

About the Cover

At a time when our ability to think at work is being disrupted, stretched and fragmented, this image captures the experience of being immersed in thought, supported by an environment designed to reduce distraction and restore focus. It reflects a growing understanding that enriched spaces can help protect brain health and provide the conditions people need to think deeply and do their best work.

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Summer 2026

# A New Mindset

Designing spaces to create  
a cognitive advantage

*Inside This Issue*

**Blueprint for  
a Better Office**  
New global employee  
research

**Creating People-  
Centered AI Spaces**  
Design ideas in the AI age

**Community Drives  
Performance**  
Before + after spaces

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Summer 2026

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“The brain health of your employees is the engine for your company’s productivity.”

Harris Eyre  
Brain Capital Alliance Lead

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From the Editor

Creating a Cognitive Advantage

Keeping our brains healthy in the age of AI

I’m starting to wonder about my relationship with AI. I mean, it definitely came through for me when I needed a complex research paper summarized fast. And it never complains when I ask for rewrites. But as someone who really likes other humans, I worry about spending even more time with my new AI “coworker.” Research from Forrester found that 45% of frequent AI users experience burnout, and MIT found a decrease in our ability to retain information when using AI.

Yet every day we see stories extolling the virtues of humans working alongside AI agents, ushering in a new dawn of increased productivity. McKinsey Quarterly practically gushed about the future hybrid workforce made up of people and AI agents — it will lead organizations to rethink “the very nature of the corporation,” they said.

Recently, LinkedIn reported on a new, AI-agents-only social media platform called Moltbook. Yes, AI bots are posting and commenting on a variety of topics. Humans can observe, but not participate. It all sounds very sci-fi and unsettling (I can only imagine their humblebrags, like “I’m so exhausted from taking over the work of an entire department!”). While I wonder what they’re chatting about, I have bigger questions. Do I trust them? Are they here to help me, or eventually take my job?

It’s within this context that the World Economic Forum, in collaboration with the McKinsey Health Institute, released its report, titled “The Human Advantage: Stronger Brains in the Age of AI.”

Human brains were a hot topic at the Forum’s annual meeting in Davos because of the growing realization that investing in AI alone is not enough — it’s the capabilities of healthy human brains combined with AI that create economic advantage.

Yet we fight an uphill battle as more people struggle with mental health and neurological issues. According to the World Health Organization, one in four people globally will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives. We are faced

with non-stop distractions that have eroded our ability to pay attention. No wonder there is a growing call to invest in building brain skills and a brain economy in which human intelligence and creativity are the main drivers of value and growth.

There are many proven ways to support and foster brain health, but one of the most underrecognized and underleveraged is the physical spaces in which we work, learn and heal. The growing field of neuroarchitecture explores how environments shape human behavior, emotions and cognitive abilities. It studies how spaces can be designed to help our brains regulate attention, think creatively, solve problems and manage stress. Moreover, places that foster a sense of community benefit people even more — when people have stronger social connections, they have better cognitive health and slower cognitive decline. Feelings of community increase oxytocin and dopamine, which support learning, memory and emotional regulation.

It’s time for a new mindset about the role of space in helping organizations and people achieve more.

In this issue of Work Better, we explore a new mindset for designing workplaces and learning spaces to support humans’ ability to think alongside our new AI coworkers. We showcase new types of spaces to help individuals and teams interact with AI, redesign underperforming spaces to help them work harder, and introduce ideas for spaces that help people be at their cognitive best — think of it as ergonomics for the brain.



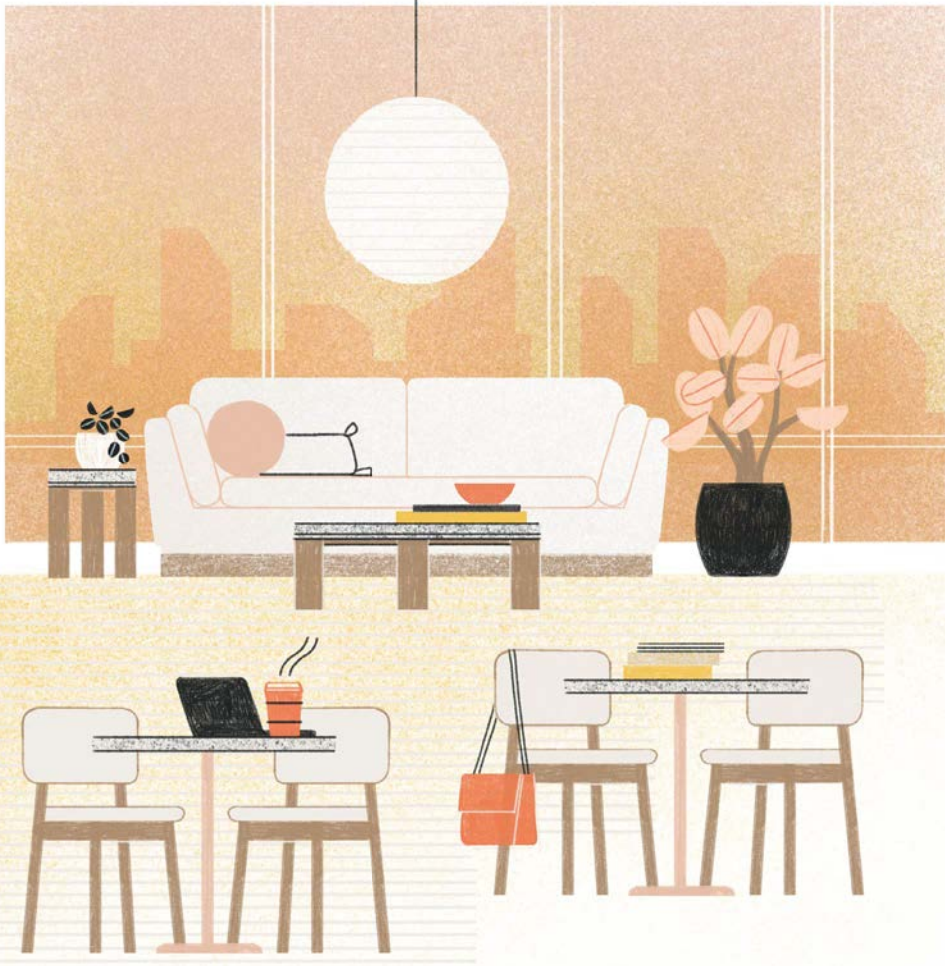
By Chris Congdon  
Editor in Chief, Work Better Magazine



# Blueprint for a Better Office

A workplace can look great. But what really defines a good day is whether it helps people get work done. Yet new Steelcase research in nine countries reveals that many workplace improvements aren't landing where they matter most.

Employees identify four critical gaps holding the office back. Targeted improvements in these areas, even subtly at first, can make a meaningful difference right away.



## The obligation office

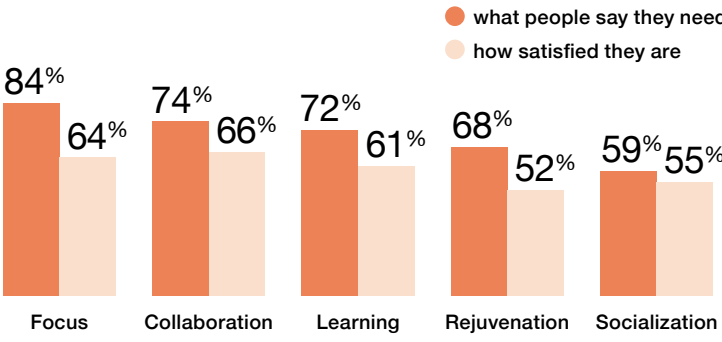
Globally, the number one reason people say they go to the office isn't to do their best work — it's because they're required to.

### Top 5 reasons to be in the office:



### The office needs to support what matters

Across the board, people are not happy with how their spaces support the work they think is most important. Gaps are sizable and have a real impact.



Enhancing spaces to address four specific gaps — wellbeing, focus, screen time and privacy — significantly improves how people feel about the workplace.

## 1. Address wellbeing: The biggest need

When asked what they most want improved in the office, employees overwhelmingly cite wellbeing as their #1 request.



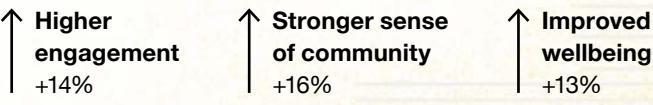
## 2. Fix focus

On average, people spend two-thirds of their day working alone, yet they are not happy with spaces available for focus work.



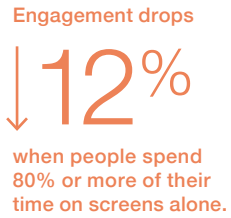
## What People Need

Early signals point to a powerful lever: People with access to a variety of spaces (3 or more) that support different kinds of work report:



## 3. Manage the screen effect

Screens now dominate the workday, with people reporting 71% of their screen time is spent alone. And too much screen time leads to lower engagement.



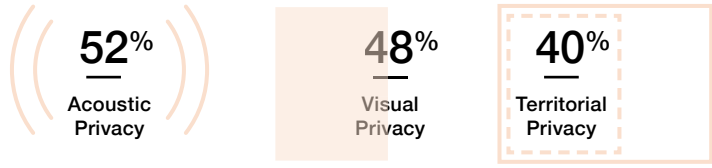
## 4. Add more privacy

Privacy is key to addressing wellbeing, focus and screen time.



Employees point to a range of privacy needs beyond being able to just shut a door.

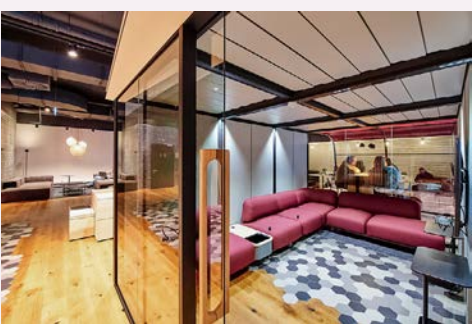
### Employees who don't have certain kinds of office privacy:



The message is clear: when workplaces support how people actually work in different ways throughout the day, people perform better and feel better. And that's what turns the office into a place people want to be.



# Inside a New Kind of Café at PUMA’s Global Headquarters



Located in Herzogenaurach, Germany, PUMA's global headquarters is a vibrant, international workplace. Employees work primarily from the main campus, while just next door, shoppers move through the PUMA concept store. Workplace and retail sit side by side, and until recently there was no shared space designed to serve both.

Back in 2024, PUMA recognized a growing necessity and opportunity for an additional place for employees to connect and recharge. But rather than creating another internal only space, PUMA chose a more ambitious path. What if one space could serve everyone – employees, customers and the public at large?

