Returning to the Office

LinkedIn Omaha. Omaha, NE. Photo by Jason O'Rear.

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Employees want the office to be a great place to get work done, even beyond collaboration. The right experiences will accelerate their return.

Gensler's newest data on workplace performance highlights that employees want to come back to the office more often if it offers the right experiences. The most important reason to come into the office is "to focus on my work," according to our panel-based survey of 2,000 U.S. employees this year. This represents a shift from data collected during the pandemic that placed a greater emphasis on working in person with teams/colleagues. Our new data suggests that the workplace's effectiveness for working alone has also hit a 15-year low. This sets up a key challenge for worker performance and the return to the office. Given that across industries, generations, and job roles, workers spend at least one-third of their time working alone—and for non-managers, closer to half—this support is a crucial foundation of the workplace experience.

The top reason employees say they come to the office is to focus on their work.

What is the most important reason to come to the office? (Percentage of respondents who selected each option in their top 5)

Rank		
1	To focus on my work	48%
2	Access to technology	43%
3	Scheduled, in-person meeting with team	42%
4	Access specific spaces, materials, resources	39%
5	To sit with my team	38%
6	Professional development/coaching	37%
7	Scheduled, in-person meeting with clients	36%
8	Socializing with colleagues	36%
9	Access to senior leaders	35%
10	To be visible for opportunities	34%
11	Impromptu, face-to-face time	32%
12	To be part of the community	30%
13	Access to an ergonomic work setting	25%
14	Access to amenities	24%

0%   50%

METHODS The Gensler Research Institute conducted an anonymous, panel-based survey of over 2,000 U.S. office workers between June 14, 2022, and August 7, 2022. Respondents excluded workers who had not yet returned to the office since the start of the pandemic. At the time of data collection, respondents were required to be working in the office at least some of the time. Respondents were distributed across 10 industries and represented a broad cross-section of demographics including education, age, commuting distances, and geographical location across the U.S.

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Effective workplaces successfully support individual and virtual work alongside collaborative work.
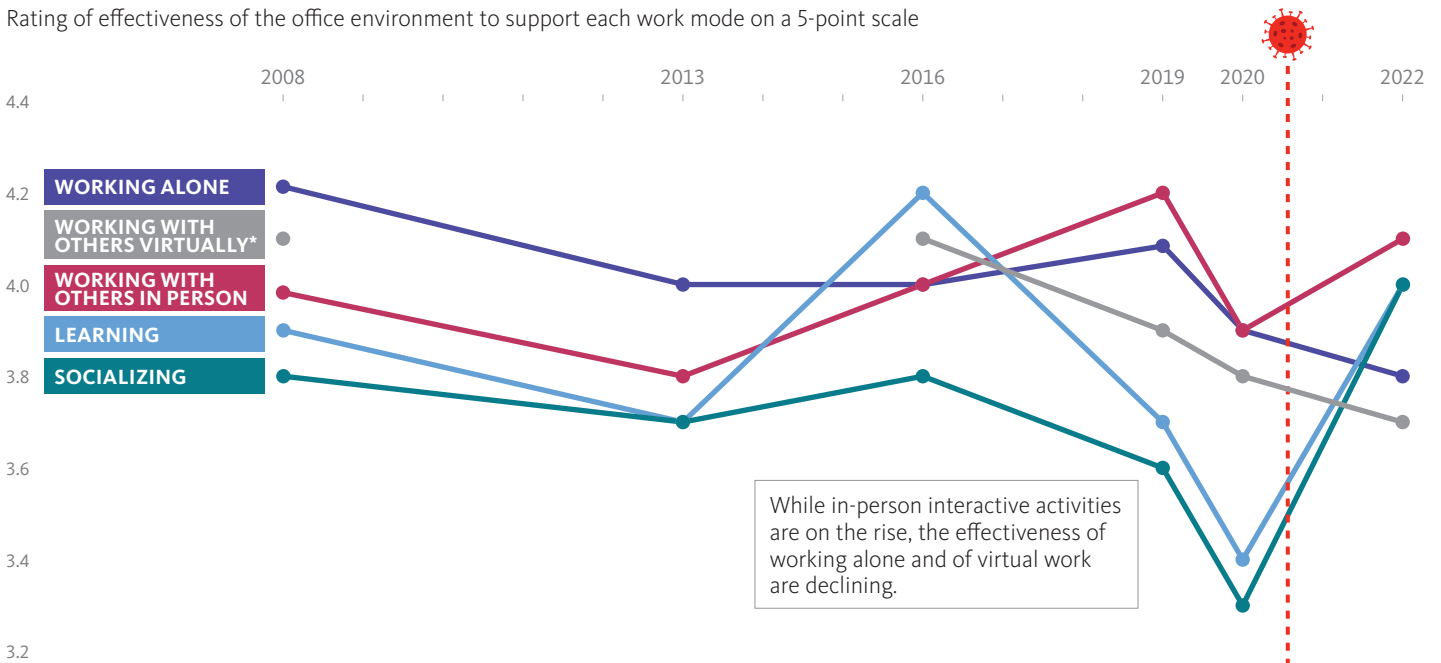
The office has become more effective in supporting activities that require physical interaction, such as socializing and in-person collaboration. However, our data from before and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic reveals that the office continues to become less effective in supporting focus, high concentration, and virtual collaboration. Most office workers still spend the largest proportion of their day working alone, and working at their desk,

