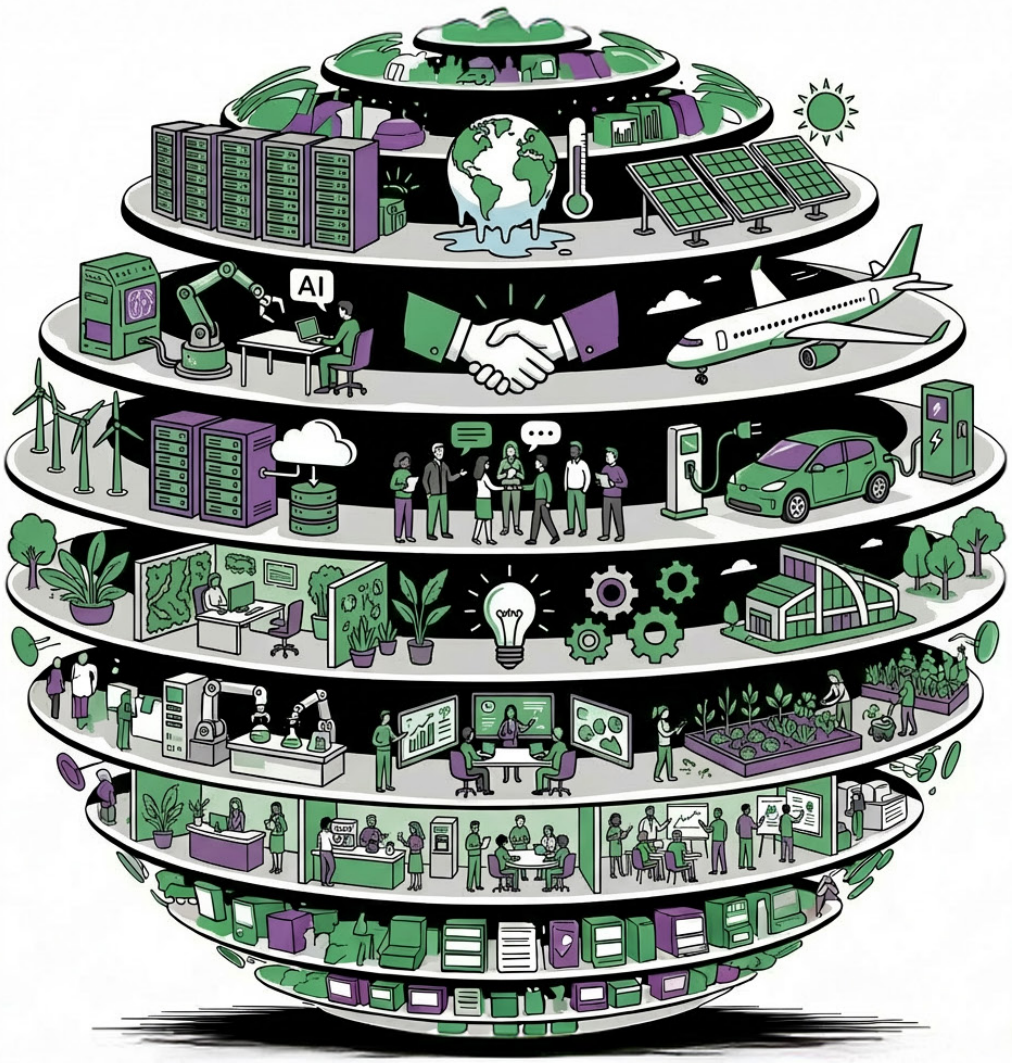
WORKTECH™ ACADEMY

THE WORLD OF WORK IN 2026



20 Workplace Trends for 2026

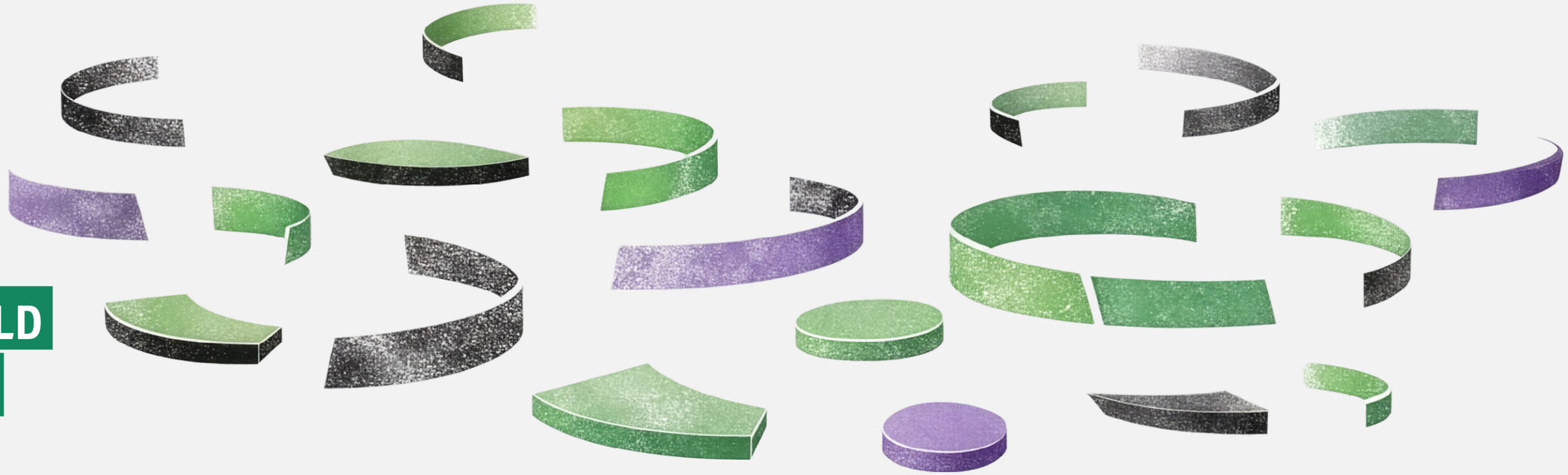
THE TRENDS

HUMAN PERFORMANCE RESET

WORKPLACE WITHOUT WALLS

SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

BACK TO BASICS



THE WORLD OF WORK IN 2026

Welcome to WORKTECH Academy's survey of trends and ideas that will impact work and the workplace in the year ahead

What will the landscape of work look like in 2026? We invited members and partners in the WORKTECH Academy's global network to contribute their predictions and included a few of our own for good measure. What's emerged is a broad spectrum of trends that we believe will help shape what corporate occupiers, developers, designers and tech innovators do in the year ahead.

These trends consider where we are today – and how we will adapt in the future.

