

WORKTECH™ ACADEMY

Trend Report

Q4 2023

Talking Points

How 2023 shifted our focus
on the future of work



prepared for

area

Executive Summary for Area



The latest talking points in work and workplace – examined through the lens of some of the most influential speakers at the WORKTECH conference over the past 20 years – open up significant avenues for Area to gauge the market and look towards how interior design, planning and fitout can contribute to a more holistic, health-inducing, human-centred workplace.

The most critical trends for Area to look out for are:

Hybrid divide: A growing schism between employee desires to work flexibly and company mandates to return to the office is affecting the stability of the hybrid model. Interior designers can help close that gap by considering the different barriers that hybrid workers face, making the office a more compelling experience, and creating spaces that encourage choice and flexibility. This plays to Area's recent creative work on the building blocks of workplace experience.

Human-centric design: Putting the user at the heart of the design process and involving employees in participatory decision-making is an emerging trend in the hybrid world of work. Design firms have a responsibility to champion the needs of the users of their buildings and spaces, creating a sense of shared identity, community and sensory wellbeing.

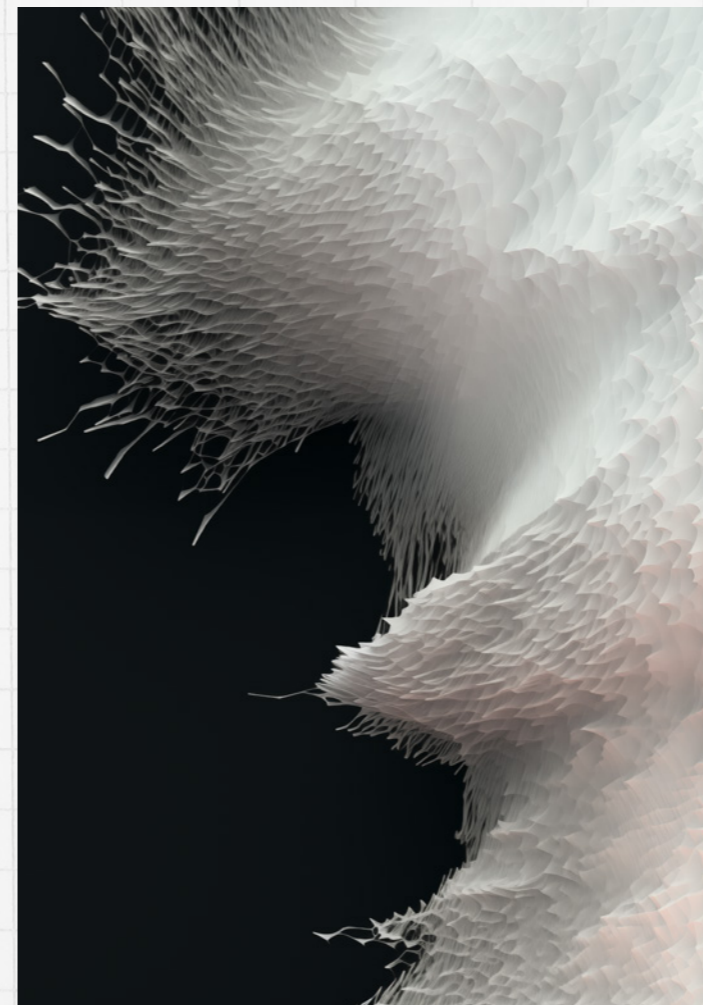
Sustainability: Faced with stricter ESG agendas, research shows that many companies are currently failing to meet their sustainability targets. This means that more far-reaching

action is needed to protect people from climate collapse, opening a door for green design solutions that can demonstrate sustainability credentials to employees, investors and other stakeholders, and help support the employer's goals on reaching net zero.

Engagement: With companies still facing an employee engagement crisis, they are looking to find new ways to recapture the hearts and minds of workers. This, coupled with an increasing tendency towards short attention spans in the era of short-form video, means that employees might require new spaces designed for deep focus or sensory engagement to help support engagement. New office aesthetics centred around wellbeing will be part of the agenda. Upping employee engagement plays to Area's recent creative work on the building of community and culture.

Urban transformation: With the Central Business District still in recovery, a rise in more connected, multi-use space in major cities is looking to fill the gap. In this context, it is important for interior design to consider the wider urban scale, taking into account the surrounding businesses, innovation networks, transport links, green spaces and amenities, and drawing cultural inspiration from the cityscape.

Artificial intelligence: Rapid advances of AI into workplace design and construction processes will have implications for Area services. AI will be a key driver of change over the next few years and Area will want to ride this wave.



How 2023 shifted our focus on the future of work

Welcome to your Q4 2023 Trend Report, which examines current talking points through the lens of great speakers over 20 years of the WORKTECH conference

In 2023, we celebrated 20 years of WORKTECH. Our final Trend Report of 2023 reviews the key talking points in work and workplace this year, assessing how these issues will shape the outlook for 2024 through the prism of some of the most important and iconic speakers in the history of the WORKTECH conference.

This novel framing device allows us to trace the roots of current debates, standing on the shoulders of giants to project into the future.

For instance, we look at how employee engagement started to recover this year – but not fast enough – through the eyes of management guru **Charles Handy**, who predicted that disengaged employees would pose a threat to the organisation at a WORKTECH London event a decade ago.

We examine new initiatives to develop more sustainable office space and assess what companies are doing (or not doing) on the road to net zero by referencing the influence of office design pioneer **Frank Duffy**, the co-founder of DEGW who called for the workspace to be used in a new and effective way.

We weigh up what's happening with hybrid work at the end of a year in which a worrying gap appeared between employers and their

workers on how much flexibility an organisation should offer, by revisiting comments by **Julia Hobsbawm**, author of *The Nowhere Office*, that hybrid patterns are still far from fixed or settled.

Looking more widely at urban design, we ask if city centres should themselves go hybrid in order to bring people back – a shift that recalls a landmark appearance at WORKTECH London in 2016 by the legendary architect **Richard Rogers**, who was a powerful advocate for public space to make cities more liveable and inclusive.

Human-centred design rose up the agenda this year, backed up by compelling research in this area – a trend we acknowledge by referencing **Bill Moggridge**, designer of the world's first laptop computer and a pioneer of a user-led design approach, who spoke at WORKTECH New York in 2009.

No review of 2023 could be without a focus on mental health, which was again a key workplace theme this year. We recall a plea by public health expert **Carol Black** at WORKTECH in 2015 for line managers to be given mental health training and for company bosses to lead on this issue from the front. Today, these imperatives are more relevant than ever.

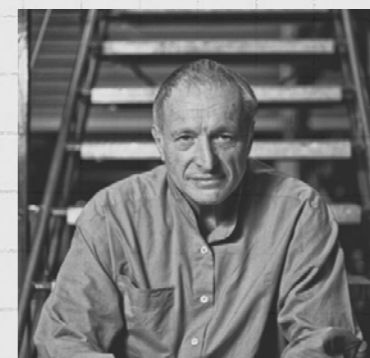
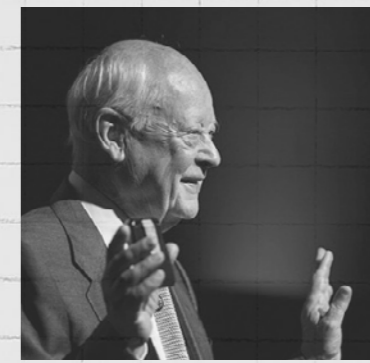
The biggest technology story this year? The incredible impact of generative AI. Where does artificial intelligence go next? We trace back to the predictions of Swedish tech entrepreneur **Niklas Zennström**, co-founder of Skype, who anticipated big things ahead.

Finally, in a year in which the debate about office aesthetics hotted up amid a growing accent on wellbeing, we re-examine the contribution of writer and philosopher **Alain de Botton** to WORKTECH on the subject of function and beauty.

Even our regular On The Radar column in this Trend Report, which recommends new books, articles and podcasts to check out, is recast in the spirit of **Edward de Bono**, who originated the term 'lateral thinking' and spoke at WORKTECH London in 2010.

We hope you enjoy the unusual format of this Trend Report and find the context for current trends interesting. As ever, we welcome your feedback and we look forward to discussing the contents of the report with you in our quarterly online Trend Report Briefing for Academy members and partners.

Professor Jeremy Myerson, Director, WORKTECH Academy



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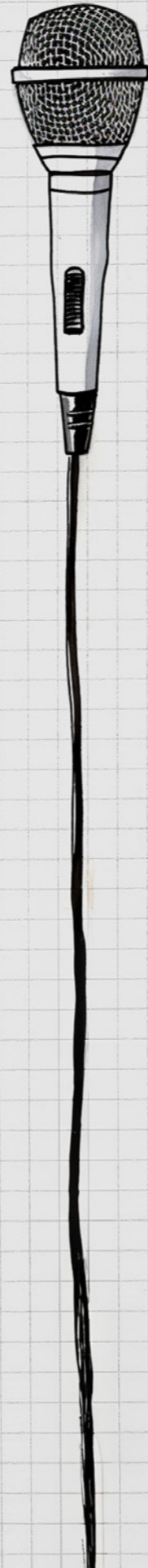
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Charles Handy (b.1932) is one of the world's most influential thinkers on organisational behaviour, culture and management, responsible for such ideas as the 'portfolio career' and the 'shamrock organisation'. The author of many books including *The Age of Unreason* and *Gods of Management*, he spoke at WORKTECH London in November 2013.



