

In the lockdown of March 2020, when we packed up our laptops and hastily cleared the tops of our desks on our way out of the office, we left a lot behind.

For many, the expectation was that working from home would last perhaps a few weeks and we'd soon be back. Desk drawers were full of half-filled notebooks, industry magazines, pens and Post-its... all things we intended on returning to and picking up right where we'd left off.

But for the majority of office-based workers, the return came much later than anticipated – or not at all. Redundancies, organizational restructures, expired leases and family relocations all conspired to make that moment of return – of resumption – out of reach. And some people are still waiting.

As we walked out of our offices with our possessions piled high into boxes, we had no way of realizing at the time that we were marking the end of the old world. A world where the office was simply a place to 'do your work'.

But the office isn't gone. Far from it. In fact, in the new world, the office has an arguably more important role to play than ever before.

We want to explore the new purpose of 'the office', and show you some of the changes we've made as we redesigned our own head office to become a hub for collaboration and community.

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Our relationship with 'the office' is changing, and for a lot of good reasons. The most obvious is that for many organizations who have predominantly office-based set-ups, their people have proven over the pandemic that they don't need to be sat in an office to be productive. But this is only the stone that created the ripples on the pond.

Once people realized they could challenge decades-old traditions about the workplace, the future of the office became open to all kinds of exciting possibilities. For the first time on a wide scale, business and HR leaders realized that they were no longer restricted to a static 1:1 desk ratio, local candidate pools or 9-5 working hours. They could start thinking about more fluid models that gave them – and their people – more agility, flexibility, and profitability. But, most importantly, they learned that the office didn't have to be a transactional, task-focused place for employees to show their face anymore. And that gave them the chance to redefine what it could be instead.

The new purpose of the office that we've seen emerging is a dramatic change to what we've seen before. While many companies already offered flexible working models, most people on office-based contracts would go into the office simply to do their work. And yet the modern, post-pandemic consensus suggests the best environment for work where you really need to buckle down and focus is a quiet home-office space.

But what the corporate office offers – beyond what workers get at home, and where we're now seeing its true value – is in the opportunities to **connect, collaborate and build community.**

A blank canvas for collaboration

Going into the office is about so much more than arriving at your desk, opening your laptop, and doing the exact same work and calls you could have done while sitting at home.

It's about taking advantage of the opportunity to use physical spaces, meet colleagues in person, and develop those projects and ideas that are hard to progress virtually. It's about being purposeful in how you use your office time and your home time, so you're getting the best out of bo th environments.

By transforming its purpose, the office is no longer bound by the same space requirements, which starts a conversation about what else it could be used for, including:

- A center for learning
- A networking and socialization hub
- A project space, etc.

The new office landscape needs to create more choice for staff. It's a place to meet colleagues, collaborate and bring everyone together to build and retain a sense of community. In a hybrid model, reduced occupancy means there's less demand on desk space which creates a great opportunity to build alternative workstyles that encourage and enable agile collaborative activities.

Stephen Griffiths

Studio Director for Space Solutions



Every office is a blank canvas, and every organization will undoubtably take a different approach.

However, it's safe to say companies won't be reverting back to the rigid, desk-for-eachworker model that is no longer sustainable, or desirable, for a workforce that's become used to having genuine flexibility in where and when they work.

Instead, we can expect to see companies leaning toward the functions that a physical office is ideally suited for: innovation, problem solving and culture.

By having a genuine purpose for coming into the office, workers are likely to be more engaged, focused and proactive than ever before – and avoid the pitfalls of boredom and inside-the-box thinking that a regular, tiresome routine can trigger in all of us.



A space for socializing

Of course, it's not possible to talk about the purpose of the office without acknowledging the significant social element.

While not everyone enjoys being exposed to the distractions of an open-plan office, the overwhelming feedback from workers surveyed during the disruptive pandemic years is that they miss the social connections.

The pandemic caused us to reassess and revalue the easily made, yet underappreciated social bonds that kept us connected to each other and our organizations. And these bonds have more real business impact – especially around engagement and retention – than one might expect.

Socializing can still happen virtually, but it's harder, less effective, and it doesn't provide the same opportunities for 'casual collisions' which, as we'll explain in the next chapter, can be a true differentiator in successful hybrid models.

