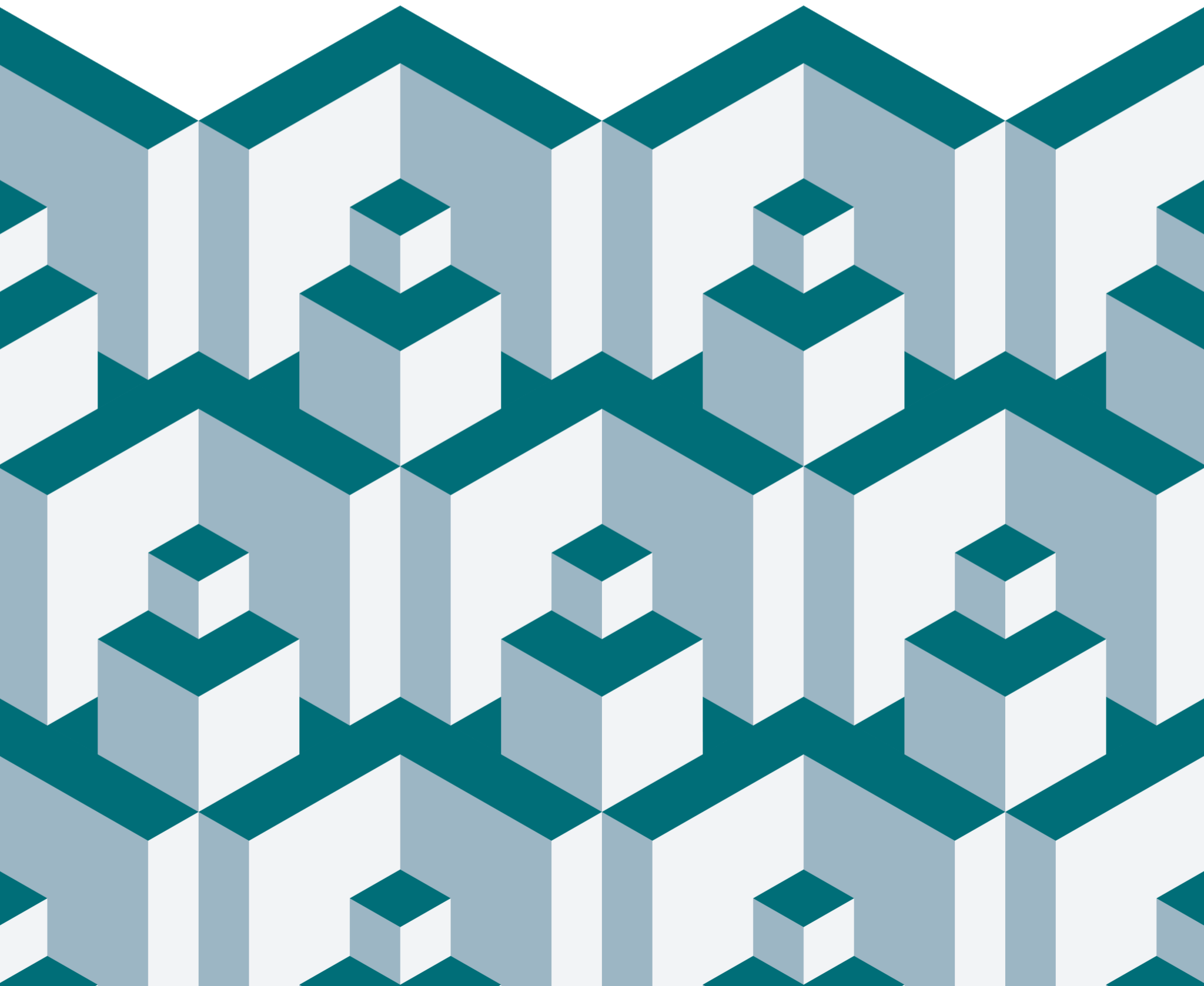


# GETTING BACK TO THE OFFICE

A checklist for creating a dynamic and vibrant in-office work environment



As we enter our third year of the new evolving (hybrid) normal our research tells us that there is a wide diversity of experiences that organisations are having as they welcome their people back to the office.