'People spend most of their working lives not really involved in the work they're doing'

- Charles Handy

How to reverse quiet quitting?

Employee engagement rose to a record level in 2023, but more than three-quarters of employees globally are not connected to their company mission

Charles Handy bemoaned the fact that 'people spend most of their working lives not really enjoying or involved in the work they're doing - that doesn't seem to me fully human'. As a leading advocate for new approaches to management, he was always adept at putting his finger on key aspects of organisational culture. A decade after he spoke at WORKTECH London, his warnings about low levels employee engagement continue to resonate as hybrid working takes hold.

This year, engaging the global workforce was high on the management radar and there was some upward movement, but business leaders continued to find it difficult to really move the dial on employee engagement.

According to Gallup's State of the Global Workplace: 2023 Report, a record rise globally in engagement to 23 per cent still leaves more than three-quarters of workers disengaged, and this workforce is feeling more stress. The European region has the lowest levels of employee engagement at just 13 per cent - an entire 20 per cent lower than the region with the highest number of engaged employees, South Asia. The US and Canada have 17 per cent of the workforce that is actively disengaged, which is potentially damaging for many employers.

Across the whole Gallup survey, more than half of workers currently employed reported that they are looking out for, or actively seeking, a new job. The reason for this? A combination of seeking higher pay, improved wellbeing and more opportunities to grow and develop.

What can be done to change the numbers? According to Gallup, effective management should include a weekly conversation with each employee focusing on recognition, goals and priorities, collaboration and strengths. This should be implemented whether employees are exclusively remote, fully on-site or hybrid. The aim is to reduce growing levels of stress.

Speaking at the WORKTECH conference in Madrid in November 2023, Gallup computational social scientist Pablo Diego Rosell confirmed the figures, adding that employees are more likely to quit or look elsewhere if their job allows for hybrid working but their employer doesn't permit it. Rosell split employees into three groups: those who are quiet quitting; those who are loud quitting, and those who are actively engaged in the workforce.

► 'Quiet quitting', a relatively new phenomenon, refers to the practice of simply meeting the basic job description – but going no further. There is a strong air of detachment attached to this way of working, which is alarming for employers who are trying to engage their workforce. With quiet quitters making up over half of the US workforce, this problem calls for some serious attention.

Charles Handy has been a long-time advocate for flexibility in the workplace, railing against rigid management regimes that almost invite the workforce to disengage. Handy's ideas are closely bound with approaches that support intrinsic motivation. In 2023, there were some small positive steps in the right direction, but management will need to take giant leaps over the next year to accelerate level of employee engagement from the current low base.

Sources:

[Globally, employees are more engaged – and more stressed.](#) Gallup, Jim Harter, June 2023.

[Is Quiet Quitting Real?](#) Gallup, Jim Harter, May 2023.

[State of the Global Workplace: 2023.](#) Gallup, 2023.



Is video affecting our declining attention span?

Does the increasing popularity of the short-form video have a hand in the waning levels of employee engagement we are seeing? A lack of long-term studies means we are unable to quantify exactly how much the average attention span may have been reduced by, but research does indicate a growing perception that attention spans may have been in decline in recent years.

The introduction of social media platforms such as TikTok, and in-built app features such as Instagram reels have only served to increase the popularity of the short-form video, and the ever-increasing availability of content leaves users with continuous choice. Whilst these platforms rely on content overload to promote their usage, information overload in the workplace can lead to employees becoming disengaged. So, in a workforce that is increasingly exposed to an immediacy of answers, employers must adapt their workplace strategies to allow for this new way of thinking.

Research from Microsoft in 2023 shows how workplace thinking in response to attention span has evolved. Drawing on the Japanese concept of 'yohaku no bi' – the beauty of empty space – American psychologist Gloria Mark has introduced the idea of organisations instituting a 'quiet time': a period during the day in which there is no form of electronic communication. With research proving that employees check their email on average 77 times a day, implementing new initiatives could go a long way towards alleviating overload and reengaging the workforce.

Sources:

[Are attention spans really collapsing?](#) Kings College London, February 2022.

[Regain control of your focus and attention with researcher Gloria Mark.](#) Microsoft, April 2023.



Further Reading

[Disconnect to reconnect: employee wellbeing through digital detoxing](#)

[Reducing information overload in your organization](#)

[The big idea: are our attention spans really getting shorter?](#)



Frank Duffy (b.1946) is an architect, co-founder of the consulting firm DEGW, and one of the most influential figures in office design over the past 40 years. The author of many books in the field, including *The New Office* and *Work and the City*, he spoke at WORKTECH Netherlands in October 2013.

‘We have to be sparing of space in an environmentally challenged world’

- Frank Duffy



Can workspace meet the eco-challenge?

More companies have pledged to meet sustainability goals, but real change is still hard to enact. Can we use the scarce resource of space more effectively?

DEGW co-founder Dr Frank Duffy studied the North American model of office space planning in the 1960s but became famously impatient with its one-size-fits-all approach. His theory and practice was all about creating workspaces that fitted the different types of knowledge work that people do, based on how much autonomy and interaction they have. Space was too precious a commodity to be squandered in a standard format.

Duffy declared that ‘I am still extremely sceptical about universal solutions for the interior’ and he warned that ‘we have to be sparing of space in an environmentally challenged world’. In this, he was ahead of his time.

A decade after he spoke at WORKTECH Netherlands, developing more sustainable office space – whether rightsizing or reducing energy use – is high on the ESG agenda. How does Duffy’s rallying cry on the environmental challenge measure up today? Research by the BBC suggests that while companies have been lining up to look like they are reaching sustainability targets, very few are making active change.

Research by Net Zero tracker further found that more than half of the world’s biggest companies have made a pledge to reach net-zero but often these pledges are not being delivered upon and

companies are floundering when it comes to taking responsibility for their space and their emissions. Some are even turning to controversial methods to appear greener – such as planting trees or carbon off-setting. While these steps may be positive, they also do nothing to reduce the actual emissions organisations are producing and allow big firms to continue with their current rate of emissions unchecked.

Into this context comes increased demand from employees. The ‘Design of the Workplace Report’ by Brookfield Properties, in partnership with architects Foster + Partners, examined how employees felt about the role of sustainability in the design of the workplace.

The study found that it is a non-negotiable issue for employees when it comes to office design: 90 per cent of employees surveyed believe that a sustainable workplace design is good for both the planet and their wellbeing.

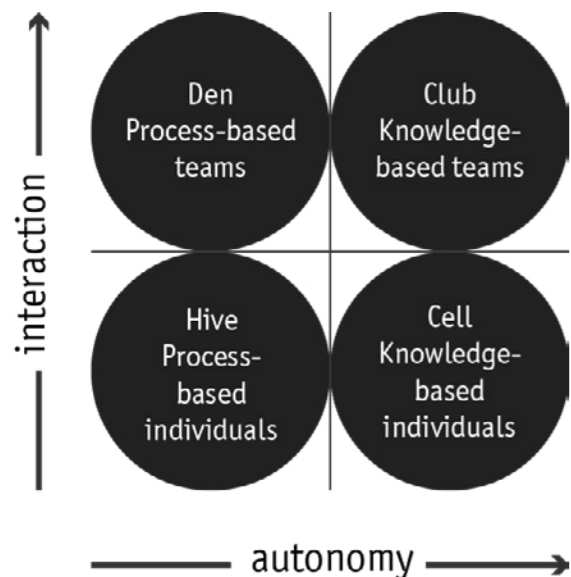
This belief might have wider consequences as 93 per cent of those working in an environmentally friendly office also stated that they felt happier in their jobs than those working in less sustainable spaces. In addition, 87 per cent of office workers believe that offices being evaluated for sustainability was as important as evaluations for



health and safety. It appears that employees are taking sustainable office space more seriously and want to see this reflected in the actions of their companies, rather than continuing to see empty promises and missed targets.

At WORKTECH, Frank Duffy crystallised a key issue – thinking about how office space is used in new ways is critical to addressing the climate crisis as well as the health deficit in the workplace. His widely admired autonomy-interaction matrix (see diagram below) advocated for different types of settings for different types of employees (a ‘club’ environment, for example, for people with high levels of autonomy and interaction).

As Despina Katsikakis of Cushman & Wakefield has pointed out, employers experienced an increase in personal autonomy during the Covid-19 crisis while working from home, but a dramatic decrease in social interaction with colleagues. A key part of making office space sustainable in the future will be to allow people to retain autonomy over their work-life while stepping up interaction with colleagues.



Ultimately, instead of looking to curb emissions via short-term fixes and offsetting, companies might be better invested in increasing the energy efficiency of their office spaces, utilising sustainable and ethically sourced materials, retrofitting and recycling, consulting their employees about what they want to see from their company, and most importantly, devising workplace strategies that use the scarce resource of workspace more efficiently.

Sources:

- [The tough truth behind corporate net zero sustainability targets](#), BBC Worklife, 2023, by Kristen Talman
- [New analysis: Half of world's largest companies are committed to net zero](#), Net Zero Tracker, 2023.
- [Design of the Workplace Report 2023](#), Brookfield Properties, 2023.

