

# What's New with Hybrid Work? Comparing functional area allocations in pre- and post-pandemic workplace designs

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Against the background of hybrid work as a common new work practice, this paper aims to understand how disruptive the COVID-19 pandemic has been to workplace design schemes.

**Research Goals:** We ask what has changed in workplace designs implemented before and after the pandemic, thus treating design as an output related variable that reflects changed organisational needs, client preferences and design values.

**Theoretical Background:** Workplace research that covers design aspects is still rare in the post-pandemic discourse, although studies have begun appearing. They mainly cover workplace location choice preferences and satisfaction but also summarise insights by experts and the literature. Taken together, a complex picture of hybrid work in relation to workplace design emerges. Many aspects mentioned, however, are already present in the pre-pandemic workplace debate.

**Design/Methodology:** We compare a sample of 18 workplace designs created by a single UK-based interior designer, AIS Interiors, in order to test how area allocations and amenity frequencies differ between pre-pandemic (n=9) and post-pandemic offices (n=9). T-tests are drawn on a set of 19 variables across four themes including functional area allocation, amenity counts, densities and design granularity.

**Findings:** Post-pandemic offices are significantly different from their pre-pandemic counterparts regarding seven aspects including floor plate size; percentage of open-plan desk areas, total office

areas, collaborative spaces, and alternative seats; area per desk and size of desking neighbourhood areas.

Originality/Value: To our knowledge, investigating design as an outcome variable is a novel approach. We highlight a step change in how post-pandemic workplaces are structured as more collaborative, more generous and more intimate. We also challenge the office design guidelines and space standards on desk density issued by the British Council for Offices (BCO) and suggest rethinking workplace design practice as a holistic planning approach rather than an exercise of scaling up areas based on desk counts.

## **Keywords**

Hybrid Work, Area Allocation, Workplace Design, Spatial Layout, Corridors.

## **1 INTRODUCTION: CONTINUITY OR DISRUPTION?**

Six years ago, when the Covid-19 pandemic swept around the world rapidly and caused severe disruptions to knowledge workers with many offices affected by month-long lockdowns, working from home (WfH) became the temporary norm in many countries with discussions arising whether offices would be needed at all anymore. Ever since, hybrid work, i.e., a combination of regularly working from the office as well as from alternative locations such as the home has become not just a de facto norm across many organisations (HubbleHQ, 2026) but also a hotly debated topic. This is reflected in the significant rise of both research papers on hybrid work (Sailer et al., 2023) and the grey literature – reports, newspaper articles, opinion pieces and so on (for an example, see: Mischke et al., 2023).

Generally speaking, two camps emerged in this debate on hybrid work: those who considered the pandemic as an opportunity to do things differently, and those who wanted to return to ‘normal’ as soon as possible. The latter group, mainly composed of large organisations and CEOs but also smaller startups propagated a return to the office for at least four to five days a week, partially alarmed by research that highlighted a loss of connectivity and trust during lockdowns (Yang et al., 2022), partially led by a perception that WfH created barriers to organisational culture (Gibson et al., 2023) and innovation (Gibbs et al., 2024); in contrast, the former group acknowledged that employees were more satisfied and equally productive with a hybrid work setup (Bloom et al., 2024).

Similarly, two different interpretations emerged on how disruptive the pandemic experience has been to the office as the place where work happens and in effect what this means for workplace design. Sailer et al. (2023) argued that the pandemic appears to have been as disruptive to working practices as the profound changes brought about by Taylorism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, thus necessitating a seismic shift in understanding work as a socio-spatial system, or in short, the social and organisational implications of design choices that manifest both physically and digitally. This implies that workplace design solutions would also differ, as the social reality had changed. On the contrary, Myerson and Ross (2022) maintained that the pandemic merely accelerated existing trends towards organising work more flexibly, which was well underway by 2020, for example in the practice of activity-based working (ABW) (Van Meel, 2019) and that those preexisting trends were only brought into the open by Covid-19. This perspective highlighted the continuity of design

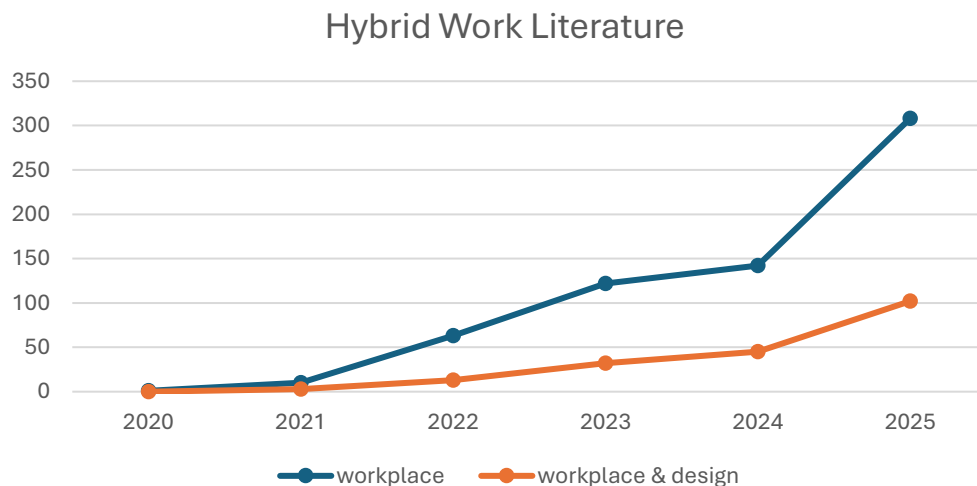
needs such as spaces for encounter and collaboration already evident in workplace design schemes implemented in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Sailer et al., 2025).

