Building a People-Centered Workplace: A Winning Approach to Putting Your Employees First
Introduction

As someone responsible for optimizing the workplace, you know that providing a better workplace experience is about more than just buying better coffee. You’re challenged from all sides: Your C-suite executives increasingly expect the office to reflect and promote company values. Your employees also increasingly expect their workplaces to be modern, technologically advanced, and customizable. And, of course, you need to do it all as economically and efficiently as possible.

Organizations that rise to this challenge have the opportunity to win big. Companies that create great places to work can benefit with a 3x return compared to those who don’t, according to the minds behind the Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For® list. In addition, meeting workers’ needs ensures a company’s operational resources are allocated appropriately for the greatest positive impact to the company’s bottom line.

Meanwhile, companies who fail to develop a proactive workplace strategy have a lot to lose: they are more likely to lose the war for talent, have disengaged workers, suffer from lost productivity, and misallocate operational resources. It’s a common problem. Despite the best efforts of workplace services teams, roughly one-third of employees report that their workplace does not help them meet their full potential. And, 67% of knowledge workers left their previous employer partly because their workplace was not optimized for them.

With stakes high, resources strained, and a dizzying number of potential solutions out there, it’s not easy to identify the best path forward. What steps do you need to take to ensure that your workplace is aligned to what people actually want? Read on to learn why developing a people-centered workplace matters, and how to do it effectively.
What is a People-Centered Workplace and Why Do You Need One?

The definition of a people-centered workplace is straightforward: it’s a working environment that aims to deliver what people want—where and how they want it. It leverages today’s best technological solutions to empower employees to control and customize their physical environments to suit their personal working needs and preferences throughout the day, and throughout the space.

The benefits are extensive. Studies show that employees who have choice over when, where, and how to work have higher levels of satisfaction, innovation, and job performance. There’s also a positive correlation between the amount of control employees have over their physical environment and their engagement levels.

A people-centered workplace approach also ensures that employees are spending valuable time and resources on the projects that matter most. Finally, it creates a positive two-way conversation between the people who work in the building and those responsible for managing it.

Choice Improves the Employee Experience
When asked how favorably they rank various factors, employees who had choice over when, where, and how to work ranked all factors more favorably than employees without choice.

A people-centered workplace delivers what people want—where and how they want it.
AppNexus, a Forbes Cloud 100 tech company, empowers their employees via easy-to-use workplace apps that provide choice and control over how they work.

“It's such a significant part of our culture now. People having the ability to make a change [to] something as simple as the temperature in an office space really goes a long way for an employee to feel happy, feel appreciated, feel really engaged in their day-to-day work.”

- Sarah Pacitti,
Learning and Development, AppNexus
Now that we’ve defined what a people-centered workplace is and why it’s critical, let’s look at the fundamental components of this type of modern workplace. A winning approach to building a better workplace experience starts with putting people first and continuously improving the workplace based on insights from people and from the building.

**Step 1: Offer choice & control**
You strive to make coming to work great. A people-centered workplace starts with empowering employees to choose and control their physical environment so that they can be their most productive.

It can mean embracing activity-based workplace design, re-imagining assigned seating, and offering ways to reserve break-out areas, quiet zones, and shared spaces. It can also mean giving employees the ability to simply turn the lights on after-hours, or dim them when they’re too bright. Or, granting them the ability to instantly adjust the temperature in a conference room or at a desk, like Forbes Cloud 100 tech company AppNexus has done via a workplace app for its employees. These solutions are "critical to keeping our employees happy and productive," says Cadi Withers, Senior Manager of Global Operations.

**Step 2: Gather feedback**
Once you’ve curated a variety of workspaces, amenities, and technological solutions for your employees, how do you know what’s working? Is the new conference room, the fleet of standing desks, or the latest room reservation system improving how employees utilize the space? Is it positively impacting productivity, collaboration, and overall satisfaction?

Gathering meaningful feedback is challenging. Employees spend less than 10 minutes a year giving feedback. This makes gathering real-time feedback in non-intrusive ways all the more critical. Current methods of gathering information, such as physical sensors, tend to focus on whether something is being used, not why or how it is being used.

For feedback to be useful, Beau Trincia, VP of Product & Design at Comfy, a workplace app provider, offers this advice: “We’ve found that the best way to understand what people truly want from their workplaces is to gather feedback directly from them as they interact with their space.”
Step 3: Discover actionable insights and make informed decisions

Once you have gathered meaningful feedback and robust data, it needs to be converted into action. For many corporate real estate teams, the biggest challenge is making sense of all the data.

