

AFTER THE RETURN:

Can The Office Really Raise Performance?

A WORKTECH Academy discussion paper in association with ACCO Brands





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1 Executive summary

Business leaders who must navigate the future of work currently face a dilemma. The return to the office has gathered pace – although it is still not fast enough for some CEOs, especially in North America. At the same time, it’s clear that hybrid working is here to stay, permanently changing the office landscape and adding a layer of complexity to any C-suite plans to develop the next workplace.

In a volatile business climate everyone is searching for the extra edge that a high-performance workplace can bring. But does being face-to-face in the office, as opposed to working in a hybrid or fully remote model, really improve performance? And is there a danger that in simply bringing people back to an office that has not been planned and equipped for the challenges of the future, senior leaders risk eroding productivity further rather than enhancing it?

This report is a collaboration between WORKTECH Academy, a global knowledge and research network for how we’ll work tomorrow, and ACCO Brands, which supplies some of the most iconic products to the office market. It looks beyond the RTO (return-to-office) debate and goes in search of practical, evidence-based ways to build a high-performance workplace – essentially pivoting from where we work to how we work.

Our investigation set out to do two things. First, we wanted to review the abundance of recent global research in the field which has evaluated the effects on people of different work modes. We envisaged a ‘study of studies’ designed to inform us about how in-office versus hybrid or remote working might influence performance at an individual, team and organizational level. Second, we wanted to give business leaders an insight into how they should view investment in the office over the next decade, with the aim of creating that high-performance workplace.

“We wanted to give business leaders an insight into how they should view investment in the office over the next decade”

We reviewed more than 90 separate pieces of research for this paper. Most were published in a two-year period from January 2023 to January 2025, and many were peer-reviewed. We then discussed the findings of the review in two research roundtables with senior workplace leaders and conducted several expert interviews. What did we discover? Globally, there are huge geographical, generational and sectoral differences around how offices operate. Performance means different things to different people in different circumstances. However, some universal themes emerged.

At the level of the individual, which has attracted the most attention by researchers, our review identified employee satisfaction as the most important governing metric for evaluating performance in relation to different work modes. Broadly, there is considerable dissatisfaction with many aspects of the office environment as it is currently configured.

Looking at specific aspects, individual job satisfaction is adversely affected by RTO mandates whereas multi-location strategies for work are received more favourably. In retail, hospitality and healthcare sectors where full-time onsite work is a must, job satisfaction is more closely tied to giving great customer, guest or patient service. Satisfaction with work-life balance can depend on people having control over their own time rather than control of the place of work. Satisfaction with personal wellbeing can suffer in the office and stress-busting adaptations are required. But hybrid working is no walk in the park either and can lead to feelings of isolation and overwork.

At the level of the team, our review identified trust within the team as the most important governing metric for evaluating performance. Generally, there has been a decline in trust in the workplace. However, there is some positive evidence that face-to-face contact in the office can create the conditions in which teams can flourish.

Looking at specific aspects of team dynamics, relationships with colleagues are enhanced by colocation, whether that is reading body language or mulling problems at a whiteboard, whereas there are documented problems with remote collaboration. Team creativity is boosted by being together in the workplace. There can be more connection with and mentoring by leaders in the office, although new leadership styles are required. Team members can feel more ‘in the loop’ and intuitively aware of critical intelligence, even if such seemingly casual encounters require careful coordination.

At the level of the organization, which has attracted the least attention by researchers, our review identified company innovation as the most important governing metric for evaluating performance. Innovation is broadly defined in the report as providing the organization with the ideas, energy, culture and resilience to constantly evolve in a fast-changing world; it is a concept closely linked to value creation, informed by culture, and most closely tuned into the realities of hybrid working.

“A contagious culture of innovation can spread more easily through workplace clusters”

Looking at specific aspects of innovation and value creation, there is evidence that in-office working supports creative collaboration, the quality of ideas, and the ability to make breakthrough discoveries. A contagious culture of innovation can spread more easily through workplace clusters. However, despite the importance of technology to innovation performance, most companies have not yet fully invested in the digital tools and technologies that the hybrid work demands.

The report goes on to make a series of recommendations for senior leaders to boost individual employee satisfaction, trust within teams, and innovation performance within their organizations. These include prioritizing a healthier environment, avoiding RTO mandates, building a trust-based leadership model, and providing spaces for creativity and experiment.

These recommendations have key implications for addressing the physical, technical and social infrastructures of the future office – and for redefining what your next workplace could be. This paper therefore concludes with the presentation of three workplace themes or scenarios. First, a *Precision* workplace driven by data and by the predictive power of AI that enables more efficient control and coordination of the office. Second, a *Prosocial* workplace driven by empathy, wellbeing and relationships that uses the power of human connection to advance company aims. Third, a *Proximity* workplace driven by location that uses persuasive placemaking to maximise the value of being together onsite.

These models are not mutually exclusive – the high-performing organization should ideally incorporate aspects of all three. They illustrate different ways in which the office really can raise performance – but only with the right investment, planning, repurposing, resources and supplies.

2 Introduction

After more than five years of organizations experimenting with hybrid work, the momentum globally is now swinging behind a return to the office. People have started to spend more time working onsite, either by choice or resulting from a company mandate. Organizations have begun to rethink their workplaces to cope with the realities of hybrid and remote working, often with inconclusive results. Amid this flurry of activity around where we work, a key question springs to mind: can company leaders be confident that they are calling their people back to an office that has been properly planned and equipped for the challenges of the future? If that is not the case, then they risk failing in the primary task that offices were originally developed to address – improving productivity.

Much has been written over many years about whether and how the office environment raises performance. This report does not intend to revisit that territory. Suffice to say that early pioneers advocated for scientific management principles to be transposed from the factory floor. This resulted in rigid time-and-motion workplaces that proved detrimental to worker wellbeing and satisfaction. More recently, the hard edges of the office as a machine have been softened with a growing focus on community, network and knowledge work.

The rise of hybrid working, however, constitutes a different scale of challenge and change because it disrupts both time and place. Given the ready availability of alternatives to the office, such as the home, coworking or other satellite spaces, it is unclear how much face-to-face working in the office contributes to performance. Researchers around the world have been busy evaluating the effects on people of different work modes, but this knowledge has not been sufficiently harnessed to enable C-suite decision makers to make plans for a future office that is high performing.