For some organisations, office occupancy is edging closer to pre-pandemic levels, but for others their offices are more than half empty. Why is this? Do we need to do something about it and if so, what?

### **Work life used to be straightforward and predictable... now it's not**

It used to be that work occurred by default in the office. Yes, we were seeing the emergence of satellite work hubs, co-working and flex-work arrangements and there have always been organisations with geographically dispersed workforces. But by and large "work" has typically happened in an office.

Come 2020 and the COVID-19 lockdowns changed all of that. We discovered that for many sectors work doesn't have to take place in an office at all. We developed abilities in technology-enabled working that we didn't know were possible. And we

discovered that being able to work from home meant more time with family, less time wasted commuting, and for many people, more productive work free from distraction<sup>1</sup>.

### **Why should we care about the office?**

Being denied access to the office during the lockdowns made us see the office in a new light. We missed seeing our colleagues. People joining the organisation found it hard to get up to speed. Younger employees missed the benefits of learning-by-seeing-and-listening and mentoring, and the great ideas that come from chance encounters all but evaporated<sup>2</sup>.

Offices are also important because they manifest who we are and what our purpose is. They are places where great ideas can be sparked, where new products and services can be created and where friendships are formed. They add vitality and patronage to our cities and contribute to their economies, creating the critical mass on which their services and facilities depend. The city is a place where things happen. Offices are its engine room<sup>3</sup>.

### **So why are some organisations having trouble getting their people back to the office?**

**Well, it's complicated.**

Whilst the "great resignation" is starting to look a little less fearsome than at first thought<sup>3</sup>, it seems that there is nevertheless a strong theme of "give the people what they want" as if the organisation and the teams within it have no say in the matter.

Certainly, in the current employment environment only the bravest of employers advertise job vacancies that are not hybrid or remote<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, there are anecdotes of people not coming into the office even when they are told they have to.

Our research and our discussions with our clients suggest that this is a really complicated issue with multiple drivers of behaviours at play. So, to address the challenge of creating a dynamic and vibrant in-office work environment (i.e. one with lots of people in it) these drivers need to be individually considered.

What follows is our suggestion for a checklist.



## The tyranny of distance

Recent research by Cushman and Wakefield<sup>5</sup> has confirmed that being able to avoid the commute is the number one driver of people's desire to avoid coming into the office.

Whilst we didn't seem to have this problem pre-pandemic, the reality is that someone who has a two-hour round trip to the office is going to think twice about going in if they feel they don't need to.

But this is not to say that they should be given a leave pass, rather that the driver is legitimate and needs to be recognised as such when deciding how to encourage them to come in.

*Knowing where people live and how far they have to travel when they come to the office is an important consideration in devising strategies to encourage them to do so.*

## Management has decided?

It is a tenet of change management that the best way to build acceptance of change is to have those affected by it be involved in defining the problem and designing the solution.

But it would seem from our research that many organisations are making decisions on their hybrid working model without engaging their people in the process. And it would also seem that many leaders have a bias toward the familiarity of having their people be in the office<sup>6</sup>.

In many instances, having management decide how their organisations should operate is the norm. After all, few operate on a basis of popular vote. But having the ability to work flexibly can be a highly personal issue and at least knowing the extent of desire of people to be able to work in this way would not only be useful in informing the decision but also in communicating and managing its implementation. Even better would be involving them in the decision on how it will work. When this doesn't happen, it would be unsurprising if people are disengaged and potentially resentful.

*Engaging people in decision-making on a hybrid working model is an important determinant of successful adoption.*



**EVERY BUSINESS IS A PEOPLE BUSINESS. ENGAGING YOUR PEOPLE IS CRITICAL FOR SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES.**

## Culture eats strategy for breakfast

Regardless of the commuting distance, people will travel if they think the destination is worth it and there is no substitute for having a great office culture in this regard.

Conversely, people who have low engagement and regard for their organisation, its leaders or their team members are less likely to want to be in the office.

