The New Office

For the Way People Want to Work

Half of You Are on Mute, and the Other Half Are Frozen

When we return to the offices that we left so abruptly in 2020, they may look the same as when we left. Except, perhaps, for the dead plants. But everything about the office has changed: who is there, what everyone does, and how people interact.

Far too many of your colleagues are stuck in a videoconference call where they aren't listening, can't be heard, and are disengaged from genuine collaborative activities. (We know you might be reading this document during one such call. Tsk.)

Although collaboration is undoubtedly the lifeblood of office work, there is an ongoing recalibration of what that means and how to foster it.

Offices should be optimized for meetings, not to maximize the number of desks.

The full effects will take years to land—office leases are long—but many public companies are already planning to shrink their footprints.[1] Your organization will probably keep its office space. But that space will change, just as the workforce has.

Many companies are reconsidering how, when, and for what its office space is used. Planners now are considering workers' health needs, making it easy to spread out and collaborate in smaller groups, and only when necessary.

It isn't only a matter of space allocation. When we gather in the new reality—some of us remotely, others around a table in a conference room—it's vital that we understand how to better communicate and collaborate. As you reimagine the office, recognize that the shift to a hybrid workforce affects every individual's ability to be seen and heard.

1 in 3 workers may quit if forced to return to the office full time.[2]

Companies and real estate developers have made very good livings by understanding space utilization. But the rise of remote work had already been changing historical patterns, and the pandemic pretty much upended them entirely. Companies, always on the prowl for efficiencies, are rethinking why offices are necessary, and what their proper role should be in the new way of working.

There is already abundant evidence that, unlike previous generations of workspace redesigns, it is employees who are driving today's change. One survey showed that one in three workers may quit if forced to return to the office full time.[2] Employers offering remote work options report getting four times more applicants.[3] And a large survey by Citrix found that an astounding 90% of millennials and Gen Z workers don't want to return to full-time office work post-pandemic.[4]

Whatever Corporate America thinks about the issue, it's clear that a significant cohort of workers are reluctant to return to the office—whether for the sake of convenience, lifestyle, or health. It's also clear that meetings will be blended, with some people working from home, perhaps some from satellite facilities, and some in the main office. When people do go into the office, even a few days a week, the primary motivation is apt to be a meeting or other reason to collaborate—and some of their colleagues are certain to be remote.

When people do go into the office to meet or collaborate, some of their colleagues are certain to be remote.

As companies adapt to new modes of work, they recognize the growing importance of conference rooms.

Too often, even in the pre-pandemic world of open workspaces, people who met face-to-face were forced into unsuitable ad hoc spaces; now, they are faced with the odd prospect of creating online meetings while sitting at their distanced desks in their offices. If an office is where people congregate because they need to meet in person, in this new way of working, well-designed and well-equipped meeting spaces become the core reason for office life to exist.

Dedicated meeting spaces, though, require lots of thought. The organization of space in a conference room is critical. Everyone must be seen and heard—not just by other people in the room (which is challenging enough) but also by those dialing in remotely.

And, although it's obvious but still needs to be noted, workstyles are different than they were a couple of years ago. It's important to accommodate those changes when you design and set up conferencing solutions.
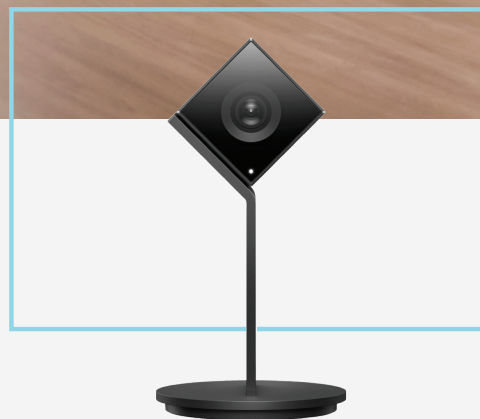
Ask the Experts

There's a lot more to successfully setting up conference space than finding a spare closet, a table, and a few chairs. There are some important constituencies whose needs you should consider, and whose voices should be part of any planning conversation.

