

THE FUTURE is FLEXIBLE

Kirsty Angerer, from workplace experts Leesman, shares its insights into employees' experience of working from home and reveals why 'purposeful presence' could be key to the future of the office

It is now more critical than ever for organisations to understand how the spaces employees use impact their ability to do their work and what the key drivers are for employee experience. Leesman has been unearthing these insights for more than a decade and amassed more than one million responses to our Leesman Office survey. In doing so, it's built the world's largest and most diverse resource of its kind.

Purposeful Presence: How and why employees return

The landscape has changed dramatically but the dust hasn't fully settled yet.

Movement is still ongoing and there can be no argument that the work landscape is now different. You need to understand the terrain – your new workplace experience baseline – in order to chart your way forward.

Knowing why employees choose their work locations is vital and our data is starting to show that a purpose-driven approach is heavily influencing employee sentiment on what they do, and where.

The challenge – home vs. the office

Very few employees are wholly office based or wholly home based – the majority are working in a hybrid way that includes the use of their homes and offices. These employees face a simple

challenge: what to do where? Purposeful presence is a simple proposition: if employees are offered a reasonable level of choice for when they use an office, their trips will increasingly have a particular purpose in mind.

It consists of three cyclical stages:

1. Conscious decision making
2. The power of connection
3. Reflection.

1. Conscious decision making

Where an employee is afforded location choice, even if within certain guidelines, it's our belief that they will make those decisions based on the availability of workplace features that they require to support specific parts of their role.

This is mandated presence not purposeful presence. In spring 2022, Leesman's advisory panel of Global Real Estate Leaders responded to a poll that questioned specific aspects of their real estate and workplace strategies. Across 125 responses, 33% of respondents indicated that, 'There will be an organisation-wide mandate to work in the office a certain number of days'.

This approach does not easily facilitate employees feeling empowered to choose locations best suited to particular activities. Instead of gently drawing employees out their bespoke home working environments,

there's a danger that this stronger mandate disenfranchises employees, especially if the workplace is not as good as their own homes at supporting what they are employed to do. Fortunately, 60% of respondents indicated that employees would have a degree of freedom.

Data from Leesman's Wellbeing module provides insight on whether employees felt they had 'freedom over where they do the work related to their job' and how that impacts their interaction with their workplaces.

Analysis of this data showed 75% of respondents who were working in a hybrid way felt like they had freedom over where they work. Interestingly, 57%



93,000+

Across our sample of 93,000+ respondents, location choice has settled into a stable pattern



80%

Around 80% of employees are working in a hybrid way that includes the use of their homes and offices

of employees who reported being wholly office-based also agreed to being free to choose where they work. This 'office only' figure is pertinent as it serves as a reminder that not everyone working in an 'office only' way has been mandated to do so. It's easy to jump to a conclusion that anyone working in the office full-time must be being forced to do so. With more than half of the respondents working in an 'office only' way agreeing that they have the freedom to choose where they work, this is not the case.

These employees may well be showcasing the ultimate power of Purposeful Presence. Or do they represent the respondents who have a poor home-working experience?

2. The power of connection

To understand how employees with freedom interact with their workplaces, organisations need to understand what forces are at play in pulling them between the office and home. Respondents indicated that 16 of the 21 standardised Leesman work activities are better supported at home, demonstrating that the effectiveness of most workplaces is mediocre at best and that the appeal towards the home working environment is therefore great.

However, there are a handful of activities that respondents have indicated are better supported in the office.

Three particular activities consistently stand out: Hosting visitors, clients or customers; informal social interaction; learning from others.

In outstanding workplaces that have achieved a Leesman+ certification, this list extends significantly with the following activities better supported in the office:

- Using technical/specialist equipment or materials
- Collaborating on creative work
- Informal, unplanned meetings
- Collaborating on focused work
- Individual focused work away from your desk
- Larger group meetings or audiences
- Spreading out paper or materials
- Relaxing/taking a break.

