

White paper

How to facilitate shared and flexible workspaces



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Equipment that supports comfort and productivity shouldn't be limited to the office.

It no longer goes without saying that each employee has their own desk, with photo frames and drawers filled with personal items. Flexible working was becoming more and more prominent in the second half of the 2010s, and the COVID-19 outbreak has significantly accelerated the process. It's becoming increasingly clear that many employees want to work from home more often after the pandemic ends.

At the same time, many large organisations are looking at a return-to-work strategy with less office space. A Fortune/Deloitte survey found that up to 76% of CEOs think they will need less office space in the future. Meanwhile, retailer Ralph Lauren announced they're cutting their corporate office space by 30%, one of many companies to downsize their physical space in the past two years.

In practice, this means that a single workspace will no longer be dedicated to a single employee. Rather, there will be more hybrid work structures. An employee could come into the office a few days a week, or they could use the office for meetings and socialising with colleagues.

As organisations shift to flexible work, it's a chance to address other aspects of office design. The only thing less popular than cubicle farms are the open-plan offices that replaced them. Study after study has shown that people working in open offices have more stress, lower morale and productivity, less collaboration and fewer interactions with their colleagues.

Now that offices are partially empty, leaders can course correct and make the working experience better than it was before. An effective and popular solution is to create suitable spaces for separate activities, such as concentrated writing in a quiet room and brainstorming with colleagues in a meeting room that's designed to facilitate collaboration.

Wellness Practitioner Betsey Banker explains the change she's seeing: "There's a lot that's still unknown about how COVID-19 will impact businesses over the long term. However, it's clear that there's a greater demand for remote and hybrid workstyles. Companies have the opportunity to break free from traditional office layouts and explore fresh ways to promote productivity and in-person collaboration. It's a concept that goes beyond the traditional idea of sofas and meeting rooms."

She believes the path forward lies in employee choice. "In my view, the new way of working gives employees greater autonomy to choose how and where they work on a given day—at home or in the office—and the opportunity to find a space that suits their tasks and personal preferences, such as a quiet room for concentration and dynamic space for creativity. Instead of conforming to a single way of working—such as everyone in cubicles or open-concept seating—employees should have the freedom to choose between a dedicated workstation or a shared one, and organisations will likely need a mix of both."

Banker points out that whilst this approach may be necessary, it comes with a challenge. "I expect that offering this level of flexibility will become a requirement for attracting and retaining talent, not only to the company but also to the actual office. The challenge is this: as companies reduce their footprints or try shared workspaces for the first time, it will also require new tools and techniques to properly address employee comfort and health."

The basic needs of a shared desk space, however, are easier to grasp. It's not only about offering different spaces but about the right office furniture and the necessary tools and technology. Flexibility is an absolute must for shared workspaces. This means that every desk must adapt quickly and simply to the needs of the individual employee.

This white paper will review steps that organisations can take to facilitate flexible and shared workspaces. The paper is supported by recent international research¹ that provides insight into the needs of employees when it comes to flexible working.

What do different employees need to do their job well?

If employees are accustomed to having their own workspace with their own office furniture, the change to shared workspaces can feel significant. Employees can feel lost without the security of a personal workspace. That makes good preparation essential.

Betsey Banker notes: “This depends a lot on the personality of each employee, as well as their tasks. As a first step, leaders should survey employees about their work preferences. Find out how they want to use the office space and how much time they want to spend there. What makes time at the office comfortable and productive? How necessary is a permanent workstation? It’s also important to understand preferences like temperature, noise and lighting. The more that’s understood about employees’ needs, the better the office footprint can be reimagined to accommodate and make employees feel motivated to spend time on-site.”

A survey can also help map out employee needs. What tools do employees think are important? What technology is necessary for collaboration, especially between on-site and remote employees? A study by Ergotron (conducted by the independent research agency Opinion Matters) shows that more than half of respondents (**61%**) like to work with two screens. Betsey Banker notes: “Before investing in new furniture, tools or technology, make sure that employees’ needs are clear. Use survey responses as a roadmap to thoughtfully guide the transition to flexible workspaces.”