And there are multiple ingredients to a great office culture – establishing clear ethos and values, fostering communication and collaboration, creating an inclusive work environment and creating clear goals and rewards<sup>7</sup>.

*People's enthusiasm for returning to the office can be an important indicator of the strength of office culture and staff engagement.*

## Family matters

A great benefit of being able to work from or closer to home that many of us discovered during lockdowns was the ability to be engaged more actively and less stressfully in balancing family commitments such as managing school and childcare runs and having family meals. But the opposite was also true.

In our research we determined that being able to work independently of family distractions by going to the office could also be a benefit<sup>8</sup>.

The reality is that everyone's circumstances are different and for this reason making universally applicable policies can be problematic in gaining acceptance. The key to addressing this is knowing what people's drivers for work location are.

*In making decisions about hybrid working models, knowing what's driving people's preferences can be invaluable to landing on a successful solution. Where there is a desire to encourage in-office working, this is even more important.*

## Non-flexible flexibility

An issue that is related to Family Matters is the "non-flexible" flexible work policy. This is a policy that tells people the specific days they have to come in because it helps ensure uniform space utilisation and avoids offices being largely empty on some days and oversubscribed on others.

For some people that's OK because it gives certainty in arranging the home / life commitments. But for others it restores the work / family balance challenges associated with having to be in the office, albeit over less days.

This didn't matter when the default expectation was to be in the office anyway. But now that people expect choice it does and they may not even respond to mandated days<sup>9</sup>.

*Stipulating specific days that people have to be in the office can strip away the flexibility that many people crave.*

## The self-perpetuating phenomenon

A big challenge of hybrid working is that the half-empty office can be a self-perpetuating phenomenon, particularly when people have free choice in when they come in.

At issue is the quite understandable refrain of "what's the point of coming in if the people I need to see aren't there?". This can be both a reality and an excuse.

Either way, ignorance of when people will be in the office is a key issue that needs to be addressed if we want to encourage people back to it<sup>10</sup>.

It's important to realise too that the

'mostly empty' office is a problem not only in terms of space utilisation. At issue also is that without people, the office can be a boring, lonely place. And that's not a great look for organisations who pride themselves on a vibrant culture, dynamic activity and innovation<sup>11</sup>.

*A key task in encouraging people back to the office is ensuring there is a critical mass of people there. The first part of this is to monitor peoples' plans on a daily basis, with the second making these plans known. Some form of attendance or booking app can be invaluable to capture this data. Also important is the need for teams to coordinate their movements amongst themselves – see later under "Teamwork, the secret sauce".*

## I can work so much better away from the office than in it.

One of the big discoveries of the COVID lockdowns, at least for some people, was that free from the noise and distractions of the office you could actually get a lot of focussed work done. Assuming of course that you didn't live in a house full of crying babies, barking dogs and noisy housemates competing with you for internet bandwidth.

Which leads of course to the question of why is it so hard to do focussed work in the office? Maybe there might be a lack of places people

can go to do this sort of work and/or effective protocols for "do not disturb" working?

This is even more of an issue now that it is highly likely that half the people that are in the office are likely to be on video calls to people who aren't (in the office) and generating even more noise in the process.

A related issue is the ability of people who need the psychological comfort afforded by quiet, out of the way places in the office to work to be able to access spaces of this nature.

Yet another issue is that of people who have very specific workspace needs related to physical or psychological disabilities<sup>12</sup>. If the office doesn't adequately support people who do this sort of work or have these types of requirements you can't blame them for wanting to stay at home.

*In a world where most office environments are fairly open, finding places to be able to think free from distractions can be a challenge. "Retreat" or "Quiet" rooms can be invaluable in this regard. And in a post-COVID world where increasingly the office will be used by people interacting (which can be noisy), more spaces to support this type of activity would be beneficial. This doesn't necessarily mean calling in the builders... just designating "quiet" and "noisy" zones can make a big difference.*

And then there's the social health of seeing and interacting with others... another great pick-me-up that you won't get at home.

But what about all those viruses in the buses and trains and lifts? Reality is they have always been there... it's just that we are so much more aware of them courtesy of COVID-19. And they're also swirling around the shops and the schools and just about everywhere else so not venturing out of the house to avoid them is not really practical.