More guidance needed on net-zero buildings

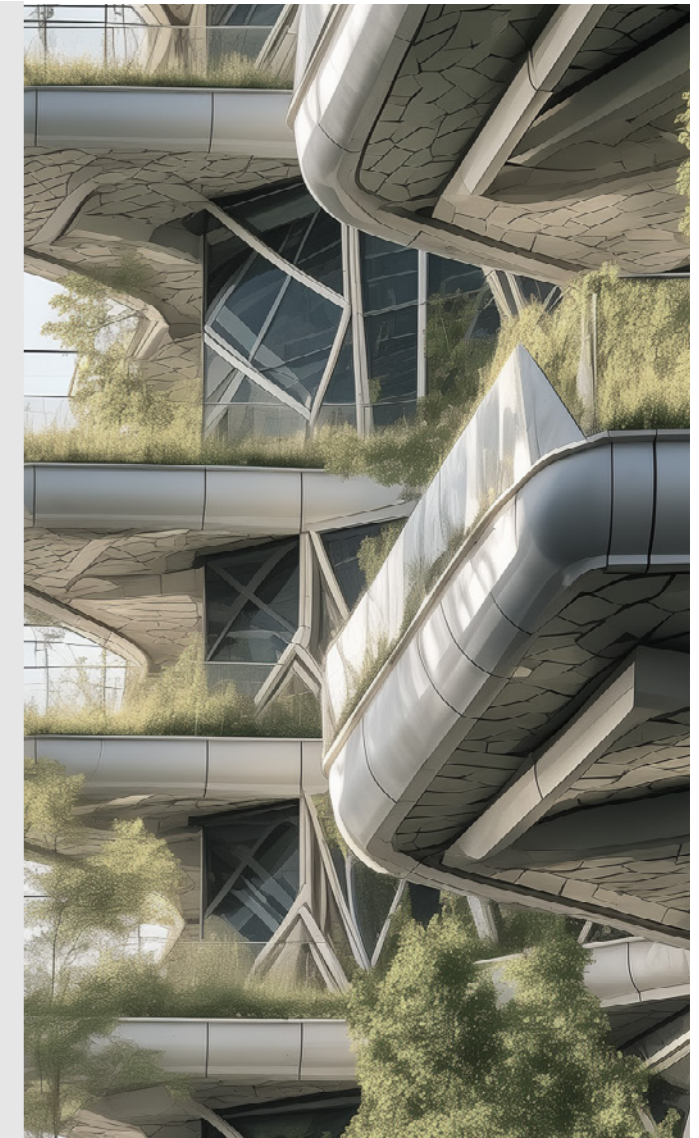
Every week the world adds buildings equivalent to the size of Paris, but the authors of a new report warn that very few of them are truly net zero in operation and call for more guidance on how to meet net-zero emission targets.

The research paper from the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and consulting firm Arup maps the landscape of emerging policies and certification systems around the world, showing a route towards a common framework for net-zero operational buildings globally.

It examines the buildings themselves and the energy that supplies them, highlighting that net-zero buildings must use clean energy and be sufficiently energy-efficient to align that use with the wider energy grid transition in their location.

However, the authors argue that without major progress, the built environment will be unable to reach the UN 2030 built environment breakthrough goal, which stipulates that all new and refurbished buildings completed from 2030 should be net-zero carbon in operation. The report calls for an internationally agreed definition for net-zero buildings, to help stimulate more robust national and local government policies and industry standards.

Source: 'Net-zero operational buildings: state of the art', World Business Council for Sustainable Development and Arup, 2023



Further Reading

- [Jobs of Tomorrow: Social and Green Jobs for Building Inclusive and Sustainable Economies](#)
- [Future of Work And The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda](#)
- [Adaptive reuse: the sustainable design trend whose time has come?](#)
- [How to design a more sustainable office space in 2023](#)



Julia Hobsbawm (b.1964) is a leading British consultant and commentator on the future of work, and the author of *The Nowhere Office* (Basic Books 2022). She spoke at WORKTECH London in November 2022.

‘The hybrid patterns being introduced today are far from fixed or settled’

- Julia Hobsbawm



How to bridge hybrid divide?

One of the side-effects of hybrid working has been a rift between company bosses and employees that is making it harder to settle on the right formula

When British author and consultant Julia Hobsbawm, chair of the Demos Workshift Commission, addressed WORKTECH London in November 2022, her concept of a ‘nowhere office’ at the heart of radical new ways of working was emblematic of the way old certainties have been stripped away from organisations in the hybrid working era.

‘The hybrid patterns being introduced today are far from fixed or settled,’ she declared. Twelve months on, that is still very much the case. Although 2023 can be described as a period of some consolidation and implementation at scale after the inconclusive experiments, policy retreats and design iterations of 2022, we have reached neither consensus nor stability on how a hybrid model works best.

For every company giving their employees choice and autonomy over how and where they work, there are others mandating them back to the office with fierce determination. For every real-estate team redesigning and reimagining their space, there are others that are simply downsizing. We may be reaching a state of hybrid permanence but not a state of hybrid grace.

Most worrying of all is that, globally, there appears to be a growing gap between what most company bosses appear to want (minimum slippage on a full-time return to the office) and what most employees feel they need (maximum flexibility to work from home).

When WHF Research, a consortium that includes Stanford University and the German thinktank Ifo Institute, surveyed full-time employees in 34 countries this year on WFH (work from home), its study discovered a significant gap between the number of WFH days that employees desire and the number of WFH days that companies plan for their workforce.

While employees would like to work at home on at least two days per week around the globe, employers only plan 1.1 WFH days per week. This gap is present in all 34 countries surveyed.

The survey also recorded a gap between the desired and the actual number of WFH days taken by employees. Around a quarter of workers would like to work from home five days per week; 56 per cent would like to work in hybrid mode, from one to four days per week at home; and 19 per cent would prefer to work fully on site.

But these numbers differ greatly from the actual number of WFH days among employees: 46 per cent currently work fully on site, 41 per cent in hybrid mode, and 13 per cent fully WFH.

What these numbers tell us is that the pre-pandemic landscape of office-based work is being rebuilt by determined company bosses while their own employees feel they've moved on. WFH levels are generally higher in English-speaking countries: full-time employees in the US, UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand worked an average of 1.4 full paid days per week from home compared to 0.7 days per week in the seven Asian countries covered by the survey and 0.8 days in European countries.

Remote work brings a new digital twist to the age-old tussle between capital and labour. As *The Economist* observed: 'It is no coincidence that the crackdown on remote work is happening as some industries cool. Job cuts across Wall Street and Silicon Valley have handed power back to businesses.' Such arguments are out in the open in the UK and US thanks to high-profile CEOs

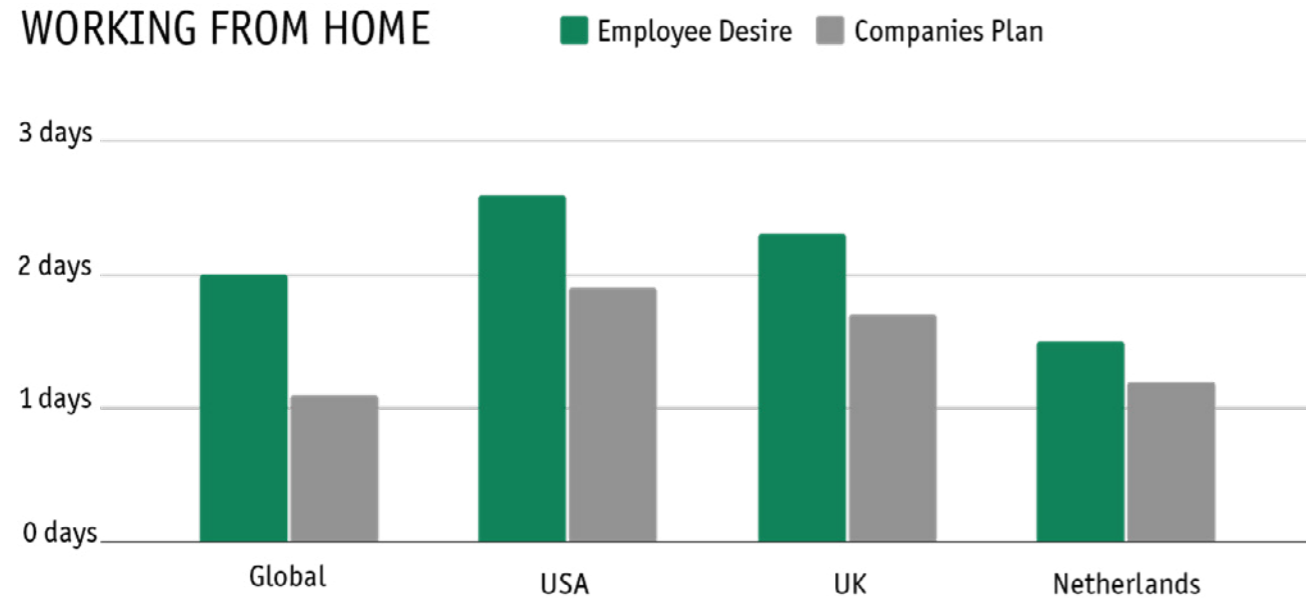
such as Elon Musk and Jamie Dimon advocating so forcibly for a return to the office, and even remote-work companies such as Zoom calling their people back.

