



Note from the Editor

The workplace was designed for a different era of work.

It was built for stability, efficiency, and linearity. Work happened in fixed places, on fixed schedules, and productivity was often measured by presence because presence was the only proof available.

The way we have traditionally designed the office will no longer work in this new reality.

The conditions work operates under today are fundamentally different. And it’s not just that they’re different. They are constantly changing. Just as many organizations are beginning to settle on a “hybrid” future, the entire apple cart is being flipped by AI. Soon, we won’t be talking about unavailable meeting rooms, but about rooms not equipped with ambient listening and multimodal task capabilities. And that’s just the room. The very nature of work, how we use tools to do it, and who we do it with are all up for discussion. AI will likely impact workplaces unevenly in the near term with accelerations and counterbalances throughout the industry. But before we reduce this to a technology infrastructure problem the office now has to accommodate, it is worth stepping back and looking at what is changing and what could change at the human behavior level.

While the human contribution to work is being re-evaluated, there is a growing interest in skills that were once dismissed as “soft.” Skills like emotional intelligence, judgment under ambiguity, and agility quotient are signaling an asset change. It’s no longer the square footage, it is human performance. Your uniquely human ability and capacity to do your best work is quickly becoming critical to business success because it’s inherently not replaceable by AI.

In this context, the building is no longer neutral. It actively shapes behavior, performance, and well-being, whether it is intentionally designed to or not.

The architecture and design community is trying to make sense of the path forward because our traditional process is not going to sustain this new reality. We are no longer designing for conditions to hold stable. The research and assumptions we gather at the beginning of the project are often shifted by design development. As a result, we must now increasingly explore the greater inputs of experience orchestration, as form and function are no longer the only dimensions of design. We design the conditions for the human experience to unfold, not the structure that contains it. What that translates to for products isn’t just multifunctionality, but elevating them as the enablers of responsive spaces that tune to personal needs in real time.



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Our Approach

We’ve created a report where workplace design, human behavior, and furniture meet.

We analyzed 200+ signals across culture, technology, environment, economy, and design to uncover five emerging shifts we believe designers should be watching. It’s intended to prompt new questions, informing both current project decisions and longer term implications for the industry.



Here’s What’s Different:

FORESIGHT

Designed to Stay Relevant

Built on a foundation of long-range drivers and cutting edge signals that give us strategic design opportunities for today and tomorrow.

EXPERIENCE

Human-Centered

The research centers on people first. Human behavior is treated as the fundamental change agent that workplaces should be designed around and for.

PERSPECTIVE

Integrated Approach

Findings are drawn from signals across politics, economy, society, technology, and the environment, then read across strategy, design, and behavior for a fuller picture of how work is changing.

STRATEGY

Actionable

Every insight comes with a “so what.” Findings become clear implications for strategy and design, so teams can move now without boxing themselves in later.

How to Read It:

We sorted our trends into two categories, Design Forces and Design Expressions. Forces are the broad, macro-level pushes shaping how work is evolving. Design Expressions are how those Design Forces are beginning to translate into practice.

TRENDS

Design Forces

Design Forces are the broad shifts reshaping how work happens, across people, strategy, and technology. They move at a systemic level and apply steady pressure over time, acting as the underlying drivers that everything else responds to.

