

The New Office Equation: Aligning Space with Work in 2026



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The office equation has changed – but many occupiers are still solving for the wrong variables. While hybrid patterns have stabilised, the alignment between how people work and how space is configured remains incomplete. Drawing on the very latest global data, this Talking Points paper examines where disconnect persists, and what it means for workplace strategy, portfolio decisions and future occupier requirements.

The Office: Misdiagnosed, Not Displaced

Let's cast our minds back to 2020. The COVID-19 outbreak forced the closure of offices at an unprecedented global scale. For many knowledge workers, the working week shifted almost overnight to a fully remote model, enabled by rapid digital adoption and the scaling of collaboration technologies.

At the time, the prevailing narrative was the 'death of the office'.

We took a different view. Rather than signalling the end, the pandemic accelerated pre-existing trends: the decentralisation of work and the transition of the office into a more deliberate, purpose-led environment centred on collaboration, connection and culture.

The latest data now supports that position.

Leesman's most recent CRE Leaders Poll shows that fully office-based models have all but disappeared, but so too have fully remote ones. The office remains the primary place of work for most organisations, but it is no longer the only one. Instead, it now sits alongside a broader mix of work settings, reflecting a permanent shift in how work is structured. In essence, as we said at the time of the pandemic, our relationship with the office would become more fluid and more flexible.

The implication is straightforward. The office has not diminished in relevance, but it has become more demanding in its role and must be more diverse in its design and configuration.

Many organisations are still adjusting to this shift. In the fourth edition of (Y)OUR SPACE published last year, one quarter of all respondents identified the alignment of workstyles and workplace as their most significant challenge. This is not a marginal issue: it points to a widespread misalignment between how people work and how space is configured. That misalignment comes at a cost to employee and employer alike. Ultimately, it will lead to inefficiency, cultural erosion, and under-performance.

This paper revisits these themes using the very latest data to assess how the evolution of work and workers is reshaping occupier requirements.

Five Key Themes

01 Data-Led Spatial Planning

Without a clear view of how space is used, workplace decisions default to assumption rather than evidence.

02 Designing for Connection

With a growing share of work taking place alongside others, the office must actively enable interaction, not just accommodate it.

03 Individual Work Still Matters

Hybrid does not remove the need for individual work in the office - it changes how and where it should be supported.

04 Learning as a Workplace Foundation

As skill development becomes embedded in the working week, workplaces must support it explicitly.

05 Experience Drives Performance

Employee experience - both physical and psychological - is now a core performance issue, not a peripheral concern.

Hybrid Has Landed, But Not Settled

The fourth edition of (Y)OUR SPACE confirms that the five-day office week continues to recede. Only a small minority of organisations expect to return to a fully office-based model. In fact, just 1 in every 7 respondents anticipated an office only posture in three years’ time.

However, beyond this broad direction of travel, there is no clear consensus. While some occupiers continue to favour office-led approaches, others are experimenting with remote-first or more flexible “work from anywhere” strategies. Those anticipating other emergent places are not anticipating completely new workstyles but the prevalence of a range of different workstyles across the organisation according to team, task, culture or geography. By far and away the largest share of respondents, falls somewhere in between, adopting hybrid models without a fixed balance between office and remote work.

This lack of clarity matters.

While survey data is useful in identifying directional trends, it offers limited insight into how space is actually being used, or how it should be configured to support business outcomes.

This brings the focus back to spatial planning. Questions around attendance patterns, peak usage, and the activities driving presence are not peripheral but fundamental. Without this understanding, there is a high risk of designing workplaces that are poorly aligned with actual need.

As a result, demand is shifting toward real estate solutions that can generate and operationalise this insight. Access systems, sensor data and booking platforms are no longer ancillary technologies; they are becoming central to managing the workplace effectively. Used properly, they allow occupiers to move from static layouts to responsive environments, adjusting space in line with real patterns of use.

The latest Gensler data provides a useful reference point. On average, employees now spend just over half of their working week in the office, with smaller proportions allocated to home, client sites and other locations. These figures have remained broadly consistent year-on-year.