To realize their vision, PUMA partnered with Steelcase to create a café space that could bring anyone together and make them all feel welcome.

**Bringing a new kind of cafe to life**

From the initial planning to opening, the project moved quickly. A six month timeline was made possible through close collaboration and ongoing dialogue between PUMA and Steelcase, ensuring the space reflected shared priorities from the start.

Working closely with PUMA, Steelcase shaped the space using community-based design, a research-led approach to creating workplaces that's inspired by urban planning principles. The project began by examining how different people might use the cafe, revealing the need for a space that could support different activities throughout the day, often happening simultaneously.

**A space that feels like PUMA**

Opened in November 2024, the café interior is intentionally varied. Just as thriving urban environments offer a mix of destinations and neighborhoods, the PUMA Café is similarly layered and thoughtfully designed to support a wide range of activities and preferences.

*“The goal was to create a community space for PUMA employees, but also for customers visiting the store and for the public. We wanted a place where people could connect in a more relaxed, yet still professional, environment.”*

**Maximilian Bremer**  
Senior Manager of Event Operations at PUMA

Open areas create a lively atmosphere that supports casual conversations and spontaneous encounters and can easily transform into gathering spaces for events. Protected alcoves and partially enclosed seating offer a more intimate experience, supporting relaxed conversations or focused work while maintaining a connection to the larger space. Fully enclosed rooms are integrated directly into the café, enabling private phone calls and professional meetings.

Bright, warm colors, large windows, plants and a carefully selected mix of furnishings create an atmosphere that feels open and energizing. Imagery from iconic sports moments and curated footwear selections immerse visitors in PUMA's world.

*“It’s an inspiring space, with so many options depending on what you need to do. I’ve used it myself for work while on the road.”*

**Christian Ströbel**  
Strategic Account Manager, at Steelcase



**A day at the PUMA cafe**

On an average day, the PUMA Café is shared by PUMA employees, store customers, and people from the surrounding neighborhoods.

Employees use the café for professional meetings, focused work, coffee breaks, and lunch with colleagues. Customers stop in for a quick bite or a moment to relax after shopping. Members of the local community come to have breakfast, work remotely, or meet others in an informal setting.

As the day progresses, the space continues to evolve. In the evenings and on weekends, the café becomes a place for social gatherings, after work events, and community activities. The space is open on Saturdays, and once a month it transforms into a lively social setting with music, food and drinks that invites the wider community onto the PUMA campus.

Thoughtful details help make the café accessible and welcoming, including free water and Wi Fi. Daily specials and seasonal offerings sourced from local and regional suppliers further strengthen its connection to the surrounding community.

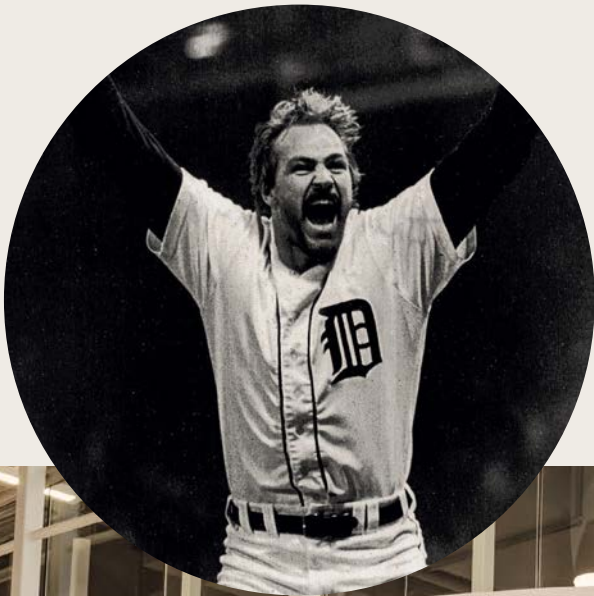
**Human-centered space designed to be shared**

Employees, customers, and members of the public share the PUMA Café naturally, all using it in ways that support their individual needs while remaining part of a larger ecosystem. By designing a space open to anyone and created to support different peoples’ needs, PUMA has created a unique hub that reflects how their brand connects with the world around it.

*“It’s not just a café. It works as a community builder. It’s a workspace, meeting space, event venue and community space all in one.”*

**Maximilian Bremer**  
Senior Manager of Event Operations at PUMA

# How Inclusive Design Redefines Parkinson's Care + Community



Baseball legend Kirk Gibson's defining moment came in 1988: injured and barely able to plant his feet, he stepped to the plate in the World Series and launched a walk-off home run that became an iconic symbol of raw grit.

Years later, that same determination would be tested again; this time against Parkinson's disease, a neurological disorder that affects movement, balance, speech, and even mood and cognition. Everyday tasks become harder, and environments that once felt simple can suddenly feel overwhelming or inaccessible.

"People need help fighting the effects every single day," Gibson says. "Since my Parkinson's diagnosis, it has become clear that exercise and movement are critical to my overall treatment."

That belief inspired the creation of the Kirk Gibson Center for Parkinson's Wellness in Farmington Hills, Michigan. The first-of-its-kind, community-focused facility offers free activity-based and educational programs for people living with Parkinson's and their care partners. To bring the vision to life, the foundation partnered with Steelcase and its inclusive design practice — designing with people rather than for them.



## At a Glance

### Kirk Gibson Center for Parkinson's

**Location**  
Farmington Hills, Michigan

**Industry**  
Healthcare

**Size**  
40,000 square feet

**Design Intent**  
Create an accessible, community-focused social gathering space for people living with Parkinson's and their care partners

Support various activity-based programs

### Key Features: Inclusive Design

Swivel seating to reduce the need for trunk flexion

Strong, stable armrests to support independent sitting and standing

Multiple seat heights to accommodate varied mobility needs

**Project Partners**  
Design Firm: Gensler

Dealer: NBS Interiors

Steelcase Workplace Innovation Design Studio

The communal table at the Kirk Gibson Center for Parkinson's Wellness is intentionally designed to welcome people at every stage of their disability. A mix of seating options supports different heights and postures, offering the right balance of stability and adaptability so everyone can participate comfortably and confidently.

From the start, the team listened to those living with Parkinson's, hosting a workshop with them, their caregivers and center employees. Their lived experiences guided every decision, influencing layout and furniture to meet a wide range of mobility, sensory and comfort needs.

Kirk Gibson Foundation CEO & Managing Director Steve Annear, an amputee, says he entered the process skeptical. "I wasn't sold on the idea that we needed to do the inclusive design workshop, but it changed everything," says Annear.

Lived experiences like those shared during the workshop sparked important design changes to the space: swivel seating to reduce strain, chairs with strong armrests for sitting and standing, and a range of seat heights for everyone.

Kirk's son, Cam Gibson, says Parkinson's brings new anxiety for their members. Inclusive design reduces those fears, allowing people to better connect and feel a sense of belonging. "People can come here and just be themselves; this new version of themselves. Creating this community setting where they feel comfortable enough to leave that shell is everything."

The result is a space shaped by the people who use it, honoring their resilience and reflecting the spirit of Kirk Gibson, a champion now helping others find their own grit and determination to overcome Parkinson's.

# Creating People-Centered AI Spaces

AI moved past the early adoption phase and is now a key medium through which work happens. It’s changing people’s behavior as they work individually and in groups, creating an urgent need to rethink the office. Leaders are ready: 78% in the US\* believe AI will lead to an office redesign within the next few years.

Industries are shifting unevenly: frequent AI use is highest in technology, followed by professional services and finance, indicating where pressure to change work settings may be felt first.

Leaders use AI to consolidate and automate; individual contributors lean on it to brainstorm. The “how” matters: treating AI as a creative, strategic partner saves 105 minutes a day vs. 53 minutes\*\* when it only speeds existing tasks. Still, the pace and learning curve take a toll — 37% of AI users report stress or burnout,\*\*\* and heavier use correlates with more strain.

Teamwork is also shifting to a new rhythm: solo with AI, in-person synthesis, then digital follow-ups. Nearly half of AI users tell Steelcase it changed how often they connect with colleagues (78% more, 22% less\*\*\*). As people toggle between AI dialogues with agents on screens and human moments to build context and make decisions, workplaces must adapt or risk becoming a barrier to productivity and wellbeing.

New Steelcase research finds 35%\*\*\* of AI users say it changes how they use their physical workspace. Across the day, AI accelerates flow: triaging inboxes, drafting, summarizing, synthesizing. Focus sessions now include back-and-forth with AI to explore possibilities and refine ideas. Team time is used to build on, challenge, verify ideas and develop a point of view. Social moments become crucial for relief from screen intensity and vital for building trust.



## This shift raises practical questions:

- **Where does critical thinking happen?** AI can hallucinate and introduce errors; teams need visible, shared spaces to review outputs together without hijacking attention.
- **How will we support wellbeing?** Burnout risks and increased screen time make rejuvenation and genuine human connection essential design criteria, not extras.
- **How do we integrate tech and space?** Camera angles, acoustics, lighting and cable management influence how AI “sees” and “hears” work, affecting equity for remote colleagues and the accuracy of AI-enabled capture and summarization.

As AI changes the workplace, the opportunity isn’t just to adopt new tools — but to shape the behaviors that help people work better.

## Three Ideas to Support Emerging AI Behaviors

The most effective response is not a single “AI lab,” but a coordinated ecosystem that supports focus, collaboration, socialization, learning and rejuvenation. The Steelcase Community-Based Design approach treats the workplace like a resilient community, with mixed-use “districts” that flex as teams shift modes, each equipped with the right technology and sensory conditions built in.

Steelcase WorkSpace Futures researchers and designers developed design concepts to help organizations evolve their workplace — and better support critical thinking, wellbeing and the integration of technology and space — as people and teams expand their use of AI.

### 1. Focus: AI dialogue, human review

**Behavior to support:** Today, people may seek a quiet, private space to focus and open areas for spontaneous teamwork. AI is shifting that pattern. Someone may need privacy to work with an AI agent, followed by deliberate human collaboration for critical thinking and verification.

**How it works:** An enclave provides privacy and dual monitors for chatting with AI agents while creating content. Task or lounge seating lets people change postures and stay energized. An all-in-one docking station offers quick technology setup. An auto-framing camera and noise-reducing microphones improve remote meetings. An adjacent front porch encourages collaboration with colleagues (see top image).

## 2. Collaboration: Flexible project rooms with microzones

**Behavior to support:** Temporary project teams spin up quickly to keep pace with work. People need spaces where they can switch among informative, evaluative and generative collaboration — sometimes with AI capturing notes and surfacing insights, sometimes with remote colleagues joining.

**How it works:** Collaboration rarely stays in one mode for long. A reservable, multi-week project room with microzones gives teams flexibility to move between different types of work without breaking momentum. Instead of forcing activity into a single meeting setting, the space adapts as collaboration evolves.