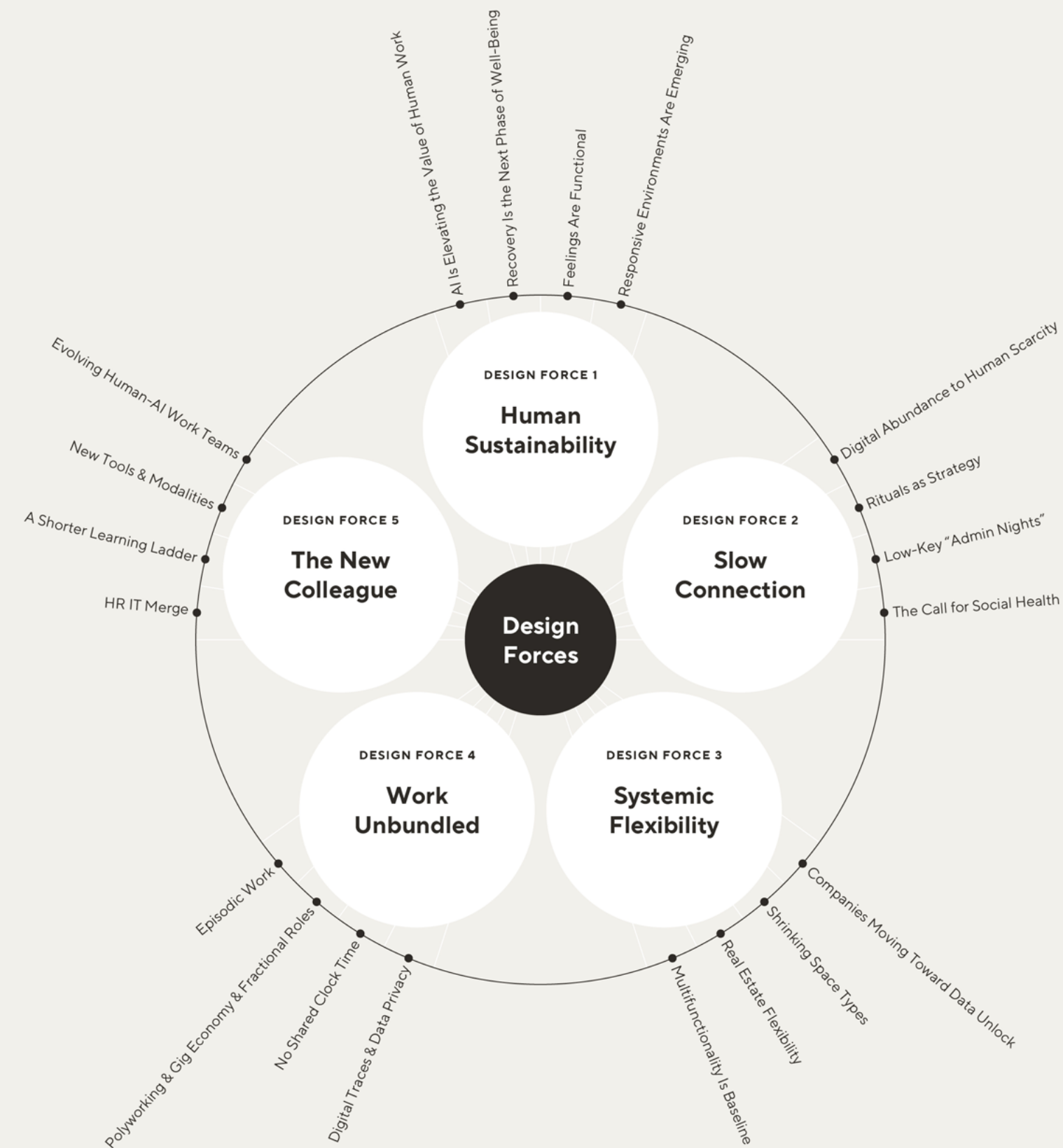
TRENDS

Design Expressions

Design Expressions are how those Design Forces start to show up in the real world. They translate big, abstract shifts into concrete changes in spaces, products, and experiences, moving from idea into practice.

Design Forces

The five Design Forces we've uncovered through our research show up in multiple vector points across industries and drive collective change.



Human Sustainability

WHAT'S HAPPENING

The more capable our technology gets, the more that uniquely human capabilities become irreplaceable.

Designing environments that sustain people emotionally, cognitively, physically, and socially is no longer a wellness initiative. It is becoming the core purpose of the performance-driven workplace.

Happier employees are associated with better long-run firm performance and shareholder value, not just nicer culture.¹

Human Sustainability



The most valuable human skills in an AI-driven future:²

- Ethical judgment
- Relationship building
- Emotional intelligence and empathy

KEY INSIGHTS

01

AI Is Elevating the Value of Human Work

As AI takes on more routine cognitive tasks,³ greater value is being placed on the skills that are hardest to automate. Critical thinking, ethical judgment, contextual understanding, and emotional intelligence are becoming essential in a work landscape wrestling with uniform “beige” AI-generated outputs. Leaders are looking for employees who can “connect the dots”, which requires more human capacity than simple prompting.

02

Recovery Is the Next Phase of Well-Being

Work is genuinely demanding and people are operating at a deficit.⁴ Designed interventions are increasingly needed to measurably close that gap, not just improve upon an already stable baseline. The fact that more public spaces are being intentionally designed for refuge, restoration, and solidarity points to something closer to an operational human need than an aspirational one. With wearables like the Oura ring which includes “Sleep Debt” scores,⁵ it’s becoming increasingly visible just how much recovery is needed.