In analysing submissions to the report, we recognised that there were four 'megatrends' emerging. The 20 trends outlined in this report show that 2026 will be a year of enhanced performance, sustainable growth, adaptive best-in-class design, and a return to basic human needs.

The first cluster of trends can be categorised by the megatrend 'Human Performance Reset'. Trends one to five explore how offices are shifting from productivity theatres to performance enhancers – focusing on human capability, skills gaps and human-centred design. Our first trend focuses on managing the impact of AI 'Workslop' – the word of the year for 2025.

The second cluster of trends fall into the megatrend of 'Workplaces Without Walls'. Trends six to 10 look at the workplace as a living, evolving system where spaces bleed into each other and are centred more on adaptability and function than aesthetics. In this context, digital blends into physical, fixed spaces are quickly becoming obsolete, and new metrics are required to understand how space is performing.

The third cluster of trends explores the idea of 'Sustainable Growth'. Trends 11 to 15 tackle this theme from different vantage points – economic, environmental, and the labour market – moving from micro-innovation hubs where local production ecosystems are created from underutilised real estate assets to the resurgence of biophilic design to support neurodivergent employees, and the emergence of a new category of sky-blue collar worker. This megatrend explores how the current landscape of work is broken. In order for it to renew and grow, change needs to happen this year.

The fourth and final cluster of trends centres around the idea of going 'Back to Basics'. Trends 16 to 20 highlight the desire to find a new baseline for work expectations and productivity – and then start building from there. These trends cover employees' sense of belonging at work, the pushback on return-to-office policies, and of what people want from a workplace experience today – spoiler: it's not more and more amenities.

You'll notice that AI does not feature as a megatrend for 2026. This is because its influence throughout 2025 means that AI is now embedded throughout these trends – it is not a single behemoth that will dominate conversations this year, but a layer that underpins what work will be about. Although seemingly contradictory, AI assistance will help us highlight what it means to be human and shine a light on our basic needs and expectations.

Despite causing major disruption to the labour market, AI will also help create new entry points for graduate workers, create opportunities for new jobs, and offer efficiencies to clear a path for greater innovation. While AI has largely been the catalyst of change in 2025, this year it will take on a more supportive role to plug the gaps it has exposed.

The final trend in this report signals a message that featured in our annual WORKTECH Academy Innovation Day, held in November 2025. The idea of 'The Future Mundane' stems from the work of futures designer and author Nick Foster, whose new book plays into the theory that we 'overestimate the impact of change in the short term and underestimate it in the long term.'

As we look to 2026, this year may not completely overturn or revolutionise everything we know about work. But these trends signal incremental changes that will slowly start to change our perceptions, the way we design, and our expectations of work. We look forward to hearing your thoughts, and we thank our contributors for their diverse and expert perspectives on the year ahead.

Kasia Maynard
Head of Editorial & Research,
WORKTECH Academy

No 1

WORKSLOP CRISIS

When AI output overwhelms human oversight

When *The Economist* recently named ‘slop’ its word of the year, the term captured a growing unease about the quality of digital content. Traditionally referring to low-grade feed, slop has become shorthand for the volume of undifferentiated, AI-generated material now filling feeds, inboxes and workflows. It reflects a broader reality: much of what digital systems produce is no longer curated, contextual or checked.

As generative AI embeds itself across everyday work, organisations face a new operational risk: overproduction. AI systems generate summaries, drafts and recommendations at a pace that outstrips human oversight. This emerging ‘workslop crisis’ erodes judgement, accelerates errors and turns speed into a liability.

The issue is structural. AI does not pause or prioritise. Without well-designed checks, it produces more output than teams can meaningfully review, creating noise that clogs decision-making and weakens accountability. When output outpaces oversight, errors shift from occasional to systemic.

Responses are beginning to surface. A new category of AI insurance has emerged, exemplified by Armilla Assurance’s launch of a product covering damages caused by hallucinations or faulty outputs.

At the same time, major insurers such as AIG, Great American and WR Berkley are seeking to exclude AI-related liabilities, anticipating multi-billion-dollar risks as adoption accelerates.

Organisations are moving quickly with AI deployment while the systems required to protect quality, trust and accountability lag behind. The result is a widening gap between automation and assurance.

Managing the workslop crisis will require redesigning workflows around human-in-the-loop judgement, clearer escalation thresholds and stronger responsibility boundaries. Insurance may offer short-term protection, but long-term stability depends on restoring discernment as a core organisational capability. As AI becomes foundational, sense-making will define organisational resilience.

‘Human-in-the-loop systems will become a prerequisite for company resilience’

No 2

RETENTION PARADOX

A stable headcount masks workforce fragility

Employee retention figures appear relatively stable across many sectors, yet this apparent resilience risks masking deeper fragility within the workforce. In a labour market shaped by economic uncertainty, AI-driven restructuring, and shifting skill expectations, employees are increasingly staying in their roles not because they feel engaged, but because the risks of moving have intensified.

Findings from Leapsome’s 2026 Workforce Trends report show that one in four employees remain in their role primarily to avoid risk, while more than half say they are not staying because they enjoy their work. Across the UK, US, Germany and the Netherlands, employees cite reduced flexibility, shorter contracts and rapidly evolving skill requirements as barriers to movement.

The implications for organisational performance and culture are significant. Where retention is driven by uncertainty rather than commitment, everyday work becomes narrower and more contained. Employees are less likely to invest discretionary energy into problem-solving, collaboration or innovation. According to the research, 60% of HR leaders already see disengagement reducing performance, while nearly half link declining morale to higher burnout.

These behaviours reflect wider restructuring across the workplace. Junior roles are increasingly automated or removed, narrowing entry-level development pathways, while more than half of HR teams report not backfilling departures. As career pathways become less visible, employees orient toward preserving stability in the present rather than pursuing uncertain futures.

In this environment, the workplace becomes a critical signal. Where organisations offer visible development pathways and credible futures, workplaces reinforce participation and belonging. Where they do not, stability risks hardening into stagnation.

For leaders, the challenge is momentum. Maintaining workforce health now depends on making progression legible, embedding learning into everyday work and ensuring that workplaces support purposeful collaboration rather than passive attendance. In an AI-shaped labour market, stability alone is no longer a meaningful indicator of organisational health.

‘When career pathways become less visible, employees preserve stability’

No 3

THE SOFT SKILL ERA

Transforming work from doing to understanding

In 2026, generative AI will be integrated into most workplace tools, producing first drafts instantly and taking over routine cognitive tasks.

As execution becomes automated, the human advantage shifts toward soft skills – judgement, creativity, sensemaking and the ability to form ideas that matter. Output volume ceases to be a measure of value when AI can generate alternatives endlessly.

This changes the organisation's understanding of talent. Routine cognitive work is no longer a differentiator; instead, the distinction lies in how people interpret complexity, challenge assumptions and translate information into insight.

