

On the clock: How to design a thoroughly modern workplace

By Hannah Hickok



The way we work is evolving at breakneck speed. From female-focused amenities to new kinds of seating that allow workers to switch from lounging to perfect posture without a hitch, designers are rising to the challenge of creating offices that fit today's needs.

The gig economy is only expanding: Freelancers currently make up about a third of the American workforce and are projected to comprise half by 2027, a trend that's mirrored in the growing contract workforce across the globe. With fewer people tied to desks, and more finding ways to work wherever we are—whether that's in bed, at the beach or on a plane—designers are rethinking how we create, connect and get comfortable in our workspaces.

It's a design challenge that invokes not just ergonomics and aesthetics, but also our deeper value systems around work-life balance, time management and boundaries. "Today, more is being asked of workers in all parts of their lives, and the personal and professional are overlapping more than ever before," says **John Hamilton**, director of global design for Coalesse, Turnstone, and Steelcase's color, materials and finish division. "The need to use our time wisely is impacting how and where work is happening; workplaces are more diverse and need to support a greater variety of work styles; and workers' expectations are higher and harder for employers to keep up with."

Designers like Hamilton, who works out of Steelcase's Learning and Innovation Center in Munich, develop modern workspace products through research on employee pain points. For instance, Coalesse's Lagunitas collection—a collaboration with acclaimed Milan-based furniture and technology designer **Toan Nguyen**—includes adjustable lounge seating, tables and fabric screens that can be moved and reconfigured based on immediate needs. "The collection was a response to observing how individuals and small groups were using casual spaces that were not designed to support working at a table in a lounge-like posture," explains Hamilton,

which led to the creation of “an articulating back cushion that can be rapidly adjusted to support the user in both upright and relaxed postures.”

Observing behavioral patterns in communal work zones like coffee shops, co-working cafes or hotel lobbies can provide designers with valuable insights on how the spaces they’ve created are actually put to use. It was the latter that inspired **Edward Barber and Jay Osgerby**, co-founders of London-based design firm Barber & Osgerby, while they were designing a co-working table for the Ace Hotel London Shoreditch. “We found people were populating sofas in the communal lobby area, working on their laptops and killing their backs,” says Barber. “There wasn’t an ergonomic product that addressed that need, even amidst the proliferation of freelance careers and ‘hot desking’ [in which employees move from desk to desk instead of ‘owning’ one].”



Left: Jay Osgerby and Edward Barber Courtesy of Vitra / Right: Soft Work Courtesy of Vitra

The realization sparked Barber & Osgerby’s Soft Work collection, a collaboration with Swiss furniture company Vitra, which combines ergonomic seating (that can be assembled to look like a couch, loveseat or individual chairs) with adjustable work surfaces, outlets and privacy panels. Available in dozens of fabric colorways, two base colors and five tabletop colors, the product was born of the design duo’s belief that the traditional conception of the office desk is, in essence, dead—or, at the very least, dying. “The workstation is disappearing as an archetype,” says Osgerby. “With mobile technology, you need a place to sit occasionally, or a comfortable place to hang out. Flexibility is key.” Soft Work, with its modular format, features pivoting tables and power sockets, generously padded seat cushions with flexible back rests, and partition screens to divide zones.

Other designers contend that the desk still holds value—but must be reinvented to accommodate modern needs. “I am even more convinced of the desk’s importance and future,” says Hamilton. “What might be dead is the uninspired desk that doesn’t account for the needs of a modern workplace. Desks that move as individuals and teams need, support current tools and technologies and enable all types of work styles will be the foundation of future spaces where we choose to work.”

Lauren Rottet, the award-winning principal and president of interior architecture firm **Rottet Studio**, is of a similar mind—and has devised her own stylish work seating system, the Lyda sofa. With a seat that is slightly higher and firmer than a regular sofa (17 inches off the ground versus some that can be as low as 15 inches), Lyda is designed to be extra-supportive and easy to get in and out of. “We used to need large desks due to the physical stacks of paper and large typewriters,” says Rottet. “Now, most of the time, we simply need a small laptop, tablet or phone, and space to stretch out as we are not moving from our seats.” Still, after designing more than 40 million square feet of office space in her career, Rottet knows that it takes much more than the perfect seating arrangement to make a workspace truly work: “It is not just the physical ergonomics that improve performance and satisfaction—it requires a psychological orchestration of ambient lighting, air

movement, amenities and a design environment with ‘cool factor,’ that’s not static, but changes with the day and time of year.”