03

Feelings Are Functional

More research is connecting belonging, happiness, and well-being directly to business outcomes.⁶ Metrics once dismissed as “soft” are increasingly proving to be the very inputs that can unlock transformational creativity and innovation. How you “feel” at work matters to how well you perform as an employee and therefore how well the organization thrives.

04

Responsive Environments Are Emerging

Personal biometric data is already being used to create “responsive” environments where smart building systems can adjust lighting, window shading, and HVAC controls in real time.⁷ We’re now moving from environmental control to personalized experiences, with hotels like Long Lane who are leveraging guest physiology to customize activities and dining based on your health profile. While not mainstream in workplace just yet, pilots are beginning to take passive data and empower employees to take charge of their own well-being data to personalize experiences.⁸

DESIGN OPPORTUNITIES

Now

Sweat the Micro-Interventions

Even little details like air quality, intentional color placement, and the feel of the upholstery can add up to whether the office is working for your biology or charging you for the “silent load” of poor design.

Map the Space By Emotional Intention

Go beyond form and function and embrace “feelings” as your guide for spatial design. For example, if you’re targeting “awe” and “wonder”, higher ceilings and architectural drama will be the best catalysts to enable these feelings. If you’re helping orchestrate belonging in a communal hub, moderate ambient noise, warm tones, and human-scaled elements are appropriate.

Nothing Is Neutral

Recovery doesn’t wait for a dedicated room most floors don’t have, so the work shifts into the products themselves, offering a gradient of privacy right where people already are. A high back, a screen, a deeper seat, or a turned orientation each give someone a way to dial enclosure up or down as the moment demands, so refuge becomes something the space offers everywhere.

Next

Agency Over Collection

You can know vegetables are best for you and still want the freedom to reach for the cookie. That freedom, the ability to opt in or opt out, will likely matter even more in a future where personal data is being used to shape how we work. Early signals already show organizations experimenting with biometric data for things like building access, but the more likely path is that personal data gets anonymized into commands the space responds to, or into suggestions handed back to the person to take or ignore. Products may increasingly become receivers, acting on what the user and their wearable choose to push, not what the building decides to collect.

Add-On Certification

We could see new metrics that indicate or prove human sustainability scores, much like ESG, with responsibility passing to products through new or expanded certifications. However, if human sustainability remains important only when talent attraction is critical and isn’t formalized, we could see the desire for these products wane during tough times or even make them vulnerable to false claims.



Slow Connection

WHAT'S HAPPENING

We engineered convenience into modern life and accidentally engineered each other out.

As digital interactions become constant, meaningful in-person connection is becoming more and more valuable.

The workplace is no longer just a site of productivity, but one of the few remaining places where unplanned, human interaction can still happen consistently.



Workplace rituals serve as tools for fostering cohesion, maintaining cultural continuity, and navigating change. They operate as a means of reinforcing organizational identity and values while providing a structured way to manage uncertainty and stress.¹

Slow Connection

Time spent socializing at work has nearly doubled since the pandemic.²



KEY INSIGHTS

01

Digital Abundance to Human Scarcity

Multiple studies are pointing to the erosion of trust and satisfaction when screens are part of the conversation.³ People are yearning for depth of relationship, and it seems the more digitally connected we become, the more a premium is put on actual human connection. Organizations are quickly realizing that engineering humans out of the experience with technology substitutes can be a costly error and that the emotional quality of interactions is in fact the product.⁴

02

Rituals as Strategy

Socialization has not just entered the workday. It has become something organizations and individuals are actively making time and space for. New social-spatial strategies are emerging that advance team dynamics and build bonds between colleagues.⁵ And while most organizations are still focused inward, treating connection as a culture strategy within their own walls, some are pushing the idea outward. Workday's "Connection as a Cause" pilot trains employees to be "social connectors," both inside the office and across their broader community.⁶

03

Low-Key "Admin Nights"

The new night out is a quiet night in. The "admin night" went viral on TikTok, where friends gathered around a kitchen table with laptops open and their "to-do lists" sprawled out in between snacks. While it would be easy to read this cultural phenomenon as a quirky productivity hack, that misses the deeper insight. People are overwhelmed and increasingly isolated. What they are reaching for is not more stimulation, but connection. What the "admin night" really signals is a hunger for solidarity and relational moments that feel supportive instead of demanding.