All spaces have many common requirements—maintainability, security, ease of management—and no single type of conference room fits all needs. Different types of meetings are best accommodated by different types of spaces with appropriate technologies. But they have to be designed correctly from the start. When equipment inevitably gets broken, you end up with a lot of unhappy people who expected a working conference room.

Each type of space has its own needs. Want to ensure that meeting spaces are designed to please the right people in the right context? Design the space with input from three important communities: IT, HR, and Facilities.

IT

Facilities

HR

IT and Facilities Professionals Think Differently

If you put an IT manager in charge of a conference room redesign, you'll soon learn that construction is culturally very different from IT. IT professionals are often willing to figure things out as they go, and patch or upgrade later. But architects and construction professionals plan and design for weeks or months before actual work begins. Once construction begins, changes are often extremely expensive. And, of course, you can't reboot a building.

For example, IT pros may be tempted to tell construction planners they will decide on data jack locations after the furniture is placed. By that time, the walls will be sealed and the electrician and the data subcontractor will be long gone.

On the other hand, IT professionals can advise the room designers of the requirement for an easy way to get cables from place to place within the conference room, such as from table to projector, or from table to screen area.

So plan ahead—together.

IT Professionals

Conference rooms inevitably involve a lot of technology. No matter how simple your system is to use, the IT department is your best ally in making sure that all the tech plumbing is in place before you start buying equipment. You don't want to discover that you put a conferencing hub somewhere that Wi-Fi can't reach, for instance. IT ultimately is tasked with troubleshooting the conference equipment and planning for potential problems; they need a seat at the table so they can help accommodate operational needs.

Nearly half of CEOs plan to increase investment in digital transformation by 10% or more, to help bridge the gap between on-site and remote workers.[5]
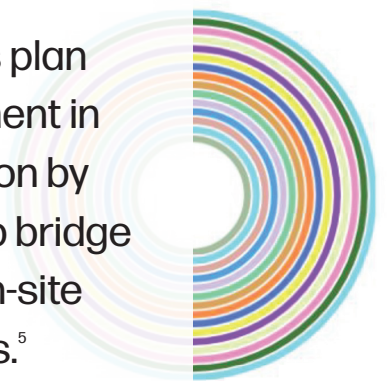
Sample Scenario

The Large Space

Large spaces can act like a forum—optimized places for presentation and discussion. They prioritize speakers and improve the audience's view of them. Clear sound and lighting for all participants keeps everyone engaged, particularly those who are not on-site. High-quality audio and video are particularly important in these environments.

Human Resources

Make sure that conference rooms are accessible to all and that the equipment is simple. Using the videoconferencing hardware should not require an engineering doctorate. The conferencing technology needs clear audio and video to help people stay productive in the workplace. Too often, the technology doesn't measure up. As skilled workers are harder than ever to find and retain, that's unacceptable. You need to capture every face, every voice, every time.

45% of women business leaders say it's difficult for women to speak up in virtual meetings.[6]

Sample Scenario
The Breakout Space

Breakout spaces act as social places for fewer than a dozen people to have quick discussions that require input from people who are not physically in the room. They could work, too, as rehearsal spaces for a bigger presentation. Because they are meant to be transient and flexible spaces, they have some technical design challenges that may require customized packages. You can't move a table, for instance, if it has cables going to a floor trench.

Facilities

Your company's facilities planners understand that what you need today will likely not be what you need tomorrow. (Given how office utilization is changing, that's probably an understatement.) They have the best handle on the physical requirements of your conference spaces and can make practical recommendations. They also have the tools and experience for building relationships with vendors— not to mention building walls and installing cabling.

67% of employees want more collaboration. Planners need to consider the needs of workers, making it easy to collaborate in small groups.[5]
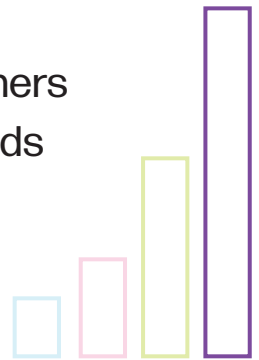
Sample Scenario

The Huddle Space

A huddle space is a casual spot for a couple of people to convene and chat with remote colleagues. Because a huddle space may not be enclosed and may be subject to ambient noise, cameras that auto-frame participants and microphones that can reject extraneous noise are especially important.