Creativity becomes an operational capability rather than a personality trait, expressed through problem-framing, synthesis and the ability to navigate paths forward.

For leaders, this requires building environments where creative thinking is permitted, expected and structurally supported. Psychological safety becomes a productivity lever, enabling teams to test ideas and develop shared understanding. Serendipity-enabling office spaces and collaborative rituals will be increasingly important, providing the conditions where insight can simply emerge rather than be scheduled.

As AI expands what can be produced, human work centres on why something matters. Soft skills become the primary differentiators: reading nuance, making decisions amid ambiguity, shaping narratives, and aligning teams around intent. These capabilities drive cohesion, innovation and resilience – qualities AI cannot replicate.

The soft skill era transforms work from doing to understanding. As AI accelerates execution, the human advantage moves to interpreting what matters and why.

'When execution is automated, judgement becomes the work'

No 4

BIOPERFORMANCE

How humans perform as a company capability

'Bioperformance reframes wellbeing as a precision practice'

Human performance will increasingly be treated as an organisational capability rather than a personal responsibility in 2026. As productivity gains from automation begin to plateau, attention will shift to looking at human potential through the lens of the biological conditions that sustain focus, resilience and long-term capacity at work.

This marks a clear departure from traditional corporate wellness programmes, which have tended to be generic. Wellbeing will increasingly be treated 'not as a perk but as a performance imperative,' says specialist design firm Area.

Bioperformance reframes wellbeing as a precision-led practice, blending performance, medicine, neuroscience and proactive health into a source of sustained organisational advantage.

Inspired by elite sport, some organisations are already experimenting with in-house medical expertise, physiotherapy to address sedentary and VR-related load, neuroscience-informed approaches to cognitive resilience, and data-driven burnout prevention. Wellbeing becomes personalised rather than programmatic, with biomarkers, individualised nutrition, recovery cycles and cognitive load management replacing one-size-fits-all initiatives.

In this scenario the workplace itself evolves into a high-performance environment. Spaces, schedules and tools are increasingly designed around human limits – optimising focus, recovery and sustained capacity rather than short-term productivity. In this context, HR functions begin to resemble R&D teams, responsible not only for talent management but for continuous human development and performance optimisation.

This shift is reinforced by a longer-term pressure: longevity. As life expectancy extends toward 95-100 years, the assumption of a linear 40-year career followed by retirement is breaking down. Organisations must design for age-ready work – roles, environments and wellbeing systems that support people across longer, non-linear working lives. As Area says, 'We talk about hybrid working, smart buildings and digital twins, but the real revolution will be biological.'

No 5

ERGONOMIC INTEGRITY

Tackling discomfort will be non-negotiable

Hybrid work has firmly established itself as the leading model globally, prompting organisations to reconsider where work happens. What hasn't changed is how the human body works, no matter the environment. This is perhaps one of the most expensive performance blind spots of the modern workplace – but things could be about to change.

In 2026, 'ergonomic integrity' is set to emerge as a critical measure of workplace quality: an organisation's ability to design environments that not only protect but also enhance human capability, sustain healthy postures, and minimise the hidden productivity losses associated with discomfort.

Today, more than half of employees report musculoskeletal discomfort, and hybrid workers in particular are losing hours of productive time each week due to poorly fitted home and unfamiliar office setups. These issues rarely show up as recordable injuries; instead, they accumulate silently in the form of fatigue, distraction, and reduced cognitive capacity. Ten minutes of discomfort-driven loss of focus per day equals thousands of dollars in annual lost value per employee—yet few organisations measure or manage this cost.

A deeper issue is that much of our workspace infrastructure simply isn't built for the people using it. Employees often lack knowledge of how to adjust the tools they do have, with fewer than 15% able to correctly identify key office chair controls. When environments don't support neutral postures, discomfort becomes the default—and performance suffers.

Ergonomic integrity reframes these challenges not as wellness perks, but as core performance risks, according to furniture design pioneer Humanscale. It expands the focus from isolated injury prevention to whole-system human performance. Organisations that have integrated strong ergonomic strategies report major gains across productivity, turnover, absenteeism, and overall operational efficiency.

Looking ahead, could ergonomic integrity become a defining workplace metric—on a par with collaboration, sustainability, and experience design? How companies treat the issue in 2026 will offer important clues.

'Our workspace infrastructure isn't built for the people using it'

No 6

MOMENTS THAT MATTER

Creating a new type of experience index

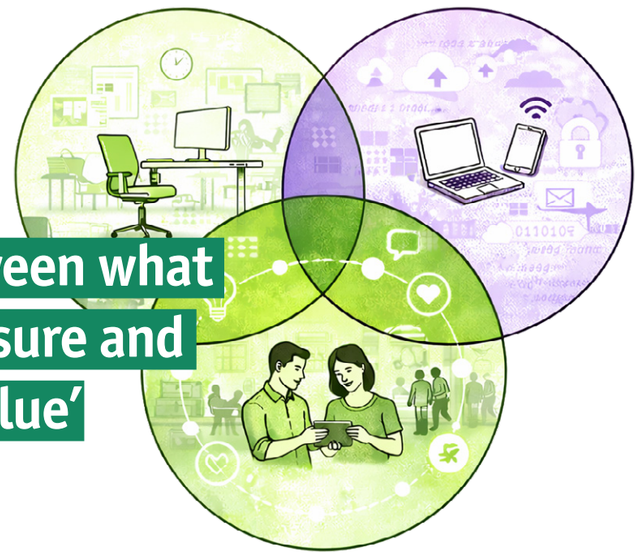
Workplace experience will continue to dominate the conversation in 2026 as a decisive factor in attracting, engaging and retaining talent. Organisations will compete to define what a great employee experience truly means. The way we work now exists at the dynamic intersection of place, technology and culture, but most industry metrics still focus narrowly on real estate efficiency or utilisation without really examining the 'why' factors.

This gap between what organisations typically measure and what employees truly value has created an urgent need for a new kind of assessment. Responding to this challenge, the WORKTECH Index introduces an innovative and accessible method to measure what really matters to employees. Developed collaboratively by UnWork, WORKTECH Academy, and a group of leading organisations forming the WORKTECH Advisory Board, the Index takes the form of a short, standardised survey that captures six key 'moments that matter' for the full employee experience journey.

These moments that matter explore interactions with the workplace environment, digital tools and cultural experiences that shape how people feel, perform and connect within and beyond their work settings. Crucially, the Index is designed to provide actionable insights based on robust data without the long lead times typical of traditional workplace studies. By aggregating data anonymously, the Index aims to create a global benchmark for workplace experience that captures a multidimensional view reflecting how people actually work today.