04

The Call for Social Health

In June 2025, the WHO released the landmark report of its Commission on Social Connection, followed by the first-ever World Health Assembly resolution on social connection, adopted in May 2025. It urged member states to develop evidence-based policies to promote social connection for mental and physical health.⁸ The report explicitly calls on policymakers and all sectors to treat social health with the same urgency as physical and mental health.



DESIGN OPPORTUNITIES

Now

Unproductive Moments on Purpose

The office has historically treated every moment as potentially productive, but slow connection requires moments that are not. Don't use charge ports as a signal to "be on", instead create "digital detox" spaces and device collection points that remove temptation to "phub" (ignoring the person you're with by checking your phone).

Friend-Making Is a Floor Plan Decision

Connection is moving from the happy hour into the workday itself, becoming less of a perk that attracts people to the office and more a health imperative the office is uniquely positioned to serve. What the "craft raves" and "admin nights" signal is that mutual interest and purpose do bridging work that proximity alone cannot. This means the multipurpose and outdoor spaces that host programming should be untouched square footage in downsizing calculations.

Activate the In-Between

Brief but repeated encounters with the same people are one of the most reliable ways social bonds form. The corridors, stair landings, and leftover pockets of a building, where people already move through each other's lives, can be activated with seating and perching products that do the quiet work of repeatable relationship-building.

Next

What if Connection Was Prescribed

Social prescribing is already reaching food, housing, and forest bathing, so with the WHO elevating social health, we could see connection itself dosed and defined as therapeutic. If it becomes a health imperative, the fork may be whether companies host connection themselves, partnering with health systems so the space gets treated as reimbursable preventive infrastructure, or whether they just hand out stipends and push it off-site. For offices already straining to justify their footprint, that first path could quietly reclassify social space from overhead to health spend.

Can Socializing Be Too Strategic

As AI gets warmer and harder to tell from a person, synthetic relationships, the human-to-AI kind, could start competing for the human-to-human moments that slow connection fosters. If people are getting their social needs met with AI companions, do human relationships become optional, or do they become an even scarcer commodity? That highly influences whether the office needs to embody social spaces or to begin designing for people who are already coming in to work "accompanied."

Systemic Flexibility

WHAT'S HAPPENING

The workplace is shifting from a static environment to a responsive system.

As organizations gain greater visibility into how people move, gather, and work throughout the day, flexibility is evolving beyond movable furniture into something more intelligent, adaptive, and continuously responsive to changing needs.

Organizations are moving past simple occupancy counts toward how, when, and why spaces actually get used, with 87% now setting explicit targets for building utilization.¹

Systemic Flexibility



Hardly any organizations are planning for just one desk per person; instead, they now anticipate more employees than seats.²

KEY INSIGHTS

01

Companies Moving Toward Data Unlock

Companies are broadly analyzing more than just “badge swipes” that tell you “when” a space is being used, but not “how” it’s being used.² In connected buildings, real time data can turn a static building into a tunable, responsive instrument that can improve environmental conditions and energy efficiency.³ Predictive analytics are increasingly informing spatial decisions and furniture layouts vs the “reactive flexibility” approach that the pandemic initiated by putting wheels on anything that could move.

02

Shrinking Space Types

Assigned seating is on the decline, and so are traditional space types. It started with the single-purpose room, one container built for one activity. Then came the neighborhood, where the office borrowed from urban planning to organize movement at the scale of a small city. Now it’s drilling down smaller still, with products and spaces starting to cater to micro-experiences tuned less to the team or the task than to the person and the moment.

03

Real Estate Flexibility

Real estate is changing its relationship with commitment. Shorter leases, the rise of flex space, and surging demand for co-working spaces are all signals that organizations are starting to treat workplace capacity like a utility, not a fixed asset.^{4,5,6} Square footage can be dialed up or down as necessary, shifted across locations, and reconfigured over time so the physical footprint can follow the needs of teams and projects rather than locking them in place.

04

Multifunctionality Is Baseline

Consumers are increasingly demanding multi-functional devices that offer a combination of experiences to increase the value of their dollar. The commercial furniture industry is responding to the same underlying baseline demand. Manufacturers are leading with adaptability as the primary narrative rather than the aesthetic one, with collections designed to not only do more than one task but enable more than one experience.