Smart building solutions that integrate data from people and buildings are powerful because they enable corporate real estate teams to drive better decisions around building management, space planning, workplace design, and more.

For example, as part of their new construction planning, WeWork, a global leader in creating delightful workspaces as cost-effectively as possible, utilized information gathered from over 800 different meeting rooms around the world to forecast the types of spaces people need.

“We’ve found that the best way to understand what people truly want from their workplaces is to gather feedback directly from them as they interact with their space.”

- Beau Trincia, VP of Product & Design, Comfy

Step 4: Repeat Often

Use these insights to continuously optimize the workplace. Employee expectations, working preferences, and real estate market conditions are ever-evolving, so creating the ideal workplace experience requires active management and constant iteration. Fortunately, the growing prevalence of building automation systems and machine learning in the office can help make the fine-tuning less manual. Now is the time to throw the old “set it and forget it” mentality out the window.
WeWork is experiencing exponential growth by making a science out of delighting employees. It is constantly collecting data (about how people work, where they are most productive, and how much space they really need to do their best work) to inform new products and experiences that empower the worker.

“Converse to the traditional ‘set it and forget it’ approach, the building becomes a dynamic system that adapts to the preferences of its users over time...[resulting] in higher levels of satisfaction and comfort and more optimized building operation and energy use.”

- Josh Emig,
  Head of R&D, WeWork
Getting Started: A Blueprint for Success

Like any ambitious transformation initiative, creating an effective people-centered workplace does not happen overnight, and it cannot happen in a vacuum. It requires input and expertise from several business functions, who also stand to benefit. To get started, it’s worth taking a moment to assess the current needs of your people and your business, and to begin fostering a culture open to change.

As Melissa Marsh, Director of Occupant Experience at real estate advisory firm Savills-Studley, recommends, “If you’re going to go to the effort of changing your workplace, don’t bother just doing it once... shift to a dynamic workplace that stays flexible to the needs of your employees over time.” Consider each of the following in the context of your business.

- **Assemble your cross-functional A-team:**
  How does a people-centered workplace align with business goals? Who can you work with from HR and IT?

- **Assess your today and your tomorrow:**
  Where are you now? What do you have? What technology, tools, and processes do you need to invest in to bring the people-centered workplace to life?

- **Partner with experts:**
  You’re not in this alone. When you look for solution providers and technology partners, look for ones who are as invested in your success and your employees as you are.

- **Engage early:**
  Identify champions, and don’t underestimate the importance of change management. How will you communicate with employees and get their buy-in?

- **Test and learn:**
  Change can be hard to swallow, but it’s easier in small doses. Don’t be afraid to experiment. Start with a department, floor, or building; roll it out, evaluate, and adjust as you need.

- **Make it a part of your DNA:**
  A people-centered workplace is not a project; it’s a process. As the needs of your business and people evolve, so should your workplace.

- **Put people at the heart of everything you do:**
  Remember who you’re working hard for, and with. Your employees, regardless of where or when they work, are all human—and will appreciate a humanized approach to workplace management.

Adopting a new approach to managing the workplace may seem daunting at first. However, **one of the best things you can do to effectively manage workplace change is to embrace it.** A recent survey showed that over a quarter of corporate real estate executives predict that shared services integration between corporate real estate, HR, IT, and finance teams will become a reality over the next three years. Actively engage with your colleagues, your employees, industry experts, and third-party solution providers. Most importantly, start now.
Cisco encourages employee interaction and brings the people-centered workplace to life by investing in innovative technologies that blend the physical and virtual work environments.

“Our people can work anywhere, on any device at any time. Technology is driving our space design now and into the future.”

- Alan McGinty, Director of Workplace, Cisco
Conclusion

People are the most critical asset to every organization. So why aren’t more digital and physical workplaces designed to support their needs and activities?

By adopting a people-centered workplace approach, you set yourself on the right path to have a positive impact on your company, resulting in:

- Self-sufficient, satisfied, and productive employees;
- Streamlined management of workplace operations;
- More impactful, data-driven business decisions;
- A workplace that nimbly evolves to meet current and future needs.

Fortunately, recent advancements in workplace technology mean corporate real estate teams of all sizes have new tools to put this approach into action today. Learn more about how to create an effective people-centered workplace at comfyapp.com.

About Comfy

Comfy is a smart building solution provider on a mission to create exceptional workplace experiences. With deep roots in advanced computing and thoughtful user experience, and living at the nexus of the digital world and physical space, our Oakland, California-based team builds unconventional software solutions for everyone— from the people who operate the building to the people who fill it.

Ready to learn more?

Find out why leading companies are using Comfy’s workplace experience app to create a more effective, people-centered workplace.

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