thus the ability to focus continues to be critical to their job performance.

While workers are increasingly mobile, they continue to spend a significant amount of their time working from their desks, often taking virtual meetings. One of the key opportunities to improve the effectiveness of the office is to provide access to spaces that support independent and virtual work, while also continuing to support collaborative work.
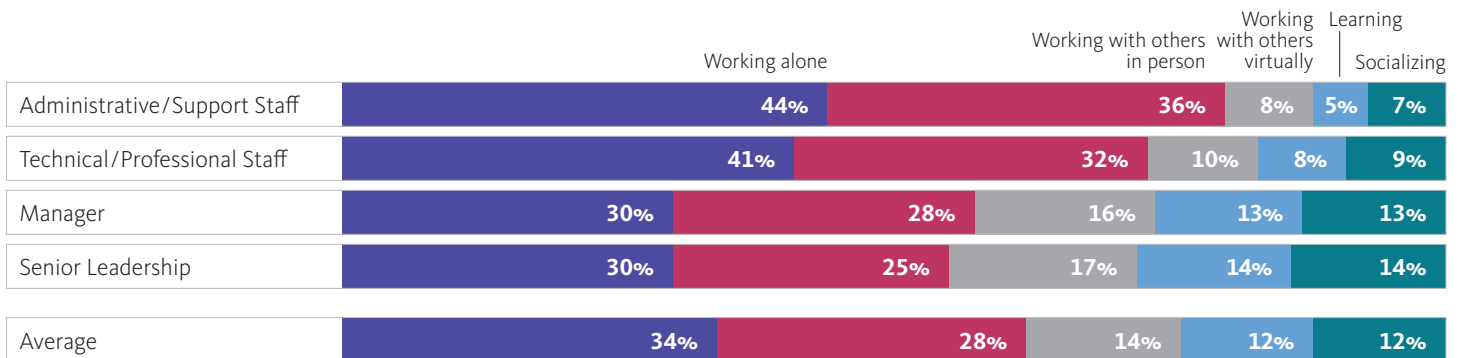
The workplaces' effectiveness for both working alone, and virtual work, is declining.

Rating of effectiveness of the office environment to support each work mode on a 5-point scale

While in-person interactive activities are on the rise, the effectiveness of working alone and of virtual work are declining.

Time spent working alone decreases with seniority.

Percent of time spent in each activity during a typical work week.

	Working alone	Working with others in person	Working with others virtually	Learning	Socializing
Administrative/Support Staff	44%	36%	8%	5%	7%
Technical/Professional Staff	41%	32%	10%	8%	9%
Manager	30%	28%	16%	13%	13%
Senior Leadership	30%	25%	17%	14%	14%
Average	34%	28%	14%	12%	12%

*We began measuring virtual collaboration and in-person collaboration separately in 2016.

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Organizations must provide an ecosystem of diverse spaces to support a desirable new mix of experiences.

Workplaces that are both effective and offer great experiences provide access to a range of spaces. Spaces for creative group work and individual quiet work have the most significant impact on space effectiveness and workplace experience. While the workplace is already effective in supporting collaborative activities, the biggest opportunity for impact is to focus on individual workspaces to improve the overall effectiveness and experience of the workplace.