**Informative collaboration** happens when teams share updates, align on context or onboard new members. Large digital displays enlist AI to update progress, timelines and action items. Settings prioritize clear sightlines and consistent audio so everyone can see and hear each other. Individual workspaces have visibility to

digital displays, making it easy to immerse new team members. Plus, these spaces allow for quick ad-hoc connections (see top image, left zone).

**Evaluative collaboration** turns the team's focus to comparing options and making decisions. This area (see top image, upper right zone) balances visibility between people and content, enabling the review of multiple sources at once. Thoughtful acoustics and lighting reduce cognitive load. Integrated AI supports content capture, transcription and summarization, helping ensure information is shared equitably even after the session ends.

For **generative collaboration**, teams need to explore, iterate and build together. Writable surfaces, large shared displays and reconfigurable furniture support movement between divergent and convergent thinking. Ideas flow effortlessly from analog to digital, with AI helping synthesize inputs while preserving the group's creative energy (see top image, right zone).

Together, these microzones create a project room that supports how collaboration really works — fluid, layered and deeply human.



## 3. Socialization: Human connection counters screen intensity

**Behavior to support:** Heavy AI and screen use can increase stress and isolation; design spaces to maximize face-to-face moments to keep teams resilient and refreshed.

**How it works:** As people spend more time working on screens, spaces designed for social interaction should promote eye contact and meaningful moments together without digital interruptions. Ambient AI is integrated into this social hub to support how people engage. A coffee bar invites casual chats, spontaneous exchanges and group conversations. People can choose from a range of postures and settings to relax, recharge and reconnect in a calm, nature-infused environment (see bottom left image).

## Bringing It Together: A Community-Based Workplace

As AI reshapes tasks and teams, these design ideas work today and allow organizations to adapt as technology advances. The goal is not to build an “AI office,” but a human-centered workplace where technology amplifies curiosity, creativity and collaboration — the enduring sources of competitive advantage.



# Finding Balance in a Screen-First Workday

Work today is shaped by screens. Video calls, digital chats, shared documents and AI tools now mediate much of how people collaborate, even when they are physically together in the same office. According to a 2025 Steelcase global study, 85% of people say they have some meetings that involve at least one remote participant, signaling hybrid work is here to stay.

This shift has brought undeniable benefits. Technology expands access, enables flexibility and makes it easier for teams to work across time zones and locations. Work can happen faster, more inclusively, and in many cases, more efficiently. But, as screen-based work has increased, some new habits and routines have also crept in that need to be understood and addressed in the workplace.

## Screens reshape the workday and fragment attention

Modern work is no longer bounded by office walls or traditional hours. Microsoft researchers describe an “infinite workday,” marked by frequent interruptions and extended activity into early mornings and evenings. Steelcase research confirms this. 64% of respondents conduct moderate to significant amounts of work outside normal work hours. Digital tools now intrude on moments that once allowed focus and recovery.

Screen-based tools allow work to move faster. But speed comes at a cognitive cost. Research by Dr. Gloria Mark at the University of California shows attention spans have shrunk from 2.5 minutes in 2007 to just 47 seconds today. Workers are interrupted roughly every two minutes by emails, meetings or messaging pings. Constant task-switching increases stress,

slows thinking and leaves employees drained. Fragmented attention has real costs, psychologically and cognitively, stifling deep thinking and adding stress.

## More screen time, less movement

People now spend 59% of their total working time on screens — a combination of both individual and collaborative work — according to Steelcase research. That share increases to 71% when they’re working alone.

**59%** of total working time is spent on screens

As screen time increases, movement drops. Walking to meetings has been replaced by hours of sitting and taking calls at desks. Yet studies show that physical movement boosts cognitive performance, so less movement leads to reduced focus and creativity. Prolonged immobility is also tied to musculoskeletal problems and chronic disease.

## Screens strain our brains

The rapid spread of AI tools is reshaping work. Used well, AI can streamline tasks and accelerate decision-making. But it also increases cognitive load. “It’s a way [of working] that strains the brain a lot more...you’re thinking all the time,” says Thomas Seitz from the McKinsey Health Institute. People who say they frequently use AI report higher levels of burnout (45%) compared to only 38% who use AI infrequently (Quantum Workplace, 2024).

Video calls also contribute to that strain. Research on video conferencing fatigue shows that the brain works harder during virtual interactions, processing flattened facial cues, slight audio delays and reduced body language. This heightened cognitive effort can lead to mental exhaustion, irritability and reduced concentration.

## Convenience is replacing connection

Steelcase research found that 39% of people take video calls at their desks, even when coworkers are close by. But only 19% say that’s their preference.

For most, it’s not a choice — it’s the easiest or only option. Meeting rooms aren’t available, calls are scheduled back-to-back, and staying put feels more practical. Over time, that convenience comes at a cost: fewer shared moments where relationships can form naturally, eroding culture and trust and contributing to loneliness. Convenience, it turns out, is crowding out connection.

## When screens help — and when they don’t

Screens are not the enemy. The problem arises when screens are asked to do everything. They excel at sharing information and coordinating across distance. They struggle with trust-building, mentoring and creativity.

In response, some organizations are rethinking how technology and space can work better together. This reflects a growing recognition that screens and physical space must work together.

Offices that work well today offer choice and balance technology with human needs, while encouraging people to move throughout the day. They provide spaces for video calls that don’t isolate people, hybrid meeting environments where in-person and remote participants can participate equally, areas for quiet focus without interruption, and inviting places that encourage informal, face-to-face interaction. They are also embedding technology seamlessly into spaces, so it’s no longer a barrier, but a bridge between people.

## Reclaiming What Screens Can’t

Work will continue to happen on screens. That reality isn’t changing. What can change is how offices support people alongside technology. Workplaces that adapt best are reclaiming the office for what screens can’t provide: movement, presence, face-to-face connection and shared experience.

# A New Mindset

Designing spaces  
to create a cognitive  
advantage

**Every morning, we bring our distinct human potential to work. It is the engine of our creativity, our resilience and our ability to connect with others.**

But too often, we treat the mind like software. We expect it to be limitless and always ready to run. The reality is the human mind is a biological organ. It tires and reacts to its surroundings, to noise and visual chaos, just as our lungs react to air quality.

We're attempting to do 21st-century work — AI-enabled, fast, synthetic — with a brain built for survival. But AI can't replace the human mind's capacity to solve problems and create new ideas. We need a new mindset, focused on helping people think better in the age of AI.

We are now operating in the “brain economy,” which, according to a recent report released at The World Economic Forum with the McKinsey Health Institute, “represents a new frontier where human intelligence and artificial intelligence work in partnership, allowing for greater productivity and resilience.” The report advocates for building “brain capital,” which combines brain health — the functional ability of the brain to perform the many tasks it's responsible for — and brain skills, such as the ability to think clearly, learn, manage attention, make decisions and solve problems. Basically, everything we do at work.

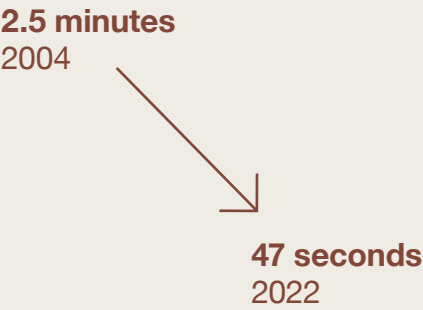
As neuroscientist Harris Eyre, lead of the Brain Capital Alliance, notes, this era demands a transition “from the current state of our economy, which is depleting brain capital, to a place where we are building brain capital.” There are many routes organizations can take to build brain capital, and one that is often overlooked is the built environment. The growing field of neuroarchitecture seeks to build brain health by researching the best ways to design physical spaces that help people mentally, emotionally and physically.

This raises the stakes for our workplaces. The office is no longer just a place to work — it must evolve into a cognitive support system.

Cognitive crisis

In the modern workplace, our experience can feel like animals in the wild. We are stuck in a state of hyper-vigilance, constantly scanning for information and threats (or Slack notifications). This reactive state makes deep, resonant thinking nearly impossible. Our brains can't process all the information they're flooded with each day, and screen-based technology increases the volume. Our average attention span has declined from 2.5 minutes in 2004 to 47 seconds, according to research by Dr. Gloria Mark at UC Irvine. Smartphones accelerated the decline.

Attention Span Decline



Our attention has become a precious resource and a form of biological fuel. Researchers distinguish between two types of focus. “Controlled attention” is high-octane, expensive fuel used for deep work and strategy. It is finite and drains quickly. “Stimulus-driven attention” is cheap, reactive fuel used when a loud noise or a moving object grabs our focus.

Poorly designed open offices force us into a permanent state of stimulus-driven attention. We burn precious energy filtering out distractions, leaving little fuel for actual work.

Additionally, the biological need for cognitive offloading is often overlooked. The brain cannot hold everything at once; we need physical environments to “hold” our thoughts for us. When you sketch on a whiteboard or pin to a wall, you offload working memory to the room, freeing your brain to process information rather than

store it. A laptop screen cannot replicate this spatial canvas. It restricts our field of view, forcing us to scroll through isolated pieces of information rather than seeing them together. To untangle complex problems, the brain needs to see the whole picture at once to connect the dots effectively.

Sustained Attention Response Task Study

**Steelcase research reveals a surprising result: visual privacy helps people manage distractions — even noise.**

The most common complaint in the office is distractions, especially in open-plan layouts where people often sit at benches. While intended to foster interactions and collaboration, too much openness can leave people overexposed and unable to focus. But Steelcase research, conducted in partnership with the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, found an easy intervention to help people manage a range of distractions: visual privacy.

Researchers measured “sustained attention,” or the ability to focus on a task over time. Participants performed cognitive tasks in two different settings: a completely open bench and a semi-shielded individual workspace. Both environments played the same track of background office noise.

**The results:** Participants with visual privacy performed significantly better on tasks requiring sustained attention than those seated at an open workbench — even with identical noise levels. They committed significantly fewer errors and demonstrated superior focus compared to people working at a bench.

**The insight:** When we are exposed to visual stimulation, such as seeing people laughing or walking by, our brains burn energy trying to filter out the distraction. Our peripheral vision is especially sensitive to motion, which helps us detect threats, but also creates a distraction that our brains have to process. But screens, shelving units, or other privacy elements help reduce that cognitive load, essentially giving the brain the extra “bandwidth” it needs to filter out noise and allowing people to perform better at work that requires higher concentration levels.



From badge swipes to brain power

For decades, we have operated in the Attendance Era. Presence measured success. If your badge swiped in at 8:00 a.m. and out at 5:00 p.m., you were considered productive.

