
THE HUMAN WORKPLACE

Research-Driven Workplace Strategy

From Experient



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The Challenge

The Covid-19 pandemic ushered in many fundamental changes across the global business landscape. From technologies enabling virtual connectivity and productivity, to career reassessments and the Great Resignation, to the normalization of working from home (WFH) and hybrid working, business leaders continue to *catch their breath* as they adapt and reset their priorities and systems.

Few aspects of business operations have been as hard hit as *the office*. What was once considered necessary and even inevitable is now in an unprecedented state of flux. CRE professionals, workplace strategists and designers, and HR professionals share the burden of figuring out how much office co-presence is necessary, and what those workspaces should look like.

The Importance of Culture

Today, when increasing numbers of CEOs are demanding their employees return to the office, we stand at a crossroads. Some leaders express concern over their company's culture, which is a legitimate concern indeed. At Experient, we agree with leaders who seek to (re)prioritize their cultures as part of their return-to-office (RTO) strategies. However, in the current RTO approaches of many organizations, company culture is largely taken for granted as something that has already been sorted out. "Bring people back to the office," the thinking goes, "and our culture will pick up where we left off."

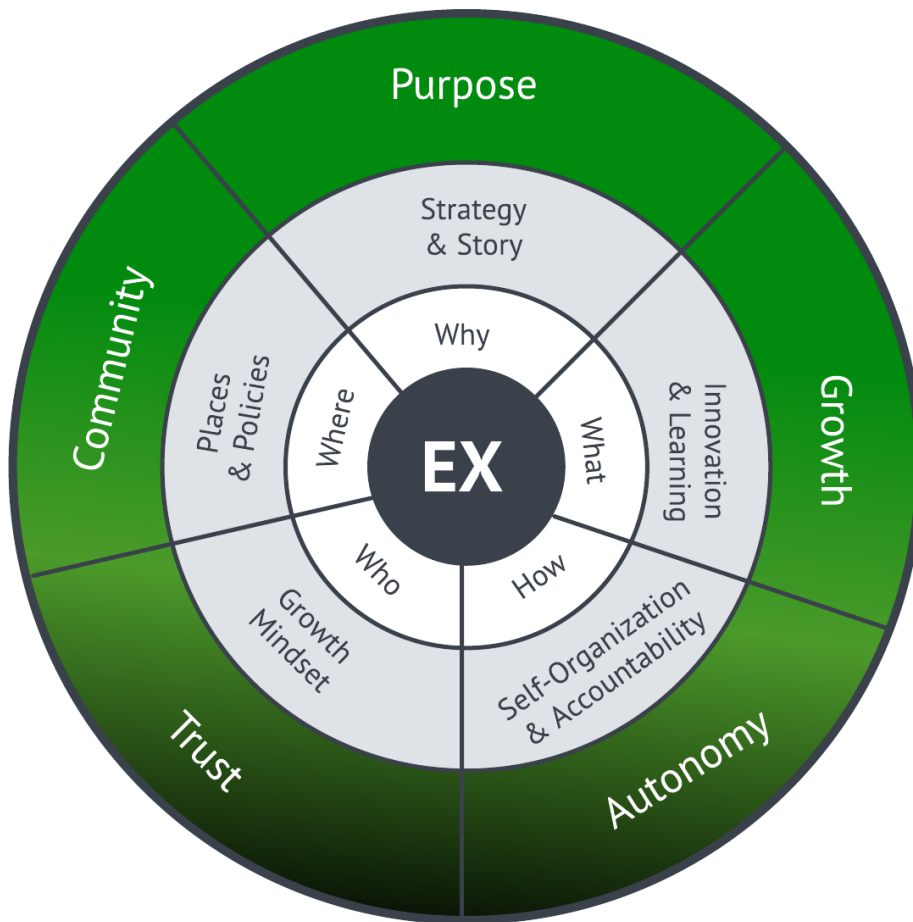
That is precisely the problem. Employee engagement levels still hover in the 30% range, and most corporate change programs continue to fail. Research from Gartner underscores that while large companies spend around \$2,200 per employee per year on culture, 69% of employees don't believe in the cultural aspirations of leaders, and 90% don't behave in ways that align with them.*

Many companies remain stuck in a failed cycle of survey-based culture assessments that claim to ‘close the gap’ between the current ‘culture type’ and the future desired ‘culture type.’ These approaches often remain quite abstract and remain far removed from the daily working experiences of employees.

