

WORKPLACE BY DESIGN



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Michal Matloň is an architectural psychologist and space strategist specializing in the relationship between physical environments, human behavior, and well-being. He has worked with one of Europe's largest office developers and later joined a Vienna-based consultancy founded by cognitive scientists from the University of Vienna. Today, he helps organizations create workplaces that support both organizational goals and the people within them. Beyond his consulting work, Michal actively promotes human-centered architecture and design through articles, educational content, and publications. He regularly speaks at international conferences and lectures architecture students on evidence-based approaches to workplace and environmental design.

What makes people genuinely want to return to the workplace rather than work from home?

Today, people need a reason to come to the workplace. For some, it is the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues in person. For others, it may simply be having better work conditions than they have at home. What has changed is that people have become more demanding. Many have built comfortable and highly personalized workspaces at home. Modern offices, especially those based on shared desks, often offer little opportunity for personalization or self-expression.

Workplaces need to provide something valuable in return: meaningful social interaction, easier collaboration, or conditions for focused work that people may not have at home. The office can no longer rely on obligation. It has to offer a genuine benefit.

Which common assumptions about office design are not supported by behavioral science?

Probably the biggest misconception is that open offices automatically create more interaction. Research consistently shows the opposite can happen. When people lack privacy and control over when they interact with others, they often withdraw socially. I call this the paradox of interaction. Constant exposure can make people protect themselves by limiting communication. Organizations should create workplaces where people

can decide when they want to collaborate and when they need privacy.

How does the physical workplace influence trust, collaboration, and a sense of belonging?

The workplace is only one piece of the puzzle. Trust and belonging are influenced much more by leadership and culture than by physical space. However, the environment can either support or hinder these outcomes.

People need spaces where they can socialize, build relationships, and meet colleagues, but they also need privacy for meaningful one-on-one conversations and team discussions. Research shows that group privacy is particularly important. Teams are often more creative and more willing to share ideas when they have some freedom from constant observation and evaluation. The workplace should also allow people and teams to express their identity. Employees want to feel that they belong somewhere and that their work is visible.

How can workplaces accommodate different working styles without becoming overly complex?

Work itself is complex, so high-quality workplaces inevitably require a certain degree of complexity as well. In our research, we identify more than twenty different workplace activities, ranging from focused individual work to collaboration, creativity, learning, and informal interaction. Different activities require different conditions.

That does not mean organizations need a separate room for every task. The key is understanding which activities create the most value and ensuring those activities are properly supported. Focused work is a good example. Employees consistently rank it among their most important activities, yet it remains one of the least supported in many offices.

What psychological needs are most often overlooked in workplace design?

Privacy remains the biggest one. Closely linked to privacy is control. People want to be able to influence how they use and organize their space, both individually and as teams.

Another overlooked need is personalization. People want a stable territory where they can express who they are and where teams can build a sense of identity. Modern workplaces often prioritize flexibility and efficiency. While these approaches can reduce costs, they can also come at the expense of performance, engagement, and workplace quality.

How can organizations know whether their workplace is actually working?

Measuring workplace performance requires multiple perspectives. Organizations can use surveys, interviews, observations, and existing employee data to understand how effectively different activities are being supported. Expert assessments can also help evaluate whether

As organizations rethink the role of the office in a hybrid world, workplace design is becoming a strategic business issue. Michal Matloň, Workplace and Environmental Psychology Consultant, explains how behavioral science can help create environments that support focus, collaboration, well-being, and a stronger sense of belonging.

specific spaces provide the conditions required for the work they are intended to support. Objective measurements such as air quality, acoustics, and environmental conditions are important as well.

The good news is that measuring workplace quality is no longer guesswork. Today we have robust methodologies that help organizations understand what works, what does not, and where improvements can have the greatest impact.

What will the next generation workplace look like?

That is becoming increasingly difficult to predict because technology is changing work faster than ever. One emerging trend is the growing use of artificial intelligence through voice interaction. More and more people are speaking directly to AI systems rather than typing. Current open-plan offices are not designed for dozens of people talking to their computers simultaneously. This creates new challenges around distraction, privacy, and concentration.

The workplaces of the future will need to accommodate these new behaviors while continuing to support the human needs that have not changed: focus, collaboration, privacy, and meaningful social connection. Ultimately, the best workplaces are not defined by trends or design features. They are environments intentionally created around the way people actually think, work, and interact.