



Field Notes: Why Return to the office?

Employees tell us why the physical workplace is essential

While working from home has many benefits, there are drawbacks to consider. Over the past few months, the Workplace Consulting group at Herman Miller has analyzed feedback from hundreds of workers across North America. The snapshot below summarizes five key themes that show why the physical workplace is more relevant than ever. Keep in mind that these responses were not decided by executives. The following sentiments create a compelling, employee-driven case for why the office matters.

1. **I need to meet in person.** This response was overwhelming across industries. This request came in two forms: (1) I need to meet with my immediate team, and (2) I need to meet with other teams (cross-functional). Current virtual tools and technology are not satisfying the desire for interaction. While the future may supply better collaboration tools, employees say some meetings are still best when they are face-to-face.



2. **I need to focus.** Due to distractions at home, from living on a noisy street, to having active pets or children at home, workers said they want to have a separate workplace to go to when they need to conduct work that requires focus. Most recent conversations with designers have been focused on the need to create more collaboration space in the future workplace. While collaboration space is important, we must not lose sight of focus areas, as this ranked a solid second in our evaluation of survey responses.
3. **I need to use a tool.** Most employees do not have elaborate printing capabilities in their dining room, and bandwidth to pull files from the cloud to the living room can be problematic. Responses included specific tools, work equipment, and technology devices that simply are not accessible at home. While the need to use a tool might not require an entire workday, it is a critical success factor. Employees may be creating workarounds at present which could be slowing them down.
4. **I need to be social.** “I want to have lunch with my team again,” and “I want to see my co-workers again” have been especially common responses. Isolation can be difficult for



people. Remember, they used to spend 8 hours a day with work colleagues. For many employees, they have been working at their organizations for several years and built friendships. Not seeing friends face-to-face or engaging in office social engagements have left many people feeling lonely.

5. **I need to separate work from home life.**

Prior to the pandemic, the debate among workplace enthusiasts was that work-life is dead and we should focus our attention to work-life integration. But when work is in your bedroom, it is hard to disconnect from the constant pinging of messages from co-workers. Employees are responding by saying things like, “I just want to drive somewhere to work and then drive home and keep things separate,” or, “When I would drive home, that was my time to disconnect from work.” We hear these as cries for order and containment; it is challenging to disconnect from work when it is strewn across your kitchen table.



What next? Consider these sentiments when thinking about what kinds of spaces employees will need in the future. As more organizations consider permanent work from home arrangements, the physical workplace will take on a different role to meet the specific needs outlined in these survey responses.

To meet the requirements employees are asking for, think about the five design considerations listed below:

1. **Create personalized flexibility in meeting spaces** to allow individual choice in seating configurations. This will enable varying options for interaction.
2. **Shift to a neighborhood concept** that is weighted toward collaboration spaces.
3. **Create ‘quiet zones’** for short- and long-term use.
4. **Update phone booths** to act as reservable havens where employees can “camp out” a bit to focus.
5. **Revamp the business center area** to highlight special tools and equipment which drive employees to the office.

For more information on the results of our survey analyses and a deeper dive into the impact on future workplace design, contact your local Herman Miller representative.