In our new reality, AI automates routine tasks, and the premium asset is cognitive capacity — the uniquely human ability to

navigate ambiguity and exercise critical judgment. We have entered the Attention Era, where brain health is no longer “just” a personal wellness goal but also a strategic business asset.

*“We are moving from an era defined by where you work to one defined by how you think.”*

**Patricia Kammer**  
Steelcase WorkSpace Futures Researcher

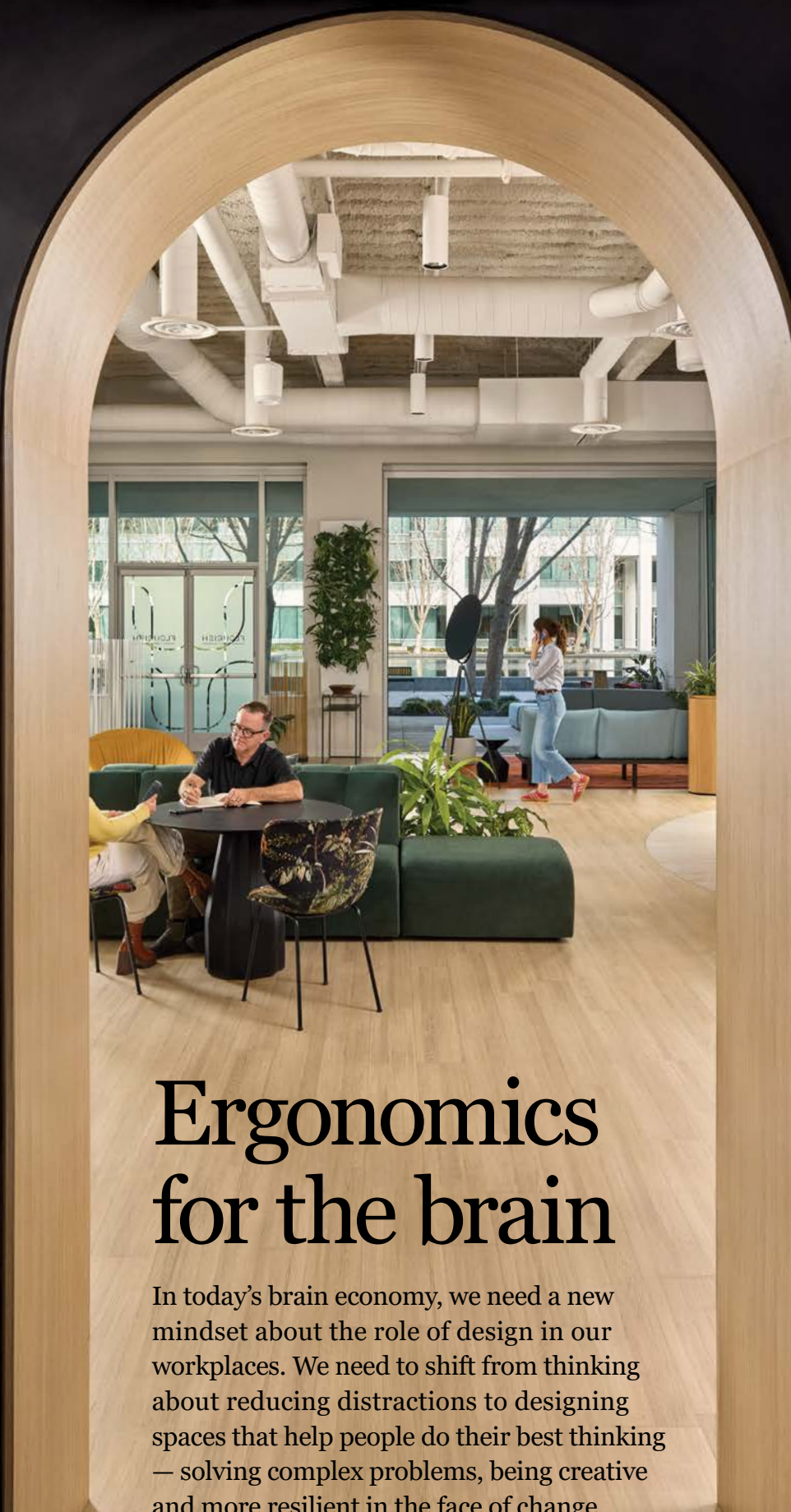
“In the Attendance Era, the office was a container for people. In the Attention Era, it must support concentration, collaboration and creativity. To solve complex problems today, we need environments that relieve the cognitive burden rather than add to it,” says Kammer.

Many leaders are still optimizing for attendance mandates (“Are you here?”) rather than enabling performance (“Can you think?”).

Today’s Workplace:  
A New Operating Model

Here’s what changes when performance is defined by cognition, not occupancy.

|                   | The Past:<br>Attendance Era | The Present:<br>Attention Era        |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Primary Metric    | Badge swipes + occupancy    | Cognitive readiness + output quality |
| The Core Question | “Are you here?”             | “Can you think?”                     |
| Value Driver      | Accumulating knowledge      | Synthesizing data + creating         |
| Office Role       | A container for staff       | A generator of innovation            |
| Management Style  | Mandate + control           | Autonomy + stewardship               |



# Ergonomics for the brain

In today's brain economy, we need a new mindset about the role of design in our workplaces. We need to shift from thinking about reducing distractions to designing spaces that help people do their best thinking — solving complex problems, being creative and more resilient in the face of change.

For years, scientists believed the adult brain stopped growing. We now know that neurogenesis, or the growth of new neurons, and neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to rewire or strengthen new connections (synapses), are possible throughout our lives. Designing sensory-rich environments, including our offices, can boost this process. "Research suggests that environmental enrichment (social, sensory, physical and cognitive stimuli) can create new synapses in the brain, changing the brain physiologically," says Dr. Upali Nanda, global sector director of innovation at HKS and member of the Brain Capital Alliance. "Think of enriched environments as a direct, and powerful, pathway to brain health."

We readily accept that we need ergonomic chairs to support our spines. Today, designers can apply similar rigor to "cognitive ergonomics," moving from simply supporting the body's posture to understanding how the brain's performance relates to its surroundings.

This isn't about a single perfect room type. It's about a variety of spaces specifically designed to support the types of work people do while supporting what the brain needs to function at its best.

Community-Based Design, the approach Steelcase uses for its own workplaces, offers a diverse range of "districts," or zones, composed of spaces that give people greater choice and autonomy over how they work. This approach creates an infrastructure for building social connections that improves cognitive health and decreases cognitive decline. It provides places for people to better manage their attention and emotions. Ultimately, it helps people thrive and organizations to be more agile.

"Flexible workspaces are a prime example of how design can support brain health," notes Dr. Debbie Beck, Principal, at Perkins & Will and a key contributor to The Building Brains Coalition's latest report. "These adaptable environments allow individuals to tailor their surroundings to fit their working styles and preferences, which can enhance focus and cognitive performance. By accommodating new technologies and work methodologies, flexible workspaces help keep the brain engaged and agile, promoting mental resilience and productivity," she notes.

There is a  
range of spaces  
organizations can  
explore to better  
support the brain:

## Spaces for connection

There's no need to demonize the open floorplan, though. Open areas, such as cafe spaces, serve as a "city center" — a relaxed, alternative to individual desks and a place to make connections. It's a place for shared energy and informal knowledge transfer. "Loneliness triggers a 'threat state' in the brain," explains Patricia Kammer. "We cannot innovate if we feel socially isolated." The office provides a "collective identity" that virtual meeting platforms cannot fully replicate. This is partly because face-to-face interaction releases neurochemicals essential to building trust and psychological safety, which are the foundations of risk-taking and innovation.

## Spaces for rejuvenation

The brain cannot sprint for eight hours. It needs "palate cleansers" to replenish resources. The answer lies in our biology. Psychological studies show that "positive affect" (feelings of joy and comfort) increases dopamine levels, which in turn improves creative problem-solving.

NBBJ Fellow and molecular biologist Dr. John Medina reminds us that nature is a powerful trigger for positive affect. Specific cues tap into our biology: color palettes of blues, greens and oranges can aid focus, while rounded edges make us feel safer than sharp corners. Natural materials such as wood and wool are "organic" elements that help lower stress and reset cognitive capacity.





### Spaces for movement

Bodily experiences and our physical surroundings influence cognition — including memory, emotion and decision-making. Movement engages areas of the brain that help offload working memory, freeing up energy for other areas to develop novel solutions to problems.

Spaces that promote movement and physically engaging in collaboration — standing, perching and reorienting — help circulate dopamine, which improves attention, creativity and problem-solving. Spaces equipped with whiteboards and vertical pin-up areas foster physical participation in group work sessions and also enable “cognitive offloading.” By making information persistent and visible, we free up working memory for processing rather than storage. The room itself becomes the external hard drive.

### Spaces for focus

Deep work requires protection. “Inhibition control” is the biological energy required to stop impulsive actions and ignore distractions. When we are exposed to constant noise and visual stimulation, our brains subconsciously monitor the room. For open plans to work, they must be balanced with high-privacy spaces, such as pods or shielded workstations, that reduce distractions. Gaining focus doesn’t always require fully enclosed spaces.

#### About the Photography

We captured photography for this story at Flourish, a social hub in the San Francisco Bay Area. Flourish is part of Bishop Ranch, a connected live-work development. In collaboration with Steelcase dealer One Workplace and design firm AP+I Design, Flourish created an inspiring destination where people can gather, work or recharge by combining the comfort of hospitality with spaces that help people get work done.



## The Leadership Pivot: From Efficiency to Capacity

Design is not the sole answer to brain health. But it is “an underleveraged intervention that can directly impact cognitive performance,” says Dr. Nanda.

For leaders, this requires a shift in metrics. We have spent decades measuring “operational efficiency” (how cheaply we can house employees). Now, the brain economy asks us to measure our “innovation capacity” (how effectively we can support their minds).

We can’t slow the velocity of information. But we can design workplaces that protect attention, reduce cognitive load and empower us to perform at our highest potential. In the brain economy, the ultimate competitive advantage isn’t your real estate footprint. It is your people’s collective ability to think deeply and solve complex problems. “The brain health of your employees is the engine for your company’s productivity,” notes Eyre.

# RebelDot: A Workplace Built for Culture and Community

RebelDot, a fast-growing digital consultancy in Cluj, Romania, partnered with Steelcase to create a flexible, community-driven office that supports growth, collaboration, and sustainability.

As hybrid work evolves, the company has invested in its workspace as a strategic asset. It worked with Steelcase to design and furnish an extension of its headquarters, creating an environment that brings people together and supports multiple work modes.