In addition, the survey shows that most employees (**84%**) find it (very) important to be able to hold meetings when part of the team is in the office and the rest are working remotely. Managers find this even more important for their teams, with **88%** indicating that they find this ability to be (very) important.

The fundamental question is: to what extent do organisations expect employees to work full time in the office again in the future? What does your organisation expect? That is an important starting point when determining how many shared workspaces you will need.

Software comparison company Capterra surveyed an international group of 4,600 employees to find the extent they would like to work full time in the office after the pandemic. This research showed that one-third of home workers do not want to return to the office.

Betsey Banker points out: “This step is especially important if the organisation is moving into a smaller space. However, even if the office size stays the same, furniture and layouts that ensure safe work and collaboration may take up more space than before, so former occupancy guidelines may not apply.”



Hybrid workspaces shouldn't come at the expense of employee ergonomics.

Shared workspaces require additional considerations. Work tools must be easy to unplug and move, so employees can find a suitable space for each activity or need throughout the day. Ergotron's research shows that **75%** of employees find it important to be able to easily switch between workspaces.

Another important requirement is simple furniture set-up. Betsey Banker says, "Workspace tools should benefit productivity, but they also need to support employee comfort and health. For computer workers, this means supporting an active workstyle and providing furniture that's adjustable. Flexibility becomes even more important if multiple users will work at a single desk. Not only do the desk, chair, monitors and keyboard need to be adjustable, but adjustments must be effortless.

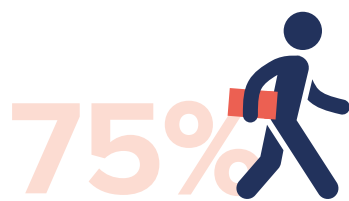
"For example, a healthy working posture requires the top edge of the monitor to be roughly eye level. Even a few centimetres of height difference between users will require a monitor adjustment. If the adjustment isn't easy to do, however, it won't happen. Hybrid workspaces shouldn't come at the expense of employee ergonomics."

Ergotron's research shows that employees appreciate social distancing in the office. **83%** of the respondents think that it's important to be able to keep sufficient distance when working with colleagues. Betsey Banker suggests: "The introduction of mobile workstations can be a great tool for supporting independent work and safe collaboration. Their size and shapes automatically put space in between individuals, but in a way that feels natural. Individual units are self-contained, so each person's technology and personal effects remain in a single work zone, even when moving between spaces and meeting rooms."

Whether through mobile workstations or shared ones, the key to flexible working is easy customisation. Once the path for the new hybrid office is mapped out, it's a good time to focus on what can be done to make shared workstations easy to personalise.



The basis of a shared workspace is flexibility. On one hand, the changeover works best when employees are flexible and able to let go of certain familiarities, such as a personal fixed workspace. On the other hand, companies should enable employees to do this by ensuring a truly flexible workspace, so the employee can set it up easily and quickly. A few basic principles help make flexible working possible.



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4A. Task-oriented areas

Different areas of the office have different needs. Collaboration and team-building require space to talk in groups and share resources. Some forms of concentrated work need complete silence. Some meetings need a space for conversation that is both uninterrupted and not overheard.

However, as Banker points out, office design has often ignored this salient fact. “In a traditional office, an individual’s desk acts like an anchor. It requires most work to be done in a single spot, regardless of personal needs or preferences. That’s why office designs, whether open-concept or cubicles, have often been unpopular. It’s difficult to maximise productivity when there’s little control over the workspace environment.”

Employers can facilitate productivity and community by creating spaces for specific tasks and preferences. Some places have workspaces for quiet concentration whilst others have workspaces together to facilitate team interaction. Flexible and mobile furniture can make it easy for people to move around throughout the day or week as their tasks require.

