What if the Workplace Was No Longer a Workplace?

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OVERVIEW

What if the Workplace Was No Longer a Workplace?

When the pandemic began in 2020, the world of work as we knew it took an unexpected turn overnight. As countries initiated lockdowns in an attempt to protect people and reduce the spread of COVID-19, thriving commercial centers and bustling business districts closed shop, becoming monuments to a time of togetherness. While everyone's pandemic experience has been unique—and uniquely felt—some generalizations can be made; for instance, broadly speaking, organizations have for the most part managed to run their operations successfully with a remote workforce, begging the question: What is the future role of the workplace? Two schools of thought have emerged on the subject. One views these developments as accelerated trends that have been simmering for a while but have become more commonly adopted or explored during the pandemic; the other views the emergence of new, grassroot innovations that are starting to disrupt their sectors in response to new-found problems and behaviors driven by the pandemic.

A quick study of several emerging trends and grassroots innovations that have been either sparked or accelerated by the pandemic can provide some insight into what's next for the workplace. According to Google Trends, our interest in growing vegetable gardens has increased two-fold over the course of the pandemic. We have become more conscious about our environmental impact, with searches for how to stop climate change at an all-time high—even if we are unsure what day of the week it is, another frequent search. Some donned aprons and learned how to bake sourdough bread, while others dusted off keyboards and taught themselves how to code, both top-trending topics. In addition to an interest in new and obscure hobbies, our collective awareness has also grown during the pandemic, making us more empathetic and more conscious of our actions and their impacts, as evidenced by the doubling of searches for "invisible disability" and "racial equality."

The global pandemic has also sparked considerable innovation born from the disruption to daily rituals and routines we've experienced, and that happened practically overnight. Board game meetups have moved online, bars are home-delivering their experience, quiz nights and lockdown parties have boomed over Zoom, cinemas are reimagining community experiences from the comfort of one's own sofa, and musicians are hosting gigs on Instagram Live. You can even sign up for a live-streamed workshop to make your own terrarium, with the gear sent to your doorstep in advance.

What accounts for this ingenuity? The crux of it is that humans are social beings and need interaction with others in order to receive and reciprocate emotion, building bonds that fulfill a sense of belonging. The accelerated development of and transition into novel online ways of being together while staying apart is shaping a new era for how we live, work, and play as we emerge from the global pandemic. But the reality is not everyone has a safe, secure, and comfortable situation at home, or even wants to seamlessly live and interact online, contributing to all-time-high levels of loneliness.

Much like trending Google searches and the emergence of grassroots innovations across societies, there are numerous workplace-related trends that have been fast-tracked by the pandemic. IA has been analyzing these and exploring innovative new ways to reimagine the role of the workplace at a time when its very purpose is called into question. It all started by asking ourselves a simple question: *What if... ?*

PIXEL PLACE

What if you could experience the workplace from home?

Based on insights gleaned during the pandemic, one of the detriments of working from home for an extended period is the significant drop in spontaneous social interaction and networking experienced throughout the typical workday. Many report that social interaction is one of the most important benefits of the work environment, and being among their team a considerable motivator for coming into the workplace. It is also a primary reason why people choose to work in coffee shops and other environments conducive to congregating: to feel connected through proximity, whether or not they are actually interacting.

So, how can we recreate the serendipity and sense of connection inherent to the workplace for those who are working remotely? Introducing: Pixel Place, a digital replica of the physical work environment that mirrors real-time events. When users log on remotely, they enter and navigate the Pixel Place as a digital avatar, where they can see and connect with colleagues occupying both the physical and digital spaces.