## A Distinctive Culture

Founded in 2018, RebelDot quickly established itself as a leader in digital solutions, expanding across Romania and into Denmark and London. Despite rapid growth, the company remains deeply committed to its core values: togetherness, care, fun, and fulfillment.

“We were growing, but we wanted to preserve our start-up vibe and stay close to people,” explains Roxana Turos, Chief People Officer.

The challenge: expand the workspace without losing the sense of community and flexibility that defined RebelDot’s culture.

## Growth, Flexibility, and Identity

“We wanted the new space to feel like ours – personal, vibrant, and flexible,” says Roxana. “It had to support quiet areas for focus, dynamic zones for teamwork and places where people can connect and feel they belong.”

From the entrance, a wall of caricatures celebrates every team member. “It’s a fun way to show who we are and create a sense of belonging from the moment you walk in,” notes Roxana.

RebelDot has 43 employee-driven clubs, and themed rooms reflect their passions, from gaming and travel to art and music. “The travel room is decorated with magnets and photos from colleagues’ trips, while the museum showcases artwork and 3D-printed pieces created by our team,” says Alex Stingu, Digital Marketing Specialist.

## Designing for Community and Sustainability

Steelcase worked closely with RebelDot to translate these ideas into a functional, inspiring environment. “The Steelcase team helped us shape the vision for our space,” says Roxana. “They listened, adapted, and even invited us to their Cluj office to experience different layouts and solutions.”

“What stood out in this project was RebelDot’s openness to new ideas,” says Iulia Galinescu, Dealer Business Manager at Steelcase. “We worked together to introduce flexible layouts, vibrant colors and a variety of spaces that encourage teamwork and individual focus.”

The new floor is divided into informal areas, versatile meeting rooms and an outdoor terrace. “We even have a grill for after-work meetups or client evenings,” Roxana adds.



Modular furniture allows teams to reconfigure spaces for different events and work modes. “We created a mix of typologies, and flex elements like whiteboards and media carts give the team freedom to adapt,” explains Iulia.

This focus on adaptability goes hand-in-hand with RebelDot’s commitment to sustainability. “Steelcase offered carbon-neutral chairs and furniture made from recycled materials, helping us create a workspace that aligns with our sustainability goals while supporting employee wellbeing,” says Miana Florian, Sustainability Officer.

## A Blueprint for Small and Medium Businesses

The results speak for themselves: the new floor is always buzzing with activity, and visitors are consistently impressed. “For recruitment, the space is a game-changer. The moment candidates step inside, they instantly get a glimpse of who we are,” says Roxana.

RebelDot’s story shows that small and mid-sized businesses can think big about their workspace. They created a vibrant, flexible space that reflects the company’s identity and helps attract and retain talent.

# Engineering a Smarter Industry

## Innovation at the heart of industrial expertise

Steelcase factories combine innovation, sustainability and strong local ties to shape a responsible model of industry.

In Europe, Steelcase relies on a strategically distributed network of factories to meet today’s industrial challenges. Beyond production, these sites serve as innovation laboratories where technology plays a central role. From automation to equipment modernization, the company fosters a culture of continuous development to enhance performance and resilience.

This caster assembly robot automates a repetitive motion often linked to musculoskeletal disorders, protecting operator health.



## Innovation Rooted in Company Culture

Technological innovation at Steelcase is built on a culture of continuous improvement, where every employee is encouraged to contribute ideas. Local teams are empowered to identify repetitive tasks that can be automated, as well as outsourced activities that can be reintegrated into the factories. Technological advancements are designed to be scalable, supporting future market transformations.

“We aim to anticipate tomorrow’s needs by developing solutions that evolve with customer expectations,” says Pierre Blesch, Director of Manufacturing Services in EMEA. “The goal is to create intelligent environments where technology adapts to people.”

## A European Network Driving Innovation

Exchanges between European sites serve as the catalyst for collective innovation. Each factory shares its experiments.

“This exchange of information helps pool best practices, avoid redundancies and quickly identify the most effective solutions,” explains Sebastian Barragan, Manufacturing Engineering Manager at the Madrid plant. “It creates a genuine innovation ecosystem where each site contributes to the emergence of new ideas.”

Innovation is ongoing, fueled by annual optimization goals, supplier interactions and monitoring of new technologies.

## Custom Equipment to Meet On-the-Ground Challenges

At the Sarrebourg plant, collaborative robots assist operators with tasks like screwing and caster assembly. In Rosenheim, automated guided vehicles navigate aisles to transport pallets, while robots handle unloading and assembly, reducing physical strain on operators.

Innovation also involves modernizing existing equipment. In Madrid, the painting line has been completely redesigned to improve quality and extend the installation’s lifespan. In Střibro, a new edge-banding machine now produces freeform parts with laser finishing, offering better cost control and technical flexibility.

Steelcase’s European factories embody a future-oriented industrial vision where technology serves agility, quality and operator wellbeing.

Continue reading



# Sustainability as a driver of transformation

Confronted with climate challenges, Steelcase is leading its European factories through a profound transformation toward a more sustainable industry. Each site contributes to an ambitious strategy focused on reducing emissions, boosting energy efficiency and advancing circularity.

## Reducing Emissions: A Shared Goal Across All Factories

Steelcase is committed to a net-zero future and has set an ambitious goal: to cut its carbon emissions by 50% by 2030 and to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050. This strategy is built on a deep overhaul of industrial processes, the adoption of renewable energy and continuous improvements in energy efficiency.

In Sarrebourg, the company’s first factory to be ISO 50001 certified, energy efficiency has become a culture. Lighting has been fully replaced with LEDs, slashing energy consumption by a factor of four, and an electric heat pump has replaced the gas boiler for paint baths, saving 100 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> annually.

An operator replaces the upholstery on the backrest of an office chair — a central step in the remanufacturing process.



In Madrid, the Internet of Things (IoT) is deployed to monitor energy consumption in real time. This technology enables production teams to reorganize their schedules, concentrating activity in the morning and therefore reducing afternoon energy needs.

In Střibro, the energy transition is marked by the installation of a 40 kW solar system, while in Rosenheim, rooftops are covered with photovoltaic panels generating 30,000 kWh per year. These panels, paired with a combined heat and power plant, supply nearly 50% of the Rosenheim factory’s electricity needs in winter.

## Circular Economy: A Catalyst for Industrial Innovation

Steelcase is also developing services to help clients reduce their carbon footprint. The Remade program is a flagship example. It extends the life of chairs by bringing them back to the Sarrebourg factory, where worn parts are replaced and structural components (mechanisms, bases, shells) are retained. The chairs are then returned to the client with an extended warranty.

“By replacing only the most stressed components, we add at least five more years to the product’s life,” explains Gaëtane Rivoilan, Product Sales Consultant. “All spare parts are sourced entirely in Europe, and the carbon footprint of a remanufactured chair is just one third that of a new model.”

This service is fully aligned with Steelcase’s circularity strategy, combining economic performance, waste reduction, and environmental commitment.

## Committed Partnerships for Responsible Production

Another standout initiative is Loop, a range of fabrics developed in partnership with supplier Gabriel, a pioneer in sustainable textiles. These fabrics are made from recycled textile waste, including scraps from Steelcase’s European factories. The project embodies a fully circular approach: materials are collected, sorted, transformed, and reintroduced into the production chain to create high-quality, attractive, and durable textiles.

The manufacturing process relies on advanced technologies that preserve the technical and visual properties of fibers while significantly reducing environmental impact. Gabriel has also committed to the Science Based Targets initiative to mitigate climate change, further reinforcing the sustainability commitment of this collaboration.

By integrating sustainability into the heart of its industrial processes, Steelcase demonstrates that excellence and responsibility can go hand in hand. The initiatives deployed in its European factories reflect a strong determination to reduce environmental impact while creating value for clients. Whether through renewable energy, circularity, or committed partnerships, every action contributes to an industry that respects the planet and is focused on a low-carbon future.



The Sarrebourg factory hosts apprentice seamstresses for internships, introducing them to industrial manufacturing and helping them perfect their training.

# Local Community Engagement

Innovation at Steelcase goes beyond technology and the environment; it’s also reflected in how people connect. Across Europe, Steelcase factories are committed to local communities, developing social initiatives that reflect the company’s values.

## An Inclusive Partnership in Rosenheim

The Rosenheim site in Germany collaborates with the Caritas organization, which supports people with intellectual disabilities. “The goal is to offer them stable and rewarding work by entrusting them with the production of various elements for the factory, such as accessory kits or cable outlet boxes,” says Klement Manzinger, Materials Management Manager. These parts are then integrated into finished products, directly contributing to the industrial value chain.

## Sarrebourg: Building Bonds with the Region

The Sarrebourg factory in France supports a small local sewing business by providing fabric scraps, offering machine maintenance assistance, and providing

training opportunities. Various disability awareness activities are also organized, and the maintenance of green spaces has been entrusted to a local organization that supports people with disabilities, as part of a long-term partnership. “What drives us is creating strong bonds with local stakeholders, providing real technical and human support,” explains Anne Brun, a member of the Human Resources team and of Changemakers Sarrebourg. “These partnerships give real meaning to our industrial activity.”

The factory also maintains regular exchanges with a nearby middle school, donating materials for art projects and organizing educational visits to the site’s biodiversity area.

## Střibro: A Factory at the Heart of Its Community

In Střibro, Czech Republic, the factory also maintains a close and lasting relationship with the local community. Each year, it welcomes final-year interns from regional vocational schools. These young people, from technical fields such as electrical

engineering or maintenance, spend several weeks alongside experienced mentors, gaining valuable experience and contributing to daily operations. Thanks to the initiative of committed employees and Steelcase grants, two community projects have recently been launched: replanting a school garden in the nearby village of Hradec with fruit trees, and equipping local volunteer firefighters with essential safety equipment. “These projects are driven by the energy and commitment of our teams,” says Martina Vycichlova, HR Director at the Střibro factory. “They illustrate our desire to strengthen ties with the local community and support causes with strong social impact.”

Steelcase chooses a human-centered industry, rooted in local communities and attentive to their needs. By valuing local partnerships, supporting inclusion and passing on its values to younger generations, the company gives real meaning to its industrial activity. In turn, European factories become places of social engagement, where innovation goes hand in hand with solidarity and responsibility.

# Community Drives Performance

Research shows it improves engagement, productivity + wellbeing



Organizations are ramping up investments in the workplace, but most employees aren't feeling the improvement — yet. In the past year, 21% of employees say their primary workspace was updated, according to recent Steelcase research, yet when asked to give their overall workplace a grade, they only give it a C.

The issue: Many offices fall short because they don't offer a range of spaces that truly support how people work or foster the sense of community and belonging that draws them in.