This paper is a modest first step in that direction. It aims to stimulate discussion by exploring two questions. First, what can review of research in the field – a ‘study of studies’ – inform us about how in-office versus hybrid or remote working can influence productivity at an individual, team and organizational level? Second, how should senior business leaders view investment in the office over the next decade with the aim of improving overall performance?

Context

Before we dive into the subject, it is important to establish some context. It’s clear that the return to the office is in full swing. According to a global poll of business leaders by KPMG (2024), more than eight out of ten bosses (83%) expect a full return to the office by 2027. Big international firms such as Amazon, JP Morgan Chase and WPP are leading the charge on a full or nearly full office return.

Such policies are sometimes driven by a desire to bring knowledge workers at HQ into line with retail, warehouse or logistics employees who belong to the same company but have no choice but to turn up at a physical workplace every day. Returners are also fuelled by a fear that the middle ground of hybrid work can be a quagmire that is difficult to coordinate. Far better, the thinking goes, to mandate a full return or go fully remote, as some big software firms have done. Leaders in returner firms have been quick to point the finger of blame for weaker performance at hybrid work practices, arguing that working from home is ‘not real work’ or ‘an aberration’.

However, despite the force with which some CEOs state their case, many employees remain unhappy at returning to the office, especially to a workplace that has not been improved or updated. Staff at some of the highest-profile returners have publicly voiced

their disquiet. Tension between what senior leaders want (more in-office work) and what workers want (more flexibility) continues to simmer. There is another duality to contend with: while the return to the office is plainly evident, it is also true that hybrid work is here to stay. The office as a future destination for work must contend with the realities of a more distributed workforce.

“Although the office continues to be the dominant experience for workers, hybrid work has changed the landscape in which it now sits”

According to the results of a monthly survey of US citizens by Barrero, Bloom and Davis (January 2025), working from home has not declined since 2023 – it has stabilised at around 25% of days in a working week. This broadly corresponds with McKinsey data (2024) that hybrid working is settling at around 3.5 days per week in the office. An earlier study from Nick Bloom and colleagues in the WFH (Work From Home) research consortium (2023), based on 34 countries, determined that two-thirds of full-time employees (66.5%) work fully on an office site and only a quarter (25.6%) are hybrid workers. The top three reasons why employees chose to work in the office were socializing with co-workers (named by 62% of respondents), face-to-face collaboration (54%) and clearer boundaries between work and personal time (43%).

We are left with a sense that although the office continues to be the dominant experience for a majority of workers, hybrid work has changed the landscape in which it now sits. To give just one example from the WHF consortium (2024): Americans now live further away from their employers. The mean distance increased from 10 miles in 2019 to 27 miles in 2023, and the share of workers living more than 50 miles from their employer rose seven-fold from 0.8 per cent to 5.5 per cent. Such factors give pause for thought on how workplace performance is understood and measured.

Methodology

This report is based on a review of more than 90 separate pieces of research. Most of the studies are concentrated in a two-year period from January 2023 to January 2025 to catch recent trends. Many have been peer-reviewed. To discuss the findings of this review, we convened two research roundtables of senior workplace leaders and conducted several expert interviews. These expert views are filtered throughout our commentary. You will also note that wherever possible we have favoured use of the more agile term ‘performance’ as opposed to ‘productivity’, which evokes a traditional model of industrial output that seems out of step with the digital world of hybrid working. Exceptions to this rule include when the term ‘productivity’ is used within an expert quote or research paper.

The following sections look at evidence of the impact of different work modes on individual, team and organizational performance.

3 Individual performance

Can the office improve employee satisfaction? Only with significant modifications and enhancements to the total environment.

More studies have been conducted into how individuals are performing in the hybrid world than at the level of the team or the organization. This wealth of research gives company leaders valuable insights into the needs and motivations of their employees. However, it also reveals an elaborate mesh of contributory factors such as connection, balance, visibility, support and wellbeing that can at times make it difficult for C-suite leaders to alight on a workplace strategy that will raise performance.

To cut through this complexity, we felt it was important to identify a single governing metric for evaluating individual performance in relation to different work modes. In this paper, we have chosen employee satisfaction because it intersects so much scientific evidence in the field; it is also a measure widely used inside commercial organizations and not just in academic research.

Satisfaction – with your job, with career opportunities and visibility to senior managers, with work-life balance, with support for health and wellbeing, and with the general environment and amenities – is critical to improving individual performance. But how has hybrid working impacted satisfaction? And will a return to in-office working lever an upturn in performance? Research indicates that while hybrid working poses many challenges for individual performance, employees are also dissatisfied with many aspects of the office environment as it is currently configured. Modifications and enhancements are needed if the office is to remain central to the future of work.

Job satisfaction

There is frankly a mixed picture on how much office attendance contributes to individual job satisfaction. Where organizations mandate their employees back to the office, evidence suggests a negative impact on satisfaction and even a guaranteed way to lose your best performers. A Gartner study (2024) surveyed 2,080 knowledge workers on their intent to stay in their jobs if strictly mandated to return to the office. It found high performers were twice as likely as the average employee to quit their jobs.

A University of Pittsburgh study by Ding and Ma (2023) used a sample of Standard and Poor’s 500 firms to examine the consequences of US firms’ return-to-office (RTO) mandates. They reported significant declines in job satisfaction ‘consistent with managers using RTO mandates to reassert control over employees and blame employees as a scapegoat for bad firm performance.’

However, where there is no RTO mandate and where office working is presented as an option within a multiple-location work strategy, there can be a more affirmative impact on job satisfaction. Japanese researcher Susumu Nagayama (2023) surveyed more than 2,000 workers in Tokyo and found a positive relationship between multiple-location work and employee outcomes such as engagement, creativity and wellbeing. Multiple-locations options included settings both within a workplace and outside it, such as cafés and coworking sites.

Where there is no choice other than to be permanently onsite, as is the case for most workers in the retail, hospitality and healthcare sectors, research suggests that job satisfaction is intrinsically linked to giving a high-quality service to store customers, hotel guests or hospital patients. For example, research by Jennifer Afolabi et al (2023)

found that employee engagement in the retail sector ‘is directly linked to customer satisfaction and loyalty. HR strategies such as continuous training and development, recognition and reward systems, and fostering a positive workplace culture ...not only enhance employee morale and productivity but also significantly improve the quality of customer interactions and service.’

