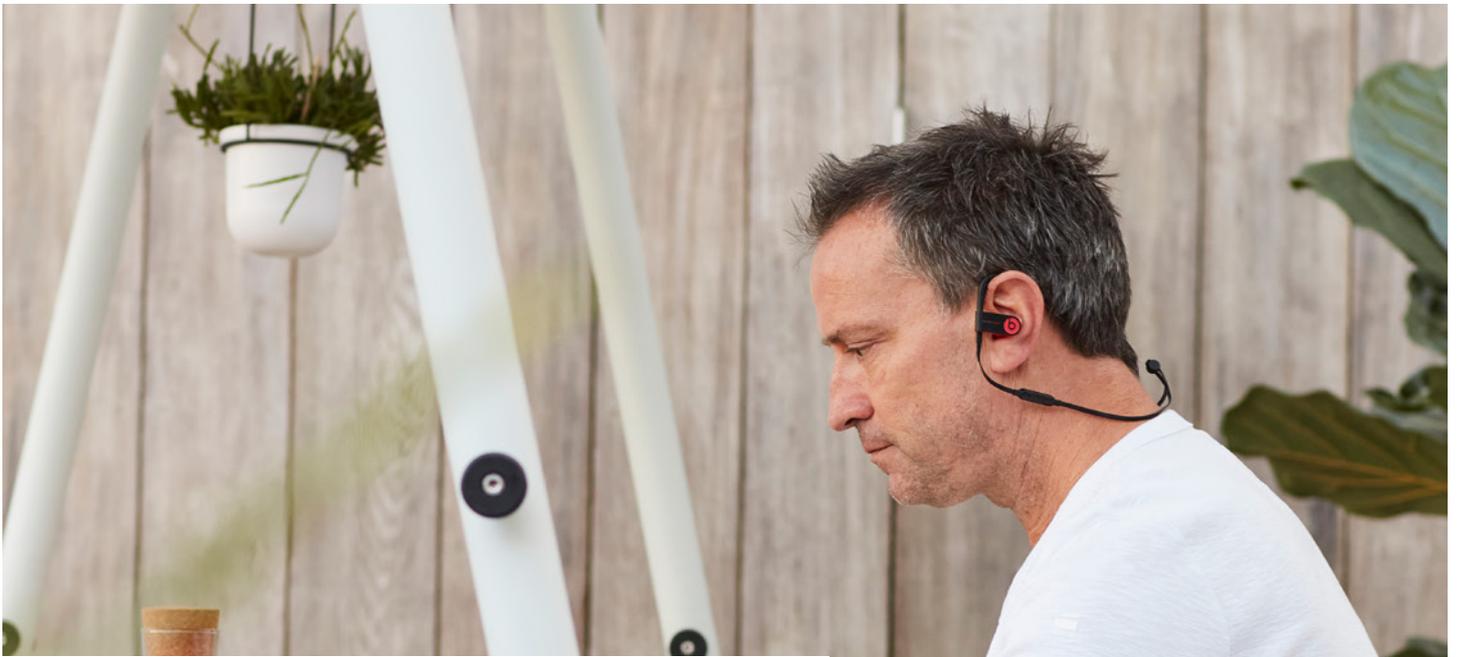
✓ **Sol + Luna:** Share a cup of coffee with colleagues on the sofa or enjoy the solo sunbed to forget about the computer screen for a while.

✓ **Kosmos:** Get super comfortable in this cozy cocoon but only for a quick nap!

✓ **Pantagruel or Gargantua:** The round shape of these tables invites you to share stories, don't talk about work but for once really get to know your colleagues.

✓ **Virus:** This playful table immediately brings a smile to the face and don't forget about the natural yet vivid colors that boost energy.





Fresh focused work

This space offers privacy, reduced distraction, adequate space, and tools for a focused work session. Whether it's for an hour of sorting through mails or a two-hour creative sprint, this setting will provide the necessary tools and atmosphere for focused work. And don't forget to offer a place for fresh and focused work outdoors for maximum concentration.

- ✓ **AMAi:** Get comfortable under the shades, turn on the lights and plug in your computer, you're all set!
- ✓ **Marina double desk:** This is the perfect office table both indoors and out - with its double tabletop combined with comfortable chairs, you're set for hours of uninterrupted working.
- ✓ **Marina picnic + Captain's Chair:** In need of a change from time to time? Switch the bench for a chair when needed and stretch your legs while doing so.
- ✓ **Pontsūn:** With its extra-wide tabletop, you have plenty of space for all your paperwork. Add a Captain's Chair for comfortable focused seating.
- ✓ **Anker:** Touch down on this triangular table for an intense moment to yourself, the unusual shape will give you a renewed boost of energy.