Workplaces that provide both effective space and a great experience are also more likely to be located in neighborhoods and developments that have access to a diverse range of amenities. Employees working in highly effective workspaces have access to a range of amenities from coffee shops and outdoor space to eateries and grocery stores, either on-site or near the office.

Spaces for creative group work and individual quiet work have the greatest impact on space effectiveness and experience.

Workplace Performance Index* (WPI) and Experience score comparisons for each amenity, differences in scores between people who have the amenity in their workplace and those who do not. Both scores are on a 100-pt scale.

GREATEST VALUE	EFFECTIVENESS (WPI)	GREAT EXPERIENCE
Quiet / Tech-free zone	+12	+18
Innovation hub	+12	+16
Maker space	+11	+14
Focus room	+10	+16
Rest / Nap space	+10	+15
Outdoor workspace	+10	+15
Meditation space	+10	+15
Alternative individual workspace	+10	+14
Project / War room	+10	+14
Game room	+10	+13
Library	+10	+12
Work café	+9	+15
Phone room	+9	+14
Cafeteria	+8	+13
Fitness area	+8	+11
Break room / Lounge	+7	+8

(In Effectiveness column: Those who have this amenity / Those who do not)

LEAST VALUE

*Gensler's Workplace Performance Index is a proprietary aggregate measure of the effectiveness and performance of a workplace.

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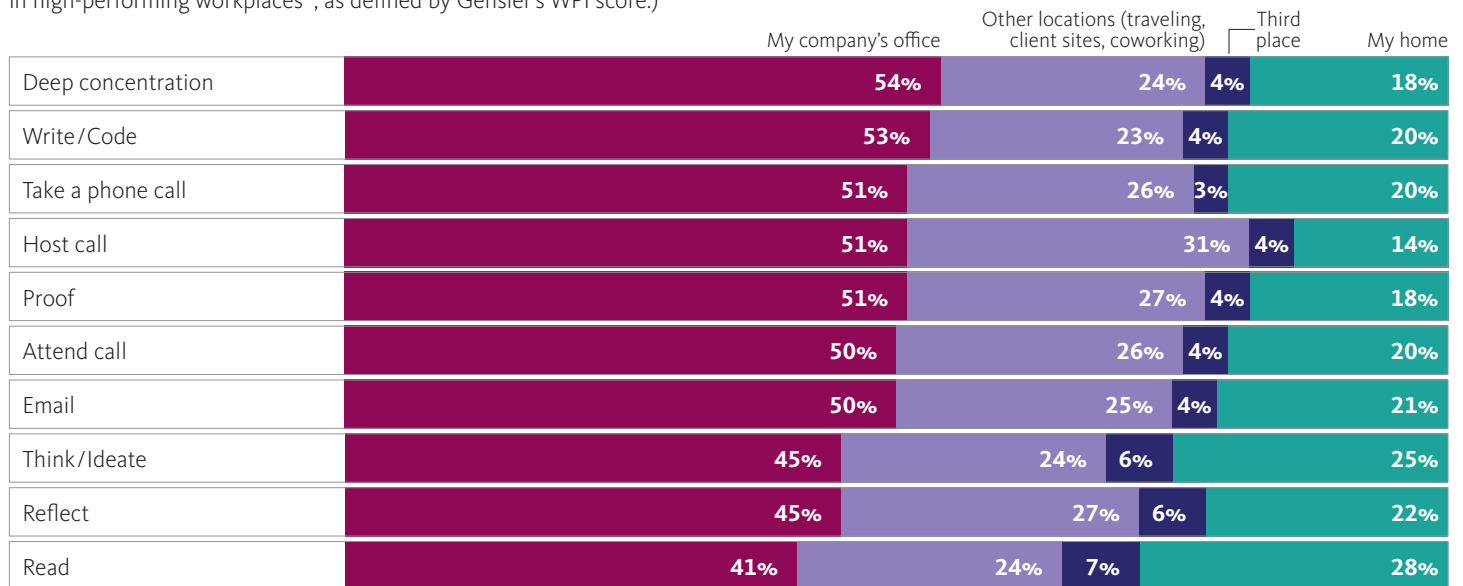
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The quality of workplace experience is a key driver in influencing employees' decision to work in the office.

The return to the office has endured a sputtering start. At the time of this research, occupancies in most major cities had not surpassed 50%, according to Kastle Systems data—and this is confirmed in our most recent survey data. Yet our data also shows that U.S. workers would actually prefer to be in the office more than they currently are to maximize individual and team productivity. So why is attendance lagging behind preference?