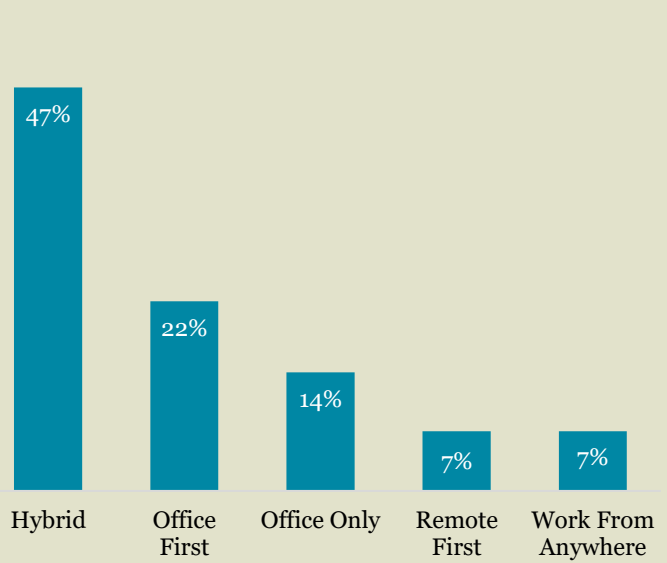
However, stability in behaviour should not be mistaken for satisfaction.

Leesman’s data shows that only around a third of occupiers believe their current approach is fully effective. The majority recognise that their model requires further refinement. In parallel, many expect continued changes to workstyles over the coming years. This aligns to our own perspective, namely that the workplace is in a process of on-going evolution rather than being a static solution to an ever-changing challenge.

Taken together, this suggests that while hybrid working patterns have stabilised, they remain unsettled at an organisational level. For occupiers, this translates directly into uncertainty around long-term demand and space planning. As we have noted throughout our (Y)OUR SPACE presentations, it leads to occupiers choosing between planning for peak occupancy in a hybrid pattern (with the lack of utilisation, operational and financial efficiency it brings) or trying to reduce the delta between peak and trough occupancy (with the challenge of then prescribing a fixed workstyle and cadence on a workforce that has become more expectant of flexibility).

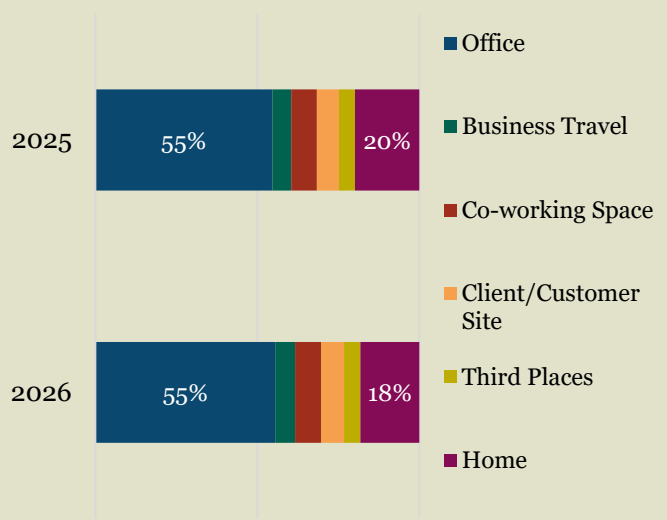
In this environment, space flexibility becomes a strategic requirement. This extends beyond lease structures to include the adaptability of space itself, alongside the systems needed to monitor and respond to change.