PICTURES / Beeldcollectief

Create and collaborate

These spaces are perfect for accommodating safe, creative, and productive meetings. Whether it's a simple catch-up or an intense brainstorming session, this space will foster creativity and teamwork throughout the day. Equip these spaces with whiteboards, monitors, and shared screens to support each shared meeting.

- ✓ **AMAI:** Put your AMAi table in the high position and brainstorm while standing up or seated on a high chair.
- ✓ **Kosmos:** Take off your shoes, leave the office spirit behind and hop in this circle of coziness with a new mindset.
- ✓ **Virus:** This playful table is perfect for tackling a creative task, with its asymmetrical shape and funky colors you'll be much less restricted than seated at a white rectangular table.
- ✓ **Bistroo:** By looking in the same direction you're on the same wavelength as your partner, it's also a good position to explain and collaborate.
- ✓ **Abachus:** Standing up gets the creativity flowing while looking at each other is easier to quickly brainstorm.



Testimonial

Focus on wellbeing

The office is a completely different place from fifteen years ago when I first started my career sitting in a dark, windowless office at a large technology company. So much so that today, myself and my former colleagues at that company wouldn't recognize it. With a focus on wellbeing, the office has become for many a source of fuel, inspiration, and collaboration rather than a source of mental and physical fatigue.

Over the last several years I found myself craving one or two hours of fresh air during the workday. I started an afternoon ritual that helped break up my day and clear my mind: answering emails outdoors. I discovered that after a few hours of reading and responding to mails amidst the rays of sunshine, fresh air, and the occasional ladybug, I reentered the indoor workspace feeling more creative and energized than I was before.

I am proud to say that this culture of getting outside throughout the day has been embraced by recent trends in the modern office. I no longer feel like the lone wolf 'slacking' on her job, but instead encouraged to make my working styles serve my wellbeing and my personal productivity. These changes to the workspace are long overdue and particularly today amidst the chaos, it's liberating that work feels like an extension of my home, rather than a sterile environment I must trudge to every day. This is great news for our collective well-being!



**Ashlee Anvik,
Employee of Extremis**

Community

The ideal office is not just a container for people to work in, instead, it's an inviting place that brings people together and brings out the best in them. But after such a long time of physical separation from colleagues, how do we rebuild and restore a sense of community? With a shift to a hybrid reality where people work in-office and from home, how do we connect people, how do we ensure that connections extend beyond the workplace, and how do we create a community?

Not only should employees be a part of this community but also other people around the office building. As an office takes public space, it should also give back to the community it stands in. On the weekend, the unused office can be given back to the public, the ground level, terrace, or rooftop garden can be opened up so that the office is rooted in the local context and becomes a part of its surrounding community.



An office community



We all belong to a variety of different communities, the pandemic showed that we long to come together in person. And when we do, we'll want to look for what we have in common. However, many of us have lost the sense of community and belonging that you pick up through face-to-face, in-person interactions⁶⁰. When we go back to the office, we'll want to rebuild community, resume in-person activities, create places to spend time together⁶¹.



PICTURE / Tima Miroshnichenko

Humans are social animals, we crave contact with others. Research shows how social relationships influence health⁶². One of the pioneers in biophilia research, Judith Heerwagen, even states that socialization, the essence of who we are as people, is an important aspect of biophilia that tends to be overlooked⁶³. The pandemic made it clearer that people have difficulties never being together. Social distancing and having Zoom conversations are not quite the same as live interactions.

Enhancing the social climate at work is a way to affect employees' wellbeing, commitment to the workplace, stress levels, satisfaction, and absenteeism⁶⁴. Friendship at work has been shown to have an impact on stress, productivity, and happiness in the office⁶⁵.

*“Social isolation is
the new smoking. It is equal
to 15 cigarettes a day.”*

Kellie Payne, Bates Smart

From fire to friends⁶⁶

In the time of hunters and gatherers, life wasn't all fun and games, it was survival. Life was all about finding food and safety. One thing that really moved human evolution on was fire. Before fire, our ancestors had to go to sleep and couldn't have any activity at night. With the arrival of fire, socializing became extended into the nighttime: we could sit, dance, protect ourselves and talk. 'We could surely live and survive without fire, but it enhanced our social abilities. All the things we see as 'human' today are thanks to fire', says Judith Heerwagen, researcher and faculty member at the University of Washington and author of *Biophilic Design: The Theory, Science and Practice of Bringing Buildings to Life*.