Remember navigating retro online chat rooms with an 8-bit digital avatar? IA's version allows users to seamlessly interact not only with those at home and in the workplace but also with the organization itself in ways that have only come to fruition during lockdown life. Join a livestream lunch-and-learn, take part in a community quiz, change the digital décor of a space, participate in a work-from-home bake-off, join a special guest talk, or perhaps pet the Pixel Place resident cat. While users come to Pixel Place to work, it also provides a platform for remote workers to feel connected to each other and the organization, binding the physical and digital spaces so that people can either passively consume or actively engage.
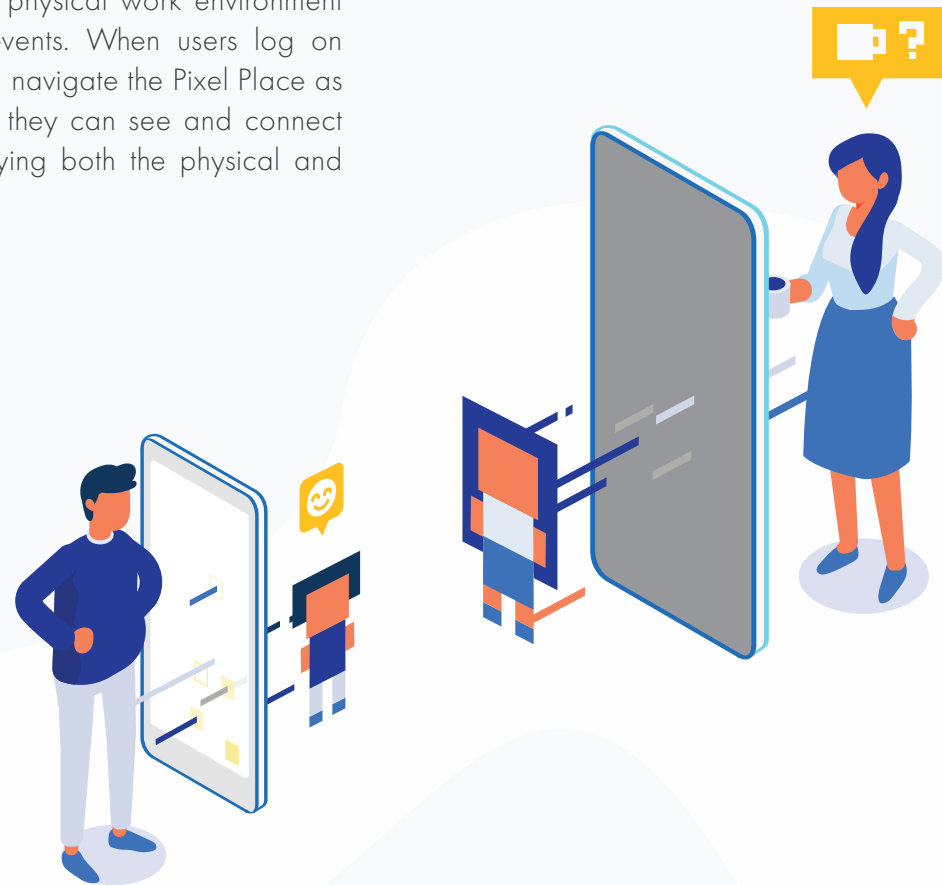
SENSORY ROOMS

What if the workplace was the healthiest place to be?

As we start to come out of the pandemic, the world will feel different, as will our personal perspectives on what matters most. The majority of us have had our daily rituals and routines disrupted, and experienced some form of lockdown restrictions, forcing us to redesign our habitual daily practices. This disruption and prolonged pause have provided an opportunity to reflect and appreciate the little things. For example, IA has discovered that people are thankful for having additional time with loved ones, more control over their exercise and eating routines, the ability to "step out" if needed for some decompression time, increased sleep, and particularly for not having to commute. Also, many of us have spent more time in loungewear than we would like to admit! Given the growing collective conscience regarding social, environmental, and economical causes, work spaces will need to serve as a platform to promote positive agendas and protect the health and wellbeing of occupants—particularly with anxiety on the rise, not only regarding cleanliness but also about having to reenter the workplace and recreate daily practices and social etiquettes.

So, how can we support a diverse population reentering the workplace and provide a place of refuge for neurodiversity? Introducing: the sensory room, a dedicated, immersive, blended environment that responds automatically to occupant mood and preferences. This enclosed physical space for individual respite is equipped with the mechanical, electrical, and digital infrastructure to create infinite combinations of multisensory scenarios, while also providing a sanctuary for self-guided meditation.

Imagine walking into the sensory room and the environment knows who you are and responds automatically to your preferences. The light level dims and adjusts to a calming blue hue; you notice a subtle woody oak scent fill the room; the walls around you start to reveal a living forest scene; you hear the wind rustling through the branches. You remove your shoes and feel warmth underfoot, and a sense of calm and tranquility moves through your body. After a short time, you decide to meditate using the in-room mindfulness app. You leave the sensory room feeling revitalized.

GAMIFICATION

What if you could play hide-and-seek in the workplace?