As author and sociologist Tracy Bower states in her Forbes article:

When people report the primary reason they want to come back to the office is to "socialize" they mean more than just standing around talking about the latest weather event, NFL game or community happening. People crave social connections which offer support and social fabric. They want to form relationships which give them the chance to learn from others, and also to share what they know in support of others. People want to build social capital — which helps them obtain advice, get things done and advance their careers.

In summary:

- The purpose of the office is changing, giving us more choice and opportunities than ever before to create workplaces where amazing things happen
- The office is no longer a place to simply do work, but a space to be used intentionally to connect, collaborate and build community
- People should use the right workplace for the right task, prioritizing home-offices or focus rooms for quiet, isolated work, and office collaboration spaces for projects, problem solving and innovation
- Being more purposeful about coming into the office can drive engagement and help people avoid boredom and insidethe-box thinking
- Socializing spaces provided by offices shouldn't be seen as a trivial perk.
 They can in fact have a big impact on business outcomes

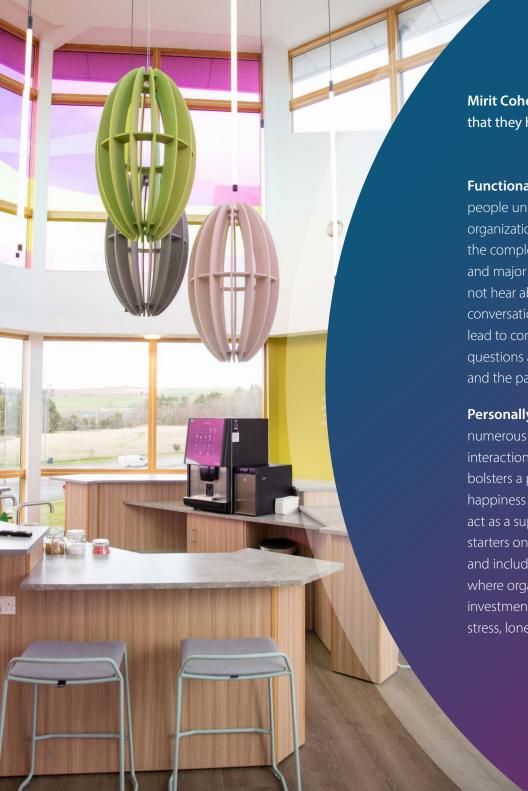
A place for 'casual collisions' and intentional collaboration

The phrase 'casual collisions' reportedly originated from Silicon Valley. It refers to the chance encounters you have with colleagues when you come together in person – either in an office or at a workshop or event – **that can spark a new conversation.**

An issue with all-virtual communications is that every call or meeting has a very specific focus and includes very specific people, meaning the conversation is unlikely to deviate from the project or task at hand. However, some of the best creativity and most meaningful connections occur when the dialogue is free-form and spontaneous – and we're more likely to learn more from each other during an 'unintentional' conversation than a contrived, scripted one.

Here's one of the main challenges of exclusively virtual working: the opportunities for casual collisions are effectively eliminated. However, in a **hybrid world,** organizations have the chance to create environments optimized for this very purpose.





Mirit Cohen of Adobe conducted research into the impact of these casual collisions, and found that they have significant value at four main levels:

Functionally: Unplanned interactions help people understand the complexities of their organization and its moving parts, especially the complex relationships, significant people and major projects that they otherwise might not hear about. As Cohen says: "Snippets of conversation overheard in the lunch line can lead to connections made, relationships forged, questions answered, opportunities discovered, and the pace of business quickened."

Personally: Seeing friendly faces and having numerous opportunities to have positive interactions with colleagues you like really bolsters a person's sense of belonging and happiness at work. Work 'friends' are known to act as a support network, and can help new starters onboard and quickly feel connected and included. These "personal collisions" are where organizations see a significant return on investment, and can help employees combat stress, loneliness and disengagement.

Culturally: The culture of an organization isn't determined by a set of values or a series of communications. It's shaped by every interaction – especially the unplanned ones.

Casual conversations reveal a lot about culture: how people speak to each other (and about each other), the things they celebrate or complain about, how people feel about policies, changes and initiatives. They also give people the chance to hear about activities that build culture, such as charitable efforts, uplifting stories and opportunities to get involved.

Financially: All the above combine to create a well-connected organization and a stronger employee experience. Moreover, Mirit's research concludes that companies who invest in these cultural and physical elements of their employee experience, in addition to the technical, are four times more profitable than other top workplaces. Casual collisions may just be one element of the overall employee experience, but they can lead to improved engagement and greater innovation, which are central to an organization's financial success.