Those intangible elements were at play when Copenhagen-based research and design lab Space10 hired local design and architecture studio Spacon & X to overhaul its 12,000-square-foot office in February to enhance mental health, community, inclusivity, flexibility and creativity. To get it right, the studio’s designers consulted with Space10’s in-house psychologist to find solutions that facilitated employee well-being through customization and flexible, user-focused design. Driven by research finding that healthy posture promotes better performance, Spacon & X brought in desks that can be swiveled up and down to an individual’s preferred height. Other design changes, like movable panels that serve as makeshift walls to divide up the office, semiprivate cubicles, and soundproof call booths, allow employees to adapt the space to their needs, whether that’s brainstorming with a group or churning out a solo report in silence.

Embracing different kinds of employees rather than expecting everyone to operate the same way has led to more inclusive workspace designs for a range of personalities, work styles, abilities and genders. The abundance of women’s co-working spaces sprouting up worldwide suggests that such tailored, community-focused solutions have struck a nerve—and are providing a long-overdue answer to male-dominated office spaces whose designs have traditionally excluded women’s needs. “Women are starting businesses five times faster than men, but the obstacles they encounter are exponentially greater,” says **Amy Nelson**, founder and CEO of The Riveter, a Seattle-headquartered women’s co-working brand with nine U.S. locations and counting. Given the wage gap, current political climate, and a litany of other challenges female workers face, it’s easy to see why women seek out a supportive, gender-specific work sanctuary.

“Our space is built by women, for everyone,” says Nelson. “Our community provides women and their allies—inclusive of any race, sexuality, age, ability or marital status—access to resources they need to build their business and network. With that in mind, we’ve designed The Riveter to center women, but be welcoming to all as a departure from workspaces in America that have long been designed by men, for men. Our workspaces include a mix of open and private areas, meditation rooms, event space and mothers’ rooms.”

Chiara de Rege, the New York-based designer behind the first six of women’s co-working club The Wing’s 12 locations in New York, Washington and California, says she wanted to create spaces that prioritize mobility, inspiration, comfort and flexibility—and fill fundamental holes missing from most workspaces. “The idea that for years on end, women in the workplace were hiding in bathroom stalls or dreary closets in order to pump is unbelievable to me,” says de Rege. “I remain completely stunned by the lack of thought that has historically gone into women’s simple, basic needs.”

While many brands are incorporating private spaces into communal work areas, others are solving the same problems by designing dedicated workspaces under residential roofs. Within Boston’s EchelonSeaport, a luxury condo development slated to open by the end of 2019, residents will enjoy access to an 8,000-square-foot state-of-the-art workspace called the Innovation Center, inspired by the city’s growing tech industry and historic universities.

“We’ve designed the amenities to feel like an extension of the resident’s home,” says **Jeffrey Beers**, architect and founder of New York-based interior architecture and design firm Jeffrey Beers International, which created the Innovation Center. “The furniture is movable and the space can be reconfigured to host meetings and TED-style talks. It’s flexible and interactive, set up to speak to a number of work styles.” Along with these practicalities, Beers used textured materials—fabrics, metals and wood—to create a warm ambiance more reminiscent of an intimate cafe than a sterile office space. 

At the end of the (work)day, it seems, what people want most is to feel comfortable while working—once that’s achieved, productivity and inspiration follow much more easily. When New York–based designer **Alexandra Champalimaud** and her son **Anthony Champalimaud** renovated Troutbeck, an 18th-century private estate turned hotel in Amenia, New York, it was paramount to create a sense of hominess. That included the cozy, book-lined library, where visitors—in addition to discovering awe-inspiring artifacts like writings by famous guests **Langston Hughes** and **Martin Luther King Jr.**—can get down to work.