DESIGN OPPORTUNITIES

Now

What the Data Can’t Feel

Early experiments are already simulating occupancy and behavior with digital twins and predictive tools to optimize layouts. That’s great for efficiency, but very few are asking how a layout tuned for systemic flexibility actually feels to the person inside it. That gap is where A&D firms can lead, designing for the human experience the data can’t see, so even highly tuned spaces still feel warm, easy, and human.

Recombine and Reconfigure

Prioritize specifying products that can evolve without needing a full replacement. Consider what materials or components can be used that upgrade-in-place. Long term value may be more in the system, platform, or even connectors than on the products themselves.

The Literacy of Change

“Kit of parts” may not be a new term, but designing that menu of flexibility is only half the opportunity. The other half is the educational piece. It isn’t as glamorous as the fit and finish, but it hands the people using the space a playbook they can return to whenever they need to reconfigure it for their own evolving needs. Videos of product adjustments, layout examples that identify what arrangement offers highest acoustic value, and simple cues for reading their own space turn the kit from a nice idea into something people actually use.



Next

The Never-Finished Space

Current state, many of our projects front-load research and insights in order to set the stage for the entire project. But this model assumes that conditions will remain the same from project scoping all the way to punch lists. We know, however, that the pace of change is only getting faster, so we may see a demand for ongoing intelligence throughout the span of the project and beyond. Some firms may secure more ongoing relationships with clients and be used to update or tweak design conditions as new realities and needs emerge. We could also see varying layers of ownership across the built environment, with CRE owning occupancy data and behavioral analysis, dealers owning the autonomous reconfigurations of spaces via robotic advancements, and architects and designers owning the stewardship of all of the human-centric texture that makes places meaningful. That meaning could look like placemaking context, cultural narratives, brand stories, and the uniquely human experience moments that can get buffed out by numbers.

Buying More Than a Product

As clients demand spaces that adapt with them, manufacturers are under growing pressure to keep up with expectations for more tailored and personalized solutions that are evolving faster than traditional launch cycles. In an AI-influenced landscape, we will likely continue to see greater value placed on design intent and the origin stories behind products. Paired with rapid advances in 3D printing that are reshaping what’s possible with custom solutions, this could begin to shift the relationship between designers and manufacturers. Custom solutions could start to scale alongside predesigned portfolio offerings, creating more collaborative pathways for specification. This would allow designers and manufacturers to work together more rapidly to bring ideas to life.

Work Unbundled

WHAT'S HAPPENING

The structures that once defined work are loosening.

Work is becoming more fluid across time, place, and role, reshaping expectations around where work happens, how people collaborate, and what the workplace needs to support.

1 in 5 meetings now happen outside regular work hours, and the average employee sends or receives 50+ messages outside of core business hours.¹

Work Unbundled

Titles and promotions still matter, but for Millennials and Gen Z they are no longer the primary signal of growth, with intentional and sustainable career moves taking priority.²



KEY INSIGHTS

01

Episodic Work

Whether it's microshifting,³ where people slip between personal errands and short work stints, the peaks-and-valleys attendance rhythms hybrid schedules create,⁴ or the rising appetite for compressed four-day workweeks as AI cuts routine load,⁵ work is becoming distinctly episodic and untethered from the old nine-to-five container the office once was. Peaks and valleys attendance continues to be a challenge for organizational leaders who want their spaces to feel vibrant and full at all times.

02

Polyworking & Gig Economy & Fractional Roles

People are increasingly assembling careers from multiple sources, combining a primary job with freelance projects,⁶ side businesses, and fractional roles,⁷ so the old model of one employer across a career is clearly loosening. "Job hugging," holding tight to a secure job out of caution, may slow the shift toward fragmented work, but it doesn't reverse it.⁸ The deeper forces, platform talent markets, skills-based hiring, and looser role definitions, are still pulling in that direction.

03

No Shared Clock Time

Workers are interrupted every two minutes by a message, a notification, or another calendar invite, and 80% report they do not have enough time or energy to do their actual work.¹ Asynchronous collaboration is becoming more mainstream and absorbing what synchronous meetings used to hold, aided by AI that can summarize a conversation, extract the decisions, and deliver the context to anyone who was not in the room.