PICTURE & LOCATION / Extremis & Vlamertinge

Invest in interactions

A study by Gensler highlights that what people working from home miss the most about the office is the social interaction⁶⁷. However, post-Covid, staff will not always be in the office full-time. Some colleagues might only come into the office two or three days per week, allowing for fewer opportunities to bump into each other.

In the hybrid workplace, there will be fewer coworkers together in the same room and fewer watercooler moments for casual conversations. That's why it's recommended that companies enhance a work culture that allows for conversations and casual chats, and design the workplace for spontaneous collisions between workers.

Unplanned and informal moments offer much more than a chat about the weather. Research shows that much of job experience is taken up by osmosis – a multitude of informal moments that add up to years of experience and a wealth of knowledge⁶⁸. Watercooler talk or conversations around the coffee machine are informal and casual moments where solutions are found, details are spilled and mentor/mentee relationships are born. When staff

return to the office, they expect also to find such opportunities for connection.

So, to continue fostering a connected company culture, it will be important to design the office differently. As part of the workforce will continue to work from home in the future, parts of the office may remain unused. Instead of turning to a smaller office, companies could invest in communal spaces where all colleagues can connect. In a context that allows all spaces to be shared by employees, regardless of their seniority or position, a sense of equity is promoted throughout the workplace.

By investing in teambuilding exercises, affinity groups, and safe spaces within the office, connections between diverse groups of colleagues are created, eventually resulting in a context in which everyone feels safe to bring their authentic selves to work.



Generational difference⁶⁹

Younger members of the workforce especially value the community feeling at work. Studies show that millennials value office relationships the most. One in ten even agrees that work relationships are more important than the workload, actively prioritizing the connection with co-workers.

PICTURE & LOCATION / Beeldcollectief & Extremis

“If you give people a beautiful biophilic environment, with wonderful spaces and where the acoustics are done brilliantly, but their leader is still a sociopath, it’s not going to make any difference.”

Greenery in the office has also been shown to influence the social climate and interaction between employees⁷⁰, or on a more technical note, companies could invest in an app that for example prompts you to meet new colleagues for lunch. This way, social meetups across diverse profiles in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, seniority, and sexual orientation could be promoted.

The office of the future will be a community where colleagues meet each other, work together, socialize and form strong relationships. But the office will also be a part of its very own community.



PICTURE & LOCATION / Extremis

The office as part of the community

An office building never simply stands on its own, it's always rooted in a place, a society, a community. When designing a building, you should not only be focusing on the building and its occupants but also on building a resilient community. To do that, you have to think outside of your workplace and think about making a place for everybody⁷¹.

Another aspect Covid-19 has made clear is that office buildings without office workers have little to contribute to society. They are empty blocks of concrete that take up space and give nothing in return. With all this square footage sitting empty half of the time, we know that we can reposition the office building better so that it meets the needs of people who live nearby. Rather than having buildings remain confined and self-contained, offices could be integrated into the surrounding community to help coworkers, clients and visitors connect with the neighborhood itself⁷².

“It’s not just about your workplace. It’s how are people experiencing the city around them and what else can we offer.”

Dr. Libby Sander, Future of Work and Bond University assistant professor

The new ground floor

As the connection between life, work and play deepens, the interface of the street, sidewalk, and building façade will also become blurred and take on a new purpose. The first place where the office intersects with the community is at ground level. Traditionally consisting of a single-use storefront consisting of a sidewalk, concrete or glass façade, and a door, this space could become a multi-use destination with extended operating hours and an integral part of the community.

By designing open, accessible spaces that bring people and local organizations into the office building, and in turn, extend the office outdoors, you create a workplace enjoyed by everyone – not just by the daytime workforce⁷³.

Building owners can become invested neighbors by turning hard surfaces surrounding the building into pocket parks or city gardens that bridge the gaps between office and nature, work and play.

The ground floor of the office itself has traditionally been dedicated to building security, support functions, and the lobby. All spaces that are dark and empty when the building is not in use – in the evening, weekend, or during a health crisis – and thus offer no benefits for its surrounding neighborhood. By extending the operating hours and opening this floor up to community-oriented programs like shops, classrooms, co-working spaces, or health centers, both populations – office workers

and neighbors – benefit from it at different times of the day.