Turning casual collisions into intentional collaboration

The office is an ideal place for these priceless casual collisions to occur. You can run into colleagues you'd normally never schedule a call with because they aren't connected to any of your teams or projects, or you can meet visiting colleagues from other offices. The more you diversify the people you talk to and the topics you talk about, the greater the chance is that you'll learn something new or stumble upon a new idea or concept that needs exploring further, as Mirit continues:

The goal of designing experiences that foster casual collisions is not to inspire a series of magical encounters that immediately lead to major innovations. Instead, our research showed that the connections and ideas that initial collisions generate tend to be reinforced in subsequent weeks/months/years through casual bump-ins at lunch, in wellness centers, and even on forums like Slack. After enough of these bump-ins, some connections will eventually be intentionally explored through scheduled meetings and collaborations.



Like scattering a handful of seeds in the knowledge that not all of them will take root, casual collisions are about creating enough opportunities for information and ideas exchanges that some will grow and yield fruit. This can only work if the conditions are right.

Whether working from the office or from home, the strength of relationships between team members and colleagues is one of the most significant influences on how well people collaborate. In one Harvard Business Review study, collaboration increased markedly in teams that were already well connected, and which invested time in building social – as well as professional – connections. Those promising projects, improvements or ideas that come up in casual conversations are going to feel a lot more achievable if you like, respect and trust the people you work with.

So the office doesn't just encourage casual collisions: it also provides a place where good relationships can be developed in person (across multiple teams and not just your own) both organically and purposefully. Because despite all the recent advancements and sophistications in virtual collaboration tools, people generally agree the best collaboration still happens face to face.

In summary:

- Casual collisions are the chance encounters that happen with colleagues in a physical environment, and they are incredibly valuable at spreading information, building culture and aiding innovation
- They help an organization at four main levels: functionally, personally, culturally and financially
- These collisions occur best in an office environment or a face-to-face meeting
- Diversifying the people you talk to and what you talk about is a great way to boost innovation
- The strength of relationships both social and professional – can determine how effective collaboration will be
- The office is a place where both relationship-building and collaboration are optimized

In her 2022 book The Nowhere Office, Julia Hobsbawm declares the pandemic marked the start of a new era of work, where the majority of workers (who don't provide direct service delivery) can choose to work from anywhere.

Part of this shift was down to a forced reassessment of what was feasible when the world locked down – when technology rose to the occasion and kept everybody working and connected at a level no one would have thought possible prior to 2020.

However, as we enter the era of what Hobsbawm titles the 'Nowhere Office', we're facing a workforce no longer prepared to work in a rigid or static-located way:

Hybrid working reflects the fact that mobility and freedom are the new prizes for the professional working class, who do not so much want to 'clock on' and 'clock off' as move seamlessly between work and private life.

Julia Hobsbawm

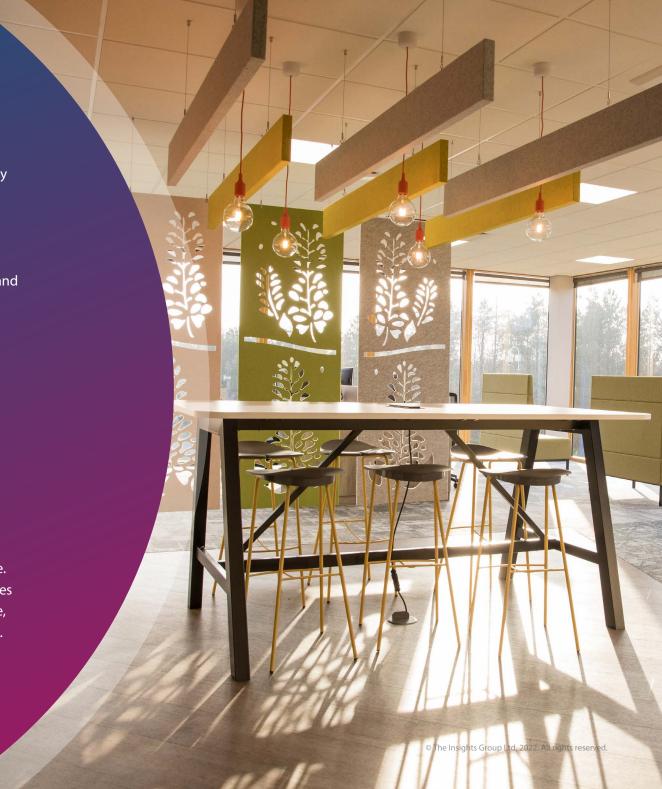
The Nowhere Office, 2022; (pg. 19)



