

As organizations seek to rekindle onsite work, they must reimagine office locations to be hybrid by design — creating physical workplaces that interconnect seamlessly with digital workspaces to enable a culture of collaboration.

Defining a Successful Journey for Office Reentry

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Questions posed by: Sharp

Answers by: Amy Loomis, Research Director, Future of Work

Q. How has the purpose of office work changed?

A. Early assumptions that workers could not be productive working remotely have been disproven. In April 2020, 30% of line-of-business (LOB) and IT leaders in an IDC COVID-19 survey cited a big drop in productivity as one of their biggest challenges for remote workers. By August 2020, 44% of organizations surveyed reported higher employee productivity being a result of allowing the workforce to primarily work from home. As 2021 began and COVID vaccines became more widely available, many organizations started to plan for a return to office-based working. Deadlines shifted from June to September and beyond. The Delta variant and fears of the "Great Resignation" have spurred employers to be more flexible in adopting hybrid work models, ensuring that these models are an enduring part of the future of work.

As months of remote work have turned into successive quarters and vaccines have become a more broadly accepted mandate, employees and employers have started exploring opportunities to return to office spaces. Meanwhile, the office's role has evolved in two important ways. On the one hand, organizations are looking to office spaces to become a hub for face-to-face collaboration, complete with conversations, whiteboarding sessions, and ad hoc meetings that drive innovation. On the other hand, in-person office work enables completely random interaction between employees, creating opportunities for cross-functional pollination and relationship building. Both roles allow the office to reaffirm and/or establish a work culture.

The reality, however, is that in-person workers still need to connect with colleagues who are offsite. The question is how to ensure that those who are not in the office can still feel connected and work effectively with employees who are working together onsite.

Q. What are the technological and cultural drivers for new ways of working?

A. We've seen rapid technological shifts toward digital transformation across the automation and augmentation of work, the evolution of intelligent digital workspaces, and the reinvention of physical workspaces. In February 2021, almost half of IT and LOB leaders surveyed by IDC said that remote and hybrid work models would be an integral part of accepted work practices for many industries. Other findings from the survey are as follows:

- » 44% said an intelligent digital workspace will be an expected way of working across locations, time zones, and devices.
- » 41% saw a shift to reliance on cloud-managed and cloud-based connectivity/devices and services.
- » 40% saw automation of repetitive tasks and workflows as likely to become ubiquitous.
- » 37% said physical workspaces would become increasingly instrumented, interconnected, and intelligent.

Despite investment in collaboration technologies, organizations are still challenged to ensure that teams can work together effectively. Building organizational trust remains an issue.

Leaders can't simply develop a culture of trust by purchasing software. They must work at building an organizational culture that truly supports multiple modes of working and a dedication to team success over individual accomplishment. In a recent IDC *Future of Work Survey*, 36% of enterprise LOB and IT leaders ranked enabling teams to work effectively together as their biggest organizational challenge for remote workers. In North America, original assumptions that broad adoption of vaccines would eliminate remote and hybrid "experiments" have not come to pass. Many workers are hesitant to work onsite because of health concerns, wasted time commuting, the inability to have an "anchor" work location, and uncertainty about which colleagues will be onsite when they are in the office.

Q. What technologies are key for in-office collaboration?

A. One of the biggest barriers to getting workers to work onsite has been establishing a safe work environment. Safety-first technologies are key not only for the physical health of workers but also for creating a culture of wellness that gives employees motivation to work in an office or other facility. These technologies include health and wellness applications; virtual reception; thermal temperature checks; contact tracing software and devices; ventilation upgrades; and sensor-activated doors, elevators, lights, and other touchless devices, such as printers and copiers. Security is also a top concern for organizational leaders — both for intellectual property (IP) and personally identifiable information (PII). Organizations need to invest in security software, from edge to enterprise, ensuring that phones, laptops, and printers as well as applications, networks, and servers are secure. The key is to ensure that security is seamlessly built into the flow of work from endpoints to applications to networks — across remote and onsite work locations.