As businesses navigate continuing transformation, the WORKTECH Index offers a timely reminder: measuring what matters is no longer optional, but essential to the future of the workplace. Consider the complex dynamics at play. According to new research from JLL, the traditional office is transforming into a 'strategic career advancement platform where employees orchestrate physical presence for relationship building while maintaining digital visibility for professional impact.'

This means that, in 2026, the key to success will increasingly depend on mastering multiple presence channels. Physical spaces will function as 'network cultivation infrastructure' with strategic touchpoints for quality interactions. That's what needs measuring – not simply counting heads in the office.



'There's a gap between what organisations measure and what employees value'

No 7

OUTDOOR WORKING

Being in nature aids cognition and wellbeing

Outdoor work areas have been de rigueur at California workplaces probably since anyone has worked in California. But in 2026, working out-of-doors on private terraces and patios, urban rooftops and internal gardens will be in vogue in less sunny climates too, offering some of the most coveted seats in the RTO world and not just in California.

There are multiple forces converging to increase the interest in outdoor working. First, people learned that high-quality professional work could happen al fresco during the Covid pandemic, which prohibited meetings indoors.

Second, study after study has trumpeted the beneficial impact of seeing nature and, even better, being in nature on our cognitive performance. These studies have received a lot of attention in the popular press. Tech companies have applied this research for some time and now other firms have jumped on the outdoor-work bandwagon. Consider, for example, the extensive and invitingly landscaped garden that extends from one building's roof to the next at Meta's Menlo Park campus.

'The pandemic taught us that high-quality professional work could happen al fresco'

Third, as the psychological contract breaks down between employers and employees, people are becoming more interested in doing what they enjoy most. Let's face it, working outdoors, even if you're writing a report or code, is a lot more pleasant than toiling away in the middle of large, noisy office floorplate – even if you've sometimes got to deal with the inconveniences of rain, snow, humidity, insects or glare. Some outdoor work areas are even large enough for walking meetings, which can be especially creative, and for connecting with the wider community.

According to architects Perkins & Will, terraces and other alfresco amenities that were once considered a workplace perk are now a vital tool to recruit and retain talent. This is influencing building design because commercial real estate developers are increasingly using outdoor space to compete for tenants. Shared outdoor spaces are valuable too, offering a way for tenants to extend the utility of their leased space for collaboration.

As offices with terraces command higher rents in more places, expect momentum to gather around outdoor working in 2026.

No 8

EXPERIENCE ENGINES

AI-powered apps as the foundational layer of workplace experience

AI is transforming workplace apps from simple automation tools into intelligent, proactive agents that shape the entire employee experience. In 2026, AI-driven solutions – from collaboration tools like Microsoft Places, Cisco Webex and Zoom to broader employee experience platforms – will evolve into proactive systems that anticipate needs, personalise workflows, and orchestrate employee journeys end to end.

These AI-powered work experiences will guide employees through onboarding, learning, performance management, wellbeing, recognition and even how they navigate the physical workplace. Rather than asking users to search, schedule or configure, AI agents embedded in the platform will surface insights, recommend actions, and automate routine decisions in real time. This will accelerate a shift from reactive digital tools towards environments that actively support focus and engagement.

This matters because performance in 2026 will increasingly be defined by a combination of efficiency and quality of experience. Organisations that deploy AI to reduce friction, accelerate decision-making and enable seamless collaboration will start to unlock measurable gains in productivity and employee satisfaction. In this scenario, AI-powered apps become the engine for seamless experiences.

However, the transition to truly autonomous, agentic AI will be incremental this coming year. In 2026, most AI agents will still operate within defined guardrails, able to run autonomously for limited periods before human oversight is required. While model performance is improving significantly – doubling capacity roughly every seven months – full-day, error-free autonomy remains closer to an 18 to 24-month horizon.

As a result, forward-looking organisations will begin planning two futures in parallel: a digital organisational structure powered by AI agents, and a human workforce focused on judgement, creativity and relationship-building. The strategic challenge of 2026 will be around designing how agents and humans work together to share responsibility and redefine what 'good work' looks like.

'AI-powered apps will become the engine for seamless experiences'

No 9

FLATPACK WORKPLACE

Modular offices will be designed to adapt in real time

In 2026, static workplaces will be on the wane. The expectation will be spaces that are as fluid and dynamic as the work they support. Hybrid work patterns, dynamic team structures, and the rise of personalisation mean offices need to adapt and respond in real time. A 'flatpack' workplace responds to this need by treating the office as a modular 'living system' rather than a fixed asset.

In this context, physical space can be assembled, disassembled and reconfigured over time.

Rather than relying on infrequent refurbishments or lease breaks to reset the environment, organisations will increasingly build adaptability into their core workplace design. To achieve this, designers and real estate teams are borrowing principles from modular product design.

Approaches inspired by flatpack design prioritise function, quality and sustainability over permanent fixtures, according to Leeson Medhurst, Chief Strategy and Marketing Officer at AIS. Function means every element of the workplace is capable of serving multiple purposes, allowing teams to reconfigure spaces quickly and independently. Quality ensures that durable components can withstand repeated change, rather than being treated as disposable fit-out. Sustainability focuses on longevity over time, where design is maintained through small, modular adjustments rather than full-scale overhauls.

Data will play a critical role in making these adaptable environments perform. In 2026, Permanent Occupancy Evaluation (POE) will start to become a standard practice. This will enable organisations to monitor how spaces are actually used and to respond in near real time over a prolonged period. Insights into utilisation, movement and behaviour will inform incremental changes that keep the workplace aligned with how people work.

'Approaches inspired by flatpack design mean spaces can be reconfigured quickly'

A shift in mindset will be required to view offices not as finished design products but as living systems. But in 2026, the most resilient workplaces will be those designed to evolve and remain relevant, sustainable and high-performing long after handover.

No 10

BRING YOUR OWN AGENT

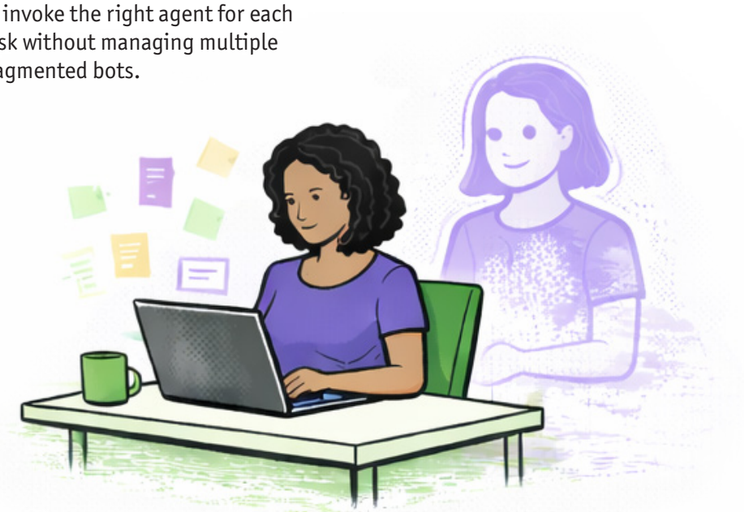
Embracing multi-agent models across platforms

In 2026, enterprises will begin a decisive shift toward a Bring Your Own Agent (BYOA) model, embedding approved AI agents directly into trusted workplace platforms. Instead of standardising on a single model such as Copilot or Gemini, organisations will support a portfolio of agents selected by role, workflow or preference. BYOA extends the logic of BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) into the AI era, showcasing a move towards hyper-personalised work environments where AI strategy and employee experience strategy converge.