However, WHF Research's global survey reveals that a potentially damaging divide between business leaders and employees is also sitting just beneath the surface in Asia, Europe and Latin America – a large swathe of the global working population. It's just not been talked about so much.

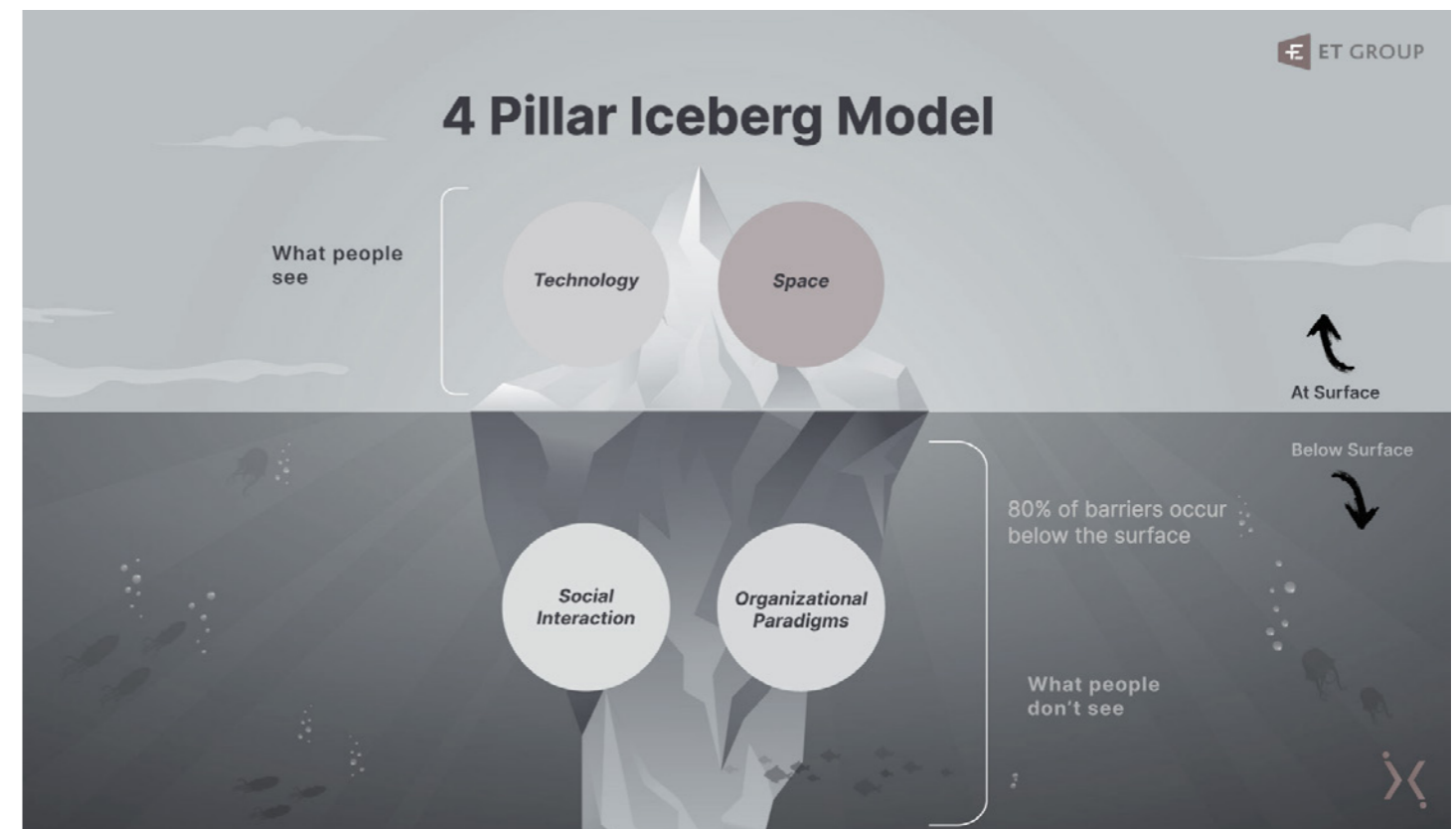
In *The Nowhere Office*, Julia Hobsbawm references the 'back office' set up on the beach during the D-Day Normandy landings in June 1944 as providing an early template for the more fluid, improvised, pop-up workplaces of the near future. Perhaps, to settle on the right formula, hybrid working needs its own equivalent of a D-Day landing to end the impasse between company bosses and their employees.

Source: 'Working from Home Around the Globe: 2023 Report', by C.G. Aksoy, J.M. Barrero, N. Bloom, S.J. Davis, M. Dolls, P. Zarate

WORKING FROM HOME



Source: WFH Research 2023



Do company values dictate hybrid collaboration?

One of the sticking points of hybrid working is collaboration between in-office and remote workers. Achieving equality of meeting experience has been typically addressed by 'fixing' space design and technology. But research by Canada's ET Group suggests that the issue of meeting equality is not independent from what's going on beneath the surface of the company.

While the technology and spatial aspects of hybrid meetings matter, the social interactions and beliefs that underpin the structure of an organisation – termed organisational paradigms – could well matter more.

ET found that only 19 per cent of the barriers to hybrid collaboration related specifically to technology and hardly any related to the place where people work. The vast majority (80 per cent) related to social interaction or organisational paradigms or some combination of both.

Source: ET Group/WORKTECH Academy, October 2023: 'The barriers to hybrid working that sit beneath the surface'

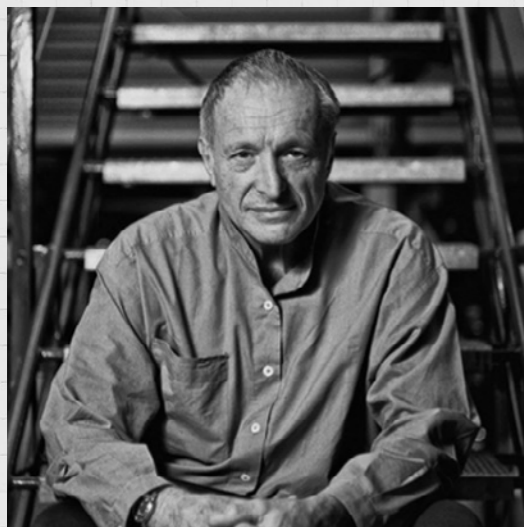


Further Reading

[Is the time now right for a 'structured' hybrid approach?](#)

[Where is the employee 'sweet spot' in creating hybrid work model?](#)

[11 ways to create an appealing hybrid work environment](#)



Lord Richard Rogers (1933-2021) was one of the greatest architects of the modern era. Famous for such visionary buildings as the Pompidou Centre in Paris and the Lloyds Building in London, he was also an urban activist who advocated for liveable, inclusive cities in his seminal book *A Place for All People*. He was interviewed onstage at WORKTECH London in 2016.

‘If a space is created that people can enjoy, it relieves civic strain’

- Richard Rogers



Will our cities go hybrid too?

City centres have struggled alongside offices to bring people back. Can providing more public space to enjoy in a hybrid model make a difference?

When Richard Rogers appeared at WORKTECH London in 2016, the future of our cities was uppermost on his mind. He shared the story of how his competition-winning design proposal with Renzo Piano for the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 1971 was designed to occupy only half the allocated site, enabling a large public plaza to sit alongside the new structure.

The French authorities objected initially, fearing such an open gathering space would become a focus for civic unrest and riots. But Rogers persevered with his plan and the Pompidou precinct became one of the most popular and successful public spaces in Paris.

This story of opening up the city is instructive for what’s happening in urban design now. More than 50 years on from the Pompidou design competition, our city centres are trying to recover and recalibrate in terms of density, purpose and amenity after suffering during the lockdowns of the global pandemic. Inclusive and enjoyable public space is an essential part of the urban offer. In Richard Rogers’ own words, ‘it relieves civic strain’.

Rogers’ practice also designed some of the most iconic office buildings in the City of London, from Lloyds to Leadenhall, and there are clear parallels

between bringing people back to office and rejuvenating city centres. In both cases, progress was patchy in 2023 as hybrid working patterns took a firmer grip, so what should cities do next?

A report from McKinsey asserts that urban centres should adapt their strategies to the new realities on the ground, which have seen the percentage of vacant office and retail space jump since before the outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020. In other words, they should go hybrid themselves. This might include developing more mixed-use neighbourhoods, constructing more adaptable buildings, and designing multi-use office and retail space. Green public space should be part of that hybrid mix.

The McKinsey report was based on analysis of nine ‘superstar cities’ – Beijing, Houston, London, New York City, Paris, Munich, San Francisco, Shanghai and Tokyo, all of which have a disproportionate share of the world’s urban GDP. What green public space might look like in a new hybrid city development is evidenced by the opening in November 2023 of the Azabudai Hills development in Tokyo.