The global study of almost 5,500 office workers examined how workplace design impacts people's performance and wellbeing. A key finding — and opportunity for improvement — is that employees do not feel their workplace is highly effective in supporting the essential work activities they do every day: focus, collaborate, socialize, learn and rejuvenate (see Blueprint For a Better Office, pg. 2)

The data shows that while offices offer some support, it isn't enough to fully meet employees' needs. The research also points to what will make a difference. When people have a range of spaces dedicated to the different types of work they do throughout the day, they perform and feel better. These spaces, designed as zones or "districts," support a primary way to work (i.e. focus, collaboration, etc.) but can also support other behaviors. They offer people a variety of ways to work, based on the tasks they need to do and their preferences.

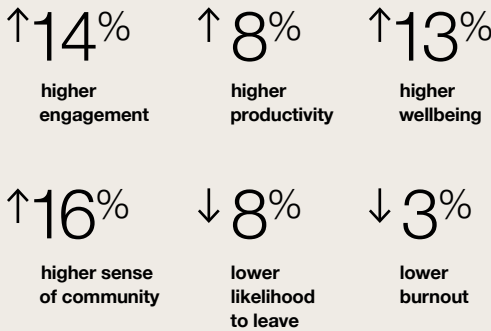
When workplaces have three or more districts dedicated to different types of work, people experience better work outcomes.

### More choice, better results

Steelcase research found that employees with access to a variety of spaces\* experience:

\* 3-5 workplace districts

Employees with access to three or more districts report stronger outcomes in key areas, such as engagement, which, in turn, impacts performance, such as productivity. But most employees lack meaningful choice in where and how they work. Globally, only 37% report access to three or more districts; 63% report access to two or fewer, according to the research. While availability varies, the broader pattern is consistent: **most offices offer a limited set of environments to support the range of activities people perform throughout the workday.**



### Designing for the full workday

Creating a workplace with a diverse range of spaces or districts is an essential part of the Community-Based Design approach that Steelcase uses for its own workplaces.

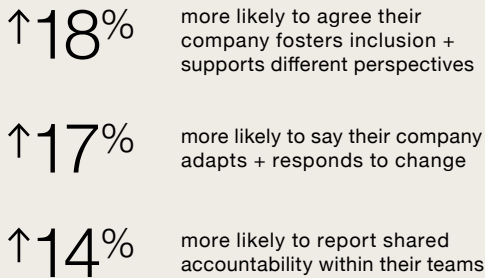
"We think of employees as members of a community at work, and we need to design workplaces for them that address how they actually work — their rhythms, their challenges and their moments of connection," says Meg Bennett, Steelcase global design principal. "When we design spaces to respond to these patterns, we draw inspiration from vibrant cities where a diversity of places — retail, homes and public spaces — coexist to support the needs of a thriving community. Similarly, in the workplace, we create an ecosystem of spaces that reflect the different ways people work. These environments enable people to build trust and drive meaningful progress together."

Community-Based Design is grounded in research that shows how vibrant neighborhoods evolve and thrive over time. Communities with diverse, mixed-use spaces naturally foster relationships, belonging and shared purpose — much like a city that grows stronger as its people interact, support one another, and co-create its future. Bringing these urban-planning principles into the workplace can help employees build trust, strengthen community and work together more effectively.

The research suggests that when workplaces support the full spectrum of work activities, organizational culture and the employee experience also improve.

### The impact on employee experience

Steelcase research found that employees with access to a variety of spaces\* are:



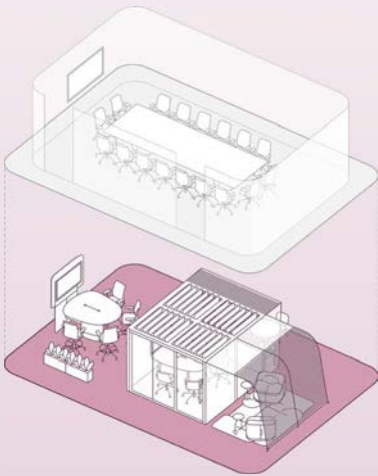
\* 3-5 workplace districts

## Changes that matter

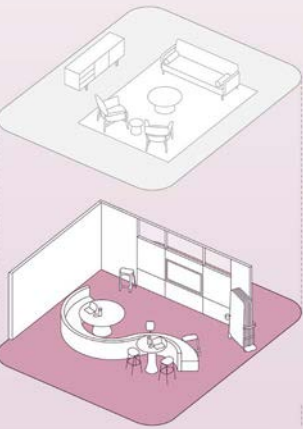
Organizations have an opportunity to make research-backed improvements to their workplaces that give people what they need to build trust and work better.

Discover how common underperforming spaces can be transformed into places where people can maintain their attention, think creatively and feel a sense of community.

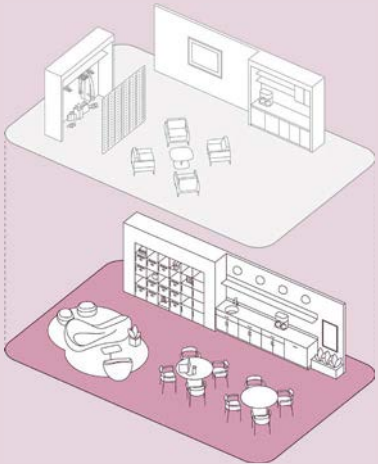
### The Underused Conference Room



### The Low-Performance Lounge



### The Blasé Café



See the transformations  
→

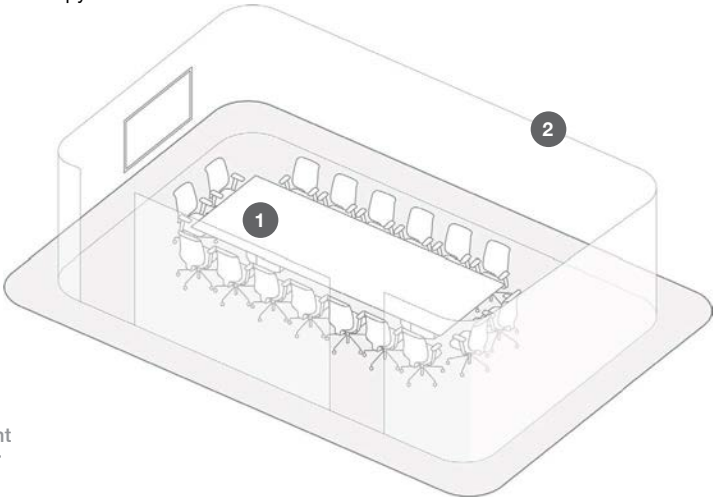
The Underused  
Conference Room

Transform a single,  
large conference  
room into multiple  
spaces where people  
can collaborate,  
focus, rejuvenate  
and socialize.

Before

**What's not working:** Large conference rooms account for nearly 60% of all meeting space, but 80% of meetings involve only one-to-three people. These more traditional rooms occupy a lot of real estate yet often sit empty.

1) A single large table or other more formal furnishings don't easily adapt to support different types of collaboration or diverse work activities.

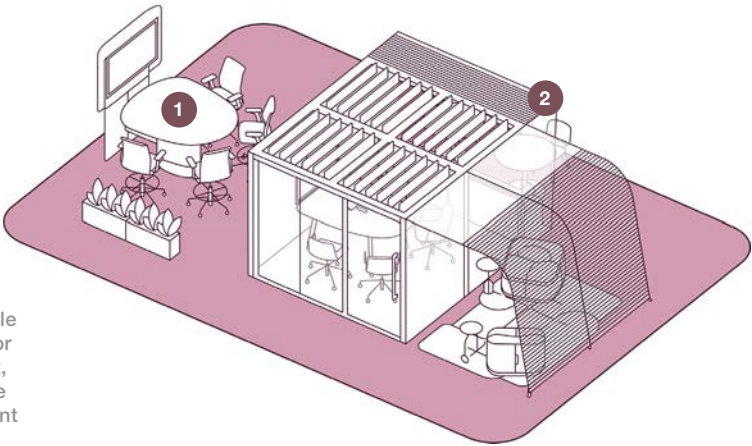


2) Large enclosed meeting spaces often use drywall, which is costly to reconfigure.

After

**What to do:** Shift from a single enclosed space to multiple workspaces that support a range of activities, giving people more choice and control over where and how they work.

1) A standing-height table and integrated monitor encourage movement, connection and make it easy to share content in the open plan.



2) Flexible architectural products allow for easy reconfiguration and can create a mix of open and enclosed spaces.

How it helps create  
community

Large, formal boardrooms can feel intimidating, often discouraging people from speaking up or fully engaging. In contrast, smaller, more welcoming spaces create a sense of comfort and equality that encourages participation. These spaces make it easier for people to interact naturally, share ideas and collaborate openly, while also supporting a wider range of work activities and team dynamics.



A private, acoustically controlled room eliminates distractions and supports both in-person and hybrid meetings.

A variety of collaboration spaces support connection, creativity and knowledge sharing. These smaller spaces can support a range of activities: hybrid meetings, quick huddles, informal collaboration and rejuvenation.

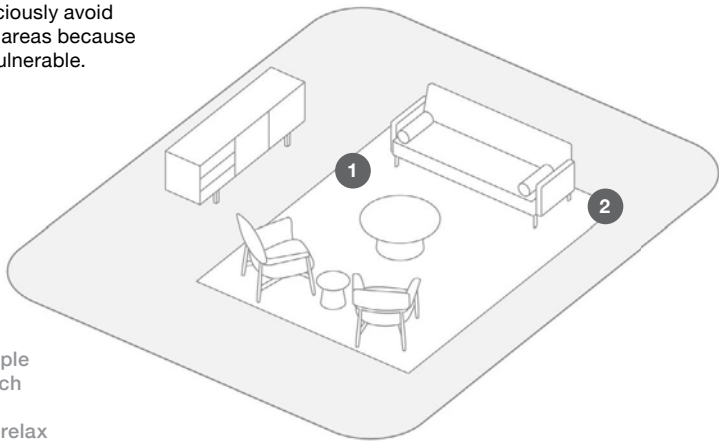
The Low-Performance Lounge

Beautiful spaces often sit empty because they lack what people need to get work done, and people feel uncomfortable in spaces that are too open.

Before

**What's not working:** Lounge spaces become underutilized when they lack key performance elements, like technology integration and access to power. Humans unconsciously avoid spaces situated in open areas because they feel exposed and vulnerable.

2) An absence of markerboards or video displays limits collaboration.