04

Digital Traces & Data Privacy

As work unbundles across time, place, and role, employers lose the presence-based oversight the office once made easy, and many are reaching for digital traces to replace it. Seven in ten large companies now say they'll use some form of employee monitoring.⁹ But as surveillance fills the gap that presence left behind, it collides with growing concern over personal data and privacy, and that collision is one more heat source under an already boiling pot of organizational trust breakdown.¹⁰



DESIGN OPPORTUNITIES

Now

Async Eats the Meeting

Asynchronous collaboration is moving from workaround to default, with AI now able to summarize a conversation, pull the decisions, and hand the context to anyone who missed it. The synchronous meeting is losing its monopoly on how work gets coordinated, which could impact meeting room quantities and typologies that serve this new normal.

The Drop-In Office

People aren't waiting for permission to work episodically, they already do. The office isn't a container for work during the hours of 9-5 anymore, but is instead something to attend purposefully to achieve a specific outcome. This reality changes the environment from feeling like a daily home base of work to a destination that needs to earn its place in the workflow. Products have to shift their position, store easily, and be equipped to serve multiple functions at all times. This also has broader implications for storage as we continue to see new lifestyle convenience amenities like Amazon lockers, Doordash lockers, and more.

Work Is Everywhere All at Once

For a growing share of the workforce juggling multiple roles, schedules, and employers, the workplace is whatever space serves the work in front of them at that moment. Work supporting design strategies are increasingly seeping into airport lounges, hotel lobbies, libraries, cafés, and other third places. Every public space is a potential workplace.

Next

The Office You Carry

In a future where gig and fractional roles are common, the person may become the unit that flexes rather than the office footprint. The workplace is no longer something you're given; it's something you carry with you. From your tools and technology to even worksurfaces, employees may have setups funded by their employer or accessed through subscriptions, tailored to specific needs such as acoustics, spatial computing, or broadcasting. As amenities shift from being defined by a single organization to being selected across a network of spaces throughout a city, the workday becomes a stitched-together journey. In this more distributed experience, the key question becomes: Who is designing the user experience across it all?

Back by Workflow, Not Mandate

If AI absorbs the automatable tasks so easily done remotely or on the go, it may pull the floor out from under much of what props up hybrid work and microshifting today. We could see a push back to the office, not by mandate but by workflow need. If the human residue AI leaves behind is high-stakes judgment, strategy that needs real-time alignment, and context-heavy analysis, then a space that re-bundles that work may become necessary. The office is reborn not as a place to do tasks but to make the calls that matter, built for record-ready acoustics, 3D visualization, and the highest privacy.

The New Colleague

WHAT'S HAPPENING

AI is quickly becoming a part of everyday work, changing not only how tasks are completed, but how people collaborate, make decisions, and organize workflows.

As organizations adapt to integrated human-AI work patterns, the workplace is beginning to support a new kind of collaboration. This transformation is shaped by evolving roles, shared intelligence, and changing expectations around learning, communication, and decision-making.

62% of organizations are experimenting with AI Agents, who can take action on behalf of a human.¹



The New Colleague



Among frontline employees, 42% who are regular AI users report saving eight hours a week.²

KEY INSIGHTS

01

Human-AI Teams

Work is shifting from using AI like an intern or tool to intentionally building teams around human and AI collaboration.³ But the organizations seeing the greatest returns are not the ones that added AI to existing workflows, they are the ones redefining the workflow from the ground up with AI optimizing the experience.⁴ Almost all businesses now use AI in at least one capacity, but leading firms are beginning to treat AI agents less like software and more like colleagues that require their own spaces, rituals, and interaction patterns.⁵

02

Speak to the Machine

AI is shifting from something you operate to something you direct. It's reading your goals, acting on its own, and adapting as things change. The keyboard is losing its place as the default, as tech giants and startups push voice dictation that is simply faster than typing. Some early adopters are speaking hundreds of thousands of words each month.⁶ Gesture, gaze, touch, and even the room itself, through microphones and sensors, are becoming the new ways people interact with technology.

03

Need for Augmentation over Automation

The entry-level tasks that once served as the on-ramp to a profession, including research, formatting, and first drafts, are exactly the work AI absorbs first.⁷ If junior employees have always learned by doing, organizations are now trying to figure out where that learning happens and redefine how they measure performance and develop talent, or they risk eroding their own leadership pipeline.