Banker notes that design really impacts the utility of these spaces. “Preference-based areas can be designed to prioritise elements like lighting, temperature and sound. When it comes to sound, some spaces can be free from noise distractions. Others can have soothing sounds from nature whilst spaces with background noise create a coffee-house effect.”

The goal is to make the office a place where employees want to be by creating spaces and collaboration opportunities that are more satisfying and productive than being 100% remote.

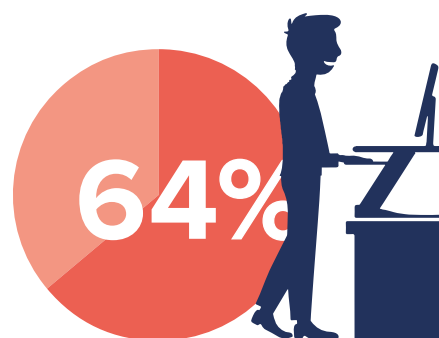
4B. Adjustable workstations

The key to ensuring these spaces are used to heighten productivity is to be sure workspaces are ergonomic and can be easily adjusted by employees. The chair should be completely adjustable, with the primary adjustments being the height and depth of the seat, lumbar support, and height and width of the armrest. In addition, a base support of five wheels will be more stable than four, and a chair with proper resistance control allows users to comfortably sit upright or lean back slightly.

An adjustable chair is the foundation of a good sitting posture and is important for anyone sitting for long stretches during the workday. Recently, an international Ergotron survey showed that employees and managers alike endorse the usefulness of an ergonomic chair: **84%** of employees and **83%** of managers think an ergonomic chair is highly important. However, only **22%** of the employees surveyed actually have such a chair.

Another important and helpful tool for flexible working is a worksurface that is easy to raise and lower. A height-adjustable worksurface lets employees vary their working posture throughout the day. This discourages sitting for eight hours straight. Ergotron's research shows that **64%** of employees consider a height-adjustable worksurface to be hugely important.

Betsey Banker explains why: "Sit-stand workstations provide that level of flexibility and can positively impact productivity. I think of them as multitools: you get a monitor that's independently adjustable from the keyboard, a keyboard that lifts or lowers into the proper typing position and the ability to sit and stand throughout the day. A greater amount of adjustability will accommodate a broader range of users."



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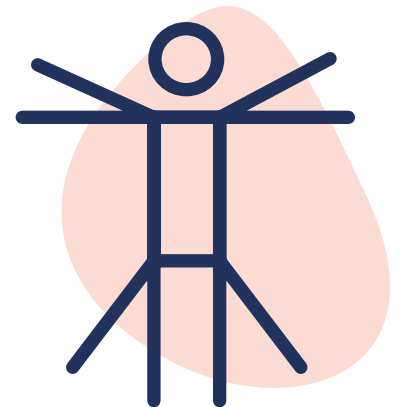
4C. Personalised technology

It's not just the chair and worksurface that need to be easy to adjust. Our working lives are dependent on and integrated with technology. For flexible working to take hold, IT needs to be easy to move and customise. This includes ensuring every station has an easy-to-adjust display. Betsey Banker points out: "Shared workspaces should have a monitor arm that's easy to adjust. Easy means tool-free and a low user force. There are monitor arms that you can easily position by hand and that automatically stay in the desired position."

It's an additional advantage if the monitor arm can carry multiple screens. Ergotron's research showed that **61%** of the employees surveyed needed to work with two monitors. A dual monitor also allows employees to quickly transform their desks into collaboration stations, so they can share screens with colleagues for integrated work.

The monitor arm is only the beginning, however. There are many ways to improve productivity by heightening the personalisation and customisation of technology throughout the office. For example, IT equipment needs to be easy to move. That means laptops need to be lightweight and easy to connect to and disconnect from docking stations. Mobile media carts can turn any room into a conference room by connecting laptops to a wider videoconferencing camera and video projection. Creating a flexible ICT infrastructure ensures that employees spend time in the office collaborating and creating, rather than getting meetings and workstations set up.