“Job satisfaction is intrinsically linked to giving a high-quality service to store customers, hotel guests or hospital patients”

An Indian study of 357 hotel employees (Peethambaran and Naim 2024) found a similar connection between service mission and satisfaction. And a US study led by Cameron Sabet of Georgetown University School of Medicine, Washington DC (2024) looked at how using evidence-based design solutions to improve patient outcomes (such as private rooms, access to nature and improved lighting) could also enhance staff satisfaction.

In contrast, knowledge workers in corporate offices sometimes lack direct engagement with frontline users of their company’s products and services, which may inhibit both job satisfaction and the return to the office. For an overwhelming majority of these workers in knowledge-led companies, hybrid holds up better as a source of satisfaction. According to Leesman’s report ‘The Hybrid Future: Redefining Possibilities’ (2025), which surveyed 3,988 employees between July 2023 and October 2024, hybrid work remains a key factor in job satisfaction: three-quarters (74%) said it influenced their decision to stay in or accept a job.

When Nick Bloom of Stanford University and China-based academics Ruobing Han and James Laing (2024) studied the effects of hybrid working (three days per week in the office and two days per week from home) on 1,612 Chinese university-educated employees in the technology company Trip.com, they found that the hybrid model improved job

satisfaction and reduced quit rates by one-third without damaging performance. The research team added that ‘The reduction in quit rates was significant for non-managers, female employees and those with long commutes’ and that ‘hybrid working did not affect performance grades over the next two years of reviews.’

Work-life balance

When it comes to work-life balance, research broadly validates the view that having a workstyle with more autonomy, flexibility and individual control will boost employee satisfaction. That points to hybrid, but the picture is more complex than it appears. According to a study by behavioural scientists Stephanie Tepper and Neil Lewis Jr of Cornell University (2024), the primary driver for knowledge-based employees is not control over their place of work but control over their time. Their findings –based on data from the National Study of the Changing Workforce, a nationally representative sample of 1,516 workers in the US – suggest that where people work is less important than employees having control over their own schedule and not being forced to punch the clock.

The Cornell study concludes that ‘Employees are not resisting the office because they don’t want to work or want to work less; instead, they want to be able to control their time — to do some chores between Zoom meetings, for instance, or get more regular exercise instead of spending 10 days per year (or almost a year of one’s life) commuting.’

Teng-Calleja and associates (2024) conducted research in which individual employees in the Philippines reported having greater work–life balance amid hybrid working. But this depended on key actions being taken at a team and organizational level, from an effective performance management system to supportive work tools and wellness initiatives. This indicates that work-life balance as a lever for individual performance cannot be addressed as a standalone issue but must be part of a wider workplace strategy.

Personal health and wellbeing

The extent to which personal health is supported in the workplace is a major contributory factor to satisfaction and performance. None of the different work modes – in-office, hybrid or remote – cover themselves in glory according to research: organizations aren’t currently moving fast enough to improve workforce health. According to a report from the World Economic Forum in collaboration with the McKinsey Health Institute (2025): ‘Failing to prioritise employee health risks is creating a sicker, unhappier and less productive workforce, burdened with higher healthcare costs and diminished productivity.’

“None of the different work modes – in-office, hybrid or remote – cover themselves in glory when it comes to supporting personal health”

Gallup’s 2024 State of the Global Workplace report highlights the scale of the challenge. This charts a stagnation in employee engagement and a decline in wellbeing, concluding that ‘the majority of the world’s employees continue to struggle at work and in life, with direct consequences for organizational productivity’. Less than a quarter (23%) of employees worldwide feel engaged, with 62% not engaged and 15% actively disengaged – a dangerous segment of potential saboteurs for any company to manage. Less than a quarter (24%) of employees feel that their organization cares about their overall wellbeing, according to Gallup.

Evidence suggests that the office can exacerbate anxiety, stress and burnout, with noise and distraction the number one complaint by employees. But there are also downsides associated with remote work such as loss of boundaries, loss of connection and overworking. According to Dales, Wilson and Tucker (2024), hybrid employees experience both positive and negative effects on their subjective wellbeing. They surveyed 412 hybrid workers in

the UK and found that benefits included improved physical health, time for family and home life, improved work-life balance, time for wellbeing activities, improved overall health, and reduced stress and anxiety. On the other hand, challenges included overwork, isolation and loneliness.

Hybrid working can also be an unsettling middle ground when it comes to wellbeing. The feeling of psychological safety may be greater for employees who either work in the office full time or work at home full time, according to a study (Potter and Ross, 2023) published by the British Psychological Society. A psychologically safe environment is one where there is a limited stress response due to feelings of safety and belonging. Hybrid workers generally scored lower than fully remote or in-office colleagues in the study. Office workers demonstrated the highest levels of psychological safety, appearing more likely to admit when they make mistakes and more willing to learn from them.

Another study (Lee 2024) looked at the psychological safety of hybrid knowledge workers in the retail e-commerce industry and found a dual effect: clear communication and asynchronous participation were valued by research participants, but technical issues and privacy concerns emerged as potential hindrances.

A Harvard School of Design study led by Charu Srivastava (2024) directly compared home and office in terms of work performance and wellbeing, based on a survey of 614 workers in the US and Canada. The results showed that while perceived comfort and wellbeing were significantly higher at home, perceived work performance was significantly higher in the office, as was motivation.

A study of 779 German office employees (Höcker et al, 2024) revealed that a combination of remote and in-office work together with work autonomy has the potential to reduce burnout. But this will only happen, according to the study, if workflows and processes are designed to provide employees with autonomy, and offices undergo ‘stress-reducing adaptations.’ What those adaptations might be are discussed later in this report.

Key Takeouts

Hybrid work impacts satisfaction – mandated office returns lower satisfaction, while multiple-location options boost engagement and wellbeing.

Work-life balance depends on time control – flexibility over schedules matters more than workplace location.

Wellbeing challenges exist in all modes – offices cause stress, remote work leads to isolation, and hybrid needs better support.

4 Team performance

Can the office build trust and support teams to thrive? Evidence suggests some positive gains from face-to-face work.