Both of these perspectives are plausible. In order to explore which of them is more closely reflected in current design practice, six years after the pandemic, this paper asks what has actually changed in workplace designs implemented since the Covid-19 pandemic compared to those designed a few years prior. Thus, we consider design as an output related variable in its own right implicitly expressing values, design assumptions and client needs. Before we do so, however, it is useful to contextualise what we can learn from workplace research specifically on design conducted over the last few years.

## 2 PERSPECTIVES ON WORKPLACE DESIGN AND HYBRID WORK

In 2023, it was lamented that compared to other aspects of hybrid work, such as management perspectives, human resources (HR) and corporate real estate (CRE), the perspective of architecture and design did not feature prominently in the discourse (Sailer et al., 2023). Most recently though, design related research has caught up somewhat as highlighted in Figure 1, which plots the increasing number of publications over the years from 2020 to 2025 found in the Scopus database<sup>1</sup> on workplace research including those that explicitly mention the keyword ‘design’.

Figure 1. Number of publications on hybrid work with and without design related keywords.



Of 195 publications (from 2020 to 2025) plus a further 18 published in 2026 (not shown in the graph) that include the keyword “design”, upon scrutinising the abstracts, the majority had to be discarded, as they did not cover workplace design and only included the phrase to describe other issues such as ‘study design’ or ‘work process design’. 22 papers were finally identified as

<sup>1</sup> Search undertaken on 10 April 2026; the search term used was: "hybrid work" AND (office OR home OR workplace OR workspace) AND design.

relevant. They equally covered built environment related (architecture, design, CRE) and people focused disciplines (management, HR, occupational health, human-computer interaction).

Key themes emerging from this body of literature include post-pandemic<sup>2</sup> studies of the effect of newly designed hybrid workspaces; they underline the relevance of user-centred design (Reindl et al., 2022, Aksamija and Milosevic, 2023) and the requirement for more meeting rooms and clearly designed breakout spaces (Hills et al., 2024); they speak of place identity and the agency of space (Andrews, 2024, Pearce et al., 2023), the need to consider location multiplicity of hybrid and physical places (Duckert and Bjørn, 2025), but also of considering furniture solutions more systematically (Cruz and Pombo, 2023).

Furthermore, three studies employed expert interviews, highlighting that design professionals believed physical space is required for creative synergies (Nabergoj and Uršič, 2024); that CRE professionals saw new strategic priorities in their roles including facilitating job tasks and communication, adjusting to change and monitoring staff behaviour (Ruiz de Castañeda Altuna et al., 2025); and that facility managers understood employee choices to work from the office or the home as needs met or unmet (Rosgaard et al., 2025).

Another three studies synthesized the literature and argued that workspaces needed to be redesigned to further staff interactions (Patricio and Nickel, 2025); offer more flexibility to support staff wellbeing and organisational productivity (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2025); and provide more balance but also a negotiation of opposing expectations and requirements (Tahsiri, 2023).

The single biggest theme in the literature, however, were empirical studies investigating employee satisfaction and workplace choice preferences. Satisfaction was highest in a study of Serbian companies when workspaces were aesthetically pleasing, flexible and fostered a sense of belonging (Krizmanić and Milovanović, 2025). The employee choice to WfH in Finnish workplaces was determined by a lack of quiet and private spaces in the office (Haapakangas et al., 2024) as well as practices for meetings (Haapakangas et al., 2025). In contrast, on-site engagement in Swiss workplaces was driven by opportunities for spontaneous encounters (Mateescu et al., 2024), however, micro qualities of desks with good visibility, thermal comfort and access to daylight also played a role for desk occupancy in a London co-working space (Pan et al., 2025). Operational support staff in a Swedish university preferred dedicated desks with the option to personalise them as well as social interaction opportunities in shared spaces; private offices were deemed less important (Aboagye et al., 2026). Finally, a detailed study of Dutch office workers was able to show that preferences varied depending on staff autonomy, i.e., between staff with flexible and fixed workdays (Tuzcuoğlu et al., 2025).