Employees in top-performing workplaces, defined using our Workplace Performance Index (WPI)—an indicator of how well the office supports work—say they need to be in the office almost a day more a week to optimize their individual and team productivity. More than half of workers in high-performing workplaces would choose to work in the office for activities such as deep concentration, proofing, and emails.
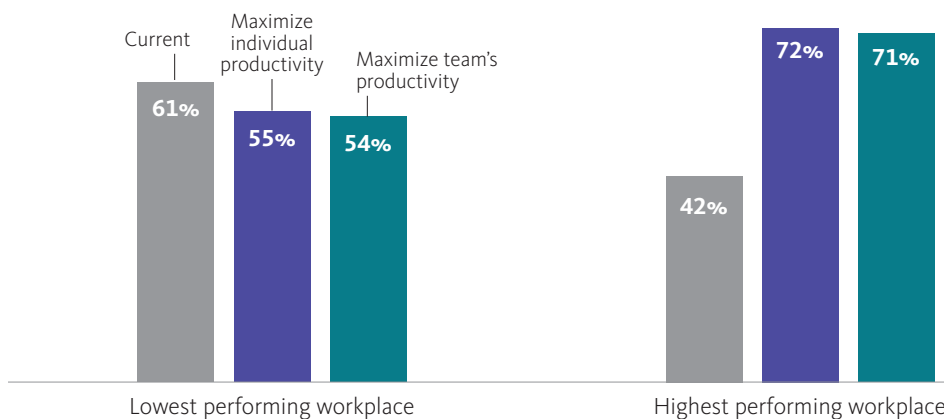
Employees with high-performing workplaces prefer to work in the office.

Where is your preferred location for each activity? (Reflects only respondents working in high-performing workplaces*, as defined by Gensler's WPI score.)

	My company's office	Other locations (traveling, client sites, coworking)	Third place	My home
Deep concentration	54%	24%	4%	18%
Write/Code	53%	23%	4%	20%
Take a phone call	51%	26%	3%	20%
Host call	51%	31%	4%	14%
Proof	51%	27%	4%	18%
Attend call	50%	26%	4%	20%
Email	50%	25%	4%	21%
Think/Ideate	45%	24%	6%	25%
Reflect	45%	27%	6%	22%
Read	41%	24%	7%	28%

Workers in high-performing workplaces report that they want to be in the office more often.

Percent of time during a typical week respondents currently work from the office compared to the time they need to be in the office to maximize team and individual productivity.

Current — 61%
Maximize individual productivity — 55%
Maximize team's productivity — 54%

Lowest performing workplace

Current — 42%
Maximize individual productivity — 72%
Maximize team's productivity — 71%

Highest performing workplace

*By segmenting the WPI into quartiles, we were able to differentiate between High-Performing and Low-Performing Workplaces. Top quartile scores range from 87–100, while bottom quartile scores range from 4–63, on a 100-pt scale.
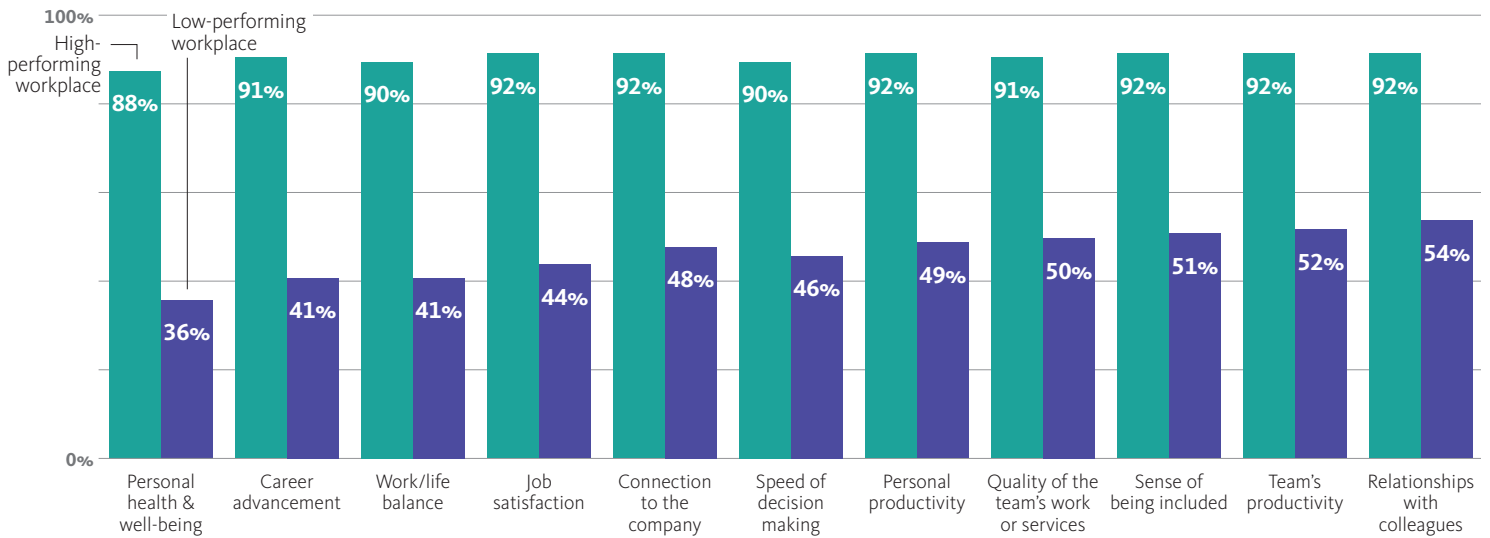
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High-performing workplaces are highly correlated with better individual and organizational outcomes.