There is less published research on how teams behave and perform in relation to different work modes compared with that for individual employees. Nevertheless, we found enough evidence in our review to suggest that hybrid and remote working can have a negative impact on team dynamics, and that fixing the office fundamentals can create more fertile ground for teams to flourish. The governing metric for team performance, we determined, is trust – trust in colleagues, trust in leadership, trust in being in the loop, trust in belonging to the team, trust in decision making and in knowledge sharing.

Relationship with colleagues

How employers relate to their teammates is critical to building trust within the team. Research in this area generally favours face-to-face contact in the office. Or to be more accurate, it is less damning of office work than the alternatives. A survey by the American Management Association (2023) found team-building capabilities were being hindered by hybrid and remote work. Research by Hall and associates (2024) revealed that working relationships were negatively impacted by homeworking, resulting in superficial connections with colleagues. A study by Keating and colleagues (2024) uncovered negative behaviours with virtual working, including ambiguity, anonymity and lack of accountability.

Lucius and Damberg (2024) learnt that ‘When workers are in the office less . . . they are less connected to their workplace and to their coworkers, while also lowering the amount of interacting they do with colleagues, which further reduces

knowledge sharing.’ Yang and colleagues (2022) collected data at Microsoft and learned that ‘firm-wide, remote work caused the collaboration network of workers to become more static and siloed, with fewer bridges between disparate parts.’ Weyrauch (2024) determined that the global rise of virtual work in the financial services industry ‘leads to a lack of trust, decreased interaction, and diminished performance.’

“Researchers who collaborated locally were much more likely to gain new knowledge from their teammates”

What swings the argument towards in-office teamworking is what is gained from physical proximity. A review by Van der Wouden and Youn (2024) of 17 million scientific publications over the past 45 years found that ‘researchers who collaborated locally were much more likely to gain new knowledge from their teammates than those who collaborated at a distance’. The study found that being together physically—reading body language, mulling a problem at a whiteboard – was especially valuable when knowledge isn’t yet codified.

Connection with leaders

How teams are led also profoundly affects team performance. A lack of trust in leadership can undermine the best efforts of companies to make productivity gains. Currently there is a crisis of trust in the workplace: Edelman’s 2025 Trust barometer shows an unprecedented decline in trust that employers will do the right thing; and a 2025 experience survey by Qualtrics estimates that only 55% of employees trust their senior leaders. ‘Trust is built in drops and lost in buckets, and we’re running out of buckets,’ comments Brian Elliot of Work

Forward, a future of work expert and former startup CEO. He advocates for intentional interaction driven by team leaders who build ‘in-person moments that matter’ – a view that reinforces the idea that just being co-located onsite is not enough to guarantee an uptick in team performance.

One of the unintended consequences of hybrid work is the erosion of organic mentoring opportunities such as impromptu conversations, shadowing leaders and informal feedback. Ready access to leaders through onsite work is set to offer a similar value to employees as traditional office amenities and services, according to a WORKTECH Academy report (2025).

How else should leaders build trust within teams? They should combine clarity and empathy with creativity, according to Rama Gheerawo, British author of a book on creative leadership (2025). Another management expert and author, Adam Kingl (2023), takes a similar tack: he advocates for drawing on the habits of highly successful leaders in the creative arts – from jazz musicians to TV scriptwriters and top chefs – to enable creative leadership to thrive.

One of the main tasks in leading teams is to communicate corporate mission and purpose. This has also become more complicated with hybrid working. Knowledge-led firms can no longer simply rely on addressing employees via on-brand messages, displays and behaviours in the physical office – they must communicate to a distributed workforce across time and distance. Retail, hospitality and healthcare work settings may be an exception to this challenge, alongside companies that have enforced a full-time return to the office. But for most purpose-driven organizations, getting the leadership message across to team members is a struggle at times. Being together in the office more frequently could make this task easier.

Awareness of critical intelligence

One way that trust is built in teams relates to being aware of critical intelligence – the common parlance is being ‘in the know’ or ‘in the loop’. It is one of the biggest arguments that companies make for getting people back into the office. But how far does the evidence back this up? The research gives a nuanced picture.

A German study by Morike and colleagues (2024), for example, investigates how onsite practices generate different types of awareness that support the progression of tasks. It acknowledges that ‘awareness of colleagues’ tasks arises from overheard conversations, screen glimpses, and other informal exchanges in the office. This knowledge sharing is crucial for effective work.’

However, other research is more sceptical about ‘watercooler moments’ in the office. Xu, Sarkar and Rintel (2023) gathered data in research labs in academic and industry. Their study suggests that offices need to carefully manage and synchronise workplace interactions to keep people in the loop, rather than simply rely on random encounters. The office should therefore focus on increased coordination of people and resources.

Making decisions and sharing knowledge

When it comes to team decision-making and knowledge-sharing, there are several studies that underpin the view that in-office working supports better performance outcomes. As with personal wellbeing, the concept of psychological safety is a factor in group decision making. Rucker and colleagues (2024) conducted an experimental study of creative performance at home and in the office with a German company. They discovered that for individual creative tasks (e.g. creating a presentation), employees were more creative when working from home (versus in the office)

because they experience higher levels of perceived psychological freedom. By contrast, for team creative tasks (e.g. developing ideas for a new product), employees reported being more creative when working in the office due to higher levels of perceived psychological safety.

“Sitting near coworkers increased the online feedback that engineers received on their computer code”

Emanuel, Harrington, and Pallais (2023) collected data from software engineers at a major corporation and determined that ‘sitting near coworkers increases the online feedback that engineers receive on their computer code.’ The effects of physical proximity were considerable, for example reducing programs written per month by 23%. The study concluded that having a single remote worker on the team can have an outsized impact, depressing collaboration even between co-located coworkers.

Oseland and Raw (2024) conducted an online survey of people who had worked in home offices and at an employer’s office. A majority considered the office to be better than the home for teamwork and collaboration, managing or mentoring a team, improving knowledge or socialising with colleagues. There was also a preference for the office to hold meetings and make key business decisions.