This landmark project has been driven by one of Japan’s leading urban landscape developers, Mori Building Company, with UK practice Heatherwick



Studio serving as lead architect of the public realm and the podium-level architecture. It comprises offices, restaurants, residential buildings, retail spaces, a school, two temples and art galleries—all set within 2.4 hectares of green, publicly accessible landscape (see above).

The design encourages connections between commuters, residents and the public, and the 8.1-hectare district is filled with trees, flowers, and water features. Meandering routes and walkable rooftop slopes invite exploration and informal gatherings.

More urban design innovations of this type will be needed to lift city centres and lead them towards a new era in which there is less fixation on productivity, with dominating business districts, and more focus on pleasure, with mixed uses and mixed experiences. This trend will be accelerated by locating more workspace away from the city-centre in suburban and outlying areas. This year there has been a growing debate in North America about working in a 'new suburbia', infilling suburbs with local businesses, coworking spaces and other third spaces such as

libraries and thereby providing new opportunities and workspaces for local people. This approach ties in with the idea of compact 15-minute neighbourhoods that are green and walkable.

Meanwhile, in Japan, the Tokyo's Xymax Real Estate Institute reports a dramatic rise in the use of satellite offices by younger workers in the Greater Tokyo region. This reflects both a growing frustration with working from home and a lessening reliance on the city-centre corporate HQ by professionals in their 20s and 30s.

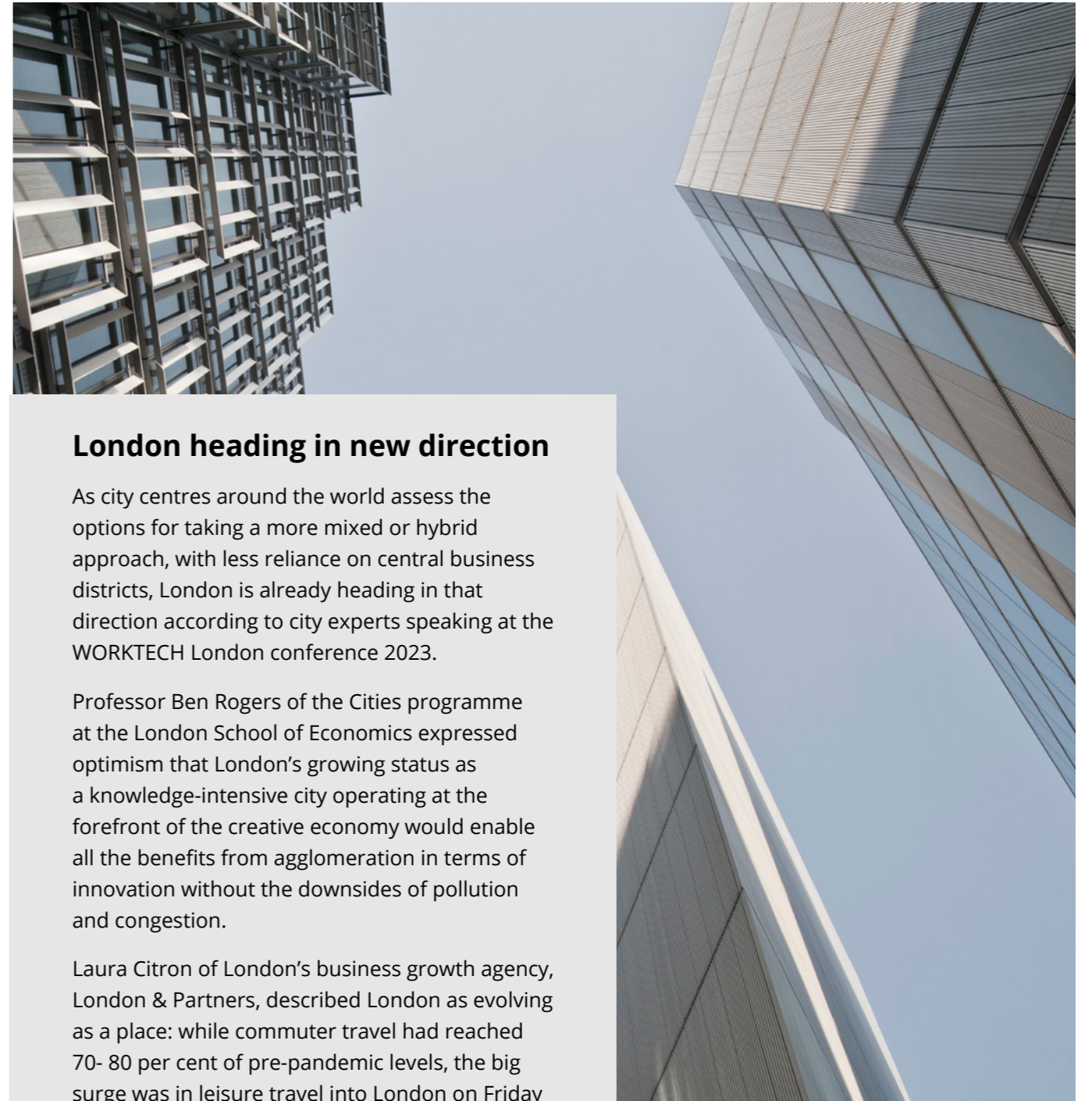
In general, any trend towards distributing workspaces more evenly around metropolitan areas will allow city centres to open up more spaces for public enjoyment in a way that Richard Rogers would surely have approved.

Sources:

[Empty spaces and hybrid places: The pandemic's lasting impact on real estate](#), McKinsey Global Institute, 2023

[Forget the city, the suburbs are set for transformation](#), WORKTECH Academy 2023

[Why Tokyo's young workers are turning to satellite offices](#), WORKTECH Academy 2023



London heading in new direction

As city centres around the world assess the options for taking a more mixed or hybrid approach, with less reliance on central business districts, London is already heading in that direction according to city experts speaking at the WORKTECH London conference 2023.

Professor Ben Rogers of the Cities programme at the London School of Economics expressed optimism that London's growing status as a knowledge-intensive city operating at the forefront of the creative economy would enable all the benefits from agglomeration in terms of innovation without the downsides of pollution and congestion.

Laura Citron of London's business growth agency, London & Partners, described London as evolving as a place: while commuter travel had reached 70- 80 per cent of pre-pandemic levels, the big surge was in leisure travel into London on Friday nights and at weekends. This suggested that 'connections and experiences' would shape the London's future.

Architect Simon Alford of AHMM, past president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, meanwhile advanced a vision in which the city's 'forever buildings' – long-life, loose fit structures that are less carbon-intensive – provide a frame for public space.

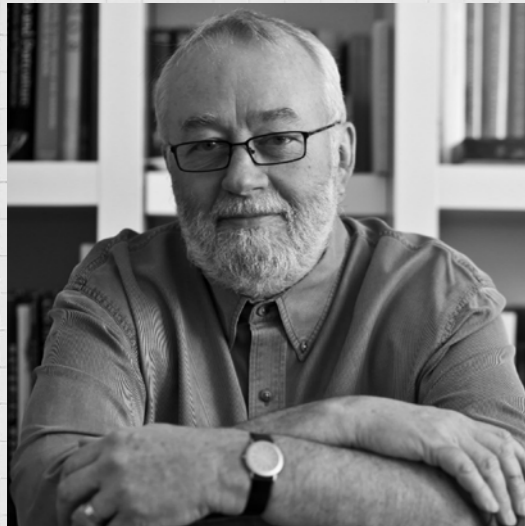
Source: WORKTECH London conference 2023

Further Reading

[New Tokyo district mixes green space with social connection](#)

[The positive effect of green cities](#)

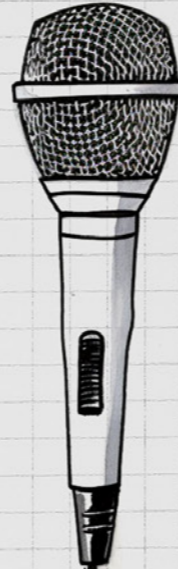
[Urban utopia: where are the world's most liveable cities?](#)



Bill Moggridge (1943-2012) is revered as one of the world's most influential industrial designers. Co-founder of global design company IDEO, he designed the world's first laptop computer and pioneered the new field of interaction design. Latterly director of the Cooper Hewitt design museum in New York, he spoke at WORKTECH New York in 2010.

'Human-centred design is the overlap between technology, business and people'

- Bill Moggridge



Can we put the user at the heart of design?

As hybrid models struggle to gain employee buy-in, there is growing interest in a human-centric rather than a location-centric approach to designing work

Credited with designing the world's first laptop computer, Bill Moggridge spent his professional life in pursuit of furthering human-centred design. That first laptop went into orbit on the Space Shuttle, but Moggridge himself was remarkably down to earth in describing how a more participatory, user-first approach could pay dividends.

He saw human-centred design as 'the overlap between technology, business and people', and this was especially true in relation to workplace design, which he explored in depth while leading the design firm IDEO through a close partnership with furniture company Steelcase.

More than a decade after Bill Moggridge shared his philosophy at WORKTECH New York, the requirement for human-centred design has never been stronger. Research by Gartner has shown that when employees are able to have a say in new workplace design, not only are they 2.5 times more likely to achieve high performance, but four times more likely to report lower fatigue.

This reveals the importance of collaborative decision-making – an essential backbone of human-centred design. With employers increasingly hoping to engage the workforce, valuing the needs and ideas that stem from employees can only be a positive.

