

Moving to a hybrid world: What we've learned

A new cohort of hybrid workers developed throughout the course of the pandemic. This cohort spans multiple age groups at different stages in their careers with contrasting workstyles and varying workspace requirements. This cohort includes people who have never worked in an office and people who have spent their entire careers in an office. It is the cohort of people who scrambled to create their own workspaces overnight—using bedrooms, garages, and kitchen counters as offices, while pets, families, and roommates became part of the workday and the workday blended into home life and school life.

With this new cohort of hybrid workers, the unique opportunity to rethink our work environments has emerged. As we move closer to a hybrid world, Cisco's objective is clear – to support an inclusive experience for all employees, regardless of their work location and environment.

Cisco IT has teamed up with our People & Communities and Workplace Resources organizations to approach this complex challenge. As we prepare for entry into offices around the world, many questions remain:

- How can we design an optimal workplace that supports all employees, whether they work flexibly and remotely, or whether they are very dependent on the office environment?
- How can we use our spaces and technology to make collaborative work inclusive, whether teams are together in person or not?
- What are the long-term trends for our workspace use?
- How can we maintain high safety levels to protect employees and visitors and comply with local health requirements?
- Most importantly, how do we enable the hybrid workforce to not only operate the business, but truly innovate?

This article shares our approach and lessons we've already learned from the perspectives of human resources and employee experience, real estate and facilities design, and technology deployment and use.

A focus on people is imperative to our success

Cisco has long had a policy of performance-driven measurement that gives employees flexibility for where and how they do their individual work. Many employees have chosen the hybrid model of working – a few days in the office and the remainder working offsite. Even before the pandemic, fifty-two percent of managers and employees worked from different cities, and fifty percent of employees at Cisco collaborated with colleagues remotely. (Source Cisco Workplace of the Future Report & Cisco Connected Workplace Report). But the pandemic has changed the way we perceive the world today. After more than a year of mandatory work from home, many companies and employees have realigned their priorities and are now reflecting on how and where they will collaborate in the future.

"We all have real-time learnings," says Stefan Bachmann, EMEAR Talent Acquisition Leader at Cisco. "We were forced to test drive working remotely, which has given us new intelligence about the employee experience that is helping us plan for a hybrid workplace."

Over the past year, we have been exploring the end-to-end experience of working in a post-pandemic world – thinking beyond location and envisioning work policies, practices, team rituals, and resources that support employees, leaders, and teams long-term. It is an immense undertaking and will require dedication from the entire company.

“For big strategies like these to work, we need to drive forward the outcomes we want to deliver across the company,” says Ray Milora, Global Lead for Workplace Experience at Cisco. “We are treating this as a change management program. It’s about a change in the way we work, change in the way we lead.”

Our foundations

Cisco offices have served as foundations for our culture and work communities. They symbolize what it means to be a part of the Cisco workforce and to customers, they signify our promise of powering an inclusive future for all, through our technology and our business practices. We are thinking about how our people can remain connected to these foundations as we shift further into a hybrid world. While the levels of restrictions vary around the world, in areas where restrictions are easing, many companies are divesting their real-estate portfolios, while others are returning to pre-pandemic offices and work practices.

“Space is a catalyst for us to connect,” says Milora. “The office serves a key purpose; it gives us a place to have that human connection. We have always focused on right-sizing the real-estate portfolio and being proactive about its usage.”

Cisco intends to reinvest any divestitures on areas that support all facets of hybrid working, and that includes real-estate, technology, and policies that enhance the employee experience. “It is about the people and the communities we live and work in before anything else,” says Milora.

Workspaces in Cisco offices have traditionally been activity-based, allowing employees to choose spaces based on the type of interaction the individual or group wants to have. We have unassigned desks and informal huddle spaces, quiet workrooms and meeting rooms of various sizes, engineering labs, customer meeting locations, call centers, and training classrooms. Our people can decide which space works best for their interactions. Wireless network availability throughout our buildings allows our people to move easily among spaces and connect with their choice of devices.

The objectives behind our workplace design include:

- Offering spaces that support effective work by teams and individual employees, while staying compliant with local safety and health requirements.
- Enabling employees to work from inside and outside our offices sustainably, with a seamless experience for hybrid work.
- Helping teams work together effectively, in collaborative spaces that are easy for leaders to access and activate.
- Embedding flexibility in our choices for workspaces and technologies to prepare for more change in the future.

“We’re constantly refining the way we work based on what’s happening in the broader world and what’s happening to us as a company,” says Milora. “We’ve always had people who came together in a communal space to connect. Now we’re focusing on providing employees the right workplace experience not just for the post-pandemic period, but for years to come. And we’re keeping our global hat on to think broadly about these solutions.”