Enterprises are ready to treat agents as a form of digital workforce, prompting new decisions about how far processes can run independently of humans and how multiple agents should be orchestrated across complex systems. At the same time, mainstream platforms are embedding agent capabilities and low-code tools, making it easier to deploy customised agents that plug into HR, CRM, supply chain and service environments.

Security and governance sit at the centre of BYOA. By running agents within enterprise identity, compliance and data-protection boundaries, organisations can audit interactions, enforce policies, and reduce reliance on unsanctioned consumer AI tools. Agent-agnostic orchestration layers further prevent 'agent sprawl,' allowing employees to invoke the right agent for each task without managing multiple fragmented bots.

BYOA encourages software-as-a-service vendors and internal platform teams to design systems as agent-ready foundations, often through open standards that support multi-agent collaboration. It also reduces dependency on any single model provider, enabling organisations to combine external or internal LLM agents as capabilities evolve. As agents become central to how employees work, BYOA will define the next phase of enterprise AI architecture.



'Under the BYOA model, AI strategy becomes employee experience strategy.'

No 11

NO-ENTRY ENTERPRISE

Work is losing its traditional point of entry

As automation accelerates, organisations are entering a 'no-entry' era in which the foundational, repeatable tasks that defined junior roles are increasingly performed by AI. This erases the traditional apprenticeship phase – the slow climb to competence where people learn by doing – and creates workplaces where new hires are expected to operate with judgement, interpretation and strategic awareness from day one. Execution is no longer the beginning of a career.

If AI completes the basics, how do people acquire the basics? How do organisations onboard employees who never get to practise foundational tasks, and how do they measure value when 'doing the work' is no longer a reliable indicator of capability? The traditional runway into professional identity – drafting, analysing, supporting – is narrowing at speed, leaving talent to begin careers at managerial level.

At the same time, generative tools are accelerating a democratisation of skill. Code, design, analysis or creative output that once required years of training can now be produced with the right input. When technical execution becomes widely accessible, differentiation shifts away from skill acquisition and toward sensemaking – the ability to interpret complexity, frame decisions and connect work to cultural, ethical or strategic meaning.

Talent models built around progressive mastery will need redesign. Development must shift from teaching tasks to cultivating judgement, creativity and interpretation. Leadership will need to support smaller, more AI-augmented teams with less linear development paths. Botscaling – achieving scale through automation rather than headcount – will compress hierarchies further in 2026.

In a no-entry enterprise, the question is no longer 'What can someone produce?' but 'How do they make sense of what is produced?'

'Onboarding changes when nobody gets to learn the basics'

No 12

AI STUDIOS

AI is moving off screens and into physical space

In 2026, AI will increasingly take on a physical form inside the workplace, as organisations invest in dedicated environments where employees can see, test and interact with AI together. Leading firms are already developing AI studios, labs and experience spaces that allow employees to engage with intelligent systems in real time.

For much of the workforce, AI still feels imposed and overwhelming. In WORKTECH Academy's 2025 global workplace survey with SPS Global, we found that just 27% of employees report that they are actively excited about the impact of AI; the majority are cautious, neutral or fearful. In 2026, this gap will start to close as artificial intelligence becomes more visible and accessible. Watching models in action, experimenting with real use cases, and observing how AI responds to human input in a physical space, with colleagues, can help build confidence and reduce resistance.

Crucially, in this context, AI adoption will shift from an individual activity to a shared organisational capability. Instead of employees experimenting alone with copilots or chatbots, teams learn together – bringing all facets of the workforce into one collaborative learning space. This will be further enforced by Open AI's new feature that allows up to 20 people to collaborate with ChatGPT in the same conversation.

These environments also serve multiple organisational functions such as onboarding and upskilling employees, as well as aligning leadership around AI strategy, engaging clients and partners, and reinforcing values around responsible and ethical AI use. Much like executive briefing centres or innovation labs before them, AI studios will become places where organisations can see the collaborative power of technology and human teams in action.

In 2026, organisations that treat AI purely as software for individual use will risk fragmented adoption and uneven capability. Those that anchor AI in physical space are better positioned to translate ambitious strategies into a collective learning exercise across the entire company, resulting in sustained performance, trust and cultural alignment.

'AI adoption will shift from an individual activity into a shared capability'

No 13

MICRO - INNOVATION HUBS

Cities turn vacant offices into engines of making

In 2026, a growing number of US cities will begin leveraging underutilised office space in urban centres to redefine the role and purpose of the city. Faced with persistent office vacancies and increasingly fragile global supply chains, developers and city leaders are reimagining underused, and in some cases undesirable, buildings as micro-innovation hubs. These hubs are compact, high-value environments where design, technology and advanced manufacturing converge.

This shift reflects a deeper rethink of how and where innovation happens. Advances in 3D printing, robotics, and machine vision are enabling small-batch, high-precision manufacturing to thrive at an urban scale.

These technologies favour proximity between designers, engineers, production teams and end users over the distance and scale efficiencies of traditional offshore manufacturing. Vacant office buildings, originally designed for flexibility, services and connectivity, are proving unexpectedly well suited to this new mode of production.

In 2026, successful micro-innovation hubs will function as dense urban ecosystems rather than standalone facilities. They will combine labs, materials libraries, production lines, training spaces and shared services, allowing ideas to move rapidly from concept to prototype to market. This model supports faster iteration, reduced waste and greater supply-chain resilience, while enabling cities to retain more of the value created by innovation.

Building on this trend, there is a further opportunity for 'HQ-plus' environments that co-locate the workplace with R&D, advanced manufacturing, flagship retail, and event spaces tailored to specific industries, according to Gensler's Design Forecast 2026,

The implications extend beyond real estate. Micro-innovation hubs reposition city centres as places of making, learning and economic renewal which, in turn, attracts talent, supports workforce development and creates future-resilient jobs. As cities search for their next economic engine, 2026 could mark a turning point towards urban innovation and local manufacturing.