Office workers in high-performing workplaces are almost twice as likely to report that the office positively contributes to their personal well-being, career advancement, and job satisfaction. They also report that they ideally want to work in the office more regularly than they currently do. This suggests that the workplace can be a critical tool for talent attraction and retention.

Those in the top quartile of key performance indicators, such as "most innovative, most engaged, and most committed," are more likely to say that they prefer to spend more time working in the office than they are currently spending. In comparison, the bottom quartile across all key indicators prefer to spend even less time in the office.
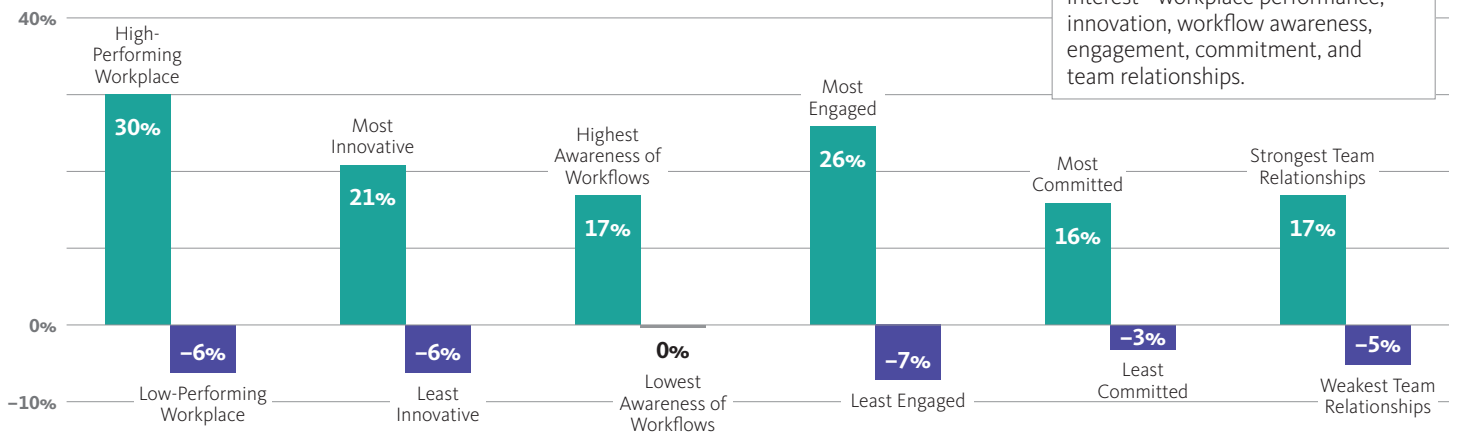
High-performing workplaces drive higher-performance outcomes.

Percent who agree that the workplace has a positive impact on each outcome.