Technology investments are needed as organizations experiment with return-to-office initiatives, but they must be accompanied by changes in culture that rethink collaborative behaviors across locations and devices. Workers collaborating via mobile phones need to have technological capabilities and social permission to be equal participants and collaborators in work conversations. This means ensuring secure BYOD access to collaboration platforms, data, and

applications as well as work practices that don't discriminate. IDC research shows LOB and IT leaders increasing spending in key technologies to support hybrid work in 2021: unified communications as a service (56%), mobile/remote worker productivity tools (53%), device management and security software/SaaS (49%), and virtualized network services (49%).

Organizations need to reorient work conversations and collaboration to bridge the gap between digital and location-based engagement. Those joining a meeting virtually not only must see speakers but also must be aware of verbal and nonverbal responses in a room. Technologies such as large displays that provide a common focal point and cameras that can capture both individual responses and audience reaction are crucial to bridging these gaps. Digitally interactive whiteboards that enable access from phones, homes, and conference rooms allow all participants to share in creating and interacting with a common "text" or interface. The experience enables workers to simultaneously connect with each other, create a common text, and work on a cocreated idea in a way that connects ideas and people at the same time.

Q. How can leadership teams enable hybrid and onsite work?

A. IDC's *Future Enterprise Resiliency and Spending Survey* asked global IT and business leaders where their organization's employees would primarily work once a steady state of business equilibrium was reached. Slightly more than half of global leaders (53%) reported their workforce would primarily work in a physical office facility. According to the survey, in the United States:

- » 47% of leaders envisioned their workforce primarily onsite.
- » 18% reported their workers would ideally be primarily working remotely.
- » 18% said their workers would primarily be working in a nonoffice facility.
- » 17% reported their workers would be primarily working in the field.

No doubt these percentages will fluctuate. The point in asking about a desired steady state of work was to better understand the degree to which long-term investments in the office environment would be well spent. While "steady state" is a long way off for many organizations, there is greater clarity on how to rethink the goal of working in office spaces. Momentum is growing toward reinventing office spaces to be:

- » **Safe**, using health applications, contact tracing, HVAC investments, and touchless technologies
- » **Secure**, utilizing visitor management, network security, and PII security
- » **Designed for collaboration** with reconfigurable office design, smart conference rooms, and AI-enabled devices

These investments will set the stage for a more inclusive work environment that attracts top talent and ensures retention at a time when competition for highly skilled workers is fierce.

Who will lead the charge to reimaging digital workspaces and physical workspaces? According to IDC's global *Future of Work Survey*, respondents pointed primarily to CEOs (40%) as key leaders of work transformation, followed by COOs (28%) and CIOs (27%). Successful management of work transformation requires cross-functional leadership. Operations is clearly engaged in preparing for employees to return to office spaces. They are working closely with technology leaders

to instrument physical spaces so they can connect to virtual intelligent digital workspaces that will bridge on-premises and remote work. With the introduction of new work practices, technologies, and applications, leaders must be dedicated to the "how" of engaging employees as much as they are to the "what" of technology deployment. Simplifying the use of software tools has become critical — whether supporting employees to automate their own work or helping them collaborate with each other. Hybrid work models will not succeed if workers spend more time trying to figure out applications and tools than they do using them to be productive.

Building a viable culture that encourages in-person collaboration starts with supporting hybrid approaches that enable employees to engage effectively across work environments. As onsite work environments advance innovation and team building, they will organically attract workers to collaborate in person when they can. Leaders have recognized that forced reentry programs and policies are a risk. The most meaningful technology investments they can make are in the software, hardware, and services that foster secure employee collaboration across and within work locations. The most meaningful organizational investments they can make are in empathic leadership practices and policies that enable a culture of trust and innovation across these boundaries.

About the Analyst



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Amy Loomis is Research Director for IDC's worldwide Future of Work market research service. In this role, Ms. Loomis covers the growing influence of technologies such as artificial intelligence, data analytics, robotics, augmented and virtual reality, and intelligent process automation in changing the nature of work. Her research looks at how these technologies influence workers' skills and behaviors, organizational culture, and worker experience and how the workspace itself is enabling the future enterprise.

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