Hobsbawm does not deny there is still a very real place for the office in this new world of work. Many people – especially in Gen Z – don't have the space to set up an adequate home office, and the additional social, learning and collaboration benefits of an in-office situation can justify the commute. But the importance here is moving seamlessly – having the flexibility to choose when to come into the office, and why, and also having flexibility within the office itself, for example:

- What spaces are available?
- How well do they accommodate people's working preferences?
- Are there different areas?
 - Quiet areas?
 - Busy areas?
 - Areas for long lunches or short catch-ups? Etc.

As such, the office has more demands on it than it did before. It needs to actively attract people by providing better facilities and more opportunities than they could experience at home, and not represent an archaic limitation of working freedoms. Choice and flexibility are key.



Designing more collaborative, hybrid-ready workplaces

Firstly, organizations are having to look at what flexibility they're offering their employees around returning to work. Companies that have forced a return to the office, or who have dictated the days employees are expected to be present, have faced major pushback and discontent, such as in the case of Apple. Some people may prefer to be based in an office at least a few days a week, but we've entered an era where employees expect that choice to sit with them. Thus, organizations that have adopted a firmer stance on office-based working days, as opposed to letting employees lead this decision, have experienced higher turnover, as people look for more flexible options elsewhere.

Secondly, organizations have been redesigning the office spaces they have to prepare them for evolving working styles. Rows of desks where people are expected to sit and complete their work and calls, that they could easily do at home, are being replaced by versatile meeting and collaboration spaces. If people are choosing when and why they come into the office, they're prioritizing the valuable face-to-face time that's exclusive to this environment, which means goodbye static desks and hello social spaces.

We spoke to Stephen Griffiths, Studio Director for workplace consultancy Space Solutions, about the changing expectations for today's offices:

The office pre-pandemic provided little choice of spaces to use for staff. They generally offered the traditional owned desk space on a 1:1 ratio, demanding large amounts of floorspace, and meeting rooms which typically were overbooked but under-capacity. A variety of work areas, such as high benches, project areas, focus booths and many more, allow staff to do their very best work and adopt the workstyle that works best for them and their teams



Stephen advised us on the best ways to make an office as versatile as possible to make sure it can accommodate the unique needs of individuals, as well as hybrid teams. Steps as simple as:

- Making furniture lightweight and movable – meaning teams can easily create the spaces they need for a specific purpose or project.
- Standing desks and workspaces at different heights – to aid wellbeing and physical health, as people are able to work in spaces that are most comfortable for them.
- Varied spaces for different kinds of conversations – small, intimate areas for 1:1s; large, open-plan social areas for casual collisions; relaxed, comfortable areas for informal meetings or brainstorming sessions.

Versatile virtual-conferencing technology is also vital in this hybrid world. Most people would agree voice calls are not a good substitute for having a visual presence in a room. Seamless screen and audio set-ups enable remote virtual participants to feel fully present alongside inperson colleagues, increasing collaboration, and are essential if a hybrid model is to be successful.

Essentially, the more diverse the office spaces, the more opportunities there are for employees to do their best work, approach ideas in new ways, and find real value in the office environment.

In summary:

- We are entering an era of work where people can work from anywhere, and employees now expect flexibility and mobility from their organizations
- The office is still hugely relevant in this era of virtual working, but it needs to provide even greater flexibility, not limitations, regarding how people work
- People need flexibility in both when/why they come into the office, and the kinds of facilities and spaces they have access to when they're in the office
- People are prioritizing face-to-face time with colleagues when they come into the office, which is why spaces need to be set up that accommodate different kinds of conversations
- Offices also need to be set up for virtual meetings to keep the voices of remote colleagues fully present as people continue to work within hybrid teams

Prioritizing inclusion and wellbeing in the hybrid office

The workplace has always been an extension of home: a place you spend most of your daylight hours, and, believe it or not, where you spend more time with colleagues than you do with family.

Fortunately, the trend in office purpose and design is moving us closer to a workplace that prioritizes health, wellbeing and inclusion.

Designing the office for inclusion

Many organizations are taking the opportunity provided by their evolving work practices to assess the accessibility and inclusivity of their offices. While offices are typically physically accessible, there's a greater awareness of the diverse needs and expectations of people, and how comfortable and productive people feel in their office environments.