'Micro-innovation hubs offer city centres a new route to economic renewal'

No 14

SKY-BLUE COLLAR WORKFORCE

New labour category merges hands-on with cloud-based

The idea of 'work from anywhere' will no longer be limited to knowledge work in 2026. Advances in digital twins, remote-operation platforms and industrial connectivity are extending flexibility into place-bound roles. This gives rise to to a new category of work that blends hands-on expertise with cloud-based control.

This emerging sky-blue collar workforce operates at the intersection of physical systems and digital infrastructure. Technicians, engineers and operators increasingly monitor, simulate and intervene in real-world environments remotely, using digital replicas of assets, processes and sites. While physical presence remains essential for maintenance, repair and safety-critical tasks, much of the cognitive labour – diagnostics, optimisation and decision-making – can now take place off-site.

A key enabler is the convergence of Operational Technology (OT) and Information Technology (IT). Historically, IT prioritised data, applications and cybersecurity, while OT focused on physical control, safety and uptime. As industrial environments digitise, this divide is breaking down. Cisco's work in bridging OT and IT illustrates the shift, providing tools that give enterprise IT systems visibility into operational assets, enabling unified security, resilience and modernisation across industrial networks.

This convergence introduces new requirements for skills, workplaces and governance. The sky-blue collar workforce must be fluent not only in physical systems, but also in digital interfaces, cybersecurity and remote collaboration tools. For organisations, the workplace extends beyond offices and sites to include control rooms, simulation environments and distributed command layers.

The implications for labour models are significant. Remote-enabled physical work reshapes where talent can be sourced, how roles are structured, and how training, safety and accountability are managed. As digital twins and remote operations scale, 'work from anywhere' becomes less a white-collar benefit and more a cross-sector capability – redefining what presence, productivity and

'Work from anywhere is no longer a white-collar privilege'

No 15

NEURO-BIOPHILIA

Neurodiverse workers seek solace of nature

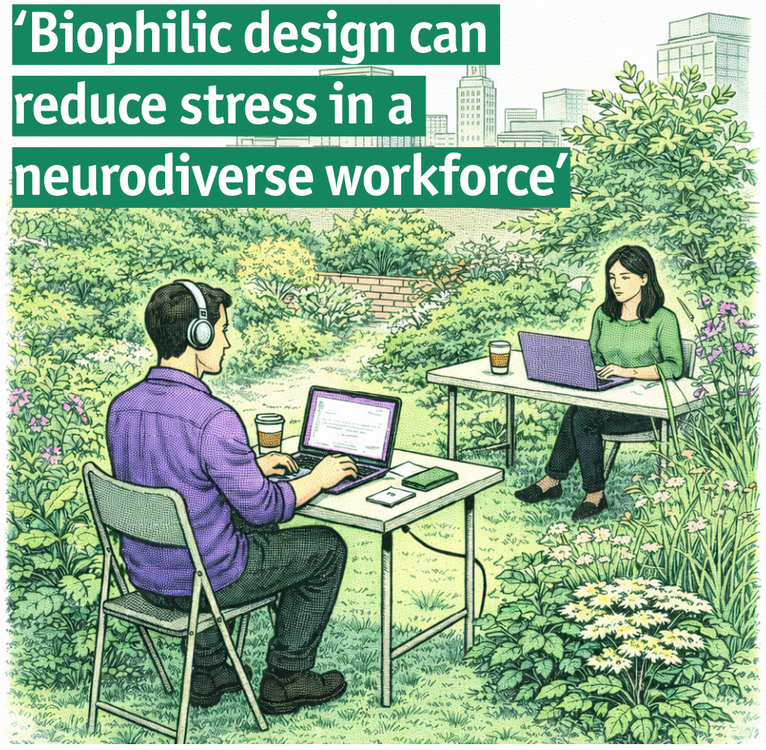
Biophilic design has already risen fast up the agenda in workplace design. In 2026 the nature-inspired biophilia bandwagon will gain added momentum as its benefits are focused on the needs of neurodiverse employees.

Organisations are increasingly mindful of the need to support the human potential of a neurodiverse workforce which can provide those alternative perspectives and ways of thinking that can unlock innovation. According to the Harvard Business Review, 'research shows that some conditions, including autism and dyslexia, can bestow special skills in pattern recognition, memory, or mathematics.'

However, a one-size--fits-all approach to office design has traditionally left those with autism or ADHD struggling with harsh lighting, repeating patterns, loud noise and exposed layouts in a factory-style setting.

Now biophilic design is emerging as a potential solution to cater for neurodiverse employees across the widest spectrum of need – from

'Biophilic design can reduce stress in a neurodiverse workforce'



those who are sensation seekers to those who are sensation avoiders. This alliance between biophilic design and the neurodiversity agenda is a partnership made – if not in heaven – then at least in a lush and varied landscape of plants, fractal patterns, curved lines, natural materials and natural light.

This is not just a feelgood green approach but one backed up by robust scientific evidence showing that natural elements help manage a range of sensory sensitivities. Biophilic design can reduce stress and anxiety in neurodiverse individuals, instilling a sense of calm and wellbeing.

And according to Attention Restoration Theory, closeness to nature can also improve concentration, reducing hyperactivity in people with ADHD.

In the hands of skilled designers, biophilic design elements are highly versatile and able to shape both busy and quiet spaces. Biophilia is also an unthreatening and reassuring way to advance the diversity, equity and inclusion agenda at a time when DEI rollbacks in the US have been common. In 2026, let a thousand biophilia initiatives bloom.

No 16

FLEXIBLITY FAULTLINE

Corporate policies on RTO need not be so volatile

There's a new faultline opening up in the battle over RTO – and in 2026 it could get a whole lot wider. Where previously the core divide was between employer demand for a return to office and employee preference for flexible work, now a different gap is emerging. This is between volatile company policies on mandating people back to the office that constantly chop and change – and stable rates of office attendance that have been largely unchanged for the past two years.

According to several tracking studies from Stanford University, McKinsey and others, the global average for office attendance is now around 3.5 days per week with 1.5 days at home. Cities with longer commutes, more knowledge workers and larger firms have less office attendance than the global average. But generally, patterns of working have been remarkably consistent since the start of 2023. The return to office has flatlined and is therefore fairly predictable to make plans for.

So why are so many organisations struggling to figure out a long-term hybrid strategy? Why are so many large employers fixated on mandating people back to the workplace full-time when the risk is that top performers in the organisation are most likely to walk out the door?

This faultline between volatile employer policy-making and stable employee attendance is opening up because it's clear that the future is hybrid but many of the most vocal CEOs calling for strict RTO mandates are still living in the past.