These interventions will make the building inviting, active and self-supporting. Instead of having an indoor lobby closed-off at the weekend, lobbies could have front porches that offer something unique and different for the community.

When office buildings start giving back space, they help create a city in which the office building acts as an anchor for the

*The steps we take now
at the workplace will
test how we design our
cities in the future.*

“20-minute community” around it. After all, we want our office back, but we do prefer to skip the commute.

Likewise, a regional design language and locally sourced materials also provide a clear identity and further reinforce the connection to the community. The future office will not be a generic box that can be dropped everywhere, it will be site-specific, culturally sensitive, and responsive to the local climate.

The office at Extremis HQ

The Extremis campus is a fine example of an office that keeps on evolving along with the needs of its employees. Although the works is never completed and there's always room for growth, let's listen to founder and head designer Dirk Wynants on what the Extremis offices in the rural town of Proven, Poperinge, Belgium look like.



Upon arrival, you immediately see the architectural building, clearly a lot of thought went into that. But is it also a fine example of a biophilic building?

Dirk: When we designed the building, I hadn't even heard of the word 'biophilia'. Every decision we made came from an instinctive gut feeling. It was actually later - when our partner Steelcase asked me to give a presentation on biophilic design - that I came to know the term and got a grasp of it. And now that I know the full scope of it, it's easier to recognize and apply it.

What I wanted in our offices, is to create the feeling of being outdoors indoors. That's what biophilia is all about. I achieved that by blurring the hard lines between the inside and outside. When going out, for example, the indoor ceiling and floor don't stop at the door, so the border where indoors becomes outdoors is not necessarily at the door.

We also used the same materials and furniture both indoors and out, we have birdsongs playing inside and have banners depicting natural scenes. By orienting the building correctly, there's always a view of nature without needing sunscreens that block the views and natural light.

That's for the architecture of the building, what about the offices, do we find any cubicles at Extremis?

Dirk: The office plan was a tough call, and as yet it is not ideal. We always try to create spaces that best fit the tasks that each person performs. We have four departments, design, marketing, sales and supply chain, and we have seen that the tasks

“You can't move around every moment of the day. But whenever there's an opportunity to change your seat, it should be possible!”

Dirk Wynants

PICTURES & LOCATION / Skinn & Extremis



in each department often suit the nature of the people performing them. We decided to divide the office by department to meet the needs of our employees. A creative designer has different office needs from a sales person who wants to make lots of phone calls.

In doing so, we try to find a balance between contact, privacy, and focus, but that balance is different for everybody. Looking towards the future, I would like to mix up the departments to create more connections and share knowledge about each task. Disconnecting from hardware such as computers and multiple screens would be an incredible help for that. Now I feel like we always have to weigh up the physical disadvantages of the job with the things that are possible.

That's clear. And when you say disconnect from fixed seats, you also mean taking work outdoors?

Dirk: Well yes, people can choose, they can sit inside, outside, in the showroom, whatever. The office is a mix of different workplaces that follow your needs throughout the day. I get that you can't move around every moment of the day.



But whenever there's an opportunity to change your seat, it should be possible!

For example, I have seen many meetings take place outdoors, phone calls, brainstorming sessions, training courses, and of course breaks as well.

Don't forget those coffee breaks! How is the atmosphere at Extremis? Is there a community feeling among employees?

Dirk: We have a very sociable team and the coffee corner is the place to be during the workday. But we also try to bring people together outside working hours. We push people to organize togetherness activities for which they get a designated budget and we often have a spontaneous get-together where we pour a [Tremist Beer](#). All of that is done on a voluntary basis, some people are always present, some are not, and that's okay.

In the lunchroom, we only have long tables where lots of people can sit; this way we create more interaction among colleagues. Often lunchtime is the most productive moment of the day. Outside, we have a petanque piste and we hold a football competition in the summertime.





PICTURES & LOCATION / Skinn & Extremis

Although not located in a bustling city but in a rural area, does Extremis try to give back to its surrounding community?

Dirk: We try to maintain close relations with our neighbors. When we first moved here with the company, we invited the whole town to come to the nearest café where we explained our plans over a shared drink."

We also support local clubs and events financially. In summer, for example, we collaborate with Watou Arts Festival where we give input, provide furniture and add brand awareness. For the 2021 edition, we even opened a pop-up café named Den Tremist', where people can enjoy a cold Tremist after checking out the art.

We never close off our premises, and leave our facilities open for use by the public. A GR hiking trail runs over our campus, hikers can always come in to catch their breath, use the restrooms and charge their batteries.