Employee Experience (EX) Design Research

At Experient, we believe that the current employer-employee RTO impasse is more of a culture issue than it is a scheduling issue. While we agree with CEOs who want to prioritize office co-presence, we also believe that for this to be successful and sustainable, companies need to stop and listen to employees and better understand their work experiences.

Our Five Question Culture Framework understands company culture through the eyes of employees, not through the pre-set ‘culture types’ provided by survey designers. Similar to the process by which marketing and usability researchers engage in customer experience (CX) or user experience (UX) research, we help organizations understand their cultures through our EX research process.



Broader cultural trends and employee expectations have changed so dramatically over the past three years that proceeding in any other way undermines the trust, transparency, and mutual respect that define any healthy company culture. We help organizations develop their policies and new workplace design typologies by starting with understanding employee experience, first.

We do this through in-depth ethnographic research using the Five Question Framework. Our team of professional anthropologists have dozens of years experience conducting ethnographic research in a wide variety of contexts. Our EX research sits at the beginning of a three-phase process for building workplaces and experiences that are aligned with the values, needs, and goals of employees.



Our Ethnographic Research Process

Using the proprietary culture framework outlined in our new book—***The Open Culture Handbook***—our researchers immerse themselves in the daily working routines of selected research participants and teams for several weeks. We use the method of *participant observation* to witness work in its naturally occurring context, as well as structured and unstructured interviews to dive into key areas of employee experience.

Having the empathy to stop and listen to what employees are saying and experiencing goes a long way to fostering an open and healthy culture. This happens on site *and* in the homes of participants willing to allow access. The goal of the research is to understand the full range of employee work experiences and how those experiences impact employees’:

- Productivity
- Engagement
- Innovation
- Creativity
- Mental health
- Learning & Career Development
- Sense of Community
- Meetings
- Physical Health
- Trust & Commitment

The goal of the research is to understand employee experience—and through that the cultural dynamics of the company—from *their* perspective. Ethnographic research is inductive in that it builds up an understanding of culture from the bottom up.

Policies

Insights from the research are used to inform, in consultation with senior leadership, workplace policies and strategies that reflect and build on what is learned from employees. What do they like or dislike about working at the office? Or at home? Where are they most productive doing different kinds of work? What do they miss most about the office when they are working at home? Are meetings more effective in-person or on Zoom? Do they feel part of a community, and if so how does the office influence that?

Effective workplace policies created without employee input are arbitrary and do not achieve genuine buy-in from people. Policies can be imposed, but they will not be respected or voluntarily followed. Stopping to take the time to listen can unlock trust and participation.

Design

Some companies promoting RTO mandates are doing so without considering if their current workspaces are even in step with how workers want to use the spaces. Just calling people back to the same offices is simple scheduling, not hybrid work.

Going forward, the insights gleaned through EX design research are most useful to planning the long-term redesign of offices. Based on the new policy agenda, what activities will people most likely be doing on campus? What types of spaces most effectively support different types of activities? What are the long-term implications for office size, and cost? What do people really want when they are at the office? And most importantly, how can the company office attract employees to come into work even when they are not required to be there?

Summary Thoughts: The Power of Empathy and Understanding

Forbes magazine refers to the standoff between what employees currently want and what employers are demanding as The Great Mismatch. On its own, this will not go away. To bring the interests of the two sides together into an agreeable and sustainable future, organizations prepared to take the time to stop, listen to, and understand employee experience will be in a

much better position to create offices where employees *want* to be. And *that* starts with research.

Developing long-term workplace policies and strategies without taking the time to conduct EX research is likely to be random and ineffective. Maybe this will work, maybe that will work? Grounded ethnographic research takes the guessing out of it. And that starts by asking employees the questions, and then listening.

And finally, the most expensive aspect of all this is design. A thoughtful workplace redesign is both costly and time-consuming. The idea that an organization would commit these types of resources without grounding their financial commitments in the tangibles of their users' experience seems shortsighted.

The first step is acknowledging that we are in the early phases of organizations fully understanding what *hybrid work* will mean to *them*, specifically. The next step is taking the time to understand employees— their experiences and the cultures they build— through thoughtful design research.

Get in touch to schedule a free 30 Discovery Call:

hello@experient.work

About Experient

Experient is a culture and employee engagement agency that helps elevate employee experience (EX) through design. We are a team of anthropologists, business strategists, designers, and workplace strategists that helps redesign how organizations work. For the past ten years we have helped clients around the world with workplace transformation projects. We are based in Austin, Texas.