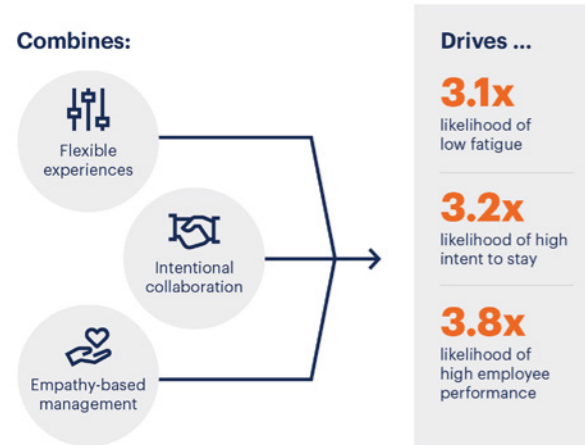
Gartner surveyed more than 400 employees and leaders of organisations around the world who have worked consistently under some kind of hybrid work model since the pandemic. Most of those work models were location-centric and delivered below-average outcomes – many involved mandating an office return that was unpopular with workers.

Only one model scored highly – a 'hybrid-flexible' model offering some location flexibility, so that people could choose where they work from, and incorporating other key elements of human-centric work design, such as the practices of intentional collaboration and empathy-based management.

According to Gartner's research, employees working in human-centric environments where they feel they are valued as people are 3.8 times more likely to be high-performing and 3.2 times more likely to have high intent to stay in the organisation. This has important implications for what companies will do in 2024 to figure out the hybrid working puzzle.

Clearly, mandating people back to the office doesn't really work but devising a new human-centric work strategy and redesigning office space around it isn't easy to implement.

A Human-Centric Work Design



gartner.com

Source: Gartner © 2022 Gartner, Inc. All rights reserved. CTMKT_2000967

Gartner.

Today, the agenda around diversity, equity and inclusion has widened the bases that human-centred design must touch. In particular, there's been a drive this year to design for neurodiverse employees, so that companies can benefit from broader perspectives and talents.

According to Kay Sargent of architectural firm HOK, who has led research in this area, some 70-80 per cent of all disabilities are invisible. Sargent believes that it is possible to design for sensory-avoiding hyper-sensitive employees and sensory-seeking hypo-sensitive ones within a single space, and without splitting up the office into separate areas, if the right approach is taken.

Designing 'for the extreme rather than the mean' is a key tenet of human-centric design and one which Bill Moggridge advanced throughout his career. One of his earliest industrial design commissions in the 1970s was to design a marine radio – he took his team out in a boat in a gale at night in the middle of winter so they would understand the stormy conditions that the average user of the new radio would experience. Putting the user at the centre of any new workplace project would not just be a fitting way to honour his legacy of inclusive design but would also make commercial sense.



Sources:

[Gartner research shows human-centric work models boosts employee performance](#), Gartner, December 2022

[Invisible disabilities in education and employment](#), Research Briefing UK Parliament, January 2023

[Neuro-inclusion: why a holistic approach can be a strength](#) - Kay Sargent/ WORKTECH Academy, October 2023

Building blocks for a human-centric experience

More human-centric work models giving employees more flexibility, autonomy and consideration place additional demands on the physical workplace to provide a great experience when they do show up at the office. So, what are the essential building blocks for a human-centred workplace design experience?

When UK and European design and fit-out specialist Area, part of Fourfront Group, ran a creative workshop, six key elements for designing a better workplace experience were identified:

- **A Sense of Identity** – creating a cohesive whole
- **Personalisation and Choice** – supporting autonomy
- **The Right Spaces** – volume, quality and location
- **Functional Support** – a focus on the fundamentals
- **Sensory Wellbeing** – from lighting to air quality
- **Community and Pride** – creating intrinsic motivation

Source: [Six essential building blocks for a better workplace experience](#) - Area/ WORKTECH Academy, October 2023



Further Reading

[Q and A with Bill Moggridge](#)

[Designing for neurodiversity and inclusion](#)

[How to make workplaces more inclusive for people with invisible disabilities](#)



Dame Carol Black (b. 1939) is a physician and academic who has been an expert advisor on health and work for NHS England and Public Health England. She is a former President of the Royal College of Physicians and Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge. She spoke at WORKTECH London in 2015.

'Line managers should be trained in mental health'

- Carol Black



Time for firms to step up support?

Business leaders are waking up to the need for better support for psychological wellbeing in the workplace, but there is much more still to do on mental health

When Dame Carol Black spoke at WORKTECH London in 2015, mental health in the workplace was already a hot topic following years of pressure on employees trying to cope with heavy workloads in hollowed-out organisations after the global financial crash of 2008.

'Companies are doing a lot of things to improve health,' she told the conference. 'But if I could direct them in certain ways, I would get them to ensure that the leadership of the company is fully engaged.' She also suggested that line managers should have training in mental health, stating that she doesn't 'want them to be psychiatrists, but just to be able to recognise when someone may not be themselves, may be anxious and stressed, and know where to signpost them'.

If Black was signalling a growing relationship between mental health and leadership in 2015, her message is more important than ever today. This past year has seen companies introduce more wellbeing initiatives and more mental health training to address a crisis that was catalysed by the pandemic but is now driven by the uncertainties of hybrid work.

Black isn't the only person speaking out in favour of better mental health training in the workplace. Stockholm-based psychologist Sofia Viotti argues that efforts from companies to offer mental health support often come too late in the day, with managers reaching for a quick fix to keep people on track, rather than investing in the wellbeing of their staff from the get-go.

Viotti advises that companies train their employees in mental resilience, offering them the skills to help weather the storms of life from day one. She argues that: 'Today, there is too much responsibility placed on the individual to understand these things, but it should be in the organisation's interest to offer this knowledge as a tool for work, just like providing a computer to do one's job.'

But why is it so critical that employers take mental health seriously now? A survey of the American workforce by the International WELL Building Institute found that nearly nine out of ten employees agree that their employers should be 'ethically obligated' to create a work environment prioritises the health, safety and wellbeing of their employees.



But they also found that more than one in five employees in non-management roles felt that their company didn't care about their health and wellbeing. And around one in three employees were unaware of any initiatives that their employer was taking to support their health and wellbeing.

Despite growing demands from employees, companies are still not doing enough, it appears. The 2023 Work in America Survey from the American Psychological Association found that 43 per cent of employees reported worrying that if they told their employer about a mental health condition, it would have a negative impact on them in the workplace. Additionally, only 12 per cent reported that their employer has people on-site who have received mental health training.

This suggests that companies are failing to be proactive on the topic of mental health and that leaders are not investing in training to support employees. This could be damaging to companies overall, as the American Psychological Association report also found that, of those that were dissatisfied with their employer's approach to mental health and wellbeing, 57 per cent were intending to look for roles elsewhere.

Clearly companies are not heeding Carol Black's advice about appropriate investment to ensure that companies are providing the right kinds of mental health support. Bringing puppies into the office, offering yoga classes or giving lectures on the issue are all helpful steps, but without serious investment in management, training and going the extra mile to break down stigma and create a supportive environment, the current crisis in mental health won't go away.

Sources:

[Psychology as a tool to manage mental resilience in the workplace](#), WORKTECH Academy 2023.

[Health-first workplace scores highly in US wellbeing poll](#), WORKTECH Academy 2023.

[2023 Work in America Survey: Workplace as engines of psychological health and well-being](#), American Psychological Association, 2023.

Health apps on the rise

A report by AXA Health, entitled 'UK Mind Health 2023,' found that the UK is faring less well on mental health than other countries, with women, minority groups, line managers and young people the most likely to be struggling with their mental wellbeing. The report also cites City Mental Health Alliance's statistic that 17 per cent of young office workers experienced suicidal thoughts during the year prior to the survey.

So, what are companies doing to offer support? The AXA report suggests that companies are increasingly using technological solutions, alongside other approaches, to support mental health at work.

Capgemini cites using its healthcare app Peppy to offer professional advice on issues such as menopause, fertility and baby loss. This can also connect employees immediately to a GP,

wherever they are in the world. Another company app, Thrive, helps individuals monitor and manage their wellbeing.

Microsoft meanwhile offered online sessions designed to improve mental health throughout the pandemic, creating virtual events where celebrities such as Roman Kemp and Reggie Yates talked about issues such as suicide and toxic masculinity to break down barriers around discussing these topics at work. The tech firm even invited Sophie Ellis-Bextor to run a Kitchen Disco to inject some fun into everyone's lives.

Whether it be an app or an online event, more companies are using technology to create better discussions around mental health and offer more tailored support to employees who may be experiencing a range of difficulties in their personal lives which affect their experiences at work.

Source: [Mental health: why UK firms are struggling and how to improve](#), WORTKECH Academy, 2023.



Further Reading

[Workplace Loneliness | Campaign to End Loneliness](#)

[It's a New Era for Mental Health at Work](#)

[Winter blues - Age of Light Innovations](#)



Swedish entrepreneur and investor Niklas Zennström rose to fame in the early 2000s as one of the co-founders of Skype, an invention that became enormously popular and had 50 million users by 2005. Zennström has co-founded a variety of other businesses and remains a significant figure in tech development. He spoke at WORKTECH London in 2005.