The workplace is the most concrete and prominent expression of an organization's brand and of the value it places on the people experience. Walking into a workplace and reading the environment like a detective can be a revealing exercise. What does it say about the brand values, and how does it support people? Is the workplace just a container or is it a generator? People strive to adjust to their surroundings; for new joiners, the cultural immersion afforded by the physical environment and co-presence will shape behavior and social norms. Inherently spatial, the built environment can unite or divide, and unfortunately workplaces that span multiple floors can often reinforce silos and act as a literal severance between teams. Complicating matters, people are habitual by nature—a self-preservation method for relieving pressure from cognitive load. It is only when our routines are disrupted that we reassess and come up with alternative solutions, which can provoke anxiety.

This is why it's human nature to seek out regularity in the form of the same seat in the workplace, once again reducing the possibility of creating new networks and social ties that would improve opportunities for collaboration and innovation.

So, how can we encourage a dynamic workplace experience whereby people choose to discover and actively engage with new spaces instead of passively consuming? Introducing: gamification, a concept most common to video/online gaming and retail, whereby users are rewarded for completing certain activities. Gamification can be used in creative ways to encourage behaviors and practices and to connect communities. This could manifest itself in the workplace through a variety of mediums such as historic artifacts, team trinkets, installations or exhibits, environmental graphics, and proximity beacons that prompt users to explore. Occupants move through the environment seeking out objects and occupying different spaces to unlock certain achievements or rewards. This strategy could also be used to create a discovery trail through the workplace for onboarding, tours, and encouraging exercise, all while promoting dynamic use of the workplace and removing the anxiety from visiting unfamiliar or underutilized areas.

Consider the following scenario: Today is your first day at the workplace. Perhaps you are a new employee or visiting from another office. You load the company's branded workplace app and embark on a discovery trail. As you move through the various spaces, you come across a framed jersey that you interact with using a QR code. You learn that the team participated in a coast-to-coast charity cycling event raising over $2,000. Next you notice an interesting environmental graphic on the floor. You point your phone's camera at it and the graphic begins to move and change, accompanied by an audio narrative about its origins. You discover that it was commissioned from a local artist to celebrate diversity and inclusion as part of Pride Month. After a short time, you decide to settle down and get to work in a booth seat, which is registered by the workplace app. Each event is rewarded within the app as either credit for the café, merchandise, or bragging rights.

What if the workplace was powered by its people?

A look at purchasing behavior reveals that the next generation of consumers is more conscious and conscientious about the brands they associate with, actively buying products that align with their values and belief system. By proactively engaging with brands rather than passively consuming, these digital natives have greater access to information than previous generations, which helps them make more informed decisions. As brands look to connect consumers with the impact their purchases have on a particular cause, whether that's supporting girls in STEM or promoting food sustainability, it is becoming ever more important to lead with action over words, being accountable and transparent about both success and failures. The same is true for the workplace, which will become a stage for promoting causes that matter to an organization, making them visible through actions and openness.

So, how can we connect human behavior with sustainable impact within the workplace in an engaging manner? Introducing: human energy. The kinetic energy generated by occupants' movement can be harvested and translated into electrical energy used to power low-energy devices.

Deploying harvesting infrastructure in locations with heavy foot traffic—primary circulation corridors, feature stairs, lobbies—would take advantage of the high kinetic energy levels generated in those places. That infrastructure could also be used as a means to promote movement or stair use if combined with gamification, for example.

Harvesting human energy for utilization within the local grid not only provides a great opportunity for promoting internal mobility and friendly competition between teams but it also tells a story. Perhaps in reception, the brand logo shining bright is powered by employees as a metaphor for the organization's success. Or, alternatively, the coffee machine in each floor's micro-kitchen grinds fresh beans using harvested energy. There are many creative examples of how the energy can be used, but what's important is how the story will resonate with the purpose of the organization, connecting the behaviors and decisions of occupants to their sustainable impact.

