

business interiors™

# Embracing the Hybrid Reality

Balancing the virtual and physical office to support great employee experiences



bi™

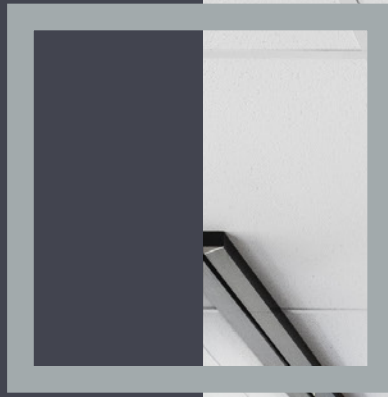
## INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the office was considered the physical heart and soul of a business, reflecting its brand identity and framing its culture. However, with the pandemic triggering a dramatic shift in the way we work, the definition of office is changing, now encompassing both the physical and virtual realms. In response, businesses are experimenting with hybrid work environments to meet the evolving needs of employees, regardless of where they are located.

Advancements in personal technology and digital connectivity have meant that, for many of us, we do not need to be co-located with colleagues to do our jobs. Many companies have opted for hybrid working models, with some employees based at home, some at the office and some splitting their time between both. The future will include Zoom meetings and virtual workspaces alongside high-quality physical workspaces, giving employees the freedom to work from home or to meet and connect with co-workers at the office.

Design will play a pivotal role in tomorrow's workplaces as we navigate this hybrid reality. Offices will need to become a destination with a purpose and blend seamlessly with the virtual world. The result will be safe, functional and inclusive working environments that ultimately build community and raise productivity, collaboration and creativity.

How do you make the office a place people want to be rather than a place they have to be? In this whitepaper, we explore answers to this question by highlighting some of the key trends that are changing the way offices are being designed in the post-pandemic era.





## CREATING A HYBRID COMMUNITY

The accelerated shift to remote work caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we work forever. Digital technology and portable devices have allowed us to work seamlessly both in and out of the office. While the benefits of remote working have become more accepted by companies and employees – more freedom, better work-life balance and, at times, increased productivity – some downsides have been observed. The most notable downsides include how remote work programs impede organisations from creating and solidifying their company culture and increased employee loneliness and isolation.

‘Placemaking’ is the practice of creating collaborative and community-focused spaces that engender a sense of belonging. While in the past, physical proximity was considered a necessary element to bring people together, this is no longer the case. Loneliness is the feeling of being socially disconnected, but there are ways to build this social connection in this ‘blended’ era with welcoming, interactive work environments.

## THE METAVERSE IS HERE!

While virtual collaboration tools enable in-person and remote workers to remain connected, the Metaverse has emerged as another powerful avenue to fostering connection, inclusion and co-creation at work.

What is the Metaverse, exactly? When companies refer to the Metaverse, they are talking about a broad shift in how we interact with technology. The Metaverse is an integrated network of 3D virtual worlds, which exist even when no one is occupying them. These worlds are accessed through a virtual reality (VR) headset, but also increasingly accessed via phones, laptops and other personal devices. Augmented reality experiences are also emerging, combining aspects of the physical and digital worlds to create a truly immersive experience.

The Metaverse will see organisations building VR workplace environments in which employees will be able to interact with each other in real time as embodied avatars. Employees can drop into their company’s virtual office to see what is happening, engage in spontaneous discussions, and chance run-ins with colleagues, and gather in community spaces for company presentations and celebrations. Virtual games and events may eventually replace Zoom drinks as the remote working social event of choice. It is through these experiences that a virtual office can enable employees to feel togetherness in a shared space.

The convergence of the physical and digital workspaces in the Metaverse highlights the importance of designing high-quality office environments. A digital twin of a company’s physical office provides the most seamless experience, which means that we must start with a physical space that fosters collaboration and community so that these benefits translate to the virtual world.

Creating a seamless connection between the in-person and virtual work world is key. Companies are providing technology-enabled workspaces and meeting rooms to bridge the gap between those working remotely and those in the office. ‘Drop-in’ virtual and on-site rooms where colleagues can connect and have one-on-one conversations can be used to recreate the break-out room experience and encourage impromptu idea-sharing.