And the challenge organizations face is how to make workplaces more accessible for certain groups, without inadvertently making them inaccessible to others.

We spoke to Mark Charlesworth, a Workplace Neurodiversity Consultant, about some of the ways an organization can ensure their offices are as inclusive as possible. He explains that there are many layers of depth when it comes to inclusive workplace design: it's not just about making the physical spaces accessible, but about acknowledging that processes, communications and working practices also influence how individuals respond to their workplace.



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enabling SUCCESS For example, you might choose to implement a hotdesking policy so that you're maximizing flexibility, but, as Mark discusses, there are many neurodivergent individuals who would find working at an unfamiliar desk disruptive or even distressing:

As someone who has ADHD myself, I know that hot desks may offer flexibility but it's not a suitable model for neurodivergent people because they need familiarity and routine. They would need to set up their desk space each time before they were comfortable and it would take half their day, every single time. A simple solution is to introduce a priority booking system where people with neurodiverse needs can book a specific desk, or at least book from a specific bank of desks."

There are often simple ways to include groups with specific needs, or simple adjustments that need to be made. Signposting clearly helps neurodivergent people navigate the office, as well as visiting colleagues, but being mindful of font size, color, type of font and spacing can also ensure that the office is more accessible to people with dyslexia or visual impairments.

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In addition, bright colors and sharp color contrasts can be particularly distracting or even disorienting. While Mark jokes about not advocating for all-beige offices, he stresses that color is a factor in how comfortable and productive neurodivergent people feel. He recommends blocks of color instead of busy patterns and putting up screens where appropriate to avoid distraction. Making the office inclusive, he says, doesn't have to be expensive.

The role of the office in employee wellbeing

As we step further into a more employee-led workplace which lets people move seamlessly between work and home, more organizations are actively working toward making the office a comfortable place that supports mental wellbeing, rather than contributing to stress.

Part of this is acknowledging that stressful things do happen at work, and that employees are people first, carrying all the stresses of life whether they're in the office or at home. Most people can cope with a few stresses throughout the day, but people have different thresholds before they need to stop and deal with their stress – whether that's talking to a colleague in a private place or finding a quiet space to decompress.

Offices need to be equipped for de-stressing, for calm, quiet moments, and for sensory relaxation so that employees can reset themselves. When poor mental and emotional health can account for as many as 60% of all lost working days, looking after employee wellbeing as a top priority becomes a sound business decision, as well as a basic human consideration.

But putting measures in place to mitigate the effects of stress is not the same as supporting wellbeing.

Work should not be a painful experience, to be compensated for with various wellbeing initiatives, but a source of connection, identify, purpose and humanity."

Julia Hobsbawm

The Nowhere Office, 2022; (pg. 119)

Work, for many, brings purpose and community. When the conditions are right, it can be an enhancer of wellbeing, not a detractor. The right role – one that uses your skills and challenges you – plays a big part in this. The people are also a significant factor in whether or not your work contributes to, or damages, wellbeing. But what is the role of the physical space – the office?

Check-in, not clock-in

While generally people report a better worklife balance when working from home, people who made the sudden switch to working exclusively from home due to Covid-19 reported several implications for their overall health and wellbeing. In a report by the Royal Society for Public Health:

- 67% reported feeling less connected to colleagues
- 46% reported doing less exercise
- 39% reported developing musculoskeletal problems
- And 37% reported disturbed sleep

The office pre-pandemic represented a lifestyle. People would go to the gym on their way to work, or perhaps walk or cycle there. People would sit at an ergonomic desk and spend time socializing with their work 'friends', and feel active and stimulated simply by the nature of their surroundings.

So for many people, enforced home working was less healthy. People didn't have the same opportunities to leave the house, vary their conversations and thought patterns, be physically active, or even sit at a proper desk. The hybrid office brings renewed opportunity to make going into work a healthy choice – both mentally and physically – and organizations can reinforce this through their messaging and culture.

Essentially, organizations that tell their people you're here to check-in, not clock-in will see better returns on their office environment – as a place where employees can reconnect with colleagues and their purpose in the business.