While it’s unlikely most of us will happen upon such historic hidden treasures during a coffee break, we can take a cue from Champalimaud’s design approach, which can be universally applied to workspaces from modern minimalist offices to home libraries: “Troutbeck’s sense of familiarity lives in the tactility and warmth of its spaces, decor, art and furnishings, while still reading very current. Our tastes may change; the feeling that rises from a space that feels like ‘home’ never leaves you,” says Champalimaud.

“With all of the changes in how we work, we need spaces that support workers and their well-being in new ways,” says Hamilton. “Inspiring corporate office or co-working spaces that factor in new technologies, teams across multiple time zones and other complexities will be increasingly sought after.”

KNOW THE RULES*The Department of Labor enforces laws protecting the safety of American workplaces. (It’s worth noting that informal co-working hubs, though on the rise as the mobile workforce grows, don’t fall under the DOL’s purview—making new products like Coalesse’s Lagunitas, Barber & Osgerby’s Soft Work and Rottet Studio’s Lyda even more important.)*

- A subsidiary of the DOL, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulates safety conditions in most private industries, monitoring poor air quality, toxic materials and other health hazards.
- The National Institute of Building Sciences (NIBS) is an American NGO that provides a Whole Building Design Guide to architects and designers, including recommendations on integrated technology, fire safety and sprinklers, light exposure, air ventilation, nontoxic materials, energy efficiency and more.
- Although the DOL doesn’t enforce the Americans With Disabilities Act, it offers resources and technical assistance on the basic requirements of the law, including accommodating job applicants and employees with disabilities through design features such as door widths of 32 inches or more; lightweight doors; conference tables at least 27 inches high; restrooms with grab bars; carpeting with less than a half-inch of pile; an absence of protruding shelves and objects that could be hazardous to blind people; Braille signs; and more.



The Wing in Brooklyn's Dumbo neighborhood Tory Williams Photography

WOMEN OF THE WING

Chiara de Rege recruited a bevy of fellow female talents to help her co-create the ideal women's workspace, resulting in touches like bookshelves full of women authors and custom wallpaper spotlighting history's inspiring women. Furnishings were sourced from female designers and women-led brands, including a custom wallcovering in collaboration with New York-based illustrator **Joana Avillez** and Connecticut-based designer **Payton Cosell Turner**; wallpaper from Parisian brand Maison C; custom upholstery from Los Angeles-based designers **Carly Jo Morgan** and **Katrien Van der Schueren**; seating from Fest Amsterdam; and fabric and furnishings from the British brand Soane. "The ethos of The Wing is to empower female-run companies and foster a network of support for women as they grow," says de Rege—a philosophy that is evident down to the design details.

TEAM WORK *Designers who study evolving work styles know that the best innovations often come from collaboration. In recent years, office juggernaut **Steelcase** has followed suit, teaming up with these industry thought leaders to create products that meet modern-day worker needs.*

Microsoft: Steelcase Flex, the company's collaboration with Microsoft, debuted in April and aims to support an increasingly fluid, flexible workflow via agile, adjustable product, including moveable desks, tables, whiteboards, carts and space dividers (most featuring bright colors and big wheels). Unsurprisingly, the line also incorporates cutting-edge technology, including a mobile stand designed for Microsoft's Surface screen and a tool that converts whiteboard ink to digital ink for analog and digital integration. "We set out to create a collection of products that was really inspired by the way teams are working today and that could accommodate a dynamic, team-orientated workplace," says **David Cooper**, product category manager at Steelcase.

Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams: In fall 2017, Steelcase announced its partnership with the Taylorsville, North Carolina-based modern furniture brand. The collaboration is still going strong—velvet chairs, round nesting tables, media consoles and bookshelves are just a few of the available offerings that strike a balance of style and functionality.

West Elm: In spring 2018, the two brands made a deal to distribute new workplace solutions, with West Elm driving the design and Steelcase manufacturing product. Current pieces include individual and shared seating options—from rolled steel and leather adjustable stools to upholstered settees—as well as credenzas, coffee tables and LED lights, all designed with flexibility and support for modern workers in mind.

Homepage photo: Nikolaj Thaning Rentzmann

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