When designing such spaces, the focus should be on delivering an equality of experience to ensure that both in-person workers and remote workers have an equal seat at the table. Tech readiness, support and remote-inclusive policies are vital in to ensuring team conversations are not dominated by those who are physically present. In addition, virtual collaboration tools, including team chat and whiteboard applications, allow new ways for teams to maintain and form bonds regardless of where each individual team member is located.





We are headed towards a future where the physical office will function primarily as a cultural space that facilitates social connection between colleagues.

## THE OFFICE AS A HUB OF CULTURE AND COLLABORATION

Before the pandemic, most businesses saw the office as the place to carry out heads-down, focused work. This paradigm is changing; carrying out tasks will be secondary as workers will do much of that from home. We are headed towards a future where the physical office will function primarily as a cultural space that facilitates social connection and in-person collaboration between colleagues.

This social connection is nurtured by more than superficial acts of collaboration, but through frequent in-person interactions. The office grants employees the ability to interact face-to-face whether in a formal meeting room, or serendipitously in lunchrooms and breakout areas. How these

spaces are designed is critical to building a community as well as motivating workers.

A successful office design will include features that people do not experience in remote working scenarios. Breakout areas, community spaces, and wellness areas will become standard, supported by adaptable furniture. Tables and chairs that can easily be moved around allow employees to collaborate with each other in an informal environment. Ergonomic seating, and a thoughtful approach to aesthetics and acoustics, encourages health and wellbeing and contributes to a work environment that is as comfortable as a home.



## FURNITURE THAT GOES BEYOND THE STANDARD

Commute-worthy settings and features are what will ultimately draw employees back into the office, even if their preference remains to work primarily from home. No employee will choose sterile, linear work environments over the basic comforts and freedom of their home office. The offices of the past, characterised by nondescript rows of desks, basic seating options, and sparse meeting rooms, will no longer suffice. High-quality furniture is the most efficient and user-friendly way to raise the quality of the office experience.

Leading furniture designers and manufacturers have been quick to respond with solutions suitable for the more agile, tech-connected landscape. New models of mobile tables, carts, charts and easels, connectivity accessories, battery packs,

and charging pylons support work from multiple locations and support the needs of today's hybrid worker. Even small details such as a hook for a backpack, lockable drawers and integrated network connections can be specified to cater specifically to the drop-in participant.

Adjustability and personalisation are common themes in the new generation of office furniture. Chairs, desks and tables with height-adjustable features are becoming standard to encourage movement and provide comfort and support. Similarly, adjustable monitor arms help promote healthy posture and enhance productivity. Each motion or adjustment allows the end-user to exert control over how and where they work in the office.

Modular components add flexibility and allow spaces to be reconfigured based on individual, team or organisational needs. Seating, tables, acoustic fittings or partition walls are available in modular designs that can be used to change the layout of an office or transform a focused work area into a team collaboration space quickly and easily. Mobile desking is a useful proposition in today's hybrid environment as companies will need to add, subtract or reconfigure desks in response to people shifting between working remotely and working in the office. Soundproof office pods are also gaining popularity as a way of providing a distraction-free space when a high level of concentration or privacy is required.

Finally, there is a growing appetite for design and style-oriented products that represent a significant evolution from the traditional, strictly functional products of the past. Seamless surfaces, muted tones and a contemporary style remain on trend, but the addition of natural materials, soft fabrics and residential-inspired accessories are increasingly featured in the latest designs. These 'resimercial' design elements evoke the warmth, comfort and familiarity of home, making transition between remote work and in-person work more seamless and providing an antidote to institutional formality.

When designing office spaces, the focus should be on delivering an equality of experience to ensure that both in-person workers and remote workers have an equal seat at the table.

## DESIGN HYBRID OFFICES THAT WORK BUSINESS INTERIORS

Business Interiors is a furniture provider that helps organisations transform their spaces into experiences with intelligent furniture solutions to enable engagement, collaboration and an inclusive culture. From a single chair to an entire fit out, the Business Interiors team can help you create dynamic work environments, all the while making the process simple, fast and cost effective. They can assist you with highly customised solutions, project planning and guidance throughout the entire project.

The Business Interiors approach towards supplying furniture is consciously informed by the way a space will be occupied and the desired experience intended. Our goal is to increase productivity and efficiency and create meaningful experiences for all employees.

Let the Business Interiors expert team help transform your workplace.

[businessinteriors.com.au](https://businessinteriors.com.au)



# business interiors™