This points to a new 'first base' purpose of workplaces, with eight out of 11 activities being ones that employees do with others.

While the consensus among workplace professionals is that the main purpose of the future office is to be a hub of collaboration, consider the subtly alternative proposition: Future workplaces should be hubs of connection.

Data collected earlier in the pandemic certainly showed that collaborative and particularly creative and collaborative events were less well supported when working remotely from

each other. More recent data shows a shift, with respondents starting to report that collaboration is supported at home as well as, if not better than in the office.

As such, an office that is designed purely around collaboration is less likely to magnetise employees back.

Instead, an office that is designed around connection, that supports the connective activities first, stands a significantly greater chance.

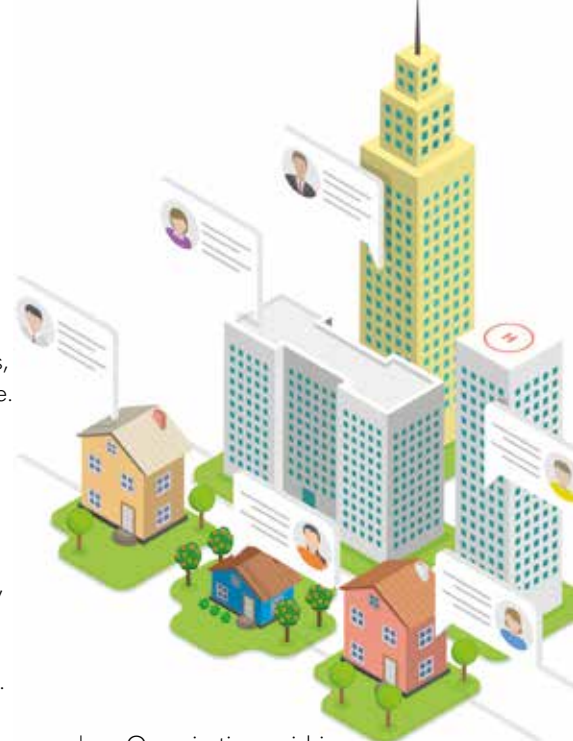
3. Reflection

While Leesman believes that Purposeful Presence is key to future workplace strategy, it's important to recognise that it's cyclical in nature. To this extent it could be a virtuous circle that builds loyalty to a workplace, or it could be a vicious circle that drives employees away through poorly supporting the things they return there to do.

Purposeful Presence is not something that's achieved once and then remains. Every interaction an employee has with their workplace will define and guide their thought process when next faced with the decision to attend the office or not.

Subsequently, the Reflection stage of Purposeful Presence is just as important as Stages 1 and 2. If, on reflection, an employee doesn't deem the 'cost of working' worth the experience they got, they're less likely to willingly return.

If organisations empower employees to consciously decide where they do the work related to their job and offer an office that supports the connective working activities and relevant workplace features, then employees are likely to have an office experience worthwhile the expenses associated with being there. This being the case, employees will positively reflect on their time in the office, in turn making the next conscious decision to attend a simpler one.



Organisations wishing to proactively support their employees' intentional use of their space will need to find ways of going beyond simply knowing what those employees do, to deeply understanding where those employees can do their best work.

Successfully indexing of hybrid or location independent work will show where investments will deliver maximum return, will show how much less real estate the organisation will need, and ultimately will build a closer relationship between employer and employee and between the employees themselves.

Reinventing the future

The world of work has dramatically shifted to a rapid, widespread adoption of hybrid working.

The debate is ongoing but setting opinion and conjecture to one side, the long-term impact of hybrid working on our societies remains a complete unknown.

The Hybrid Future is our latest research project and is the definitive investigation into the impact of hybrid working on people, places and society. Joining MIT's Center for Real Estate as a strategic partner, it's a three-year longitudinal study led by Leesman.

If you would like to involve your organisation or join the conversation, please get in touch with us at thehybridfuture@leesmanindex.com ■