04

Who Owns the Experience

HR and IT are rapidly converging into a single decision spine that will shape how AI and human workflows are governed, staffed, and physically supported.⁸ As HR takes responsibility for skills, roles, and experience and IT owns platforms, data, and security, their joint priorities will determine the new DEX or Digital Employee Experience.⁹ This will likely influence which AI-human practices are scaled, how roles are redefined, and what kinds of spaces are required to support those practices.

DESIGN OPPORTUNITIES

Now

The Room Is the Interface

How people interact with technology fundamentally shapes how furniture can support it either directly or indirectly. If the interface is moving off the screen and into the body and the room, then acoustics, sensor placement, sightlines, and spatial configuration become part of the technology stack whether designers have named them that yet or not.

Invest in the Pipeline

Some leaders are proposing to hand junior hires harder problems sooner, but problem-solving is often judgement dependent which is built by experience. Project-based learning is the model worth borrowing. Workplaces designed with products and solutions that enable real problem-solving, iteration, and peer critique aren't just supporting the work, they're developing the tacit knowledge that is not easily automated.

Competing Priorities, One Room

HR and IT are arriving in the same room, and they won't always agree. As these functions converge, the people defining what a space must enable bring complementary but competing priorities, like IT's demands around data, privacy, and device density alongside HR's focus on well-being and inclusion. The designer's job is increasingly to reconcile them into spaces that feel human and technologically invisible.

Next

Designing Systems and Spaces

Work already moves across places. But we could begin to see it operate more intentionally as a system, spanning AI agents, people, digital environments, and physical space at once. As that system becomes more connected, the challenge could shift from designing individual environments to shaping the experience across everything. This means how information flows, how decisions get made, and how teams stay aligned all become part of the design challenge. This could begin to change the role of the office. Instead of being the primary site of work, it may become one node in a broader network that includes home, the city, and digital platforms, but one that is constantly adapting. It becomes the place where the most critical moments happen, when teams need to come together to see the full picture, align quickly, or make high-impact decisions. Spaces may need to surface that visibility in real time through spatial computing or live data environments that help teams understand and act on the system around them. With predictive programming and responsive design, that space could shift between moments or even serve multiple organizations, adjusting privacy, access, and purpose as needed. Designers may need to think beyond the room, shaping how work carries across contexts and ensuring that every touchpoint, not just the office, contributes to a coherent experience.



Where These Design Forces Are Leading

Across these five Design Forces, an unlikely thing keeps happening. Technology, the very force we feared would flatten the human experience, is starting to enable it, sometimes in ways that feel almost natural. That’s the promise. But it comes paired with a threat we can’t look past.

AI is about to split our industry into two speeds. The first is “good enough” design that satisfies the brief without ever rising above it, and under the real pressures of time and budget, plenty of clients will accept it. The second is the work AI can’t reach, the tier that used to be our ceiling and now has to become our floor.

These Design Forces don’t resolve neatly or point to a single answer. What they ask for is a profession willing to work above the line AI draws, even when everything pushes us toward the easier side of it. That’s the harder road. It’s also the one that preserves and stewards the experience of being human in the built environment.



DESIGN FORCE 1: HUMAN SUSTAINABILITY

Data and science can make the workplace work for the body, not against it.

Well-being is moving out of dedicated amenities and into the whole environment. As work grows more cognitively and emotionally demanding, the small things (light, air, acoustics, and the feel of a material) start to add up, and data increasingly lets us tune them in real time. Get those details right and the space builds people’s capacity; ignore them and it quietly spends it, charging everyone the silent load of poor design.

DESIGN FORCE 2: SLOW CONNECTION

Connection does not happen by default.

Meaningful connection is becoming a core workplace condition rather than an afterthought. When you design for the unhurried moments, the shared table, the agenda-less coffee, and the time away from screens, then relationships, trust, and belonging will have room to form.

DESIGN FORCE 3: SYSTEMIC FLEXIBILITY

Flexibility is becoming more proactive and embedded.

Adaptability is shifting from a one-time planning decision to an ongoing system, with spaces that respond to changing work patterns, team needs, and real-time data. As efficiency reshapes everything, the real work is protecting what it can’t optimize, including the human experience, narrative, and culture, so that a space retains its meaning even as it continues to change.