'We think AI is going to be used to transform our lives all over again'

- Niklas Zennström



Will AI target creative jobs too?

Hope and fears around AI in the workplace are not just centred around automation. The technology has creative knowledge work in its sights

Niklas Zennström may not have been around for the first industrial revolution, but he was certainly a high-profile participant in the second as Skype rode the wave of the tech boom in the early 2000s.

Skype's technology prefigured the era of remote and hybrid working we are in now. But even the pioneer-in-chief of video conferencing thinks that the greatest shift in how technology will affect our lives will be brought about by the rise of artificial intelligence, saying 'we think AI is going to be used to create huge companies that transform our lives all over again'.

This emerging technology is poised to sweep away the boring tasks that we all perform at work and bring about a workplace revolution, or so technology investors and builders would have us believe. But what will this next great tech wave look like and how will it affect us day-to-day? In 2023, the debate about AI and the future shot to the top of the agenda as Open AI's ChatGBT opened a new vista.

Among employees, there seems to be a mix of excitement and anxiety around the rise of AI. A report by Microsoft found that 49 per cent of workers say that they are worried that AI will replace their jobs, but even more employees – as many as 70 per cent – would delegate as much

as possible to AI to lessen their workloads. This is hardly surprising given that 64 per cent of people say that they struggle to find the time and energy to do their job. Simultaneously, employees are hopeful that new technology can support them in their work-life and help them to be more productive and effective in their roles.

From an employee perspective, excitement around the role of AI seems to be pinned on its ability to automate certain procedures and take monotony out of the working day. But is this where AI is making a difference? Research by Professor Lynda Gratton of London Business School suggests that AI isn't exclusively being utilised in this manner, raising questions about how it might affect us in the future.

Professor Gratton conducted online research with around 260 HR executives from companies in the US, Japan, Europe and Australia in order to examine the use of generative AI in the HR sector. Her study found that instead of replacing dull and repetitive tasks, AI is offering HR professionals new services. Gratton argues that 'it's a technology with the potential to hit at the heart of non-routine analytical work. This is knowledge work, such as forming a hypothesis, creating content, recommending medical diagnostics, or making a sales pitch.'

Among her sample group of HR professionals, 46 per cent are experimenting with the technology for internal knowledge management, 44 per cent are using it for recruitment and around a third are using it for skills training. This isn't the kind of run-of-the-mill routine work that AI has been touted to replace. Instead Gratton is suggesting that it can offer support for more complex tasks.

Rather than remaining in the domain of automation, AI is spilling out into creative knowledge work, helping with image and idea generation. But what does this mean for people doing knowledge work or involved in artistic creation if AI can also take over these jobs which have traditionally been seen as fulfilling work?

However, some people think that even this isn't going far enough. Daniel Hulme, CEO of Satalia and Chief AI Officer of WPP, believes that AI could make possible a world of abundance, where we are freed up from the burden of having to make money and therefore able to conduct work that offers benefit to society and is meaningful to us as individuals.

This idea of technology enabling a utopian society where we can pursue our interests and satisfy our core values without being forced to face the realities of paying rent or buying food is not a new one. But it retains great appeal.

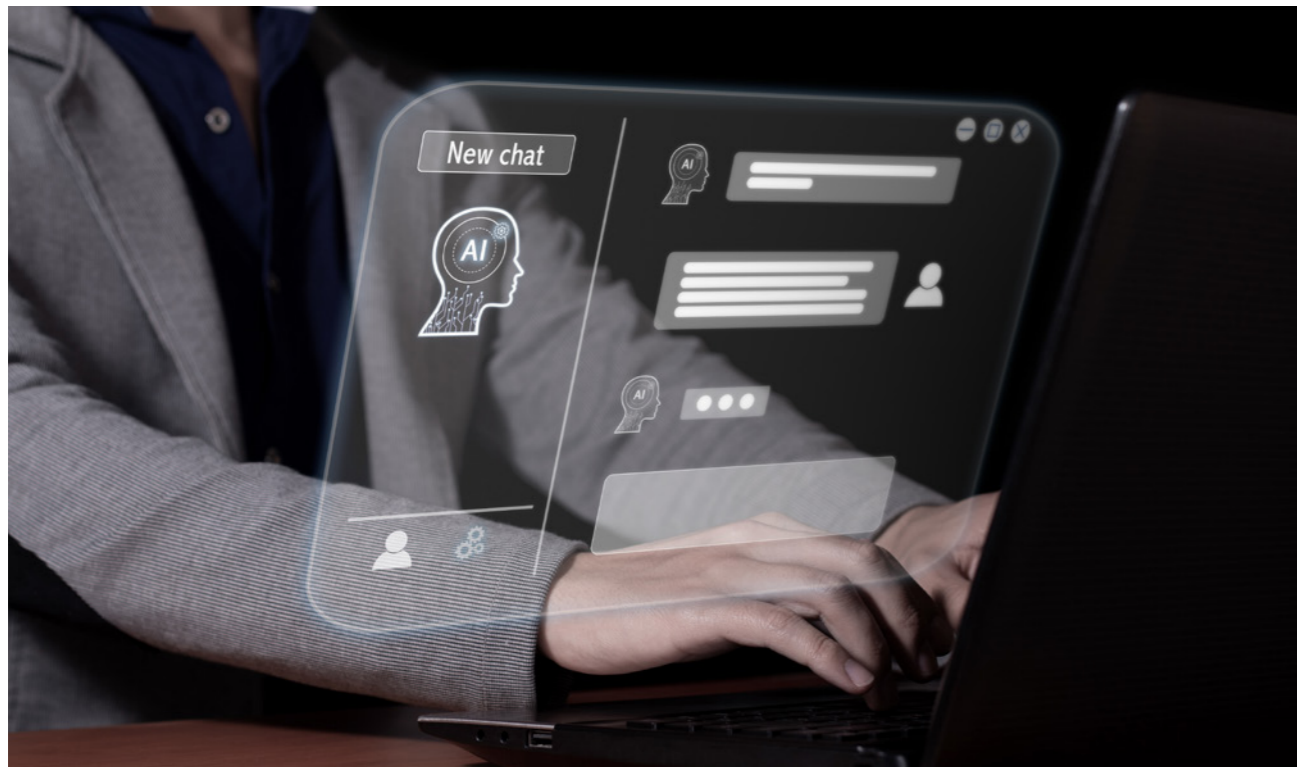
At this point, it is hard to see where AI will have the most impact and where it will settle, but the debate will intensify in 2024. While the automation of admin provides a clear opportunity, the thrust of AI into more interesting, engaging and creative tasks will penetrate a new work frontier. As Niklas Zennström told *Wired* magazine in 2012, 'I have never been as hopeful as I am now about the potential of technology, and I have never been as motivated by the urgency we all face to find and fund it.'

Sources:

AI and its impact on business and humanity, Daniel Hulme, WORKTECH London conference 2023.

[Work trend index: Will AI fix work?](#) Microsoft, 2023.

[Experiment and ambiguity as generative AI shakes up HR](#), Professor Lynda Gratton, WORKTECH Academy 2023.



AI safety in the spotlight

When the UK hosted the first AI Safety Summit at Bletchley Park, the home of British computing innovation, in November 2023, this event was considered a significant moment in AI governance.

The AI Safety Summit saw countries like the US and China sign a joint statement on AI risk, and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak also announced the launch of an AI Safety Institute which will test new kinds of AI before and after they are released to ensure they are safe for public use.

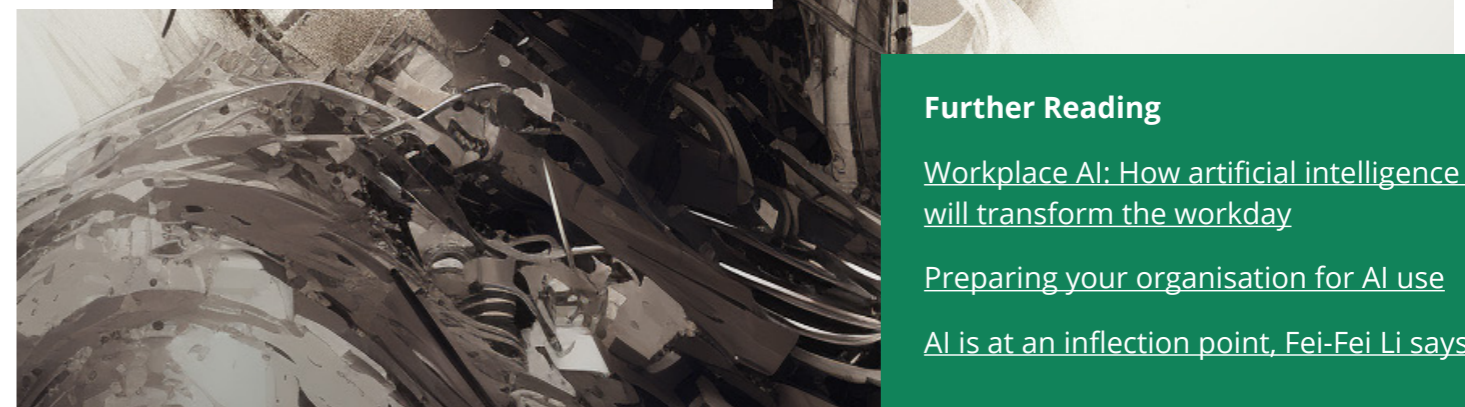
Those concerned about the role that AI will play in the creation of misinformation, or its co-option by so-called 'bad actors', might breathe a sigh of relief at these positive changes. But there are still concerns around whether the AI Safety Summit went far enough. A key issue is whether there is enough separation between industry investors and policymakers in the field.