Q. How would you describe your organisation's predominant workstyle three years from today?



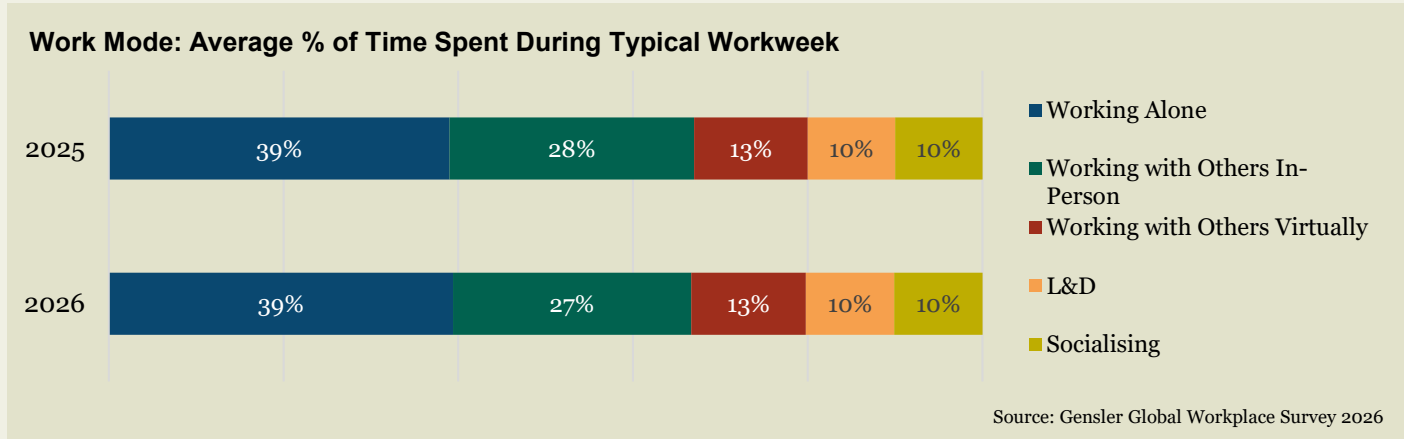
Source: (Y)OUR SPACE 4th Edition 2025

Work Settings: Average % of Time Spent During Typical Workweek



Source: Gensler Global Workplace Survey 2026

The Working Week In Focus



Beyond where work happens, it is equally important to understand what employees are doing with their time.

Gensler’s latest findings show little change year-on-year. A significant proportion of the working week is still dedicated to individual tasks, while a comparable share is spent collaborating or interacting with others.

This reinforces a central point: the office must support both modes effectively.

However, there is a risk of misinterpretation. The visibility of sustained levels of individual work may encourage a retention of desk-heavy layouts, while the emphasis on collaboration may drive a disproportionate shift toward shared space. In both cases, the outcome is suboptimal.

The challenge for occupiers is not to prioritise one mode over the other, but to calibrate their environments to support both.

This requires a more deliberate approach to workplace composition. Rather than uniform environments, offices should offer a range of settings that align with different activities, degrees of privacy and group sizes. Flexibility is critical here, enabling space to be adapted as needs shift throughout the day and over time.

Importantly, this is not solely a design issue. It requires a more integrated approach to workplace strategy, bringing together real estate, HR and technology functions to ensure that space, behaviours and business objectives are aligned.



Spaces for Connection

With more than a third of time spent working with others, the ability of the workplace to support collaboration is increasingly important.

This goes beyond the provision of meeting rooms. Effective environments combine a range of formal and informal settings, allowing employees to move between structured sessions and more spontaneous interaction. Layout also plays a role, with circulation, adjacency and shared amenities all influencing the likelihood of connection.



Working Alone, On-Site and At Home

At the same time, the need for focused work remains significant. Many employees will undertake individual tasks both at home and in the office. The workplace must therefore offer environments that allow concentration, particularly in open-plan settings where distraction can undermine productivity.

This reinforces the need for variety. Without access to quieter, more controlled spaces, the office risks underperforming as a place for individual output.