Workspace tools should benefit productivity, but they also need to support employee comfort and health.



5. Tips for encouraging an ergonomic working posture

An ergonomic workspace is necessary in the office and at home. In most countries, employers are legally responsible for ensuring this. Companies can let employees choose from a range of ergonomic furniture for the home or provide a budget to purchase their own. Ergotron's research shows that **27%** of employees have been supplied with a large monitor, and **22%** have been supplied with an ergonomic chair. About **19%** of employees received funds from their employers to purchase office furniture and supplies. What else can organisations do to encourage healthy working postures?



Tip 1: Movement reminders

The most crucial factor in ergonomic working is supporting various postures and interrupting sedentary time. Betsey Banker advises: "Changing the design of the workspace is an opportunity to change the culture. Introducing height-adjustable worksurfaces and active seating reinforces the message that movement is encouraged. Take it a step further by implementing new policies that support physical activity, like adding 5-10 minutes of standing and light stretching to every 60-minute meeting."

Tip 2: Make it personal

Even though research shows that employees like height-adjustable worksurfaces, it's still a good idea to remind them of the advantages. Betsey Banker notes: "When people develop an intrinsic reason for making a lifestyle change, it improves the likelihood of sticking with it. Height-adjustable worksurfaces have been associated with improved mood states and less pain. It's an opportunity to finish the workday feeling just as good—if not better—than when you started, with more energy to make health-promoting choices in the evening."

Tip 3: Posture check

Ergotron has developed a [workspace assessment](#) tool that employees can use to check if they have a good working posture. Betsey Banker says: "Working at a computer can appear so simple, but posture really matters. Working with the body out of alignment can add stress and lead to pain or injury. It's important to position equipment according to each user and then make regular checks and adjustments."

Tip 4: Check in with your employees

Regardless of how many software tools you offer your employees, personal attention is also needed. If employees work from home, it is more difficult for managers to estimate whether employees are comfortable in their work. After all, you can't hear them sighing from a distance, and you don't easily see a slumped posture. The Ergotron survey showed that **63%** of employees do not have a manager who regularly checks on how they are doing.

Betsey Banker emphasises: "Equipment that supports comfort and productivity shouldn't be limited to the office. Remote employees need access to the same tools and strategies as on-site workers. In addition, consider policies that intentionally support remote workers, like normalising walking or stepping in place during web meetings, when appropriate."

A return-to-work strategy that includes shared workspaces should reflect how and where employees want to work to maximise productivity and safe collaboration. The transition to flexible, shared workspaces is an opportunity for organisations to invest in ergonomic furniture that encourages movement and supports employee health. Thorough preparation and the proper tools are necessary to enable employees to work at flexible workspaces in a way that's healthy and good for morale.

The following preparatory steps are required:

1. Map out employees' needs
2. Make a estimate of daily occupancy
3. Get familiar with the necessary office tools
4. Facilitate social distancing
5. Make investments based on the latest health guidelines

Next, build flexible workspaces with the following equipment:

- Ergonomic desk chair
- Height-adjustable workstation
- Easily adjustable monitor arm

Betsey Banker summarises: “Good preparation and the right tools determine whether the implementation of flexible workspaces will be successful. Additionally, good guidance from HR, facilities or ergonomic professionals is important to help employees embrace healthy working postures and make movement a daily habit.”

The transition to flexible, shared workspaces is an opportunity for organisations to invest in ergonomic furniture that encourages movement and supports employee health.

¹ The Future of Office Research was conducted in May 2021 by [Opinion Matters](#) on behalf of Ergotron Europe. This survey was conducted in 4 regions (in local language) UK/FR/DE/NL, addressing 150 Employees and 150 Employers. [Opinion Matters Data Drill Deck Link: Part A \(Employees\) & Part B \(Employers\)](#)



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