Ninnemann and colleagues (2024) evaluated decisions made by hybrid teams and determined that urgent and/or complex tasks require more time for spontaneous team exchange in the physical workplace. In contrast to face-to-face interaction, virtual meetings may lead to increased drowsiness, according to research by Nurmi and Pakarinen (2023), due to an ‘underload of stimulation’ which then affects cognitive performance. A study by Chawla (2021) of grant reviewers of the US National Institutes of Health found shorter attention spans and lower engagement during video grant-review meetings than in those held face-to face.

What these and other studies tell us is that in-office working can bring benefits to team trust, cohesion and performance. However there needs to be a more coherent strategy around HR protocols, leadership style, workplace design and technology systems to achieve those gains.

Key Takeouts

Trust is key to team performance – in-office work fosters trust, while remote work risks siloed teams and weaker relationships.

Leadership trust is declining – employees increasingly distrust leaders, requiring new leadership styles and better communication.

Being ‘in the loop’ matters – office interactions aid awareness, but casual encounters alone don’t ensure knowledge-sharing.

Team creativity thrives in-office – psychological safety boosts collaborative creativity, while remote work benefits individual creativity.

5 Organizational performance

Can the office support innovation and value creation? It all depends on building the right culture and technology infrastructure.

When compared to the amount of research at the individual and team level, there are less studies that look at organizational performance in relation to different work modes. In part this is because company success can sometimes be reduced to an amalgam of individual efforts and team behaviours, but also because some organizations appear unwilling to open their doors to external scrutiny for fear of disclosing sensitive corporate information. Nevertheless, a combination of published research and discussions with our expert group in preparing this report has led us to settle on a governing metric for organizational performance: *innovation*.

We do not define innovation narrowly as specifically related to the activities of new product development, but more broadly as giving the organization the ideas, energy, culture and resilience to constantly evolve in a fast-changing world. Innovation relates directly to value creation – and value can be created just as readily by a business model or a process refinement or a customer initiative as it can by the design of newly minted product or service. Innovation is also used by many large firms as a proxy or metric for organizational performance. As one of our experts, a senior partner in a large multinational architectural practice, told us, ‘Productivity isn’t how long people spending staring at a screen. It’s the value that people create.’

It is instructive that former Google CEO Eric Schmidt chose to blame hybrid working for his company’s failure to stay ahead in the race to develop AI, telling *Fortune* magazine in 2024 that ‘Google decided that work-life balance and going home early and working from home was more important than winning.’ However, more generally

at the organizational level, we found less focus on the impact of where we work – home or office – on performance, and more on how we work. Hybrid work was simply taken as a given by C-suite leaders and the questions they wanted answered related to which settings, systems and cultures might enhance innovative capacity and build value across a distributed workforce.

Creative collaboration

What does the research tell us? The evidence suggests some bonus for creativity from being on-site. A research team led by Michael Gibbs of the University of Chicago (2024) looked at unique data from an Indian IT services company containing a precise measure of innovation activity for over 48,000 employees working first in the office, then at home, and later in a hybrid setup. Its findings suggested that remote and hybrid work modes may inhibit collaboration and innovation. The study was based on measuring the quantity and quality of ideas. Quantity of ideas did not change during the work-from-home period as compared to the office, but the quality of ideas suffered. During the later hybrid period, the quantity of submitted ideas fell.

A German study by Lucius and Damberg (2024) found that social interaction in the office is a key driver of company creativity and innovation. The researchers report that ‘although creativity may not be directly impacted by proximity, low informal or social interaction in a work context will lead eventually to lower wellbeing and can critically endanger creativity.’ Tokyo-based researchers Arata and Kawakubo (2023) produced data suggesting that, although productivity in simple tasks increased with the frequency of working from home, there was a decline in creative productivity for the fully remote organization. This study advocated for a combination of office and remote work to increase overall performance.

“Managers are more inclined to assign generative tasks (i.e. creativity-focused and less structured) to in-office workers”

Not all results favour the office as a setting for innovation. Gleeson (2025), for example, surveyed 258 US-based knowledge workers and found no significant differences when comparing the effect on innovative work behaviours of working remotely or onsite. There was instead a positive effect with hybrid working. However, a reason why the office might offer more fertile territory for creativity could be in the allocation of tasks by managers. According to one study (Mautz 2024), managers are more inclined to assign generative tasks (i.e. creativity-focused and less structured) to in-office workers and evaluative tasks (ie. accuracy-focused and more structured) to remote workers. The research suggests that ‘managers’ task assignment preferences have the potential to impair remote workers’ performance before even beginning their assigned tasks.’

There are other reasons why remote teams can struggle to innovate, which can be traced to certain behaviours in developing new knowledge. When researchers from the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Oxford (Lin and colleagues 2023) organised a literature review of 20 million articles and analysed four million patent applications filed worldwide over the last 50 years, they determined that ‘across all fields, periods and team sizes, researchers in ... remote teams are consistently less likely to make breakthrough discoveries relative to their on-site counterparts.’

The Lin study found that among distributed team members, collaboration centres on late-stage, technical tasks involving more codified knowledge. Yet they are less likely to join forces in conceptual tasks—such as conceiving new ideas and designing research—when knowledge is tacit. The researchers concluded that ‘despite striking improvements in digital technology in recent years, remote teams are less likely to integrate the knowledge of their

members to produce new, disruptive ideas.’ This lack of breakthrough discovery can blunt the organizational capacity to adapt to change.

Cultural patterns

Producing new ideas, whether disruptive or not, can be seen as the lifeblood of the high-performing company. Ways to create the right type of culture to support this – giving high performers within the organization the psychological safety to try new things – has long been a subject of research. However there has been less attention paid to how hybrid working affects cultural patterns within firms.

A study by Arena, Hines and Golden (2023) is an exception: this University of Pennsylvania-Amazon research evaluated ten attributes critical to an organization’s culture in a study of more than 50,000 employees across three years. The results highlighted ‘three critical cultural patterns that will help to more deeply evaluate culture in a hybrid context’. The first of 3 ‘C’s’ is clusters – culture is not evenly distributed across an organization, rather it evolves in pockets within the network; the second is contagion – employees shape each other’s experience and, as a result, certain cultural behaviours are modelled and reinforced person-to-person; the third is context – the degree to which cultural behaviours are transmitted from group to group varies, based on the context surrounding a group.