AUTOMATED SPACE MODELING

What if the workplace did the work for you?
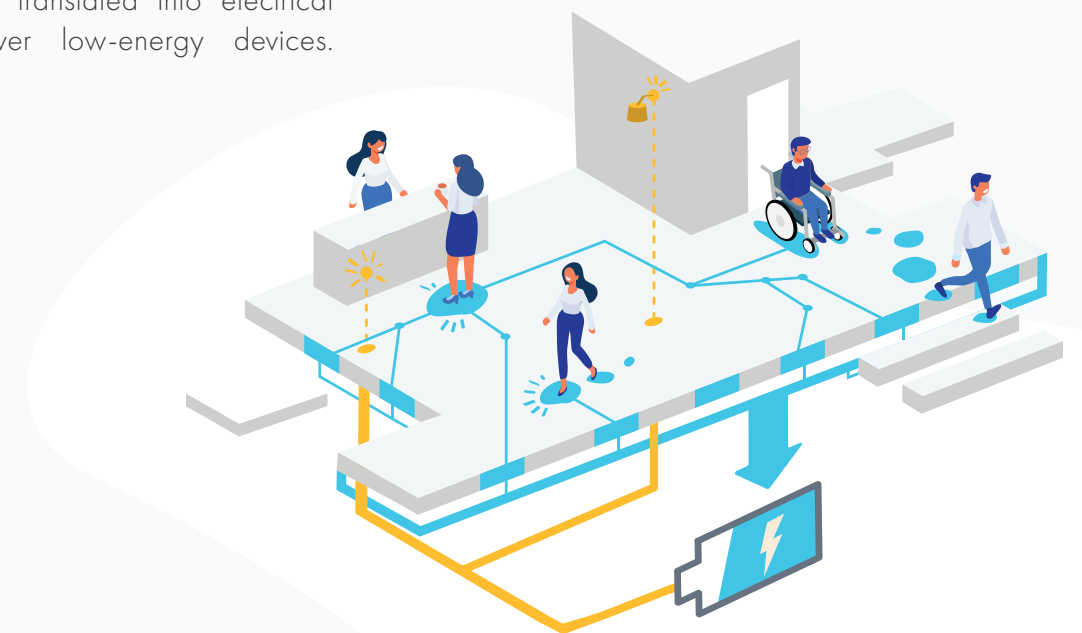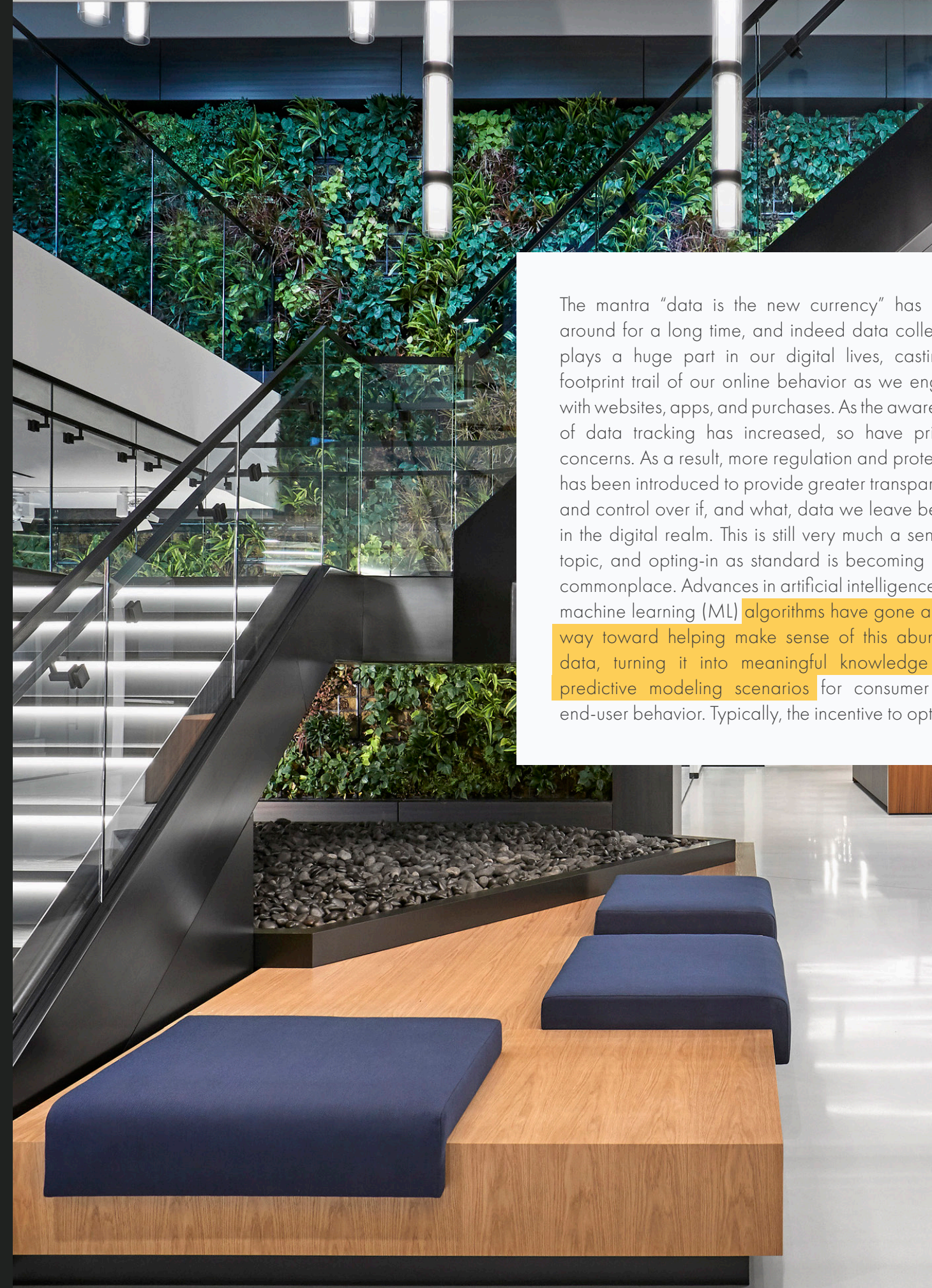
The mantra "data is the new currency" has been around for a long time, and indeed data collection plays a huge part in our digital lives, casting a footprint trail of our online behavior as we engage with websites, apps, and purchases. As the awareness of data tracking has increased, so have privacy concerns. As a result, more regulation and protection has been introduced to provide greater transparency and control over if, and what, data we leave behind in the digital realm. This is still very much a sensitive topic, and opting-in as standard is becoming more commonplace. Advances in artificial intelligence and machine learning (ML) algorithms have gone a long way toward helping make sense of this abundant data, turning it into meaningful knowledge and predictive modeling scenarios for consumer and end-user behavior. Typically, the incentive to opt-in to sharing data is to benefit from targeted and tailored experiences within the digital platform.