Finally, two more studies address changes before, during and after the pandemic directly and are therefore most closely aligned with the aims of this paper. A literature review traced the impacts of workplace management transformations as an effect of the pandemic and found an accelerated adoption of digital technologies, a renewed focus on health and sustainability and a shift towards hybrid work models (Hou and Sing, 2025). A large empirical study of more than 5,000 office

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<sup>2</sup> The term post-pandemic is used as a shortcut here to describe events, attitudes and approaches from early 2020 onwards. This does not mean that the pandemic is over; quite the contrary, we acknowledge that aftereffects of the pandemic still cast a long shadow, not only in the debate around workplaces but also in public health.

workers in Australia with matched responses for three time periods (before March 2020, March 2020 – November 2021, after November 2021) revealed significant shifts in work patterns and preferences with a rise in flexible arrangements, a decrease of time spent in the office and a decline in satisfaction with indoor environmental quality, while privacy and disruption were the strongest predictors of perceived productivity and health (Gocer et al., 2025).

Taken together, the literature discussed above paints a varied picture of workplace design needs in times of hybrid work and highlights important changes that occurred since the Covid-19 pandemic, not just in working practices (such as less time spent in the office), but also regarding design variables. For example, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century discussion on workplaces, open-plan offices were repeatedly scolded as undesirable regarding satisfaction, productivity, privacy and even collaboration (Bernstein and Turban, 2018, Kim and De Dear, 2020, Sailer and Thomas, 2021). However, Aboagye et al. (2026) now found a preference for open-plan layouts, possibly due to a newfound appreciation of social contact.

Still as a whole, there is gap in detailing workplace design changes regarding their layout choices. In addition, the literature is inconclusive on whether post-pandemic design is significantly different from pre-pandemic approaches, as most themes were present in earlier discussions, too, such as the need for quiet spaces for concentration, privacy, thermal comfort, and human-centred design. For instance, disruption and lack of privacy as strongest predictors of dissatisfaction were well established in the pre-pandemic literature (Kim and de Dear, 2013).

### 3 METHOD AND DATA

To investigate changes in workplace design induced by the pandemic, we chose a sample of 18 workplaces, all created by a single interior designer, AIS, to avoid biases stemming from different design philosophies. Half of the cases were completed just before the pandemic in 2018 and 2019 ( $n=9$ ), the other half were completed since 2021 ( $n=9$ ).<sup>3</sup> All cases in the sample came from the financial services industry and included insurance companies, fintech firms, banking institutions and investment or asset management organisations. Variations due to industry differences, for instance in interaction behaviour (Sailer et al., 2016) can therefore be ruled out. The size of workplaces differed significantly with 563 m<sup>2</sup> net internal area (NIA) for the smallest case to over 11,000 m<sup>2</sup> for the largest. Due to constraints with data availability, a sample with more consistency regarding office size was not feasible.

In the analysis, we worked with the floor plans in CAD and Revit and drew polygons around each functional space to measure its area (in m<sup>2</sup>) and perform a series of counts. The functional allocation of areas constitutes a major design decision in interior office planning. Density measures such as the area allowable for each desk are common industry standards, as for example summarised in the UK by the British Council of Offices, BCO (2022). We added measures of granularity, i.e., how large or small functional areas were on average.

To establish significant differences between the pre- and post-pandemic cases, we undertook a series of t-tests on our variables. In line with the exploratory research approach, we consider this a pattern detection method rather than confirmatory testing. Hence, only simple t-tests were

<sup>3</sup> For clarity of results, we avoided designs of 2020 as an interim period of great uncertainty.

performed rather than the more complex Bonferroni, Holm or FDR tests. In detail, as listed in table 1, the following metrics were compared:

- *Area allocation*: percentage of NIA allocated to different functional areas, i.e., 1) open-plan desking, 2) enclosed offices, 3) meeting rooms, 4) breakout spaces, 5) eating areas, 6) amenities, 7) storage, 8) services and 9) corridors / circulation spaces; for the analysis categories 3-6 were clubbed together as collaborative spaces).
- *Amenity counts*: number of amenities and key pieces of furniture, i.e., the number of 1) seats at desks, 2) alternative seats in collaborative areas, 3) the percentage of alternative seats (out of all seats), 4) the percentage of booths (out of all meeting rooms) and 5) the variety of meeting rooms (by size).
- *Allowances*: the area allocated to seats, i.e., 1) area per desk as NIA divided by the number of seats at desks, 2) area per seat as NIA divided by the number of all seats.
- *Granularity* of functional areas, i.e., the number of 1) all polygons and 2) desking neighbourhoods; 3) mean area per desking neighbourhood; as well as normalised figures given the size of the office, i.e., 4) the number of polygons divided by NIA and 5) mean area per desking neighbourhood divided by NIA.