This framework is helpful to understand how culture might drive a company’s ability to innovate in the hybrid era. Other frameworks developed in a previous era dominated by office working continue to hold relevance for improving performance. These include Cameron and Quinn’s ‘Four Cultures Model’ from the University of Michigan (1999) which is still widely used as an evaluative tool for companies seeking to develop cultures around four ‘competing values’ – collaboration, creativity, competition and control.

Technological infrastructure

In our expert roundtables to help shape this report, our senior workplace professionals emphasized the importance of technology to support innovation and raise performance. Tech systems that enable hybrid work, smooth team interactions and address cybersecurity threats can only be managed and delivered at the level of the organization.

However, when JLL research (2022) identified to 15 ‘anchor technologies’ that are significant for hybrid work transformation, the study revealed that organizations were on average adopting only four of these 15 anchors. The list for adoption ranged from workplace experience apps and in-office collaboration tech to wellbeing solutions and VR environments.

Technology company Brivo (2023) conducted research exploring the relationship between the level of digital integration and the level of hybrid adoption by organizations. It found relatively few companies that could be termed ‘integrators’ or ‘innovators’ with a digital infrastructure that completely supported the adoption of hybrid working. Far more firms were ‘bystanders’, who had not invested in either hybrid or new technology, or ‘wanderers’, enthusiastic embracers of hybrid working who had failed to provide the digital infrastructure, thus exposing them to security threats.

“Relatively few companies could be termed integrators with a digital infrastructure that supported the adoption of hybrid working”

In 2025, organizations globally have headed further down the path of digital transformation, but the journey is far from over and its significance to a company’s performance remains under-estimated by many business leaders. Tech investment is further complicated by the speed with which the

power of predictive AI is reshaping all aspects of business, including designing and managing the workplace. The rise of Generative AI has taken many company leaders by surprise and has largely been introduced by employees into the organization on an ad hoc basis rather than planned from the top to hone innovation.

Many large employers today require a workplace reset – and not just in the arena of technology. Gartner research with HR leaders (2024) determined that the ‘reset-ready organization’ must address three critical gaps to successfully reset: weak collaborative ties, a shortage of skills, and a lack of communication over technology. Only 14 per cent of HR leaders, among more than 180 surveyed, said that workers were given a voice in technology decisions at their organization.

However, when companies take a human-first approach to AI, says Gartner, employees are 1.5 times more likely to be high performers and 2.3 times more likely to be highly engaged. That creates a more innovative and productive workforce – and brings people back to a workplace better-equipped to face the future.

Key Takeouts

Innovation drives organizational performance – success depends on fostering creativity, collaboration and adaptability, not just productivity metrics.

In-office work supports knowledge sharing – remote teams struggle with breakthrough ideas, while proximity enhances knowledge-sharing and innovation.

Hybrid work reshapes company culture – culture forms in clusters, spreads through networks, and varies by context.

Tech investment lags behind hybrid adoption – many firms embrace hybrid work but lack the digital infrastructure to support it.

6 Your next office

What should senior leaders do to address the current picture? Here are some recommendations for shaping a high-performance workplace.

Our review of research into the impact of different work modes suggests some topline objectives for what employers might do to enhance office performance. At the level of the individual employee, we believe it is essential to find ways to boost personal satisfaction. At the level of the team, a key objective is to build trust. At the level of the organization, a central mission is to advance capabilities for innovation and value creation.

These are not easy things to achieve, but in-office working has the potential to make a significant contribution to each of them. Indeed, while uncovering further evidence that hybrid is here to stay, our ‘study of studies’ contains some cautious optimism for the future role of the office. In the right conditions, the office can, for instance, provide greater psychological safety, encourage trust-building relationships with colleagues, support better mental and physical wellbeing, and make it easier to perform conceptual value-creation tasks that require the sharing of tacit knowledge.

However, we’re not talking about the office as it has been traditionally set up and encountered. It is clear from successive surveys that people don’t want to return to an office designed and operated in the same old ways – they want a new experience with the type of amenities, settings, infrastructures, tools, supplies and equipment that will enable them to do a better job. They want to see their next office repurposed, even reimaged entirely. The trouble right now is that many people are returning to a workplace that isn’t ready for the future and hasn’t kept pace with employee needs or management change.

“The office is currently a place of low productivity, low legitimacy and low morale”

Some businesses have cut their desk space so aggressively since the pandemic, for example, that they are now struggling to accommodate all the people they’ve mandated back to the office. In a survey by Remit Consulting (2024), a fifth of workers ranked a shortage of desks among their top three reasons for avoiding the office. Getting people to return to the office has remained especially sluggish in the US where Kastle’s Back to Work Barometer (for end March 2024) doesn’t look great: average weekly office occupancy in 10 US cities was 53.3%, with San Francisco struggling on 43.4%, New York hitting the norm, and Dallas furthest ahead on 59.6%. At one of our roundtable experts, a professor of innovation observed: ‘The office is currently a place of low productivity, low legitimacy, low morale and too much rhetoric.’

What company leaders might do to change this picture brings us back to the two core questions driving this report. What can a review of recent research in the field tell us about how different work modes influence individual, team and organizational performance? And how should business leaders approach investment over the next decade with the aim of creating a high-performance workplace? The first question is answered by the new insights we have described that can help shape an office-based strategy; the second by a focus on integrating people, place and technology in a more rounded and comprehensive way, based around three interconnecting types of workplace model that we will present at the conclusion of this report.

High performers

An interesting perspective comes from Gensler Research Institute’s Global Workplace Survey 2024, based on 16,000 office workers across 15 countries and 10 industries. This links work performance to workplace performance. The research found that high performers (described in the study as ‘engaged individuals’, ‘strong teams’, and ‘innovative companies’) typically work in high performance workplaces (environments that offer a great employee experience and have effective spaces to work from). There are lessons here for company leaders at the individual level, where the most engaged individuals spend less time working individually and more time learning, socialising and developing their career; and at the team level, where strong teams are much more likely to sit together when they’re in the workplace and almost twice as likely to be aware of what their teammates are working on than the weakest teams.