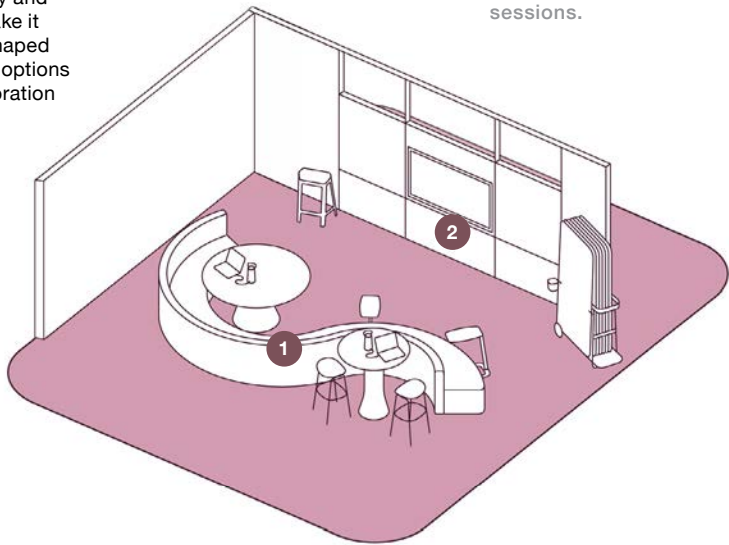


1) Without screens, people can feel exposed which can make it harder to have a conversation, relax or focus.

After

**What to do:** Add boundaries to create a sense of greater visual privacy and provide a display surface to make it harder working. The organic-shaped lounge provides varied seating options and postures for social, collaboration and focused work.

2) Integrated technology and markerboards let people share content during brainstorming sessions.



1) Stool-height, lounge and perch seating offer relaxed posture options which promote movement, helping to spark greater creativity and new ways of thinking.

How it helps create community

This lounge setting makes it easy for people to come together for both scheduled and impromptu meetings and encourage spontaneous conversations, relationship-building and idea sharing. This helps teammates feel more connected to one another and the organization. It enables people to solve problems together — and in doing so, build and strengthen trust.



Steelcase Flex Mobile Power ensures people are no longer tethered to one place and can charge multiple devices, helping people gather longer.

Modular wall supports technology and provides visual privacy to minimize distractions.

The Blasé Café

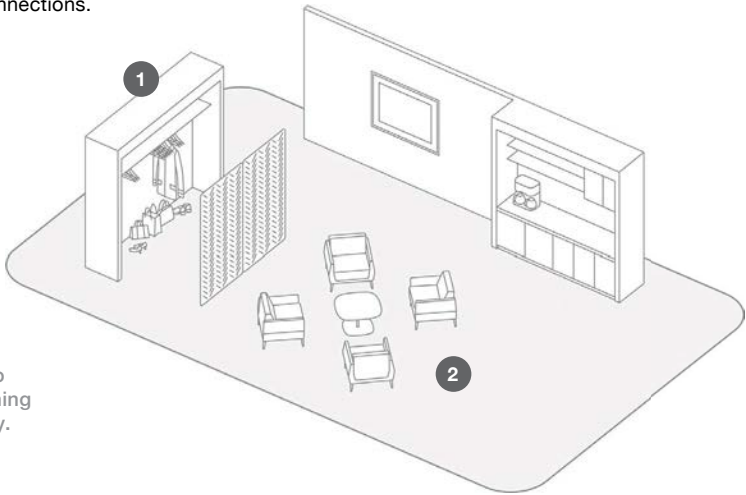
Many café spaces offer basic hospitality and are used primarily for brief interactions or dining. It’s functional but not inspiring.

Before

**What’s not working:** Furnishings support conversation, but don’t encourage lingering or collaborating. Storage space takes up a larger footprint that could be used to promote more connections.

2) Limited seating options and furniture do not support socialization or allow people to use the space for collaboration and individual work.

1) An uninspiring single-purpose space fails to draw people in, remaining empty most of the day.

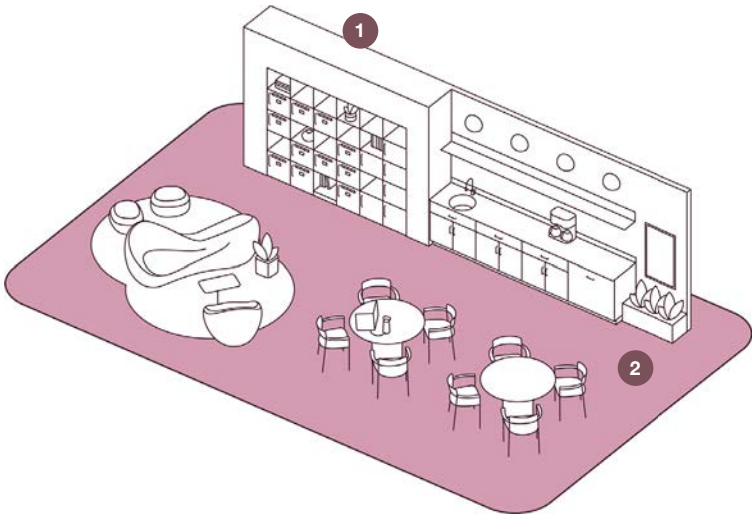


After

**What to do:** Create a versatile café that provides a welcoming touchpoint and encourages chance encounters that can build trust and culture.

2) Steelcase research shows the presence of social hubs can increase engagement and belonging by 10%.

1) Lockers give people a place where they can start their day and safely store their belongings.



How it helps create community

This vibrant hub blends the comfort and energy of a café with the functionality of a workplace. As more organizations move to shared workstations, this space supports people’s new routines. At the start of their day, it provides them with a place to store personal items, grab a coffee and socialize. It also draws people together throughout the day — for casual conversations, dining, focused work or impromptu collaboration.

A wall of lockers creates a central spot where people begin their day, store belongings and build connections. Open cubbies display company artifacts and branding, strengthening the sense of belonging.

Lounge seating supports an alternate posture and creates a welcoming social space where people can connect.

Diverse settings and seating options create a welcoming space where people can work, eat or socialize — no matter the time of day.

# From Process to Agency With Samuel Durand



As our relationship to work continues to evolve, filmmaker and researcher Samuel Durand explores the forces reshaping careers, motivation and value — and what it takes to stay relevant today.

**Work Better: What do you see as fundamentally changing today in our relationship with work?**

**Samuel Durand:** We’ve seen a gradual erosion of traditional employment and the promises it once held, alongside a shift toward alternative ways of making a living. There is also a deeper shift in how we think about work. For a long time, progress meant working more to earn more and live better. Today, success is defined more broadly, with time becoming a key dimension – a shift accelerated by the pandemic and already reshaping work rhythms and workplaces.

**WB: Motivation is a key issue. What drives engagement, and what role do work environments play?**

**SD:** Across organizations, compensation remains the primary driver, but it does not create true engagement. Three levers stand out: the work environment – spatial design, relationships, flexibility; the work itself – skills, autonomy, responsibility;

and purpose – the ability to contribute to something larger than oneself.

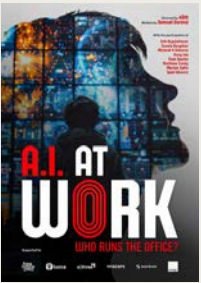
**WB: What is the most defining impact of AI on work today?**

**SD:** The fear of being replaced by AI rests on a misunderstanding. The real risk is missing the shift and being left behind. Unlike previous innovations, it can narrow skill gaps, if approached with curiosity and discernment. AI is an augmentation tool: the real value of human work lies in agency and the ability to navigate complexity.

**WB: What signals today point to the future of work?**

**SD:** The first shift is demographic. In France, the working population is set to decline in the coming years. This calls for rethinking work across the span of a career. The second shift relates to the nature of work in the age of AI. For decades, people were trained to follow processes and seek permission. Today, what is most valued is the ability to decide and take initiative.

# Conversations



**Watch the Documentary**  
Filmmaker and researcher Samuel Durand explores how work is evolving — from the rise of AI to shifting careers, motivations and new ways of creating value. Through a series of documentaries, he captures the changing nature of work today. Watch at [wipdocumentary.com/en](http://wipdocumentary.com/en).

# Why Mattering Matters With Zach Mercurio



People want their work to matter, yet they’re often expected to care without being shown they are cared for. Researcher Zach Mercurio, author of “The Power of Mattering,” joined the Work Better podcast to explore how “mattering” — feeling seen, valued and needed — is a basic human need and a powerful performance driver.

**Work Better: What is “mattering” and how is it different from belonging or inclusion?**

**Zach Mercurio:** Belonging is being welcomed into a group and inclusion is being invited to participate. Mattering goes a step further. It’s the lived experience of being significant to those around you. It’s everyday interactions that help people feel seen, heard and essential, not just present. That distinction matters: Mattering is foundational, a primal human need that fuels motivation and wellbeing.

**WB: Why should leaders care about mattering when they’re under pressure to drive productivity?**

**ZM:** You can’t get sustained productivity without people feeling they matter. When people feel valued first, they build the confidence and energy that power quality and quantity of work — the outcomes organizations seek. Treating these skills as “soft” has led many teams to overlook the rigor required to cultivate them.

**WB: What are practical ways to build a culture where people feel significant?**

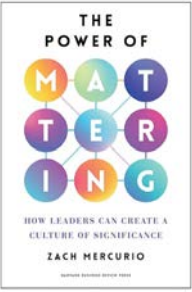
**ZM:** Think in moments. Three repeatable practices are key: notice, affirm and show people they’re needed. Ask better questions that invite real answers (“What has your attention today?”), then affirm with specific, meaningful gratitude that names the situation, behavior, person’s unique gifts and impact. Finally, make the impact visible. Collect stories, photos or customer feedback and say, “Look what you did,” so no one has to guess how their work helps others.

**WB: How can the workplace reinforce mattering?**

**ZM:** Design visible links between daily tasks and bigger outcomes. One example: NASA sketched a “ladder to the moon,” mapping each unit’s work to mission goals so people saw why their role was indispensable. Also, create places for caring conversations that build trust. Make it easier — not harder — for leaders to notice and support people.

# Conversations

Read more from Zach Mercurio



**Keep Listening:**  
Hear two full episodes with Zach by searching “Work Better” wherever you get your podcasts, then follow or subscribe.



# Reimagining Learning in Saudi Arabia

## How Maarif Education Is Shaping the Future of Student Development

In a country undergoing one of the world’s most ambitious national transformations, the launch of Sherborne School Jeddah marks a turning point for education in Saudi Arabia. Developed by Maarif Education, the Kingdom’s largest education company, this new institution is the first British school to open in Jeddah. At the heart of its creation is a partnership with Steelcase, whose expertise in learning environments helped translate a forward-thinking idea into reality.