Bring in the Specialists

Your in-house staff doesn't need to design the new conference rooms. There are companies with real expertise in this field, from sound design to construction. Bring in someone who does this every day, listen to their expertise, and follow their advice.

Expect a professional conference room system integrator to ask you a lot of questions, including:

Provide details about your technology ecosystem (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or a combination).

Tell me about your phone systems.

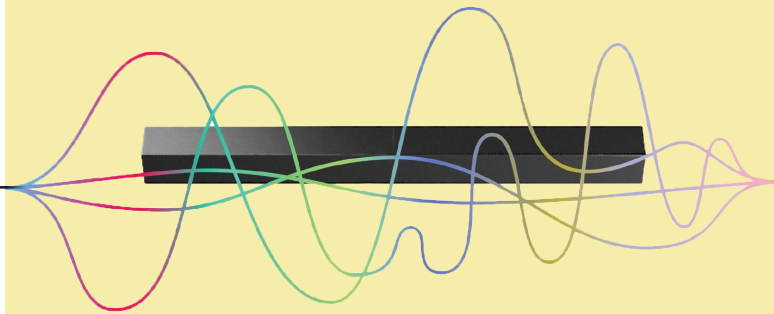What about IP addressing and other network settings?

What are your audio requirements?

What is a typical number of meeting participants?

Do participants have laptops?

Which operating system do they use?

What connections do they have?

Sound Advice

Ideally you don't need to pick favorites, but when you need to choose between audio and video, audio wins. It's an annoyance if the video fails and you can't see the other person. But if a participant misunderstands what someone says in a meeting, the results can be catastrophic.

Don't let your architect suggest you build a glass fishbowl. That's a fast track to bad audio. As one IT professional recommended:

" Insist on echo reduction measures, such as rugs and wall panels. We tried to convince the designer of this importance but we were told, 'It doesn't fit the aesthetic,' so now all of our rooms are echo-y nightmares."

The Modern Workplace

The companies that will thrive in the new world of work are the ones that embrace the fact that collaboration doesn't just happen within arms' reach. Although it's true that nothing beats sitting around a table, technology can make the table infinitely large while retaining the intimacy of the best meetings. Companies that get it right will attract top talent and reap the benefits of creativity, inclusiveness, and innovation.

Bad meetings aren't just annoying; they're bad for business. They cost time and money. Ideas get lost. Meetings connect people and teams, so anything that gets in the way kills productivity and esprit de corps. Remote workers who aren't included or can't be heard feel excluded and frustrated. A misfiring conference system is like a phone system that doesn't work right.

Making your remote system work right is an expense that pays off.

Having Blank Room Syndrome?

Head to the HP Interactive Room Configuration Tool and get started.

Learn More ⟶

[1] The New York Times, "After Pandemic, Shrinking Need for Office Space Could Crush Landlords," April 8, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/08/business/economy/office-buildings-remote-work.html.

[2] Cision, "1 in 3 Remote Workers May Quit if Required to Return to the Office Full Time, Robert Half Survey Finds," April 6, 2021, https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/1-in-3-remote-workers-may-quit-if-required-to-return-to-the-office-full-time-robert-half-survey-finds-848559105.html.

[3] Vox Recode, "Many people don't want to work unless it's from home," June 24, 2021, https://www.vox.com/recode/22543409/remote-work-from-home-jobs-supply-demand-hiring-platforms.

[4] ZDNet, "90% of millennials and Gen-Z do not want to return to full-time office work post-pandemic," May 25, 2021, https://www.zdnet.com/article/90-of-millennials-gen-z-do-not-want-to-return-to-full-time-office-work-post-pandemic-report.

[5] PwC, "Future of work: what boards should be thinking about," August 2021, https://www.pwc.com/us/en/services/governance-insights-center/library/covid-19-returning-workplace-boards.html.

[6] McKinsey, "What executives are saying about the future of hybrid work," May 17, 2021, https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/what-executives-are-saying-about-the-future-of-hybrid-work.

November 2021

HP Presence