However, in a fast-moving environment where innovation appears to outstrip the lumbering force of governance at almost every turn, an international recognition of the dangers that AI technology might pose to society, and signs of taking action, can only be considered a step in the right direction.

Sources:

[AI Safety Summit 2023](#), Gov.uk, 2023.

[Five takeaways from UK's AI safety summit at Bletchley Park](#), The Guardian, November 2023.



Further Reading

[Workplace AI: How artificial intelligence will transform the workday](#)

[Preparing your organisation for AI use](#)

[AI is at an inflection point, Fei-Fei Li says](#)



A writer and philosopher, Alain de Botton (b.1969) has been writing about love, travel, architecture and work since the 1990s. He is the author of *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* and one of the founders of The School of Life – an alternative educational establishment that applies ideas from psychology and philosophy to everyday life. He spoke at WORKTECH London in 2009.

‘The office has a functional purpose to attend to, which must override all considerations of beauty’

- Alain de Botton



Can health drive new-look office?

If the purpose and patterns of office work are changing, it follows that the office aesthetic will shift too – with health a major factor in shaping a new approach

When the philosopher Alain de Botton told WORKTECH London conference in 2009 that ‘The office, rather like the feeding shed, abattoir or petrol station, has a functional purpose to attend to, which must override all considerations of beauty’, he was merely confirming the utilitarian roots of the modern workplace – in which the work aesthetic and the work ethic mirrored each other.

Today, there is more scope for form as well as function in office design. Even before the pandemic prompted a wholesale rethink on what offices are for and what they might look like in a new era, there was some movement on office aesthetics. The factory-floor edges of the modern workplace were gradually softened by a series of visual innovations from light and art to plants and rest pods.

Since Covid-19 has been quelled, that shift has contributed to a growing debate about style as well as substance. In 2023, the aesthetic arguments raged mainly around the façades of commercial buildings, prompted by a polemic constructed by leading international designer Thomas Heatherwick in a new book, *Humanise*, and a BBC Radio 4 programme series called ‘Building Soul’.

Heatherwick’s provocation is that our cities are suffering from what he calls a ‘blandemic’. Too many buildings are too flat, shiny, plain, straight, monotonous, monstrous and anonymous – an unintended architectural legacy of what he terms ‘mediocre modernism’. Heatherwick’s team have even created a ‘boringometer’ – a software tool that measures the visual complexity of a building’s design from the perspective of the passer-by.

Heatherwick’s thesis has been dismissed as too simplistic in some quarters – some of his fellow designers have countered that there’s nothing wrong with building calm, restrained commercial districts with unfussy buildings. Nevertheless, he has pushed workplace aesthetics up the agenda. And in exposing the limitations of dull and disposable office buildings, he has also given Alain De Botton’s philosophical comments a contemporary twist.

Thomas Heatherwick has championed the needs of people outside looking into shiny buildings, but it’s not hard to see the ‘blandemic’ debate extending to the office interior – to people inside looking out. If the hybrid working era is changing both the patterns and the purpose of the office, it makes sense that its aesthetics should change too.



Here, the biggest influence will not be centred around aesthetic taste or the language of style. Instead, the impact on our health and wellbeing will be the critical issue in how offices look and feel in the future. Research into neuroscience and design has revealed just how critical the design of spaces is to our wellbeing.

The current biophilic movement that has resulted from this research is creating a whole new office aesthetic in which employing organisations are not only bringing the outside in through natural light and materials, green walls and water features, but are also encouraging people to spend more time outside with more outdoor spaces to work and even workplace gardens to cultivate. These trends will continue to gather pace in 2024.

Research by Scandinavian facilities company Coor has looked at how people in the Nordics spend an average of 80-90 percent of their time indoors –

traditional office work contributes to this statistic. But it doesn't have to be this way – there are many tasks that can be done outside in nature. Working outdoors also reduces stress levels, allows us to recover better, and gives us better quality sleep.

As the look and feel of the office changes, this will increasingly have less to do with pure aesthetic enjoyment of a space and more to do with a neurologically informed approach to workplace design. The well-designed workplace will connect deeply to our psychology, and beauty will be intrinsically linked to wellbeing.

Sources:

[Thomas Heatherwick's war on boring buildings: 'I've never gone against the whole industry before'](#), The Guardian, October 2023

[Are outdoor office the future? The Nordics lead the way.](#) WORKTECH Academy 2023

[Water at work: is more blue space the answer to the blues?](#) WORKTECH Academy 2023

From biophilia to biomorphism: the next step?

As wellbeing considerations drive the interior design of the next generation of offices, do we need to explore the links between work and health at a deeper level?

Chinmayee Ananth, director of international design firm Adrianse, believes this to be the case. She explains: 'The way we think about health has changed since Covid-19. The drive to design wellness-compliant workspace is now very strong. But while such initiatives are expanding, too many are just transactional and programmatic. We need to think more deeply and conceptually about how healthy work can be defined from multiple perspectives.'

This call-to-arms suggests that we need a more interconnected approach that brings ideas around health and work together. But how can this be achieved?

Neri Oxman, a former associate professor at MIT Media Lab and now the architect and designer behind research organisation Oxman, has spent her career exploring how the built environment can more deeply mimic the natural world. She argues that we need to 'design to empower a future of complete synergy between nature and humanity'. This approach amounts to biomorphism – a step beyond biophilic design where the design of spaces and objects reflects more deeply the patterns and forms found in nature.

Source: [Biomorphism: designing natural systems for natural ways of working](#), WORKTECH Academy 2023.

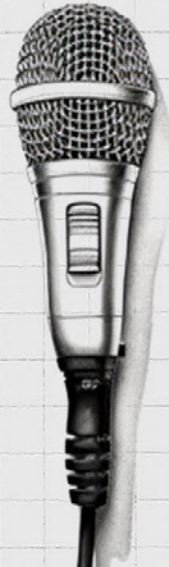


Further Reading

[Biophilia bonanza: the impact of nature on work performance](#)

[Space to Breathe: Study shows value of NHS green space for staff wellbeing](#)

[The surprising benefits of blue spaces](#)



Edward de Bono (1933-2021) was a physician, psychologist, author and inventor who originated the term 'lateral thinking'. He wrote many books on thinking, including *Six Thinking Hats*, and he was a proponent of the teaching of thinking as a subject in schools. He spoke at WORKTECH London in 2010.

'Why have a mind if you can't change it?'

- Edward de Bono

ON OUR RADAR

In the spirit of Edward de Bono, who gave us the term 'lateral thinking', here is a selection of external links to articles, podcasts and books on subjects that are on WORKTECH Academy's radar this quarter:



Warriors, Rebels and Saints

Think you know what makes a great leader? This book by Moshik Temkin might challenge your perspective on what behaviours and traits have defined the great leaders of history and how we can all learn from their example.

[Read more](#)



Unworking Podcast

How can we unlearn the old habits and rituals of the old office and create new ones fit for an age of digital technology, design innovation and diverse workforces? That's the question that this podcast series aims to answer by challenging old models and introducing new ideas to the workplace sector.

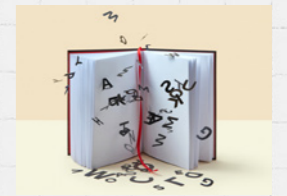
[Read more](#)



Unmasked

With neurodiversity becoming a key issue for workplace inclusion, this book offers a new perspective on how we can all understand better the needs and experiences of neurodivergent friends and colleagues.

[Read more](#)



Designing Employee Learning Programs

Think you know how to run your learning and development program? This Harvard Business Review article might make you think again – encouraging companies to think simple and effective rather than going overboard.

[Read more](#)



The Machine Age

Regardless of whether you're feeling ready to embrace AI or anxious about an automated future, this book by Robert Skidelsky looks to history to teach us how technological transformations really unfold and therefore better prepare us for the future ahead.

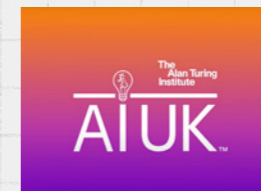
[Read more](#)



Workplace Geeks Podcast

Workplace Geeks is a podcast aiming to bring its audience the best and most interesting workplace research. With an episode on the WORKTECH London event coming soon, this podcast is a tool that will challenge your preconceptions about the workplace.

[Read more](#)



AI UK

Whether you're tech-savvy or the office luddite, this upcoming conference on data science and AI, hosted by the Alan Turing Institute, will leave us all better informed about the emerging risks and exciting benefits of the new technologies that are hitting the workplace market.

[Read more](#)



Do Team

Working with others is one of the great joys and challenges of the workplace. Here, entrepreneur Charlie Gladstone reveals his thoughts on how we can leave ineffective and taxing team relationships behind us and embrace new behaviours which will connect us better with each other.

[Read more](#)



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