*Table 1. Overview of cases and key metrics; p-values for the t-tests in the last column are greyed out if insignificant at the 5% level. Metrics discussed in detail later are coloured in a red to green colour scheme for easier reading.*

|                 |                                        | PRE     |           |           |           |         |             |           |             |               |             | POST    |         |           |               |         |         |           |               |                   |  |  |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------|---------|-----------|-----------|-----------|---------|-------------|-----------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------|---------|-----------|---------------|---------|---------|-----------|---------------|-------------------|--|--|
|                 | ID                                     | FE      | ID        | IN        | IM        | BO      | MI          | IL        | MA          | SE1           | MU          | BE      | FI      | IC        | SE2           | BA      | BU      | IF        | SA            |                   |  |  |
|                 | Sector                                 | Fintech | Insurance | Insurance | Insurance | Banking | Invest Mgmt | Insurance | Invest Mgmt | Fin. Services | Invest Mgmt | Banking | Fintech | Insurance | Fin. Services | Banking | Banking | Insurance | Fin. Services | p-value in t-test |  |  |
|                 | NIA [m2]                               | 907     | 964       | 1664      | 5213      | 563     | 1837        | 2600      | 1337        | 3390          | 4144        | 3174    | 1340    | 2410      | 2236          | 3258    | 11378   | 1474      | 1217          |                   |  |  |
|                 | # of Floors                            | 1       | 1         | 1         | 4         | 1       | 2           | 2         | 1           | 2             | 1           | 2       | 1       | 1         | 1             | 1       | 5       | 2         | 1             |                   |  |  |
|                 | Floor Area                             | 907     | 964       | 1664      | 1303      | 563     | 919         | 1300      | 1337        | 1695          | 4144        | 1587    | 1340    | 2410      | 2236          | 3258    | 2276    | 737       | 1217          | 0.015             |  |  |
| Area allocation | % Desk Area                            | 32%     | 22%       | 28%       | 23%       | 60%     | 39%         | 42%       | 27%         | 32%           | 23%         | 25%     | 13%     | 26%       | 22%           | 30%     | 15%     | 6%        | 14%           | 0.029             |  |  |
|                 | % Enclosed Office                      | 9%      | 1%        | 2%        | 23%       | 0%      | 15%         | 7%        | 11%         | 3%            | 1%          | 3%      | 0%      | 0%        | 2%            | 0%      | 0%      | 26%       | 2%            | 0.292             |  |  |
|                 | % Office total                         | 41%     | 23%       | 30%       | 46%       | 60%     | 54%         | 49%       | 38%         | 35%           | 24%         | 28%     | 13%     | 26%       | 24%           | 30%     | 15%     | 32%       | 16%           | 0.001             |  |  |
|                 | % Corridor                             | 22%     | 30%       | 32%       | 25%       | 12%     | 24%         | 26%       | 20%         | 27%           | 30%         | 38%     | 32%     | 30%       | 25%           | 25%     | 33%     | 26%       | 28%           | 0.076             |  |  |
|                 | % Collab Space                         | 37%     | 47%       | 38%       | 29%       | 28%     | 22%         | 25%       | 42%         | 38%           | 46%         | 34%     | 55%     | 44%       | 51%           | 45%     | 52%     | 42%       | 56%           | 0.007             |  |  |
|                 |                                        |         |           |           |           |         |             |           |             |               |             |         |         |           |               |         |         |           |               |                   |  |  |
| Amenity Count   | # Seats at Desks                       | 167     | 54        | 98        | 234       | 122     | 211         | 261       | 112         | 364           | 285         | 237     | 58      | 179       | 134           | 280     | 482     | 60        | 60            | 0.771             |  |  |
|                 | # of Alternative Seats                 | 156     | 121       | 218       | 402       | 64      | 101         | 285       | 213         | 531           | 591         | 311     | 261     | 410       | 290           | 435     | 1445    | 100       | 207           | 0.157             |  |  |
|                 | Total # of Seats                       | 323     | 175       | 316       | 636       | 186     | 312         | 546       | 325         | 895           | 876         | 548     | 319     | 589       | 424           | 715     | 1927    | 160       | 267           | 0.250             |  |  |
|                 | % Alternative Seats                    | 48%     | 69%       | 69%       | 63%       | 34%     | 32%         | 52%       | 66%         | 59%           | 67%         | 57%     | 82%     | 70%       | 68%           | 61%     | 75%     | 63%       | 78%           | 0.011             |  |  |
|                 | # Booths (% of Meeting Rooms)          | 27%     | 31%       | 31%       | 22%       | 0%      | 38%         | 24%       | 13%         | 62%           | 20%         | 33%     | 52%     | 28%       | 18%           | 43%     | 35%     | 17%       | 46%           | 0.508             |  |  |
|                 | Variety of Meeting Rooms               | 7       | 5         | 5         | 7         | 1       | 6           | 5         | 7           | 9             | 14          | 8       | 6       | 7         | 9             | 9       | 10      | 4         | 7             | 0.059             |  |  |
| Dens.           | Area per Desk                          | 5.4     | 17.9      | 17.0      | 22.3      | 4.6     | 8.7         | 10.0      | 11.9        | 9.3           | 14.5        | 13.4    | 23.1    | 13.5      | 16.7          | 11.6    | 23.6    | 24.6      | 20.3          | 0.034             |  |  |
|                 | Area per Seat                          | 2.8     | 5.5       | 5.3       | 8.2       | 3.0     | 5.9         | 4.8       | 4.1         | 3.8           | 4.7         | 5.8     | 4.2     | 4.1       | 5.3           | 4.6     | 5.9     | 9.2       | 4.6           | 0.473             |  |  |
| Granularity     | # of Polygons                          | 52      | 36        | 37        | 152       | 13      | 60          | 75        | 48          | 118           | 97          | 98      | 58      | 69        | 118           | 88      | 482     | 58        | 41            | 0.257             |  |  |
|                 | # Polygons / NIA                       | 0.057   | 0.037     | 0.022     | 0.029     | 0.023   | 0.033       | 0.029     | 0.036       | 0.035         | 0.023       | 0.031   | 0.043   | 0.029     | 0.053         | 0.027   | 0.042   | 0.039     | 0.034         | 0.679             |  |  |
|                 | # Desking Neighbourhoods               | 8       | 2         | 3         | 15        | 6       | 11          | 9         | 3           | 15            | 10          | 12      | 5       | 7         | 15            | 10      | 18      | 2         | 2             | 0.183             |  |  |
|                 | Mean Area per Desk Neighbourhood       | 36      | 102       | 153       | 77        | 56      | 64          | 119       | 119         | 71            | 93          | 65      | 35      | 88        | 58            | 94      | 71      | 45        | 86            | 0.231             |  |  |
|                 | Mean Area per Desk Neighbourhood / NIA | 0.040   | 0.106     | 0.092     | 0.015     | 0.099   | 0.035       | 0.046     | 0.089       | 0.021         | 0.022       | 0.020   | 0.026   | 0.037     | 0.026         | 0.029   | 0.006   | 0.031     | 0.071         | 0.041             |  |  |