High-performing workplace / Low-performing workplace

Outcome	High-performing	Low-performing
Personal health & well-being	88%	36%
Career advancement	91%	41%
Work/life balance	90%	41%
Job satisfaction	92%	44%
Connection to the company	92%	48%
Speed of decision making	90%	46%
Personal productivity	92%	49%
Quality of the team's work or services	91%	50%
Sense of being included	92%	51%
Team's productivity	92%	52%
Relationships with colleagues	92%	54%

Respondents who score high across key performance indicators prefer to spend more time in the office.

Difference in percentage of time during a typical week respondents are currently in the workplace compared to how much time they need to be in to maximize their productivity for each key performance indicator.

Key Performance indicator groups were determined using a quartile analysis on each of the subscores of interest—workplace performance, innovation, workflow awareness, engagement, commitment, and team relationships.

Key Performance Indicator	High/Top quartile	Low/Bottom quartile
High-Performing Workplace / Low-Performing Workplace	30%	−6%
Most Innovative / Least Innovative	21%	−6%
Highest Awareness of Workflows / Lowest Awareness of Workflows	17%	0%
Most Engaged / Least Engaged	26%	−7%
Most Committed / Least Committed	16%	−3%
Strongest Team Relationships / Weakest Team Relationships	17%	−5%

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Employees say having a rich diversity of experiences would be an incentive to work in the office more often.
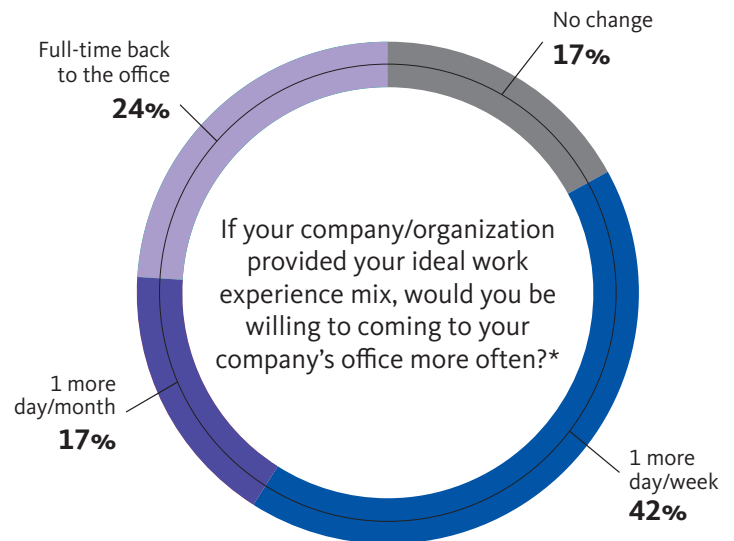
In addition to effective spaces, office workers are seeking a new mix of experiences. Before the pandemic, the workplace was on a trajectory toward diversifying work settings and experiences to match the dynamic nature of work. As workers return to the office, it's clear they are expecting a spectrum of different experiences.

If a workplace offered an employees' idea experience, 83% report that they would return to the office at least one additional day per month. While younger generations have a clear preference for hospitality-focused experiences, older workers prefer a blend of corporate and hospitality-focused experiences. We found that workplaces that are perceived as welcoming, beautiful, easy to navigate, have controllable noise level, and are equipped with the latest technology drive the best experience.

Workers want a new mix of experiences.

Respondents were asked to select their ideal mix of environments for their company's office from the list below.

Clubhouse
Informal spaces for connection & community

Boutique hotel
Hospitality-infused, amenity-rich spaces

Coffee shop
Work cafés

Residential
More like home

Library
Quiet work areas

Conference center
Spaces to come together for group work

Creative lab
Tech-enabled spaces to experiment & explore

Corporate
Business-like

No change **17%**

Full-time back to the office **24%**

1 more day/month **17%**

If your company/organization provided your ideal work experience mix, would you be willing to coming to your company's office more often?*

1 more day/week **42%**

Younger generations prefer a coffee shop/hospitality mix of experiences while older generations prefer a more corporate experience.

The mix of experiences vary by generation.

Ranking of ideal office experiences from most preferred to least, by generation.

Rank	Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer
1	Coffee shop	Coffee shop	Coffee shop	Corporate
2	Boutique hotel	Boutique hotel	Corporate	Coffee shop
3	Clubhouse	Clubhouse	Boutique hotel	Residential
4	Corporate	Residential	Residential	Library
5	Residential	Corporate	Clubhouse	Conference center

*This question was only asked of respondents who were working from the office less than 80% of the time.

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