So, how can we source and connect data from the workplace and use it in a meaningful way to enhance experience—while optimizing space footprint? Introducing: automated space modeling. ML algorithms can be used to continuously test various occupancy models and design scenarios against predictive utilization and activity patterns (based on historic data), staff survey data, incident reporting, booking data, and correlated models. There's also the possibility to introduce design rules within the code to ensure that proposals comply with building regulations, design standards, and performance metrics. Each model would have key performance indicators against time, cost, impact, and return on investment, including metrics such as densities and predicted utilization factors.

It is important for real estate professionals to understand the market and the demand for space. Opportunities to increase, decrease, or consolidate are usually identified after a period of manual research and business engagement. But imagine if the data was readily available, connected and consumed by ML analytics to automate the process of identifying patterns and suggesting new occupancy and design models, considerably improving spatial efficiency. It could also suggest new layouts based on utilization patterns and identify potential design pitfalls that might account for low utilization, such as conflicting adjacencies or design or environmental conditions.

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SUMMARY

It all starts with a conversation, and asking yourself that simple question: *What if...?*

In summary, the pandemic has sped up adoption of a number of trends and brought to bear new innovations that could change the future of workplace design, its role reconsidered in the context of a new norm of work. If the majority of the knowledge-based workforce has been able to successfully work from home and maintain productivity levels, then why return to the workplace? What is its purpose? The answer is inherently subjective and will require a response customized to fit each organization's unique identity. However, at its core, the workplace must provide something people want and need, something they cannot replicate at home. Although our insights suggest the majority of the workforce want to maintain a level of hybrid working post-pandemic, some will still prefer to work solely from the workplace. Choice and autonomy will play an important part of creating an enriched experience for people.

The global pandemic has certainly sown a seed for change and has created an opportunity for us to reconsider what matters most and reevaluate the role of the built environment in supporting life. So, what if the workplace was no longer a workplace, but instead a destination for community, collaboration, celebration, and connection, nurturing a sense of belonging and strengthening social ties—and emphasizing the moments that are better experienced together in co-presence?

Hopefully some of these ideas have stimulated thought and provoked an alternative view of what the workplace could be. IA is always looking for exciting opportunities to partner in supporting your workplace journey. Get in touch if you would like to discuss any of these topics or explore how we might collaborate. It all starts with a conversation, and asking yourself that simple question: *What if...?*

For more information visit: **www.interiorarchitects.com**

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