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GIVING VOICE TO THOSE WHO CREATE WORKPLACE DESIGN & FURNISHINGS

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Employees want to return to the office to collaborate with colleagues. Photo courtesy of Veronica Bean.

Reducing Loneliness in the Workplace

by Anna Zappia

With remote work now the norm, there has been an [increase in employee loneliness](#), with 61% of Americans claiming to feel lonely, a rise from 54% in 2018. This disconnect from others leads to absenteeism, staff turnover, and loss of productivity. Management teams are now looking to designers to reshape offices so that workers feel less isolated.

The pandemic has forever changed the way people work, and so much time away from the office took an unexpected toll. “We’re coming off of almost two years of working remotely, and burnout has become a real issue. It’s actually difficult to get a break from the chaos at home,” said Suzette Subance, managing executive and studio creative director at New York City-based TPG Architecture.

People are ready to return to the workplace so that they can meet with their colleagues again, and as Subance explained, workplaces must emphasize collaboration. Central hubs like town halls that give employees the opportunity to

gather will be important. “People aren’t coming back to the office just to sit at a desk behind a monitor. They’re returning because they crave social interaction.”

Subance also noted that while the physical space links to the company culture, there is less focus on offering a host of amenities as an afterthought, and more attention placed on task-oriented areas where staff can do their work comfortably. “There might be a four-person area for a meeting. And then a section that fosters mentorship, somewhere to pop in and have a one-on-one conversation. We are creating spaces with purpose, so everything is curated. Having an open office and a ping-pong table is not enough anymore.”

Surprisingly, furniture plays a key role in promoting camaraderie, which can lessen loneliness during the workday. Incorporating removable partitions or adjustable seating gives employees options — crucial in shifting hybrid

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environments. “We’re talking about soft architecture now, and how it will enhance these types of spaces. It might be furniture that creates subtle boundaries. The pieces that we are selecting can provide some useful privacy, but they are also moveable,” Subance noted.

By utilizing multi-tasking essentials, Subance said that designers can mimic the ease of a residential setting. “People want choice in their work environment. At home, individuals can move from one place to the next, and tailor an interior to suit their needs. They want that same flexibility to make their jobs easier. So there will be less structure and more creativity.”

She also described two types of adaptability that ensure seamless re-



Furniture is a form of soft architecture. Incorporating removable partitions or adjustable seating gives employees options. Photo courtesy of Veronica Bean.



Designed by TPG Architecture for Havas Health, this space is suitable for a range of functions. Photo courtesy of TPG Architecture

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configuration. “There is the short-term flexibility, so that might mean using a lounge chair on casters and a portable laptop table that I can pull up to it. Then there’s the flexibility that may require a little bit more. You might have to pull things apart with tools, but you won’t necessarily need an architect to come in and redesign the entire office.”

Leaders in every sector are embracing the concept of neighborhoods, with designated areas and rooms within certain zones to support the mental health of employees. Remote workers are used to having the ability to step away from their computers to take a quick break. Creating similar recharge

zones will keep staff energized and encourage mingling.

“The idea of wellness in the office is more all-encompassing now. It’s not just about good spots to have a meal or to connect, we might also add a meditation room. Maybe we will include more respite spaces. These things used to be considered a luxury, and they are becoming the norm,” Subance said.

She described analyzing traffic patterns to produce an effective layout. Active areas are found in the center, and quiet, heads-down departments along the perimeter. Each space is crafted to be a destination that invites

discovery. “A lot of clients are moving away from a regimented sea of workstations. We are all taking our cues from hospitality design, bringing in these elements of delight, like a beautiful wallpaper or unique finish. These special details make the workplace interesting and really enriching for people.”

By applying introspection and skill, designers can ultimately help to decrease the sense of loneliness experienced at the office. “People actually need to thrive in a workspace. So as we design, we need to think about how we affect humans at every level,” Subance added. ■



Designers are taking their cues from hospitality design, bringing elements of delight into the office. Photo by Tom Sibley