The same is true for viruses swirling in the office, but there are things we can do to reduce the risk and, in the process, help people feel safer. Air quality has always been a key concern for office-dwellers<sup>14</sup> and so doing all we can through filtration and the like, particularly in enclosed spaces, can provide reassurance.

*COVID-19 has heightened people's awareness of health in the office. The more we can do to reassure people about this the better.*

## Teamwork... the secret sauce

Much of the discussion at present about hybrid working is focussed on "number of days in the office". Whilst this might be useful in attempting a critical mass and /or managing office logistics, it runs the risk of missing the opportunity of hybrid working as it relates to the office.

In pre-COVID times when the office

## The sleeper issue... health and wellbeing

We hear anecdotes of people working from home being able to "recycle" the time saved from the commute through walks with the dog or runs in the park but for many it's the opposite: working from home means "always on, never off" and the temptations of the kitchen pantry are ever present. It would seem that too much working from home can be bad for your health<sup>13</sup>.

Going to the office, on the other hand can be great for your health. For starters, just walking to and from the bus or the train will get your steps up. And when you're in the office it's highly likely that you won't just sit in one spot all day... more steps!



**HEALTH STRATEGIES SHOULD ADDRESS THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL, BE COMPREHENSIVE AND REASSURE PEOPLE.**



**GETTING TOGETHER REQUIRES STRUCTURE. THE OPPORTUNITY IS TO BE MORE DELIBERATE AND PURPOSEFUL ABOUT IT.**

was the default, teams would come into the office to do all manner of individual and interactive work. But post-COVID when a lot of people can do individual work at home, time in the office assumes a new purpose... TEAMWORK.

The opportunity here is to rethink what teamwork means and how it can be harnessed. The term "intentional togetherness" is getting a lot of mileage in this regard<sup>15</sup>. If we are going to come to the office to "be together" what does that mean? What are we seeking to achieve when we come together in the office that we can't achieve with a video call? What sort of things will we do and where / how will we do them? And how will we know what we have achieved when we do?

Perhaps "days in the office" is the wrong thing to focus on? Perhaps we should be promoting "teams in the office" instead? Surely having a minimum number of occupied seats on any given day is not as important as having productive, energised teams in the office?

*We have always functioned as teams but hybrid working provides a new opportunity to rethink the purpose of a team and how can it achieve its best work. Needing to convene team get togethers when they used to happen spontaneously might seem like a chore, but it's actually a massive opportunity for more purposeful and productive teamwork and should be promoted as such.*

**Six Ideas by Dexu** are specialists in workplace strategy and change.

Our holistic approach creates strategies that deliver sustained financial, social and environmental value.

We can show you how to embrace the future to gain competitive advantage and build a sustainable, high performance work environment.

If you have questions about any of these topics, or want to discuss return to office options, contact us at: [collaboration@six-ideas.com](mailto:collaboration@six-ideas.com)

