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Global workplace and office design trends

A UNISPACE POINT OF VIEW

The office isn't obsolete.
Lazy thinking is.

For the past few years, workplace conversations have been dominated by extremes. Remote versus in-office. Attendance versus autonomy. Technology versus culture.

In 2026, those binaries feel outdated. The reality is more nuanced and more interesting.

Organizations aren't asking whether offices still matter. They're asking whether their spaces are earning their role (and cost) in a hybrid world shaped by AI, generational change, and radically different expectations of work.

At Unispace, we see a clear shift well underway.

The most effective workplaces are no longer defined by scale, density, or aesthetics.

They're defined **by how well they work for people**—cognitively, socially, and operationally.

These trends reflect that shift.

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1

AI is no longer a tool, it's a teammate.

For years, AI sat quietly in the background. A smarter search bar, a faster assistant.

That era is over!

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1

In 2026, AI agents are active contributors to work. They draft, analyze, predict, and collaborate.

Which raises a new question for workplace design:

If AI is part of the team, where and how does it show up?

What's changed, or changing

- Teams now collaborate with AI in real time, not asynchronously
- Workflows are faster, more iterative, and more cognitively demanding
- Privacy, visibility, and focus matter more than ever

As AI takes on pattern recognition, data synthesis, and predictive analysis, the human role shifts.

Less time is spent processing information. More time is spent interpreting it, exercising judgment, navigating ambiguity, and making ethical calls. Those activities place very different demands on space. They require environments that support focus, discretion, and high-stakes thinking—not just speed or visibility.

And designing for AI collaboration isn't simply adding more screens in meeting rooms. It's about creating spatial conditions where human judgment can keep pace with machine intelligence.

Design implications

- Spaces that support deep human judgment alongside machine speed
- Rooms designed for human-AI collaboration, not just screen sharing
- Infrastructure that supports secure, seamless, always-on intelligence

AI isn't just changing how work gets done. It's changing how workplaces respond to people.

Systems can track how spaces are actually used and adjust lighting, temperature, acoustics, and air quality throughout the day, supporting people as work happens, not just at the point of design.

OUR POINT OF VIEW:

The workplace shouldn't compete with AI.

It should amplify what humans do best:

strategy, creativity, context, ethics, connection, ambiguity, experience, et cetera.

GWI DATA:

49%

of employees already actively use AI day to day in the workplace, according to our 2025-2026 Global Workplace Insights report.

According to employees, **creative thinking, oversight and monitoring, and quality control** will remain the top human responsibilities in the AI-enabled workplace.

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Occupancy is a vanity metric. Performance isn't.

Counting heads made sense when work was linear and location dependent.

It doesn't anymore.

In 2026, the real question isn't *"How full is the building?"*

It's ***"How well is it working for the people inside?"***

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What's changed, or changing

- Hybrid work for many **is** the default, not a perk
- Time in the office is intentional and outcome-driven
- Employees expect value, not obligation

Design implications

- Spaces designed around outcomes, not averages
- Fewer assumptions, more evidence-based planning
- Metrics that measure effectiveness, not attendance

OUR POINT OF VIEW:

If people only come in because they're forced to, the space has already failed.

The best workplaces make the choice obvious:

This shift has significant financial implications. When organizations optimize for attendance, they often lock in excess space, oversized rooms, and underutilized assets.

When they optimize for performance, they start making smarter decisions about scale, mix, and investment.

The result isn't just better experience, it's better capital efficiency.

In a hybrid world, space that doesn't actively support outcomes becomes one of the most expensive line items on the balance sheet.

GWI DATA:

59%

of the global workforce across six core industries operated in a hybrid environment in 2025, with only 28% fully in-office. This is unlikely to change by the end of the decade.

Collaboration remains

the #1 reason for voluntary office attendance.

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Hybrid work exposed the noise problem —and the basics beneath it.

Hybrid work didn't just change where people work.

It exposed how poorly many offices support focus.

Open plans promised collaboration. Too often, it's delivered distraction.

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What's changed, or changing

- Knowledge work demands deep concentration alongside collaboration
- Video calls now happen everywhere, all the time
- Noise is one of the biggest sources of workplace dissatisfaction globally

Distraction today isn't just acoustic. It's cognitive.

What's required isn't silence for its own sake, but environments that protect sustained thinking. In that context, managing noise becomes a strategic capability, not a comfort feature.

Design implications

- Clear zoning for focus, collaboration, and transition
- Acoustic design treated as core infrastructure, not an afterthought
- A renewed emphasis on quiet rooms, call booths, and retreat spaces

Noise is only one factor, though.