DESIGN FORCE 4: WORK UNBUNDLED

The office must earn each visit.

Work is becoming fluid across time, place, and role, with less of a fixed daily routine and more of something people assemble on their own terms. As output becomes the metric of success, the office has to deliver on its intent, including the focus, collaboration, and connection it promises, rather than simply hold people for the day. Every space now has to prove what it’s for, or it won’t be worth the trip.

DESIGN FORCE 5: THE NEW COLLEAGUE

The colleague you direct, not the tool you operate.

AI is shifting from a tool you operate to a colleague you direct, and that changes what a workplace has to hold. It’s not just people working together, but people and machines working side-by-side. As AI absorbs the routine tasks, what’s left for people is the judgment, the context, and the creativity it can’t replicate. The space has to be built to develop exactly those things.

Design Expressions

The Design Forces explored throughout this report are beginning to take physical shape in the environments around us.

These Design Expressions highlight emerging workplace ideas, spatial strategies, and human-centered experiences influenced by the shifts redefining how people work, connect, and feel in the workplace.



Scan to explore the spaces and projects that bring these ideas to life.



DESIGN EXPRESSION 1

Sound First Design

Design shaped by sound, rhythm, and atmosphere. Instead of simply controlling noise, spaces are shaped to support mood, focus, and emotional comfort.



DESIGN EXPRESSION 2

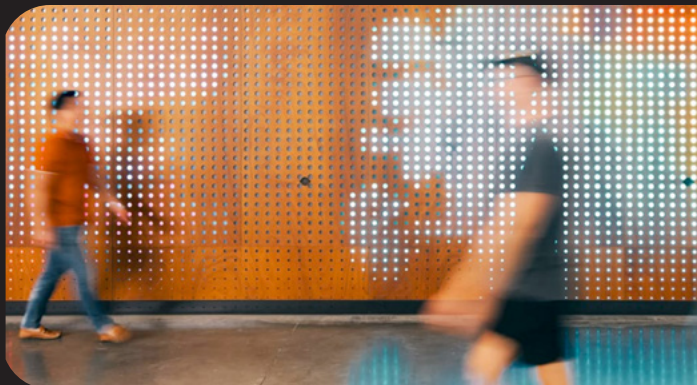
Exposing the Seams

Design that reveals process, material honesty, and human touch. Exposing the seams embraces visible process and material honesty, revealing how things are made rather than hiding construction details.

DESIGN EXPRESSION 3

Carving Out Peace in Public

Designing for “alone together” is shaping more personal moments within shared spaces. As environments become more open and social, people are looking for ways to retreat without fully leaving the space. Designers are layering in moments where someone can step back without stepping out.



DESIGN EXPRESSION 4

Play Becomes Form

Moments designed for participation, not just use. Play is no longer just a decorative layer. It’s a way for people to connect, experiment, and feel a sense of agency within the spaces and products around them. As environments invite interaction, the line between designer and user begins to blur, allowing participation to shape the experience itself.

DESIGN EXPRESSION 5

Nothing is Neutral

Design choices that communicate values, identity, and intent. Every design communicates something, even when it appears neutral. Color, material, layout, and messaging all reflect values and intent, whether consciously chosen or not. These choices shape how culture is expressed and who feels represented, making neutrality not an absence of meaning, but a message in itself.



Resources

See Design Forces Come to Life in Chicago

Explore how the Design Forces shaping the future of work are translated into real environments, applications, and experiences within our Chicago showroom. From hospitality-inspired moments to spaces designed for focus, flexibility, and connection, see how emerging workplace ideas come to life through design.



View Our Research

Dive deeper into the research shaping our perspective on the future of work, including Creating Places to Belong and other insights focused on human experience, well-being, connection, and workplace behavior. Explore the signals and research helping organizations design environments that better support how people feel, connect, and perform.



Learn More About CEUs

Continue the conversation through CEUs exploring emerging trends and human-centered design across Workplace, Health, and Education environments. From well-being and connection to flexibility, care, and evolving ways of working and learning, discover insights designed to inspire new thinking and practical application.



DesignSuite: Where Ideas Take Form

Designed to meet projects at any stage, DesignSuite simplifies the path from concept to specification through collaboration, expertise, and a seamless, team-driven approach. As a curated, end-to-end program, it helps move ideas forward with clarity, momentum, and confidence from early inspiration through final execution.



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