In summary:

- Workplace design is moving toward greater health, wellbeing and inclusion, especially for people with neurodiverse needs
- There are small adjustments that can be made to make people more comfortable and productive; inclusivity doesn't have to be expensive
- The workplace should support mental wellbeing, rather than contributing to stress, and needs to create spaces for people to decompress
- Work brings purpose and community, which aids wellbeing
- People who made the switch to working exclusively from home reported a negative impact on health and wellbeing
- The hybrid office can encourage healthy lifestyle choices and promote a culture of checking-in, not clocking-in



Why we needed a new approach

At Insights, we have 16 offices globally, but our headquarters is in Dundee, Scotland – the city where both our founders and our flagship offering, Insights Discovery, were born.

In January 2020, we'd just opened our third Dundee building to accommodate our ever-expanding workforce. At the time, while we had remote and hybrid workers, most of our people were recruited onto office-based contracts, and we were going through a period of intense growth. We simply had to find room for everyone, and this meant more offices, more desks, more meeting rooms, more space.

Then Covid-19 hit. And all of a sudden, our space issues were the least of our worries.

Fast forward, and we reached a time when, like many others, we considered returning to the office – and what that might look like. We knew instinctively that the model we'd used before wasn't going to work. We couldn't keep adding desks and buildings to accommodate our workforce, and nor, it seemed, did we need to.

We knew the office needed to be something different on our return, and our executive team started thinking about its purpose.

thoughtful, committed Our people had not only got us through the most challenging time in our history, but they'd done it all remotely. te Insights Group Ltd, 2022. All rights resen

The purpose of our redesigned office

We started with research. We knew that our peoples' lives had changed, as had their expectations of the workplace. For example, many of our people had begun to express a preference for hybrid working, and shared their concerns about returning to the office safely while Covid-19 was still a threat. Naturally, we had to build our return-to-work plans, and our new office design, around what our people wanted and needed.

In addition, we knew that we wanted to prioritize and maximize collaborative working to stay true to our cultural values of 'Working together' and 'Enjoying the journey'. As a peopleled organization, we knew that many colleagues had struggled with the isolation imposed by the pandemic, and we were eager to return to a state where our people, all over the world, had the opportunity to come together with their colleagues in person.

We also had to ask ourselves: what would be the impact of not having a building at all? And that helped us pinpoint where we saw the office adding the most value.

With all of this in mind, we determined that the purpose of the refreshed Terra Nova would be to act as our local collaboration hub, and the global heart of our Insights community. Where people could come to feel connected and take advantage of a variety of hybrid-friendly meeting areas.

It would no longer be a hive of desks and busywork, but a lifestyle and workstyle choice. A place where 'casual collisions' could happen, and we could enter a new era of growth and connectivity.





What did we change?

The better question would be: what didn't we change? We stepped away from the expectation that everyone needed to have a desk and an office-based contract, and we adopted a 'lite' hot-desking model where desk banks are there for specific teams, for when they need them.

The extra space we gained from reducing desk allocation gave us the freedom to create more versatile collaboration and connection spaces, including working areas, casual areas and caféstyle socializing areas.

By stepping away from one-desk-for-oneemployee, we were also able to convert our second Dundee office into a project and learning hub, reserved specifically for global learning programs and multi-functional project work. Our super-classroom was designed as a highly technology-enabled room with roving cameras, large virtual-conferencing screens and ceiling microphones, allowing our Learning and Development team to deliver the best possible learning experience to our globally dispersed workforce.

The impact on our people

At Insights, we know all about appreciating people's differences – it's what we do.

We know there are extroverted people who've struggled with the absence of in-person social interaction, the lack of opportunities to get involved, and the disconnection from the 'hive'. Similarly, there are introverted people who have suffered from the slow deterioration of their close networks and relationships as all-virtual working dominated. But many people are a combination of the two, and therefore they need opportunities to step into both spaces, which our new community-building office provides.

Our CEO, Fiona Logan, championed the redevelopment of our office as a way to further grow and celebrate our people-led culture:

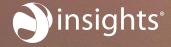
The redevelopment was designed to provide a vibrant working environment, driven by technology, where employees can come together to collaborate flexibly. Our people told us that while they wanted to retain the opportunity to work from home, with all the flexibility that came with it, they also missed time spent in the workplace enjoying the journey as a community.

People who have returned to the office have commented on the new, more relaxed and mood-elevating atmosphere which, as one employee remarked, is "so much more 'Insights' than before".

The office has delivered on its goals of providing a comfortable, community-like feel, and giving opportunities for even better conversations. At the same time, we're supporting our employees to work flexibly, collaboratively and healthily, in a way that lets them bring their best, wherever they choose to put their laptop.



enjoying the journey



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