## 4 RESULTS

Across all four themes, area allocations, amenity counts, densities and granularity, we found relevant and significant differences between the pre- and post-pandemic workplace designs, however, as to be expected, not all metrics delivered significant differences. Furthermore, not all found differences can necessarily be considered meaningful as expressions of changed design needs due to the pandemic. For example, the average floor area (NIA divided by the number of floors) yields significant results ( $p < 0.015$ ), however, this could be a bias inherent in the nature of our sample.

Five major changes in the post-pandemic sample point towards significantly different design approaches and solutions as sketched below.

Firstly, *open-plan desking* areas are significantly reduced in our sample of post-pandemic workplaces ( $p < 0.029$ ). While the pre-pandemic offices in our sample allocated an average of 34% of their NIA to desks, this figure dropped to just 19% post-pandemically. Case BO in banking might be an extreme example of a 2019 workplace design with 60% of open-plan desking areas, however two other cases showed 39% and 42% of open-plan areas. In contrast, in the post-pandemic workplaces, four cases have less than 15% of NIA dedicated to desks. An even clearer picture ( $p < 0.001$ ) is obtained by comparing the total percentage of areas allocated to offices (open-plan desking plus enclosed offices), which dropped from 42% to 23%. Some organisations, for instance case IF, designed in 2025, compensated their very small open-plan desking area (6%) with 26% of enclosed offices. With more than three quarters of NIA dedicated to functions outside of enclosed or open-plan desking, it becomes clear that a major shift has happened in what organisations expect their staff to do while onsite and what designers have implemented accordingly.