## REFERENCES

1. Six Ideas by Dexu research <https://www.six-ideas.com/working-from-home-experience-study>
2. Jacobs, E. (2021, March 21) Do young people really need the office? Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/d7c8ce81-8e81-4d67-8104-4f6b3174958a>
3. Westacott, J. (2021, February, 9) CBD needs workers to make it vibrant, safe and prosperous. Sydney Morning Herald Online. <https://www.smh.com.au/business/workplace/cbd-needs-workers-to-make-it-vibrant-safe-and-prosperous-20210209-p570wl.html>  
PwC Australia. (2021) Changing Places: how hybrid working is reinventing the Australian CBD. <https://www.pwc.com.au/future-of-work-design-for-the-future/changing-places-australian-cbd.html>
4. Han, Z. (2023, March 6) Job postings offering hybrid work have tripled since 2019. MarketWatch. <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/job-postings-offering-hybrid-work-have-tripled-since-before-the-pandemic-but-they-are-even-more-popular-in-other-countries-1cbb8b65>  
Tilo, D. (2022, September 15) Craving hybrid work? HR job ads for flexi-work soar. HRD Australia. <https://www.hcamag.com/au/specialisation/employee-engagement/craving-hybrid-work-hr-job-ads-for-flexi-work-soar/420505>
5. Cushman & Wakefield. (2022) Flexible office is a powerful part of your workplace strategy. Cushman & Wakefield <https://cw-gbl-gws-prod.azureedge.net/-/media/cw/global/insights/2022/flexibleoffice082022.pdf?rev=c29f8ee33533463e878c05af6ac54f27>
6. Yeung, P. (2021, March 26) The bosses who want us back in the office. BBC Worklife. <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20210323-the-bosses-who-want-us-back-in-the-office>
7. RMIT. (2020, August 5) Establishing a positive workplace culture: definition, tips & why it's important. RMIT Online. <https://studyonline.rmit.edu.au/blog/positive-workplace-culture>
8. Lisanne Bergfurt, Rianne Appel-Meulenbroek, Celine Maris, Theo Arentze, Minou Weijs-Perrée & Yvonne de Kort (2023) The influence of distractions of the home-work environment on mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, Ergonomics, 66:1, 16-33, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00140139.2022.2053590>
9. De Smet, A., Dowling, B., Mugayar-Baldocchi, M., Schaninger, B. (2021, September, 8) 'Great Attrition' or 'Great Attraction'? The choice is yours. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/great-attrition-or-great-attraction-the-choice-is-yours>
10. Molla, R. (2022, June 10) Why the return to the office isn't working. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/recode/23161501/return-to-office-remote-not-working>  
Bienasz, G. (2022, October 14) 'Not Even the HR Manager Who Organized It': No One Showed Up For This Office's Friday Happy Hour Except One Lone TikToker. Entrepreneur. <https://www.entrepreneur.com/business-news/viral-tiktok-proves-no-one-wants-to-go-back-to-the-office/437278>
11. Verma, S. (2014, November 18) 8 Key ingredients to vibrant office culture. LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20141118073408-221564000-8-key-ingredients-to-vibrant-office-culture/>
12. Ruppner, L., Churchill, B., Bissell, D., Ghin, P., Hydellund, C., Ainsworth, S., Blackman, A., Borland, J., Cheong, M., Evans, M., Frermann, L., King, T. & Vetere, F. (2023). State of the Future of Work Report 2023. Work Futures Hallmark Research Initiative, The University of Melbourne. Available at [https://research.unimelb.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/4589425/FutureWorkLab\\_StateofFutureReport\\_2023\\_FINAL\\_LowRes.pdf](https://research.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/4589425/FutureWorkLab_StateofFutureReport_2023_FINAL_LowRes.pdf)
13. Open Access Government. (2022, February 2) WHO says working from home creates "blurring of boundaries". Open Access Government online. <https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/who-working-from-home/128758/>
14. Work in Mind Content team. (2022 April) 72% of office workers worry about air quality in their buildings. Work in Mind. <https://workinmind.org/2022/02/16/global-survey-reveals-72-of-office-workers-worry-about-air-quality-in-their-buildings/>
15. Saylor, T. (2022, July 19) 5 ways to create intentional collaborations in a hybrid workplace. Financial Management Online. <https://www.fm-magazine.com/news/2022/jul/5-ways-create-intentional-collaborations-hybrid-workplace.html>  
Shih, C. (2022, August 11) Keeping Hybrid Employees Engaged. Harvard Business Review. Available at <https://hbr.org/2022/08/keeping-hybrid-employees-engaged>  
Hoff, M. (2021, May 19) Younger Workers Might Benefit From Social Perks of Being in an Office. Insider. Available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/younger-workers-being-in-an-office-benefits-networking-social-2021-5>

HELPING YOU NAVIGATE SPACE RELATED CHANGE



**[www.six-ideas.com](http://www.six-ideas.com)**

This document is issued by DexUS Funds Management Limited ABN 24 060 920 783, Australian Financial Services Licence holder. This document is issued for information purposes only and DexUS Funds Management Limited specifically disclaims any liability for any use of or reliance upon the information it contains. Information in this document may not be reproduced without the written approval of DexUS Funds Management Limited.