Strengthening connection and collaboration

“Before the pandemic, people used to go into offices,” says Kieran Higgins, head of Digital Workforce Collaboration at Cisco. “They didn’t necessarily have a focused set of objectives they were trying to achieve while they were there. That’s changing.”

Cisco is in the process of transforming some Cisco office spaces into collaboration centers to support practices for collaboration and innovation. The collaborative concept reverses traditional ideas of workspace design, allowing leaders and individuals more

choice in the setting for their interactions than a fixed configuration of areas and furnishings provides. The idea behind collaboration centers is to separate individual work, things that can be done from anywhere, from collaborative work, things that require in-person interaction. Where offices tend to promote more individual work, collaboration centers will promote collaborative teamwork.

“A new workplace design is never just a technology fix,” says Bachmann. “You also need collaboration and team rituals, and a physical environment that supports the work you want to enable.”

We will support, help, and even train leaders in effective practices for collaboration, especially when some employees work off-site part-time or full-time. We want to foster the team connectedness that is vital to problem-solving and innovation, while also respecting the right of employees to establish appropriate boundaries between life and work.

Looking to the future, we see more changes to come. We expect a continued shift from traditional fixed workspace design, to one that is flexible and adaptable to business needs, and the speed of business decisions. Furnishings, equipment, technology, and even walls will need to flex to these needs, possibly on a day-to-day basis. We are also looking at ways that technology and equipment design can support home office setups, so that working off-site is as equitable an experience as working on-site.

We will look at where current and prospective employees want to live and how often and how far they are willing to commute. These trends may mean shifting some work facilities away from urban or regional centers to smaller, more dispersed locations.

We are continuing to look at how our policies and culture make it clear that working outside of the office is not the exception but seen rather as an everyday practice.

Technology will weave these inclusive experiences together

In addition to well-designed and well-located workspaces, well-designed technology is important as well. Virtual collaboration is part of everyone's workday, with [98% of meetings having off-site participants](#). We want our collaboration solutions to be consistent and inclusive, whether employees are working in the office, at home, or from a remote location. Some companies are designing for the lowest common denominator and will have everyone in the office and at home continue to video conference from their laptops. We want to ensure that both in-person and offsite meeting attendees feel like they're part of the whole conversation. [New Cisco Webex® features](#), such as People Focus, live transcripts, and real-time translations aim to disrupt practices that can lead employees to disengage from their meetings.

“Moving forward, employees will expect better tools, services, and experiences that make their job easier to do, regardless of where they work,” says Higgins. “This means that all of the technology associated with workspaces needs to be a lot more portable while still delivering a consistent experience.”

[Cisco ThousandEyes Internet Insights](#) continually collects data on the user's experience, allowing help desk staff to quickly identify the source of a problem, whether a service provider issue, high CPU utilization, or an application. Users receive a fast solution to the immediate problem and advice on how to prevent it in the future, avoiding one of the most frustrating aspects of remote work.

Employee laptops have also had an increased CPU load to bear. The [Webex Desk Series of endpoints](#) improve the collaboration experience. These devices also reduce the CPU load on the employee's laptop, which will improve the performance and experience for other applications.

We are not alone in deploying video solutions that are more capable than laptop clients. The [2020 Cisco Business Resilience Networking Survey](#) found that 62 percent of networking teams are planning to deploy more pervasive videoconferencing solutions in preparation for employees returning to campuses.

Security has also been priority as we move to the hybrid world. We have focused our attention to Zero Trust initiatives, ensuring we have secure connections, improved authentication experiences, borderless access, and our use of DUO technology.'

Keeping safety as a prime focus

As countries and communities allow entry into offices, we know that safety and health measures are essential. These measures help us comply with local requirements and contribute to employee well-being.

Within workspaces, we are leveraging [Cisco DNA Spaces](#), [Cisco Meraki™ cameras](#), and [Cisco Webex conferencing and collaboration endpoints](#) to help monitor real-time space occupancy against reduced capacity levels. We are using Webex devices and the [Appspace](#) platform to display alerts when a space exceeds allowed occupancy, and in the future, air quality levels. When employees need to move to another work area, they can use Webex to find an available space, based on information integrated from Appspace.

The move to an inclusive hybrid world

Whether working from our kitchen tables or conference rooms, we know some things are certain - we will adapt to the shifting landscape and continue to place our employees at the heart of our operations. Check back as we continue to share our evolving plans.

For More Information

[Collaboration for a remote workforce](#)

[Leveraging Insights from Cisco DNA Spaces for Safe Return to Work](#)

[Five ways we're improving telework with SD-WAN and telemetry](#)

[Cisco Webex and MazeMap Help Employees Prepare for Safe Return to the Office](#)

[How Cisco and Appspace Can Bridge the Return to the Office Safely](#)

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To view Cisco IT webinars and events about related topics, visit [Cisco on Cisco Webinars & Events](#).

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