At the organizational level, the Gensler study found that nearly three-quarters of meetings in the most innovative companies are ‘hybrid’—involving both in-person and virtual attendees—compared to just half of those in the least innovative companies. Employees in the most innovative companies spend almost twice as much time in workspaces such as coworking, client sites, and business travel than do those in the least innovative companies – and they are much more likely to say that their workplace positively contributes to the quality of their team’s work or services and their speed of decision making. So, what workplace modifications or enhancements would support higher performance? Let’s return to our topline objectives.

Employee satisfaction

To boost personal satisfaction in the office:

Avoid issuing RTO mandates and explore a flexible ecosystem of work instead. The RTO mandate betrays a lack of corporate mission and

purpose that would otherwise attract employees back into the workplace. Far better to position the office as a central hub within a multi-location ecosystem of work that is based on flexibility and autonomy. This strategy is more difficult to land but it makes the office more of a destination of choice with a clear purpose – typically to collaborate and socialise – while other spaces in the network (coworking, satellite or home offices for example) serve other purposes. Such thinking draws on a report by Mirvac (2021) which predicted ‘a shift from office to omni-channel working’. There is a clear parallel with omni-channel commerce which provides multiple physical and digital ways to shop.

Prioritise employee wellbeing and provide a healthier environment. The idea that the office is an unhealthy and contaminated place has lingered long after the pandemic. This must be dispelled to improve performance. Research studies have identified what people require for better wellbeing at work. Greenery, window views of nature, daylight and visual comfort are factors with the greatest positive effect, according to an Australian study by Yildirim and colleagues (2024). Reducing stress can be achieved by focusing on two variables: first, indoor environmental quality (IEQ) parameters, including noise, lighting, temperature and air quality; and second, interior design factors such as furniture, finishes and colours, as well as biophilic design features that enhance mood, cognition and clarity of thought according to research. Ergonomic design is supported by studies warning against prolonged sitting and advocating for active workstations.

Plan a workplace strategy that counters the arguments for hybrid work. People need help in managing their work and life. Working from home can sometimes help them achieve what they need to do. So why not provide office services and amenities that do more to support work-life balance? These could range from drycleaning and fitness services to childcare and eldercare, even a day’s leave for your child’s first day at school. Many people find commuting tiring and stressful, especially in large cities, and a reason to stay away. So why not try

to ‘fix’ the commute with staggered travel times, real-time onsite travel information and dedicated transport services? Giving people control over their own schedule is important, so create a workplace experience that is coordinated, efficient and respectful of their time.

Create opportunities for networking, development and belonging. Being in the office can support personal career goals but only if the environment drives learning, growth and community. It is important to plan spaces and settings that support mentoring, give ready access to senior leaders, provide social connection and stimulation, and are inclusive of different needs. Younger people aged 18 to 34 are keenest to return to the office full-time to build their social networks, develop their ‘soft skills’ through face-to-face interaction, and be mentored by older colleagues, according to a European study by Unispace (2021). They should be a test group for office initiatives and experiences that build belonging.

Trust in teams

To counter a trust deficit in teamworking:

Create safe spaces properly equipped to build and share knowledge. Teamwork is a complex dynamic and can be easily thrown off course. Research suggests that the office can provide the higher levels of psychological comfort required for teams to succeed, but company leaders have got to actively make it happen. Team settings should combine easy physical proximity with the right tools and technologies for group engagement. There should be spaces for instant mentoring and support. The environment should communicate a feeling of inclusion and respect irrespective of rank or background. Rows of serried desks flanked by glass-box meeting rooms won’t cut it in the future. C-suite leaders should think more expansively and imaginatively about settings and resources for collaboration.

Foster a trust-based leadership model based on outcomes rather than presence. A new style of open and hybrid leadership should be developed in the workplace that replaces in-office supervision with transparent communication, trust, accountability and empathy across a distributed workforce. KPIs (key performance indicators) should be rewritten so that people are measured on outcomes (what they produce), not on time spent in the office (presence at the desk). Leaders shouldn’t be afraid to show vulnerability, invite feedback and admit to mistakes. They should use data to explain the basis for decision making, and involve employees in those decisions wherever possible, even extending participation to co-design of the office environment in certain circumstances.

Plan your office around relationships and curate a sense of mission. What makes teams hum is the web of relationships within them. So why not plan the office around human connections in the workplace – based on who people relate to at work rather than what they do? Activity-based working (ABW), which uses activities as a foundation for office design, has been around for a long time. Relationship-based work – a term coined by global furniture firm Miller Knoll – is a new, complementary approach that supports how teams connect in an environment where collaboration, trust and emotional intelligence combine. An intentional focus on relationships further helps to build a sense of mission and purpose around how teams operate.

Innovation capability

To advance value creation and innovation in the organization:

Provide a variety of spaces and facilities for creativity and rapid prototyping. If the office is to be recast as an arena for value creation, then there needs to be more variety of spaces and settings that support creative work and the prototyping of ideas. These might range from music rooms to model shops. Research by Leesman

(2024) underscores the value of variety in office settings. This study found that environments with diverse seating arrangements – including spaces for informal collaboration, private conversations, and creative work – consistently outperform those that rely solely on unassigned desks without additional spatial options.

Coordinate people and resources in a culture that values new ideas. Innovation has been described as a ‘contact sport’, so making sure the right people meet in the right physical and virtual spaces at the right time with the right tools is essential. Coordinating value-creation activities successfully requires a corporate step-change in terms of infrastructural support that must work in tandem with a cultural shift to create more resilience, openness to new ideas, and willingness to experiment within the organization. Research suggests that cultures of innovation are contagious and build in clusters, a process that can be supported by physical and technical adaptations to the office environment.

Provide the technology and data infrastructure to innovate successfully. The fundamentals of IT continuity, maintenance, repair and cybersecurity underpin the effective evolution of the organization. The provision of seamless technology and data analysis that yields actionable insights are key drivers of performance as digital transformation in the age of AI tops the business agenda. The more innovative the company, the more meetings that are hybrid with both in-person and virtual participants – so equipping a wider range of workspaces for video conferencing will be important. Company leaders should also formulate a policy on use of generative AI in the organization and regain the initiative to ensure that AI can serve broader corporate innovation goals.

