

OpenBlue

To Make Your Office Hybrid-Friendly, Focus On These Three Factors



Before COVID-19, most employees worked at the office every day, but the pandemic proved that people can also be productive at home, whether they live down the street, in another state or even another country. Now, with hybrid work schedules, many employees can choose whether to work on-site every day, come into the office only on required days, or work solely from home.

Of workers who are able to work from home, 59% are doing so all or most of the time, and 18% are working from home some of the time, according to a [Pew Research Center](#) study conducted this year.

With employees able to return to the office at least part-time, each company now must figure out how to adapt its space to suit its specific needs. Some are opting for radical changes, like ditching the office altogether or opening satellite offices closer to employees' homes. Others are keeping their traditional offices, reconfiguring them to serve the needs of a hybrid workforce.

Regardless of where businesses land, they all recognize that the moment to rethink office space – and reallocate related resources – is now. Real estate claims a large chunk of any non-virtual company budget, accounting for 10%-20% of all personnel-driven expenses, according to [McKinsey](#). Well-conceived office spaces, coupled with flexible work schedules, can also attract and retain talent in a tight labor market.

Companies need to go beyond rearranging desks and expanding conference rooms. It's a good time to add technology that makes life easier for hybrid workers,

including frictionless access, facial recognition and in-office geolocation. And employers also need tools to monitor and maintain the new flow of workers, says Beth Stana, senior product manager for Johnson Controls' OpenBlue Companion.

"The new flexibility is here to stay," she says.

To best prepare their offices for this new flexible future, companies should focus on making changes in these three key areas.

1. Workspace allocation

When it comes to networking, collaborating and interacting, nothing compares to in-person gatherings. "Sometimes having that space and meeting people further opens up lines of communication," says Stana.

In-person gatherings will run more smoothly and safely in less-crowded and smarter conference rooms, where remote workers can digitally join the conversation and occupants can swiftly adjust lighting, window coverings and temperature to save time getting comfortable.

Hybrid work models have also upended the usual flow of workers. Wednesday, or "hump day," has taken the crown for busiest day of the week, with 46% of U.S. office workers in person that day, compared with 35% on Mondays.

Employers also need to make sure there's enough space to accommodate workers each day. This can be a difficult balance to strike. Monday may find rows of desks sitting empty, only for the entire staff to show up Tuesday, leaving some workers without a seat. While coordinating staff schedules can help, requiring people to punch in on specific days partly defeats the purpose of a flexible workplace where people can tailor their in-office hours according to their preferences.

One solution is "hot-desking," in which employees grab any available desk. Employees can then store belongings in lockers so they have what they need for each workday. Hot-desking can take some time to get used to initially but will help streamline the process. About 63% of real estate executives anticipated adding more hot-desking options, according to the CBRE Spring 2022 Occupier Sentiment Survey, which polled 185 corporate real estate executives with U.S. office portfolios.

2. Air quality

As an airborne virus, COVID-19 made improving air filtration indoors an imperative to keep workers safe. Demand for these types of sustainable features is not going away. The CBRE survey found that more than 50% of tenants are interested in indoor air quality, while 37% are considering adopting air-quality sensors. "Air quality is very much top of mind for employers, to ensure the quality of air that people are breathing is not contaminated," says Stana.

It's now normal to walk into a building and see air purifiers stowed in corners, in addition to any purification systems that exist behind the scenes. OpenBlue Enterprise Manager monitors air quality and provides dashboards and customizable reports, so

facilities staff and management can monitor it at will. Of current workers with a hybrid work status, 77% expressed that they are at least somewhat satisfied with their employers' measures to protect them from the virus at work, according to the Pew study.

3. Touchless technology

COVID-19 made people more conscious about germs on surfaces and keeping hands clean. That's one reason that more than 40% of tenants are interested in touchless technology, according to CBRE. Digital tools can make a hybrid workplace more comfortable and efficient on several fronts. For instance, applications like OpenBlue Companion allow employees to control their working environment via an app on their phones. They can also use the app to make desk reservations, access smart lockers, reserve parking and locate colleagues with step-by-step navigation. The phone acts as an access badge.

Touchless technology helps when the printer isn't working or something is wrong in the meeting room. OpenBlue can directly send a help-desk ticket, avoiding multiple calls and manual ticket creation. This enhanced efficiency means problems get resolved quickly and effortlessly.

The OpenBlue Companion app allows employees to know the conference room capacity at a glance and schedule meeting rooms without back-and-forth emails with an administrator. OpenBlue Companion integrates with Microsoft Outlook to manage and sync individual schedules as well. It can also share announcements (and emergency information like severe-weather alerts) as an additional way to spread important information.

For employers, the OpenBlue Companion app paired with OpenBlue Enterprise Manager increases visibility into infrastructure performance, uptime, scheduling and capital planning. And it eases the transition back to work as well. Johnson Controls' OpenBlue Companion can help owner-operators and tenants adapt to the new hybrid work model, making the experience efficient and comfortable.

Three years ago, this hybrid workplace was far less common. And most companies never envisioned it as a possibility. But today, employers and employees alike can look to the latest innovations to create a sense of calm and control for those in the office, supporting their roles and making day-to-day work easier. Employers can also reassure employees that it is safe to come back to the workplace and enjoy the camaraderie and satisfaction of working with their teammates in person. And that makes for a more productive environment for everyone.