One factor above all could swing the debate in 2026. Research from Boston Consulting Group and Columbia Business School suggests that companies that have figured out hybrid work are seven times more likely to successfully master use of AI than those sticking to a traditional office policy. Could the need to integrate AI for gains inside the organisation be the flex point that persuades more large employers to settle on a stable hybrid policy in the coming year?

'Organisations that have figured out hybrid working make better use of AI'

No 17

BASICS OF BELONGING

Rapport as the primary driver of return to office

In 2026, organisations will increasingly recognise that the real driver of in-person work is not policy but belonging. As return-to-office mandates lose their persuasive power, workplaces that succeed will be those that feel intuitive, safe and easy to inhabit – environments people choose because they support how humans think, relate and collaborate.

Belonging begins at a neurological level. When a space is confusing, visually overwhelming or emotionally flat, the brain remains in a low-grade threat state, diverting energy away from focus, creativity and social connection. Research into visual complexity consistently shows that people perform best in environments that are moderately complex – offering enough variation to be engaging, but not so much that cognitive effort is spent simply decoding the space. In these conditions, comfort increases, mood stabilises, and collaboration becomes more fluid.

This points to a shift in workplace strategy. Rather than layering on new systems or constantly reinventing the office, organisations will need to reintroduce spatial simplicity. That does not mean minimalism or stripping spaces bare, but reducing unnecessary friction so environments feel legible and coherent. Legible layouts with clear wayfinding, restrained visual noise, and thoughtful use of colour and materials often do more to support collaboration than complex technologies or enforced presence.

Belonging is not a soft outcome. It unlocks performance. Spaces that feel easy to navigate support psychological safety, enabling trust and rapport, idea formation and spontaneous interaction.

Serendipity emerges not from spectacle, but from comfort. The basics of belonging ask organisations to fine-tune rather than transform. When workplaces stop fighting the brain, people stop resisting the office – and start using it as a place to think, connect and work together.

‘Belonging emerges when workplaces stop fighting the brain’

No 18

PARADISE LOST

Why your best amenity is holding onto your job

As the job market continues to tighten, 2026 could see generous workplace amenities get scarcer. Even industries formerly seen as economic powerhouses are laying off employees, cutting more than post-pandemic bloat, and simultaneously eliminating some of the most attention-grabbing of the amenities previously offered to workers.

Perks such as dry cleaning have faded away and even at-work snacks have been downgraded according to the *New York Times*, which reported that Google ‘has shuttered some microkitchens, and begun offering fewer – and cheaper – snacks. Artisanal chocolate has been swapped out for Twix.’

Tech workers in Silicon Valley who once enjoyed the best amenities on the planet will survive the inconvenience of lower-status confectionery. They might simply shrug at no longer being able to join off-site meetings in exotic locations. But they may have lost their greatest perk of all: job security. In 2026, the best and most important amenity that employees covet will be the job itself.

For designers and developers who successfully used an amenity-rich strategy in 2025 to revitalise older Class B properties in such places as Manhattan, where 35% of the office stock is Class B, the news that some large employers are turning their back on providing amenities will not be good news. But given that America is currently in the middle of ‘a white-collar blood bath’ according to *Business Insider*, it appears that in 2026 the perks of the job will be of less value than staying employed.

Could this short-term retreat from creating a generous environment be a short-sighted move? It will do little to help companies in the war for talent, especially those prized specialists in AI. And in the long run, paradise lost is not so easily regained in the eyes of employees.

‘America is currently in the middle of a white-collar blood bath’

No 19

EXPERIENCE-AS-A-SERVICE

Workplace value shifts from amenities to service quality

If 2025 was defined by the return to office, this year will be defined by its renewal. As attendance stabilises, organisations are rethinking how they measure the value of physical workplaces, moving beyond traditional metrics such as presence, utilisation and outputs, and towards performance, experience and outcomes. In this new phase, workplace experience becomes less about how many amenities can be crammed into one office, and more about the quality of how they are delivered.

In 2026, the office will increasingly operate on an experience-as-a-service model. From mailrooms, print and IT support to catering, coffee, and concierge, service quality becomes the primary differentiator. Rather than layering on more amenities, leading organisations will focus on creating seamless, coordinated service journeys that remove friction from the working day and allow employees to focus on high-value work.

This shift is driving the consolidation of workplace services into integrated service hubs with a single point of coordination. This approach allows for a more seamless flow, clearer accountability, improved efficiency, and stronger ESG performance through reduced duplication and better resource management. The workplace begins to look more like a well-run hospitality environment that is responsive, intuitive and human-centred, but without losing its corporate rigour.

As service teams move from back-of-house to visible, people-facing roles, organisations will also need to rethink how success is measured.

Traditional service metrics will be supplemented by measures of emotional impact, trust and perceived support. Hospitality principles such as empathy, anticipation and consistency will become embedded across the workplace, not confined to reception or client areas.

In 2026, people will expect the office experience to feel smoother, more integrated and more welcoming than it ever has. Organisations that invest intentionally in service-led workplace models will save times and costs down the line, instead of trying to constantly add more to the amenity stack.

‘Service teams are moving from back-of-house to visible, people-facing roles’

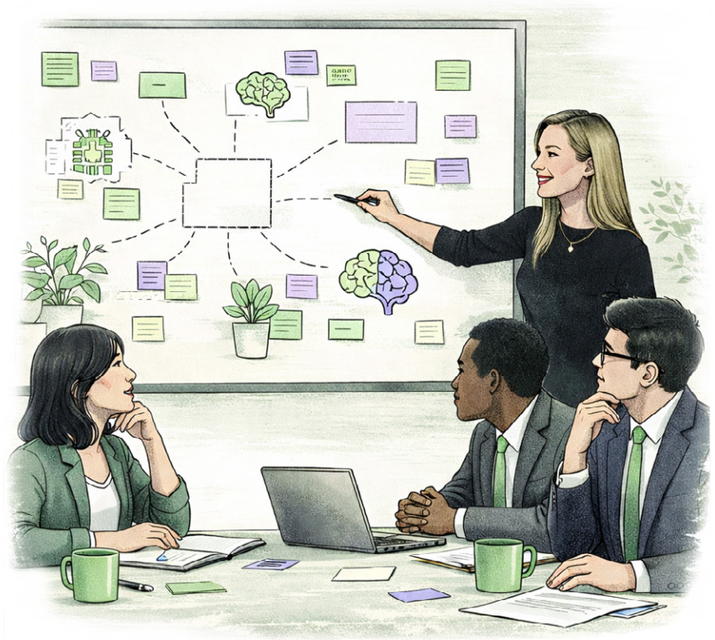
No 20

THE FUTURE MUNDANE

We need a more nuanced way to make predictions

Our final trend for 2026 looks at how we think about the future itself. It is very common for predictions about the future of work to be expressed via dazzling technological possibilities, such as flying cars, cybernetic robots and gleaming neon skylines inspired by sci-fi literature and movies. But we also know that real life doesn’t necessarily make such giant leaps one year to the next.