Recently, we installed charging stations for electric cars that can be used by our neighbors. We always want to compensate for our environmental impact and it comes in handy for neighbors and passers-by with an electric car. We also have bicycle storage with power for electric cycles which people are free to use. My dream would be to install even more solar panels on the roof and hand out the surplus electricity to our neighbors, but at the moment, that's not legally allowed in Belgium - yet.



Five pillars of an office for people

Combining flexibility, nature, and community in the office will help promote five important workplace trends that will be priorities for the post-pandemic office: choice, mobility, privacy, well-being, and integration.

The next-gen workplace will enable workers to pull the levers, occupying spaces that support varying aspects of focused and collaborative work, socialization, learning, care, and connection. In these workplaces people feel individually cared for, are empowered to be their best, and meet opportunities for serendipity.





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1. Choice

The return to the workplace will bring some changes with it; however, the main difference will be employee choice. People will have a spectrum of work settings to choose from: working in the office, at home, or in the outdoor office. They might be able to choose their working hours and when to work on which task. Another option might be to link your mood to the way of working, alone or collaborative? In a private space or the shared office? In the office for people, workers get the flexibility they desire.

2. Mobility

With flexible working hours and the option to work from home, people are able to match their workday with their mobility preferences. Get ahead of traffic jams or match your commuting schedule to the weather forecast. In the 20-minute city, cars are kept to a minimum and walking, cycling, e-scooting, or using public transport becomes more inviting.

3. Privacy

Office-workers will wish to have a private corner in the office just like in the home office. A place where focused work is possible and where noise is kept to a minimum. To keep a healthy balance between open and private, group and individual, offices will have to set up private corners.



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4. Well-being

In the next-gen office, it will be the workers who are at the core. By offering nature in and around the office, nudging towards healthy behaviors, allowing work from home when needed or wanted, employers value people's mental and physical well-being. With more opportunities for community building, self-expression and diversity, people are free to be themselves at work.

5. Integration

Every person is integrated equally into the office of the future, and the office itself also gets integrated into its surroundings. The post-pandemic workplace considers each individual, whether they work in the office itself, at home, or elsewhere. Collaboration rooms will join people both physically and digitally so that everybody has an equal experience and feels equally valued.

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Conclusion

What will the office look like in the - near - future?
Rather than going back to our working lives the way they were before, companies and leaders have been presented an opportunity to rethink their employee value proposition.

Providing a human-centric experience for employees will be the rule, rather than the exception, for progressive organizations to attract top talent. People might continue to work from home, but in the office, they will meet people, nature, a shared culture, safe and healthy habits and a place for human interaction.

Employers need to communicate that they understand each employee is unique and each has individual requirements. While getting ever

closer to a more human-centric workplace, employees will appreciate control over their way of working, benefit the company's bottom line and become more engaged, happy, and productive.

Every company, organization, or association has the potential to restructure the very core of how it approaches the workplace. In the end, it is of such importance for a large number of people over a lifetime of employment.

*So is the office dead?
No. It's alive and kicking.*



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Key insights to put on the table – or desk

- Keep in mind that **the office is an evolving organism**. Offices change not only in physical appearance but also in attitude. There will never be a one solution that will fit everybody forever, but by changing up certain routines you'll find a balance for all employees.
- As working is such a massive part in people's lives, organizations have to ask themselves **"would I want to stay in this office for the rest of my days?"** If the answer is no, you cannot expect your employees to stay either.
- **Covid-19 accelerated some office trends** like working from home, flexible working hours, less presenteeism and valuing shared moments with colleagues. Post-pandemic, these changes should not be discarded rather, **they should be embraced**.
- **Include natural elements in and around the workplace** to feel the many advantages biophilia has to offer. In doing so, think of elements that appeal to all senses.
- **Dare to take your work out of the office walls** and into the open air. With the right equipment you can perfectly combine working with being outdoors.
- To step into the future of work, **workspaces need to be adapted to employees' needs throughout the day**. Offering just one fixed desk will not boost productivity, instead, offer different spaces for different tasks.
- **Reinforce connections between office workers** to bolster a community feeling, lift up spirits and allow for colleagues to become friends.
- **Look at the office** not as a single, separate entity only for employees, rather as an **extension to its surroundings** for each person that makes use of the neighborhood.
- Lastly, don't be discouraged by this list of insights. **Start small and go step by step** to change the office for the better. By listening to employees you'll soon learn which points are most at issue.

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