Lighting, temperature, and air quality are just as critical to focus, well-being, and productivity. Static environments can't keep up with the way hybrid offices are used.

OUR POINT OF VIEW:

Some noise supports collaboration. Too much noise undermines focus.

Great workplaces are designed to manage the difference.

GWI DATA:

>80%

of employees said their office was more distracting than working from home.

Noise and distractions, or lack of suitable spaces for focus or quiet work, in the office was the

#1 productivity barrier in 2025.

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4

Designing for the next workforce means designing for difference.

By 2026, Gen Z is no longer "emerging." They're established.

And they're not adapting quietly.

They expect workplaces to reflect neurodiversity, multiculturalism, and individuality versus a singular, dominant way of working.

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What's changed, or changing

- Wider recognition of neurodivergent needs
- Global teams spanning cultures, time zones, and communication styles
- Stronger expectations around inclusion, choice, and authenticity

Design implications

- Multiple ways to work well in the same environment
- Spaces that reduce sensory overload and social pressure
- Design that supports belonging without forcing uniformity

Designing for difference isn't about creating 'special-case' solutions. It's about recognizing that cognitive diversity is the norm.

People vary in how they process information, manage stimulation, and do their best work. Environments that offer choice —across noise levels, lighting, enclosure, and even timing —perform better for everyone.

When people can control how and when they engage, inclusion stops being a policy and becomes a lived experience.

On top of this, AI-enabled workplaces can support different sensitivities and working styles by adapting environmental conditions based on how individuals and teams use a space, offering choice and customization without adding complexity.

OUR POINT OF VIEW:

Inclusion isn't a policy. It's an experience.

If your space only works for one type of person, it doesn't work. Period.

GWI DATA:

Gen Z said **'access to tools and technology, collaboration, and socializing'** were the top reasons for coming to the office.

1 in 3

employees under 39 said they'd like to see more workplace support for neurodiverse individuals.

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Less lounge. More usefulness.

In the rush to make offices feel social, many organizations overshot.

They added cafes, lounges, and informal areas that remain largely underutilized on a day-to-day basis — and quietly removed, or simply forgot, what people needed to work better.

The result?

Beautiful spaces that don't fully function.

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The issue isn't that offices have too many amenities. It's that many have the wrong ones in the wrong places, at the wrong scale.

Large lounges sit empty while small meeting rooms are overbooked. Showcase areas photograph well but fail day to day.

This isn't a design trend problem.

It's a prioritization problem.

The most effective workplaces invest in the spaces people rely on most, and design social areas with the same discipline as core work zones.

What's changed, or changing

Employees are clear about what they want:

- More right size meeting rooms
- More call booths and quiet zones
- Greater access to assigned or semi-assigned desks
- Technology that works every time

Design implications

- Rebalancing space away from underused "dead zones"
- Designing social spaces with intent, not excess
- Prioritizing reliability, comfort, and usability

OUR POINT OF VIEW:

Social spaces matter. But not at the expense of work.

The most loved workplaces are **practically generous** for what employees actually need.

GWI DATA:

The desk remains the most important 'zone' in the workplace.

The largest meeting rooms operate at around **25% capacity,** even during peak use.

20%

of employees globally ranked difficulty booking meeting rooms as a top productivity barrier last year.

6

Environmental performance is now a baseline requirement.

Environmental sustainability in the workplace has moved from the realm of ambition to expectation.

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In 2026, organizations are operating in a far more regulated environment.

Energy performance standards, carbon reporting requirements, and building compliance obligations are tightening across many regions.

At the same time, scrutiny from investors, employees, and regulators is increasing.

And when was the last time utility costs went down?

What's changed, or changing

- Environmental compliance is becoming more complex and more visible
- Operational energy and water usage are under greater pressure as costs rise
- Organizations are expected to demonstrate measurable reductions in environmental impact

Design implications

- Workplaces need to meet higher standards for energy efficiency, materials, and systems performance
- Design decisions must account for long-term operational impact, not just upfront cost
- Buildings must be capable of adapting to evolving regulations without major disruption

OUR POINT OF VIEW:

Environmental performance isn't a differentiator anymore.

It's the minimum standard for responsible workplace design and future proofing investment portfolios.

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Designing what actually works

The workplace of today isn't about forcing people into the office. That approach hasn't held.

It's about giving people a reason to come together.

AI is reshaping how work happens. Hybrid work has changed when it happens. And expectations continue to evolve.

The role of design is to balance these forces.

When space adapts to people, it earns its place.

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