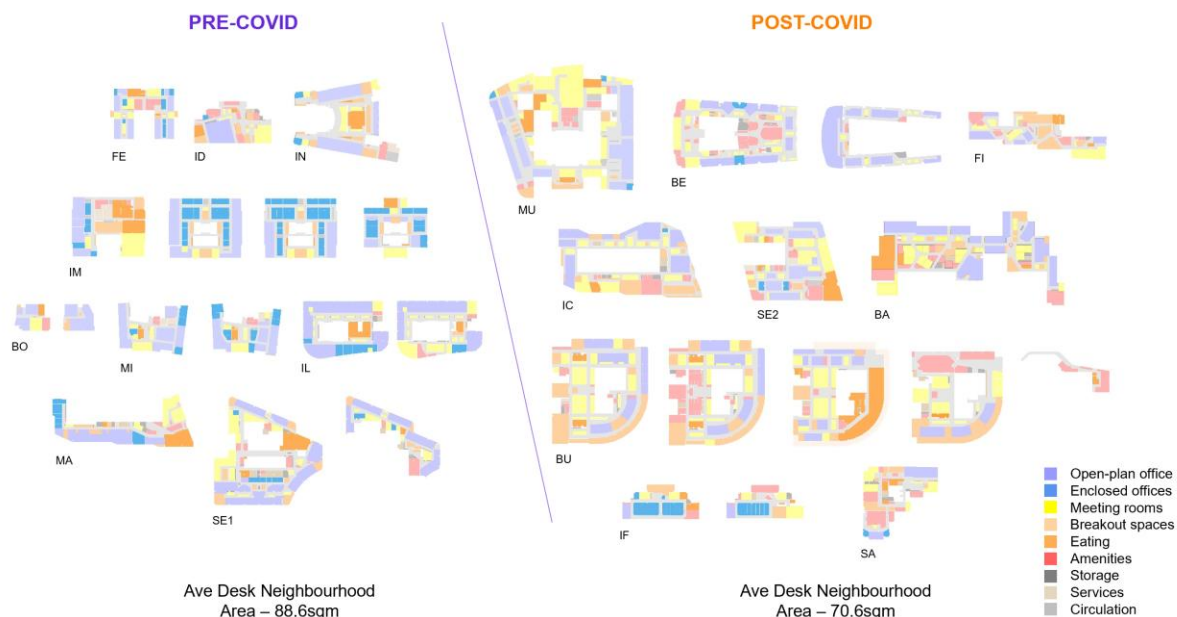
Secondly, in line with decreased desking, the percentage allocated to *collaborative spaces* (i.e., meeting rooms, breakout spaces, eating spaces and amenities) has increased significantly ( $p < 0.007$ ) from an average of 34% before the pandemic to 47% afterwards. One of the cases in our sample, a business in the financial services sector, of which we have both a pre and a post design represented illustrates these shifting priorities very clearly. In 2019, company SE occupied more than 3,300 m<sup>2</sup>, of which 35% were allocated to desks / offices and an almost equal amount of 33% to collaborative spaces. In 2025, the company moved, not only downsizing to two thirds of their overall NIA but more importantly by prioritising their social areas. In this workplace, combined desking took up only 24% (-11%), whereas collaborative spaces became the single biggest functional category with 51% of NIA.

Thirdly, with desking disappearing, seating options do not get reduced but shift predominantly to so called *alternative seats*. Their pure number is not significant in a t-test ( $p < 0.157$ ), mainly because the workplace designs in our sample differ so much in size, but the percentage of alternative seats as a proportion of all seats yields significant results ( $p < 0.011$ ). Where the 2018-2019 cases feature an average of 13 alternative seats for every ten traditional desk-based seats, already showing forward-thinking design centred around ABW, this figure almost doubles in the post-pandemic sample, where every ten desk-based seats are complemented by 23 alternative seats. This means that seating opportunities therefore also transition from individual desks to collaborative zones.

Fourthly, *areas per desk* increase significantly ( $p < 0.034$ ), which means there is a larger area on average allocated to each desk, or in other words, the workplace is less densely packed. Desk allowance has risen significantly in our sample from an average of  $11.9 \text{ m}^2$  pre-COVID to  $17.9 \text{ m}^2$  post-COVID. Again, a look at the outliers as presented in table 1 highlights interesting differences. Two cases from 2018 and 2019 stand out in this regard with an allowance of only  $5.4 \text{ m}^2$  and  $4.6 \text{ m}^2$  per desk respectively. These workplaces are dominated by efficiently planned desking areas with few other collaborative spaces and a tightly organised circulation. On the other side of the spectrum, we have three cases from 2024-2025 with a generous provision of  $23\text{--}24 \text{ m}^2$  per desk. They are quite different in character owing to their specific floor plates and mix of areas but generally have smaller areas allocated to desking and larger areas dedicated to collaborative functions and corridors.

Finally, the last metric with significant differences ( $p < 0.041$ ) is the average area per desking neighbourhood (normalised by NIA), which expresses the *granularity and intimacy* of a design. In the post-pandemic cases, when controlling for the overall size of the workplace, open-plan desking areas have become smaller and more intimate, moving away from a design featuring a “sea of desks” and each desk being immersed among dozens if not hundreds of co-workers seated in the same area. Instead, desking neighbourhoods have become smaller, shrinking from  $89 \text{ m}^2$  on average to  $71 \text{ m}^2$  post-pandemically. The effect of smaller neighbourhoods can be seen in figure 2, which illustrates abstracted floor plates by displaying only the shape polygons of all cases in the sample. The post-COVID floor plates on the right tend to have smaller desking neighbourhoods that are more intermixed with other functions rather than clustering the same functions together, as evident in the pre-COVID cases on the left.

Figure 2. Abstracted floor plates with coloured polygons for each functional area for all 18 cases in the sample.





Interestingly, some variables we hypothesized to differ significantly did not yield results for instance the number of phone booths ( $p < 0.508$ ) or the variety of meeting room sizes, which narrowly misses the 5% level of significance ( $p < 0.059$ ). Likewise, circulation seems to take up more space post-pandemically, but the t-test remains just about insignificant ( $p < 0.076$ ).