The Workplace as a Learning Platform

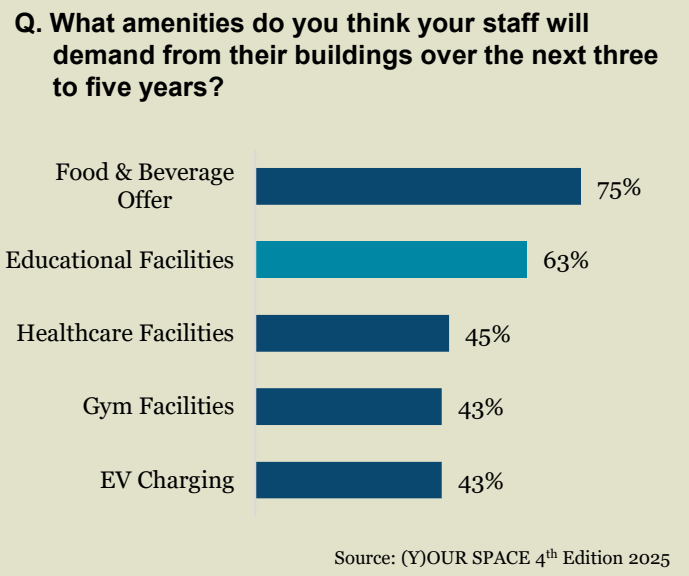
Another increasingly prominent feature of the working week is time spent on learning and development.

Gensler’s data suggests this now accounts for around a tenth of working time, reflecting the growing importance of upskilling in response to rapid organisational and technological change.

Deloitte’s latest research reinforces this point. Workers are experiencing continuous shifts in responsibilities, required skills and the nature of work itself, with artificial intelligence playing a significant role in accelerating this process.

As a result, learning is becoming embedded within the flow of work, rather than treated as a separate activity.

This should come as no surprise to the respondents of our last (Y)OUR SPACE survey. From 2023 to 2025, the anticipated demand for educational facilities rose from third-place to second in our polls, with nearly two-thirds of participants forecasting employee demand for learning spaces over the years to come.



For occupiers, this has clear implications. Workplaces must support both structured and informal learning, providing environments that enable knowledge exchange as well as more formal training activity. This may require dedicated spaces, but also the integration of learning into everyday settings.

At the same time, the pace of change is having measurable impacts on employee wellbeing. Increased workloads, evolving expectations and concerns around long-term relevance are contributing to higher levels of stress and disengagement.

This places greater emphasis on the quality of the workplace environment. Factors such as lighting, ventilation and acoustics are not simply design considerations—they materially influence productivity and experience. Equally, access to spaces for rest, recovery and informal interaction plays an important role in supporting employee resilience.

The office, in this context, becomes part of a broader system for sustaining performance over time.



Five Key Considerations CRE Teams Just Cannot Avoid

Against this backdrop, several questions become critical for CRE decision-makers.



Workspace Demand

How stable are current patterns of attendance, and how could/should portfolios adapt if they change?



Workplace Utilisation

Is there a clear understanding of how space is used, and is this insight being translated into action to inform existing and future space needs?



‘Me’ vs ‘We’

Does the current balance of space reflect actual work patterns, or legacy assumptions?



Employee Experience

Are workplaces supporting learning, wellbeing and performance, or falling short?



Cost vs Value, Impact vs Investment

Where should cost be optimised, and where should investment increase to support long-term value?

Delivering on the New Office Equation

The office has not diminished in importance, but its brief has become more exacting. It is no longer sufficient to provide space at scale in anticipation of future headcount projections. Space must now be demonstrably aligned with how work is actually performed. As hybrid patterns stabilise, the gap between behaviour and workplace configuration has come into sharper focus, exposing inefficiencies that can no longer be absorbed within portfolios designed for a different era.

For occupiers, this raises the bar on decision-making at a time when, arguably, interest in and scrutiny of, real estate has never been greater. Against this backdrop, real estate strategy must move beyond broad assumptions about attendance and embrace a more granular understanding of utilisation, activity patterns, and evolving workforce needs. This demands greater integration across functions, the stronger use of data, and a willingness to treat space as a dynamic asset rather than a fixed cost base.

In this context, the emphasis must shift away from an overbearing focus on presence and towards a more considered understanding of performance. The value of the office is no longer defined by how many people it accommodates, but by how effectively it enables them to work. The organisations that extract the most value from their workplaces will be those that make this transition: aligning space not simply with attendance, but with outcomes.



We like questions; if you've got one about our research, or would like some property advice, we would love to hear from you.



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