

# DESIGN STRATEGIES: Activity Based Work Environments



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Activity-based working (ABW) allows employees to choose from a variety of settings according to the nature of the work they are doing, combined with a workplace experience that empowers them to use a range of spaces throughout the day.

The thinking behind it is that employees will be more productive when they have the right spaces for the specific tasks they need to accomplish. It is not a new concept, it's the foundation for coworking environments that must adapt to many different work scenarios simultaneously under one roof.

Worklife continues to evolve and adapt to today's lifestyle, where everything is "on-demand." From TV shows to food, music to travel, it's all on-demand. Encouraging workspaces to be this flexible is the next natural step into the future of work. Work environments themselves must become fluid, living, breathing organisms that adapt to accommodate employees' needs.

## FOUR DEFINITIVE ABW ELEMENTS

ABW isn't just about adding couches and phone booths to a workplace. For ABW to coexist within an established work environment these four elements must be present:

**ZONAL DESIGN** the workspace with a variety of specific work zones for specific functions. Focus spaces like booths or desks in a study area when silence essential to the task. Meeting area's in all shapes and sizes, to host a client meeting in a large

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conferenceroom, or a departmental huddle at small tables. Relaxed cafe spaces promote flexible work or casual collaborations among teams in restaurant-style booths. Privacy on demand with pods or phone booths dotted around the office for quick easy access.



**SENSORY EXPERIENCES** make ABW spaces unique. They should provide explicit and implicit cues about how to use the space. Whether they need to access high- or low-energy space for the type of work they're doing, employees should be able to easily gauge which space is right for them in the moment.

WeWork pioneered this approach with high-energy kitchen spaces where the smell of freshly brewed coffee greets you as soon as you enter, music is playing over the speakers, and the energy of others in the space is creatively charged. These elements draw people in and make them feel welcome to pour a cup of coffee and chat.

On the other end of the energy spectrum, a study/library is quiet from the moment you walk in, providing you with enough mental space to focus on your next pitch deck or design project.

In this way, different environmental elements provide unique cues and act as an overlay on the physical design, inherently sharing how to use each space differently.

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**BEHAVIORAL EMPOWERMENT:** An optimal ABW design with sensory cues works best when people are aware of its expectations. Empowerment frees people to use the space as it suits them and the work at hand :

- Being quiet in the study, or using phone booths for calls.
- Bringing personal belongings with you to allow others free use of a space.
- Leadership must be open to change to create change.

No amount of free coffee will encourage a team to have a meeting in the kitchen if the leaders frown upon them being away from their desks.

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**INTERACTIVE LEARNING:** Employees are truly empowered to adopt a new work style such as ABW when company leaders fully embrace the change in mindset, combined with the design, behaviors, and programming of an ever-evolving workplace.

When leaders are committed to creating a feedback loop through qualitative and quantitative data, and implementing those findings to improve the workspace, they're helping to ensure their ABW space will be a success and their people will invest in the success of their business.

## MENTAL RESET

The biggest investment in an Activity Based Design is the change of mind-set. It's letting go of traditional business models to make way for more expansive thinking and ways of working.



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ABW holds many promises, but if not designed and implemented properly, it can actually have a negative effect on employee experience. This is the exact opposite of its intended goal.



Activity-based workspace design best practices, usually fall under four complementary design models:

**AGILE WORKING** is part of an employee-centered way of work that focuses on how work is done, empowering employees to decide when, where, and how they work. This optimizes work life and the office environments where they feel most productive. This in turn can help improve the employee experience and overall employee satisfaction and greater employee productivity, money, time and headaches.

**FLEXIBLE WORK SPACES** support a variety of non-traditional workplace models that all act as a 'catalyst' for transparency and connection:

- No assigned offices or desks
- A mix of office zones, and meeting spaces
- Open alongside enclosed spaces
- Hot desk and hoteling

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**HYBRID & SHIFT WORK** blends remote and in-office working. Shift working is where employees are in rotating groups. Shared desk arrangements are arranged in an open, flexible office environment.

**OFFICE NEIGHBORHOODS** group employees and work areas based upon their personalities, job functions, work styles, and tasks to help leverage the activity-based office. Smaller neighborhoods should have access to collaborative support and community spaces. Maintain a small number of assigned traditional desks for those who prefer that workstyle.

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## PEOPLE-CENTRIC WORKPLACES

Business performance is ultimately about people performance. The physical workplace must be effective for people to build community, grow talent, learn cultural norms, and create alignment. This requires spaces for people to work both solo and collectively to get work done.