## 5 DISCUSSION

In the following discussion, we want to briefly reflect on our findings in the context of extant literature and offer practical considerations for interior space planning.

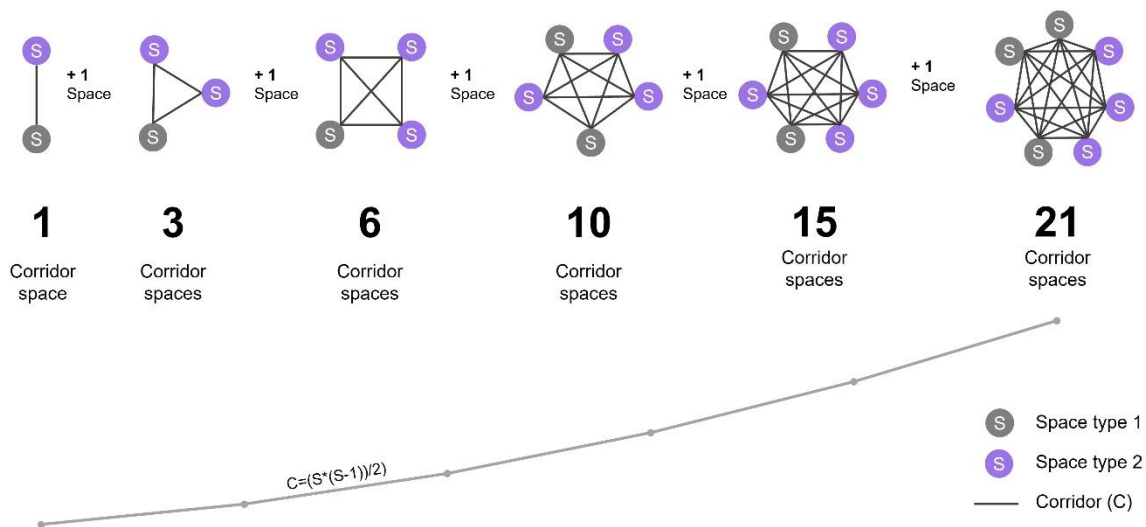
### 5.1 Collaborative Yet Intimate

The evident focus on collaborative functions in post-pandemic offices clearly reflects the role of the office as a social place (Gratton, 2021) where the presence of others becomes a main driver to work on-site as discussed in the extant literature (Mateescu et al., 2024, Aboagye et al., 2026). At the same time though, places for quiet work and privacy were also highlighted as crucial by the literature (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022, Haapakangas et al., 2024) and those areas feature much less prominently in our sample, despite a small (yet insignificant) rise in the percentage of phone booths (from 28% to 32%). The fact that desking neighbourhoods in particular have become more intimate in our post-pandemic sample may alleviate some of these concerns, as smaller areas might enhance feelings of privacy and quiescence, and ultimately improve satisfaction and perceived productivity not just for focused but also for teamwork, as highlighted by earlier research (Sailer et al., 2021a). The requirement for an appropriate balance between collaborative and contemplative functions still needs to be kept in mind for future workplace design and research.

### 5.2 The Role of Corridors

One of the more surprising findings was the moderate (yet insignificant) rise of circulation spaces evident in post-pandemic offices (30%, up from 24%). Viewed from the common early 21<sup>st</sup> century lens of efficient space planning, which in many design practices amounted to less than 15% of NIA dedicated to circulation, this seems undesirable. However, a change in perspective can make sense here: firstly, to understand that more granularity in design necessarily leads to a higher proportion of corridor spaces in order to connect all functions (see figure 3), and secondly to appreciate the crucial role of corridors in bringing people together (Backhouse and Drew, 1992), supporting unplanned encounters (Waber et al., 2014) and thereby improving the likelihood of new ideas to flourish (Sailer et al., 2021b). This suggests that corridors might be appreciated as a space in their own right rather than a mere leftover function or separate entity, as popular in modernist architectural approaches.

Figure 3. Conceptual sketch of rising need for corridor spaces as a function of more distinctive spaces *S* to be connected (in reality spaces tend to share backbone circulation rather than connecting pairwise, so this is illustrative only).



