

In the hybrid work era, tech companies experiment with new office layouts



Qualtrics designed its new Seattle HQ during the pandemic and included several spaces for gathering and socializing. (GeekWire Photo / Taylor Soper)

By Taylor Soper

Many tech companies are reducing their real estate footprints as they adopt permanent hybrid work policies spurred by the pandemic. They're also rethinking how existing space is designed and used as the physical office becomes more about gathering and collaborating in this new era of work.

Zillow Group was one of the first tech companies to implement a flexible work policy, letting employees work from any location. As a result, it has subleased some of its office space and is experimenting with different office layouts, particularly with in-person all-hands meetings in mind. Social interaction is "the reason why people are coming in," said Meghan Reibstein, Zillow's vice president of project management and flexible work.

Qualtrics opened a new headquarters in downtown Seattle last year. To maximize real estate and improve productivity when employees come in — they're expected in the office 1-to-2 days per week — Qualtrics created "neighborhoods" used by specific teams on specific days. It also reoriented a large conference room to optimize digital viewing for weekly all-hands meetings.

Amazon's People eXperience and Technology group (PXT) redesigned several floors at the company's Nitro buildings in Seattle to offer more flexibility, including floors dedicated to collaborating or quiet work. Amazon also paused construction on five towers in downtown Bellevue, Wash., citing ongoing uncertainty about the impact of hybrid work on its office designs.

Internal company surveys show that employees feel they are productive at home. But many also still value face-to-face connection with their colleagues. Some research shows that meeting in person can generate more creative ideas compared to video calls.

"Most of technology is a creative business, whether you're an engineer or a software seller, and I think that's the piece people have been missing," said Michel Feaster, chief product officer of research at Qualtrics. "The emotional trust with your team is the spice of work. It's the stuff that makes a good job great."

A survey from April found that 61% of workplace leaders said they have added or reconfigured their space to enable hybrid and fully in-office teams. The report, from workplace management company Envoy, noted that adding more collaboration and social spaces were the most common changes.

Another survey, from real estate company JLL, found 73% of respondents have planned or are planning to make all office space open and collaborative, with no dedicated desk spaces.

"Our survey participants tell us they want their future office to be a collaborative, creative space that fosters employee wellbeing and maximizes productivity," JLL said in its report.

But offering private space for individual work is still important for those that want focused time to configure code or scrutinize spreadsheets. On a recent tour of Qualtrics' space, the company's private "phone booth" rooms and "library" were in use.

"It's unrealistic to think someone could come into the office and only collaborate," said Gina Sheibley, chief communications officer at Qualtrics.

Data from facilities company Kastle showed office occupancy rising to 47.5% earlier this month, the highest level since before the pandemic.

Qualtrics has seven floors across 175,000 square feet in the downtown Seattle 2+U tower (and six subleased floors), one of which is not yet built out. The company, which employs 1,000 people in Seattle, is in a wait-and-see mode as the hybrid work experiment continues to evolve.

"We'll learn based on what people do," Sheibley said. "Maybe we do end up creating more conference space. Maybe we might need more desks. But I love the idea that we have a little bit of flexibility."

Happy hour with colleagues over Zoom became popular at the pandemic's outset, but the

novelty of those events faded. Now, some say company-wide retreats should be a requirement.

The next office culture trend may be hard to predict. Executives stressed the importance of listening to employee feedback as more people come back to the office.

“The workplace itself is being reinvented right now,” Zillow CEO Rich Barton said on a recent Morning Brew podcast. “It’s kind of like the Big Bang. We’re trying to figure out the early physics, right after the Big Bang. We’re all inventing that together.”