Locate in districts where there are strong research and cultural links. Forward-thinking organizations are now looking at a ‘desk-to-district’ approach to fostering innovation, paying closer strategic attention to where the company should be located and bringing their employees

closer to external knowledge networks. Some firms have headed to innovation districts that provide immediate access to research, startups and talent alongside a range of cultural and education amenities including retail and hospitality. According to Professor Geoff Mulgan of University College London, ‘Planners and developers of clusters of this kind need to understand them as a kind of collective intelligence’.

Bringing it all together

Our analysis of the performance metrics for individuals, teams and the organizations, our review of evidence to show the effects of different work modes, and our recommendations for workplace modifications lead us to some key conclusions.

If performance relies on engaged individuals, harmonious teams and an innovation-ready company culture, then we would suggest that there are three cross-cutting workplace themes that senior leaders should look at if they want to move the dial. These conceptual models are designed to aid planning and development of your next office.

Precision: the first model relies on data and technology to coordinate and synchronise the hybrid workplace with precision.

Prosocial: the second encourages a prosocial approach based around relationships, belonging, empathy and wellbeing.

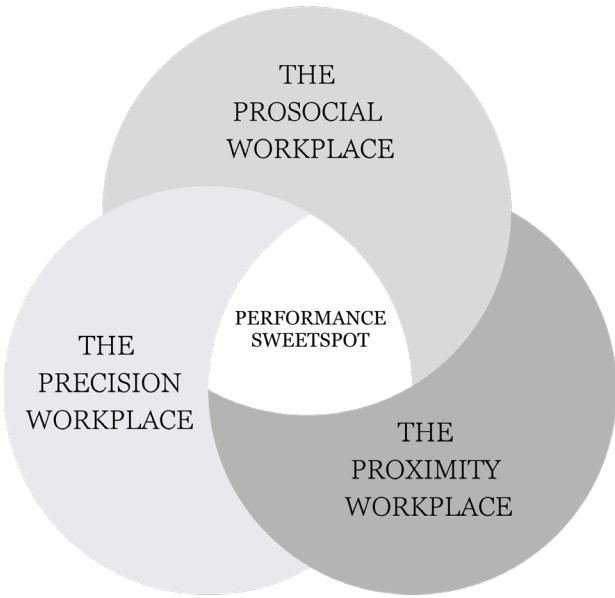
Proximity: the third draws on the power of proximity, placemaking and face-to-face interactions to drive higher performance.

The final section of this report expands on these models.

7 Three themes to note

It is important to recognise that, globally, there are huge geographical, generational and sectoral differences around how offices operate. Performance means different things to different people in different circumstances. Nevertheless, to conclude this report we want to share three governing themes emerging from our research – three indicative types of workplace model that company leaders should note. These models are not intended to be mutually exclusive. The high-performing organization should ideally incorporate aspects of all three. One could also argue that a performance sweet spot can be found at the intersection of precision, proximity and a prosocial approach. The main aim is to generate debate about what in-office working can bring to company success and profitability.

Three Directions for the Future Office



The Precision Workplace

Driven by data

A precision workplace uses data and technology alongside a range of practical tools (diaries, planners, workplace apps etc) to create a more efficient environment in which resources, energy, space and time are not wasted. This optimised vision of real time real estate is driven by data, which informs decision making at every level. The predictive analytics of AI and machine learning are underpinned by a strong technology infrastructure that prioritises security, advances digital integration, and supports sustainability.

All this enables more control and coordination of the office. It provides a better, more customised employee experience in terms of managing workloads, meeting face-to-face with colleagues, hosting hybrid calls and working in the right environmental conditions with careful monitoring of air quality, lighting and temperature.

A focus on precision is all about the technical orchestration of the workplace, using the ‘science of work’ to advance company aims.

How does the precision workplace improve performance?

Employee satisfaction is increased by such factors as reducing noise, providing more comfort, improving ergonomics, and supporting a less stressful commute. Teamwork and trust are enhanced by network analysis with pinpoint data showing how people relate to each other within teams and between them. Innovation and value creation is powered by collaboration technologies that support a mix of synchronous and asynchronous work, AI-driven video-conferencing systems that promote digital equality in hybrid meetings, and other tools that bring professionals together to innovate.

The Prosocial Workplace

Driven by empathy

A prosocial workplace is a place for people that is centred on wellbeing, mentoring, connection, relationships and balance. It is designed to encourage prosocial behaviour in the office that can be broadly defined as benefitting others and includes being agreeable, generous, trusting, helpful and empathetic. To achieve this, company culture, leadership and spatial design are all reshaped around the centrality of social interaction and inclusion. Workplaces strive to create diverse and welcoming experiences with health and wellbeing enriched by natural light, biophilia, fresh air, circadian lighting, ergonomic furniture and acoustic privacy. There are spaces for mentoring and privacy alongside those for socialising and collaboration.

A prosocial focus is all about the social orchestration of the workplace, using the power of human connection to advance company aims.

How does the prosocial workplace improve performance?

Employee satisfaction is increased by people-centred design that that responds directly to the individual’s need to socialise and connect at work. Teamwork and trust are enhanced by clarity and honesty of communication in custom spaces designed for teams to flourish. Innovation and value creation is powered by social networks that grow with informal encounters and connections in an environment tailored to leverage human ingenuity.

The Proximity Workplace

Driven by location

A proximity workplace is built around the idea that face-to-face interaction is the most important driver of office performance, and that spaces, settings and

systems should be configured to maximise the value of being together onsite. In this scenario, location is key to workplace strategy as the office is reimagined as a magnet destination for employees who attend out of choice, not because they are mandated to do so. The focus in on creating a great place to be with a wide variety of settings (whether you want to do solo work, collaborate in a team, or socialise with colleagues). The location is typically close to transport links to make commuting less stressful and connects the office to a wider innovation network in the district or neighbourhood, where employees can form useful new external ties.

A focus on proximity is all about the orchestration of location, using persuasive placemaking to advance company aims.

How does the proximity workplace improve performance?

Employee satisfaction is increased by greater in-person connection and support in the office, and by receiving an experience (in terms of wi-fi, food, visual stimulation, ergonomic comfort, amenities, collaboration tools etc) that is superior to home. Teamwork is enhanced by the regularity of face-to-face sessions that build trust and create a sense of shared mission. Innovation and value creation is powered by an onsite community that uses face-to-face communication and shared space to give the organization a competitive advantage in term of generating ideas, exploring tacit knowledge and completing creative tasks.

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