### Vision meets opportunity

For Maarif, Sherborne School Jeddah was never just another project. “Our ambition is to set a new benchmark for learning, leading by example and helping shape the future of the sector in line with the country’s bold objectives,” adds Osman. Inspired by Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, Maarif set out to create a school

that would unlock every child’s potential – not just academically, but in whatever field excites them. “It’s a place where children can discover what drives them, what they excel in, whether they want to be a top scientist, an Olympic champion, an executive chef or a radio host,” says Osman. “We hope the school will help uncover that, develop it, nourish it, and instill the required skills and confidence in students to pursue what really drives them.”

Steelcase was brought in from the earliest stages, working directly with the CEO and project team. “From the very beginning, we were welcomed as true collaborators,” says Claudia Rus, Regional Business Manager & Design Consultant at Steelcase.

### Breaking the mold

Designing a school that blends international best practices with local needs was a challenge that required innovation at every step. The team faced the task of transforming a building abandoned for 20 years into a vibrant, sustainable learning environment.

“We were lucky to find a building that we could completely remodel and bring back to life,” says Osman. “Sustainability was a priority for us. We made a conscious effort to preserve as much of the original structure as possible, minimizing waste and reducing our environmental footprint.”

But the real innovation was in the educational approach. Sherborne Jeddah draws inspiration from the long-standing traditions of Sherborne schools in the UK, yet it was designed to meet the specific needs and aspirations of students and classrooms in Saudi Arabia. “We’re proud to be part of the Sherborne family,” says Joe Paget, Founding Head of School. “But this project gave us complete freedom to create something new.”

The curriculum and pedagogy focus on flexibility, collaboration and lifelong learning. “We worked closely with Sherborne to co-design spaces that truly support the curriculum and teaching methodologies – integrating active learning, flexibility and team-based learning at every step,” explains Claudia Rus. One of the most distinctive features of Sherborne Jeddah is the abundance of learning commons: open, shared areas throughout the school where students and teachers can gather and explore beyond the traditional classroom. This innovative approach strengthens a dynamic culture where learning is constantly in motion.

Reinforcing this idea, the school’s design emphasizes how learning extends into every corner of the campus. “I didn’t want people to be confined within four walls,” explains Joe Paget. “I wanted the corridors to become part of the classroom.” Glass partitions allow students and teachers to see into adjacent spaces and learning commons, creating a sense of openness and connection. The result is an environment where students are empowered to learn in ways that suit their individual needs and interests.



### A school designed for the future

Sherborne Jeddah stands as a campus that redefines what a school can be in Saudi Arabia. Steelcase delivered a comprehensive design package, from co-developing the pedagogical approach to classroom space planning, furniture selection, and finishes. Every element was chosen to support flexibility, peer-learning and wellbeing. It’s a place where collaboration and creativity are part of everyday life.

“We’ve made use of every square meter to create bridges between classrooms and age groups,” adds Rus. “We designed a mix of settings: soft seating, flexible tables, and even standing areas with natural elements. These spaces encourage connection and allow students to experience different postures and activities appropriate to their stage of learning.”

The school’s approach to furniture is as progressive as its pedagogy. “We moved away from traditional teacher desks to

create a more dynamic role for educators,” Rus notes. “Classrooms feature mobile setups and storage units, with ergonomic seating tailored to each age group. Every element was selected to support learners, from scaled seating to soft, reconfigurable pieces that educators can adapt throughout the day.”

The design team opted for a calming, neutral palette that helps children feel grounded and focused. Soft, light tones reduce visual overstimulation, support concentration, and create brighter, more open spaces that feel inviting and comfortable.

### A blueprint for transformation

Sherborne School Jeddah is a leader in educational excellence and innovation in Saudi Arabia. The partnership between Maarif and Steelcase has set a new standard for what is possible when vision, expertise and shared ambition come together. “We started with the educators’ vision and built everything around the learning process and the needs of the

children. That shift put students and their experience at the very center of our work.”

Sherborne Jeddah is a testament to the power of design to transform learning and to the impact that true partnership can have on shaping the future.





Coming soon

# Beyond Inspiration

## How the redesigned Munich LINC supports co-creation and community at work

Opened in 2017, the Munich Learning + Innovation Center (LINC) was conceived as a place to explore how space can support better work. With its recent redesign, that role has evolved into a working environment where clients, partners and Steelcase teams actively collaborate to move projects forward.

Visitors are invited to engage, contribute and test ideas: “There’s a big difference between discussing concepts and actually working side by side to shape a solution,” says Elena de Kan, Workplace Design & Consulting Director at Steelcase.

### Designing for collaboration, not display

From the outset, the redesign aimed to support collaboration throughout the customer journey. One of the LINC’s defining strengths is the range of expertise brought together in one place:

workplace strategy, interior design, project management, product development and circularity. This proximity allows teams to move fluidly from vision to planning, and from planning to concrete outcomes.

Dedicated co-creation environments support this process. Teams can arrive with an idea and leave with a tangible result — whether a spatial concept, a layout plan or a specification. The space makes work visible, shared, helping teams align quickly and progress with confidence.

### An immersive environment for co-creation

At the center of the redesigned LINC is a collaborative hub that brings together materials, products and digital tools. More than a resource space, it acts as a shared platform where teams can compare options in real time. “It’s a place where physical and digital elements come together — a library of knowledge, products, materials and applications,” Elena explains.

Rather than positioning materials choice at the end of a project, the hub brings it into the conversation early. Clients and partners can explore finishes, textures and applications alongside layout planning, product selection and sustainability considerations.

“If everything stays verbal, everyone imagines something slightly different,” Elena notes. “Being able to visualize ideas at full scale makes a real difference.”

### Community as a driver of performance

The redesign reflects a broader insight from Steelcase research: community supports performance. When people feel connected to each other and to the work, collaboration improves, engagement increases and learning accelerates.

At the LINC, this thinking is embedded throughout the building. Spaces are organized into interconnected neighborhoods that support focus, collaboration, learning, socialization and rejuvenation. Public-facing areas are intentionally open and welcoming, while more private zones provide the right level of retreat.

*“There’s a big difference between discussing concepts and actually working side by side to shape a solution.”*

**Elena de Kan**  
Workplace Design & Consulting Director  
at Steelcase

“A big part of creating vibrancy is placing the right teams together,” Elena says. “When conversations happen between people who can build on each other’s work, that’s what creates positive energy.”

For employees, the redesign has changed the daily experience of work. Houda Badri, Human Resources Manager, sees its impact on relationships and engagement.

“When people work closer together, interactions become more immediate,” she says. “Things get resolved more quickly, and ideas don’t get lost along the way.”

### A more local and authentic environment

While the Munich LINC serves as an EMEA hub, the redesign places greater emphasis on local character. Subtle choices in materials, colors and details reflect the cultural context of Munich, without losing a broader European perspective.

As travel becomes less frequent, that sense of place matters more. “When you arrive somewhere, you need to feel grounded,” Elena says. “You want to know where you are.”

By balancing global consistency with local relevance, the LINC feels more authentic. Visitors encounter a workplace shaped by real constraints, making it easier to relate the experience to their own projects.

### From manufacturer to partner

For customers and architects, the redesigned LINC reinforces a clear message: Steelcase is not just a furniture manufacturer, but a long-term partner.

The space supports deeper conversations about organizational culture, sustainability and change. It allows teams to host workshops, run working sessions and explore scenarios together, using the environment itself as an active tool.

“Clients don’t want to see furniture lined up,” says Fabian Fischer, Dealer Business Manager. “They want to experience a working concept and understand how everything fits together.”

### Circularity as part of everyday work

Sustainability is embedded throughout the LINC as part of a broader service value proposition. Circularity, reuse and adaptability are considered alongside design, consulting and project delivery.

“Circularity isn’t treated as a separate layer, it’s simply part of the approach,” says Pia Garnica, Senior Interior Designer. “At the LINC, designers and circularity experts work side by side every day, in a space that brings these perspectives

closer together. This proximity creates a shared mindset, where circular thinking naturally informs decisions and shapes the way we design.”

### Working better, together

Ultimately, the redesigned Munich LINC is more than a place to visit. It is a working example of Steelcase’s Community-Based Design approach — an ecosystem of spaces designed to support everyday work and bring people closer together.

It reframes what the LINC represents: a continuous experience where work, expertise and collaboration come together. It allows customers and partners to experience how ideas take shape in a setting that reflects today’s work, and the value of partnership.

To plan a visit of the Munich LINC, go to [Steelcase.com](https://www.steelcase.com).



# Making Space to Think

Solutions designed to help people focus, collaborate and create

Designing workplaces where people can do their best thinking requires a diverse range of furniture and technology solutions that help reduce distractions. People need a variety of privacy options so they can focus. Promoting movement supports creativity and problem-solving. Spaces that are physically and emotionally comfortable can help reduce stress. Explore ideas for creating spaces that help people do and feel their best.



New!

**Possilio®**  
Steelcase



Notable!

**Be my guest® – Connecting Spaces**  
Orangebox



New!

**Steelcase Flex™ Rocker Stool**  
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Steelcase Flex™ Rocker Stool promotes constant movement, inviting people to shift positions, stay engaged and join the conversation.



New!

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Notable!

**Mielo**  
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New!

**Rigato**  
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**Manto Lounge**  
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**Reflection Portable Lamp**  
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*New!*

#### Ocular® Sightline Tables Steelcase

Intentionally engineered for larger, evolving collaboration spaces, this conference table supports today's hybrid meetings while remaining relevant as technologies and needs change. Durable materials, a future-ready structure and discreet technology integration ensure the table you choose today continues to deliver clarity, equity and performance for years to come.

*New!*

#### Steelcase Series® M Steelcase

Modular, mindful of the planet and built to last — these collaborative chairs are intentionally engineered for spaces that evolve over time. The chair you choose today will work beautifully for years to come, thanks to the exchangeable bases, shells and upholstery that provide a convenient way to refresh its look as needs or environments change.



*New!*

**Cubow Collection**  
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*New!*

**Lucén Lighting**  
BOLIA



**Seed**  
BOLIA



*New!*

**Ripon**  
BOLIA



**Steelcase Flex™ Mobile Power**  
Steelcase

With advanced battery technology and a refined design, Steelcase Flex Mobile Power keeps you connected and productive wherever work happens.



*Notable!*

**Campers & Dens®**  
Orangebox



*Notable!*

**Air3™**  
Orangebox



*New!*

**Tessel**  
Orangebox

With a flexible design system and intuitive detailing, Tessel adapts seamlessly to different configurations, supporting collaboration with clarity and efficiency across a range of spaces.



*New!*

**Vetona**  
Vicarbe

With its adjustable height and refined, functional design, Vetona adapts effortlessly to different uses, providing a versatile support surface with a distinctive presence.



*New!*

**Missiva**  
Vicarbe

Defined by its modular composition and inviting, sculptural forms, Missiva enables fluid layouts that encourage interaction, creating comfortable, connected environments in modern spaces.