### 5.3 Policy Implications for Space Planning

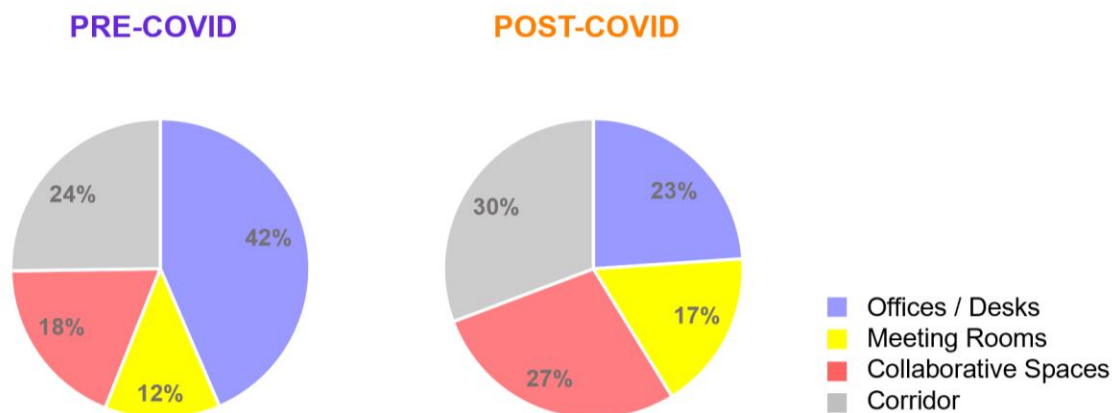
Finally, our findings have important implications for space planning and interior design practice as well as wider policy. A rule of thumb for calculating the overall area need for a workplace has always been to take the BCO (2022) recommended standards for desk allowances and multiple this by the number of staff, for example an organisation with 100 employees would have required a total of 1000-1250 m<sup>2</sup> following the 2019 guidance. This figure would have included all areas beyond desking, e.g., meeting rooms, break-out spaces and circulation.

In their post-pandemic review of office utilisation, the BCO (2025) recognised both the negative impact of too densely planned workspaces and the fact that in hybrid work, employees might work offsite, thereby creating significant underutilisation. This led to a continued recommendation of 10-12 m<sup>2</sup> of area allowance per desk as a baseline for calculating building infrastructure, since the average real-time occupancy figure of 66% would create less densely perceived environments by default.

Our data challenges this approach. Not only did we find significantly relaxed desk allowance figures of 17.9 m<sup>2</sup> per desk on average (up from 11.9 m<sup>2</sup>), also only 23% of space is taken up by desking, while 77% of the remaining NIA is used for different functions. Pragmatically, interior designers might consider a four quarters approach as a planning rule of thumb and allocate approximately 25% of the floor area each to desking, collaborative spaces, meeting rooms and circulation (see figure 4). In practice, this is how space planners might now calculate area needs: firstly, in discussion with an organisation, it would have to be established how many desks are required, based on their staff count but also their WfH policies, their willingness to desk-share,

etc. For example, an organisation with 200 full-time employees, two onsite days per week, a desk-sharing and booking policy and no need for all employees to be in at the same time, would require 100 desks (this includes a 20 desk buffer, as strictly speaking only 80 would be needed for an even distribution over the course of the week). Assuming a density of 18 m<sup>2</sup> per desk<sup>4</sup>, an overall area of 1,800 m<sup>2</sup> would be a good starting point, of which roughly one quarter (450 m<sup>2</sup>) would be desking and the remaining three quarters distributed more or less equally among meeting rooms, collaborative space and corridors, depending on organisational needs and the idiosyncrasies of floor plate geometry. This approach moves away from purely centring on desks while still providing a practical solution. On this basis a configurational approach to space planning can then interweave and balance the different functions needed.

Figure 4. Simplified space allocation compared for pre- and post-pandemic samples with the distribution approximating four quarters in the post-Covid averages.



## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Using workplace design outcomes, in this case functional allocations as a variable of interest across a sample of 18 different UK workplaces, we were able to show that post-pandemic office design has fundamentally changed to provide more intimate, generous and collaborative solutions that no longer put desks at the centre of attention. These findings confirm that a step change in design has occurred due to the pandemic, as otherwise no significant differences would have been found in a sample of this size, however, not all metrics provided definite answers and therefore, the alternative explanation that pre-pandemic workplace design trends were merely accelerated cannot be fully ruled out and some changes might indeed have originated earlier.

As every research, this paper has limitations, mainly around the sample, which was limited by feasibility and data accessibility. Testing the presented findings against a larger, possibly more diverse sample would be beneficial in confirming significant results and providing more clarity, for instance on the rise of corridor spaces, meeting room diversity and whether indeed companies preferred larger floor plates post-pandemically. Stricter statistical testing using Bonferroni, Holm or FDR correction methods to control family-wise errors that occur with multiple tests on the same

<sup>4</sup> Note that 18 m<sup>2</sup> desk allowance this is the average of our post-pandemic sample, which has a relatively large range from 11.6 to 24.6 m<sup>2</sup>.

data set would be appropriate at that stage. Additionally, further research could elaborate on different design decisions inherent in workplace layouts, for instance on adjacencies and configurational choices, e.g., lines of sight.

What our approach has contributed, though, is shedding light on a question of high practical relevance that is not often considered in workplace research, i.e., putting architectural design at the heart of research inquiry. Critiquing current space standards and fit-out guidelines for their desk fixation allows seeing workplace design as a multi-layered system with different interconnected functions.

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