Gensler's [global workplace research](#) shows that better designed, people-centric workplaces have significant return on investment for individuals, teams, and the business outcomes. As more organizations understand that the workplace landscape has permanently changed, the focus will be less on how many people come into the office and more on how the office can support people's needs while evolving with changing demands and earning people's commutes.

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## CURATED DESTINATIONS

The new workplace must become a compelling destination with a choice of experiences where people desire to be.

Office workers want everything the office has traditionally offered (colleagues, technology, mentorship, socialization) and everything they have become used to at home (privacy, acoustic control, fresh air).

The workplace will look and feel different for each company or site based on the mix of experiences, demographics, and functions at each location. Undifferentiated open-offices with its one-size-fits-all programming template are not coming back.

## WORK IS DYNAMIC

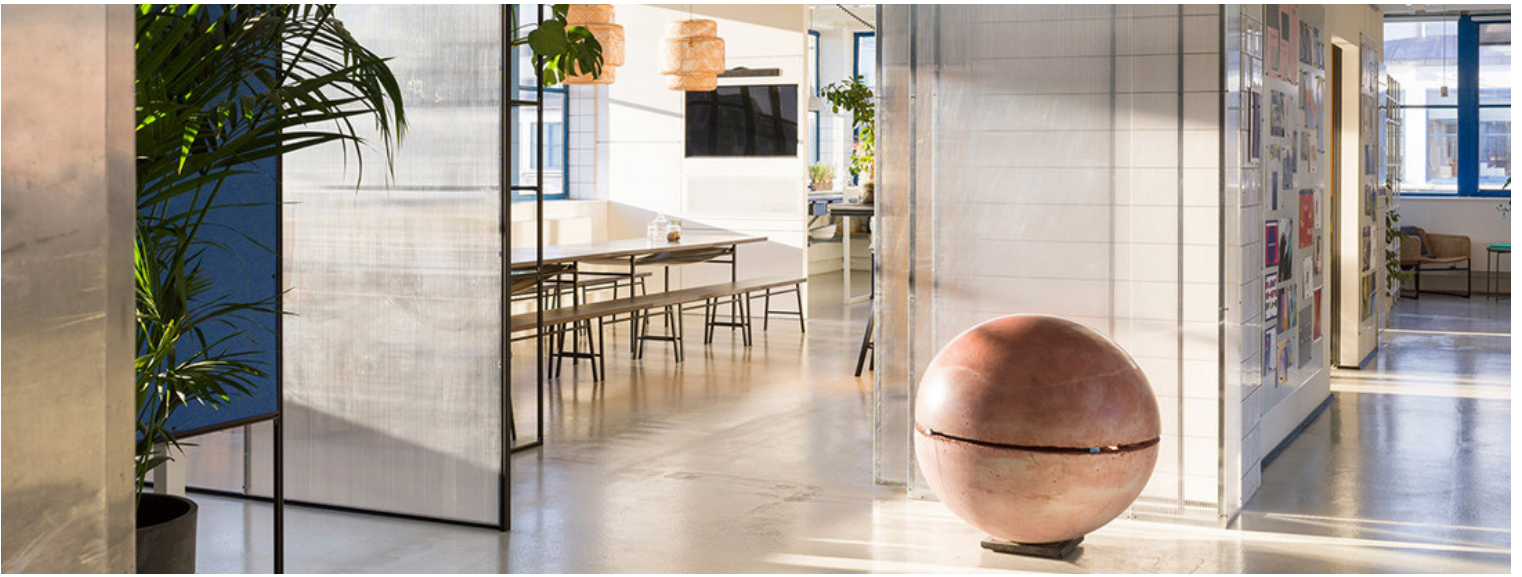
Workplaces must adapt as work changes and employee expectations evolve, yet only 38% of workplaces have been remodeled since the pandemic. The best workplaces will be designed for ever-evolving change, like retail environments, which are constantly updated. Piloting new ideas, testing design solutions, gathering data, adjusting for feedback.

Workplaces are for people. This is a time of incredible opportunity to rethink not only how people work, but what people need most to work at their personal and collective best. Resist the temptation for the status quo and embrace new thinking of what's possible. Hybrid is here to stay, but so is the office. The workplace of the future can be a place where people want to be, where they feel part of a larger purpose and community, and where they feel cared for as a person.

Our *design team* can help you curate the perfect environment for your team to reconnect, expand expectations and flourish in a the new way of working. Give us your story and we will find a narrative that perfectly aligns with your vision.

*This article utilizes content previously published by WeWork, Gensler, and OfficeSpace*





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