‘Expect the workplace in 2026 to take small, incremental steps towards the future’



The future is more ‘accretive’ according to futures designer Nick Foster, author of a new book called *Could Should Might Don’t: How we think about the future.* Foster argues that the future builds on the present just as the present has built on the past. He talks about ‘the future mundane’ which is ordinary, everyday and boring – and an antidote to escapist science fiction. In this context, we should expect the workplace in 2026 to take small, incremental steps towards the future, not whizz-bang, Star Trek-style strides.

Foster’s book maps out four alternative ways of framing the future. ‘Could futurism’ is driven by unconstrained optimism about the power of technology. ‘Should futurism’ is driven by ideology or values: it points with certainty at what a ‘better’ world ‘should’ be like. ‘Might futurism’ deals in probabilities rather than certainties, assigning a probability to a range of different scenarios and expanding our thinking by discovering unrevealed pathways. ‘Don’t futurism’ thinks responsibly and points out the unintended consequences and dystopian downsides of certain actions.

Nick Foster advocates integrating all four frames on the future to create more balanced and nuanced predictions. We followed his advice when exploring a radical reset for RTO at our autumn 2025 Innovation Day event for WORKTECH Academy partners and members. In a creative workshop, we entertained a vision of ‘could-we’ science and technology but moderated its effects with an ideology geared to social value, exploration of alternative scenarios, and cautionary course redirections.

Through this process, a greener, fairer, happier, more inclusive workplace took shape, which sought to prioritise community and human-centred design over rapid advances in technology. Mundane perhaps but let’s bring it on 2026.

Global Partners

Area is the founding member of Fourfront Group, a family of workplace specialists with one united vison – to create inspiring environments that embody their client's values and cultural aspirations through sustainable, transformative change.

www.area.co.uk

Modo is the leading provider of workplace experience technology, empowering enterprises to engage hybrid and on-site teams through a seamless, personalized, mobile-first platform.

www.modolabs.com

Humanscale is the leading designer and manufacturer of high-performance ergonomic products that improve the health and comfort of work life.

www.uk.humanscale.com

Signify is the world leader in lighting for professionals, consumers, and the IoT.

www.signify.com

UnWork is a management consultancy and research house focused on the future of work, and the collision between people, property and technology.

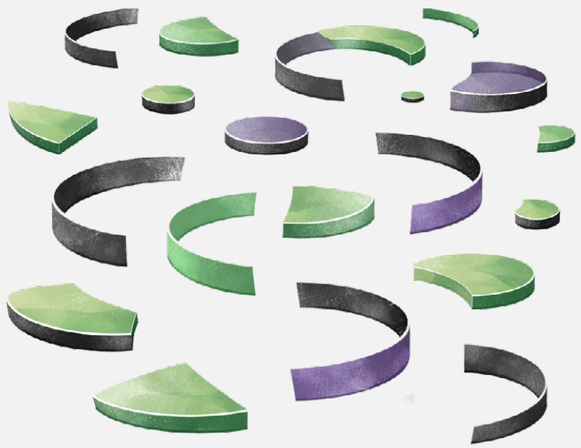
www.unwork.com

Technology Partner

Cordless Consultants

Latin-American Partner

contract workplaces



Contributors

Harsh Paleja, Modo Labs
Sean Kae, Modo Labs
Peter Duine, Signify
Aki Stamatis, Area
Ben Hoare, Area
Amy Morgan, Area
Guenaelle Watson, Area
Helen Owen, Humanscale
Madi Hanc, UnWork
Alex Burdett, UnWork
Yaasmeen Muhammad, UnWork
Renee Tordjeman, UnWork
Claire Ward, SPS Global
Leeson Medhurst, AIS
Ben Gardner, Nuvolo
Mie Tanaka, Ricoh
Isao Ashida, Panasonic
Suki Reilly, MovePlan
Hayley Russell, Matrix Booking
Yuri Hisada, Kokuyo
Ruth Hynes, JLL
Michel Le Borgne, JLL
Peter Miscovich, JLL
Flore Pradere, JLL
Kay Sargent, HOK
Agustin Chevez, University of Melbourne
Sally Augustin, Research Design Connections
Alastair Phillips, Fidelity
Jaroslaw Solinski, Barco
Tim Fendley, Applied Information Group
Oscar Stjernborg, Coor
Saskia Ordelman, Vecos
Misaki Abe, Frontier Consulting
Floris Vroemen, Mapiq

Team

Managing Director: Matthew Myerson
Head of Editorial and Research: Kasia Maynard
Writer and Researcher: Gabriela Białkowska
Senior Research Associate: Imogen Privett
Editorial and Marketing Coordinator: Simona Melville
Chairman: Jeremy Myerson
Group CEO: Philip Ross
Graphic Designer: Kassiani Kappelos

WORKTECH™ ACADEMY

Discover the future of work with WORKTECH Academy

WORKTECH Academy is the world's leading intelligence network and membership club, offering access to cutting-edge research and practical tools to help your team stay ahead in the evolving world of work.

As a WORKTECH Academy member, you'll gain:

Exclusive Research: Tap into cutting-edge research, trends, and case studies shaping the future of work

Team Development: Equip your workforce with learning resources and frameworks to foster innovation

Global Perspectives: Connect with a network of thought leaders and industry pioneers driving change worldwide

Practical Solutions: Access actionable strategies to future-proof your organisation and inspire smarter decision-making.

Give your team the knowledge and tools they need to innovate, collaborate, and thrive in an ever-changing workplace landscape.

Email **matthew.myerson@worktechacademy.com** for more information.

Socials

WORKTECH Academy
@WORKTECHAcademy
@worktechacademy

WORKSLOP CRISIS | RETENTION PARADOX | THE SOFT SKILL ERA | BIOPERFORMANCE | ERGONOMIC INTEGRITY | MOMENTS THAT MATTER | OUTDOOR WORKING | EXPERIENCE ENGINES | FLAT-PACK WORKPLACE | BRING YOUR OWN AGENT | NO-ENTRY ENTERPRISE | AI STUDIOS | MICRO-INNOVATION HUBS | SKY-BLUE COLLAR WORKFORCE | NEURO-BIOPHILIA | FLEXIBILITY FAULTLINE | BASICS OF BELONGING | PARADISE LOST | EXPERIENCE-AS-A-SERVICE | THE FUTURE MUNDANE

WORKTECH™ ACADEMY

www.worktechacademy.com