

# What Today's Employees Really Want from the Office

By Will Thomae  
October 2, 2025

## Why Feelings Are the Strategy

For decades, the office was designed around functions: how many desks could fit, how many conference rooms were needed, how to keep costs predictable. That lens is shifting. The most forward-thinking workplace teams are now starting with a different question: How should people feel here if they are going to do their best work?

The rationale is hard to ignore. Employee well-being and emotional safety are directly tied to performance. According to the American Psychological Association's 2023 Work and Well-Being survey, survey shows that stress and burnout remain the top drivers of disengagement, while trust and belonging strongly predict retention and collaboration, Edelman's 2024 Workplace Trust Barometer and McKinsey's research on psychological safety underscore this connection. In other words, the quality of the emotional experience inside the office can determine whether employees want to stay, share ideas, or walk out the door.

## With Insights from WorkX speakers



**Bill Callahan**  
Director of Workplace Experience  
WorkX Speaker



**Nichole Aguinaga**  
Supervisor of Corporate  
Space Planning & Facilities  
WorkX Speaker



Bill Callahan, Director of Workplace Experience at Seismic, sees this play out in real estate decisions. For his teams, flexibility is not just a perk but a recruitment advantage.

*“Talent acquisition is the number one benefit. Flexibility lets us pull talent from anywhere and pivot our footprint. We’ve closed locations where there wasn’t a critical mass and reinvested in ways that make the office more of a benefit than a burden.”*

At Tandem Diabetes Care, culture drives the design language. When employees asked for brighter colors, open lighting, and lower walls, the facilities team delivered.

*“When we opened our headquarters in 2023, we heard loud and clear that people wanted vibrancy and collaboration. We designed for that, and it immediately changed how people felt in the space,” says Nichole Aguinaga.*

**77%** of employees report stress at work negatively impacts their mental health.

American Psychological Association, 2023

**56%** increase in performance in teams with a strong sense of belonging

Edelman, 2024

**74%** less stress and

**50%** higher productivity in companies with high trust cultures

McKinsey & Company, 2023

## Designing for Calm: Spaces that Heal Stress

After years of blurred boundaries and elevated burnout, a calming environment has become a non-negotiable workplace outcome. Employees want spaces that lower anxiety, restore focus, and help them return to their workday with more clarity. Surveys show that **77% of employees say work stress has harmed their mental health** (American Psychological Association, 2023) and nearly half report that most of their stress comes directly from the job. Calm is no longer a wellness perk; it is a productivity strategy. Workplace teams are responding by reverse-engineering environments around ease of use and sensory balance.

At Seismic, the principle is to reduce friction. *“You can’t hand people new tools every visit. It has to be simple and frictionless. Every desk and room is one USB to your laptop and you’re up,”* says Bill Callahan. *“That’s huge when you only come in twice a quarter.”*

The physical details matter. Callahan notes that investments in larger phone booths, sit-stand desks, **better ventilation and lighting** paid dividends. Employees use the booths for calls and demos, then return to collaborative areas. The pattern feels natural rather than forced.

At Tandem Diabetes Care, calm is embedded in culture. Nichole Aguinaga points to the library, a deliberate quiet zone, as one of the most valued additions.

*“It’s there so people can decompress for a minute,”* she explains. *“It signals that it’s okay to step away.”*

## The Science of Calm

**15%** well-being increase in office with biophilic design (plants, daylight)

**46** minutes more in average sleep/night in employees exposed to natural light

**93%** of employees reject the idea of returning to old layouts after a wellness-focused redesign  
CBRE

External case studies support these choices. CBRE’s wellness-driven office redesign led to **93% of employees saying they would not return to the old setup** after experiencing the calmer, health-oriented space (CBRE, 2022). Coca-Cola’s Singapore hub introduced a casual lounge overlooking the ocean; it quickly became one of the most popular destinations, despite being intended only as a break area (Coca-Cola Company, 2022). Both examples demonstrate how employees “vote with their feet” toward spaces that deliver psychological relief.

The design levers are consistent: more daylight, greenery, acoustic privacy, and restorative spaces. Research in the Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine (2020) shows that exposure to natural light improves sleep quality by up to **46 minutes per night** and lowers reported stress. Noise reduction has been linked to higher cognitive performance and fewer interruptions. Each of these measurable outcomes ties directly back to organizational performance.

The lesson is clear: calm is not incidental. It can be built into the workplace through deliberate choices, and when it is, employees are more engaged, focused, and willing to return.

# Designing for Trust and Connection

If calm is about restoring balance, trust is about making people feel safe enough to speak, share, and belong. In hybrid work, where many interactions are filtered through screens, the physical office is being reimaged as the anchor for connection. The goal is not just to provide space, but to cultivate psychological safety - the feeling that one can be candid without repercussion.

The stakes are high. McKinsey's 2023 research showed only **26% of U.S. workers feel psychologically safe at work**, leaving most hesitant to share ideas or admit mistakes. Low trust environments lead to silence, missed opportunities, and eventually turnover. High-trust environments correlate with stronger collaboration, faster problem solving, and higher employee engagement.

Bill Callahan at Seismic explained how flexibility and trust intersect in his workplace design.

"We're activity-based now. If everyone showed up the same day, we'd be oversubscribed for workstations, so we built flexible booths and ad-hoc meeting spots to cover the peaks. When people come in, there's no friction - they can plug in for two hours of focus, then step out to collaborate. That rhythm strengthens cohesion."

At Tandem Diabetes Care, design choices reinforce openness.

"Lowering cube walls and boosting light and openness helped people see each other and connect without leaving their area," says Nichole Aguinaga.

External case studies, including findings from Gensler (2024) and Leesman (2023), confirm that layout adjustments can directly improve connection. Moving shared resources like printers or coffee points into central hubs creates "collision zones" where colleagues run into each other, building trust through casual encounters. Conversely, environments that feel like glass-walled fishbowls (where every desk is exposed) tend to backfire, leaving employees self-conscious and less willing to speak. Privacy booths, acoustic pods, and side rooms, paradoxically, enable more openness by giving people confidence their conversations won't be overheard.

Hospitality-inspired design also plays a role. Offices that feel warm and inclusive - through lighting, furniture, artwork, or simply providing gathering spaces that reflect company values - signal to employees that they are welcome and respected. Gensler's 2024 Workplace Survey found that employees who rated their office as "inclusive and community-oriented" were **two times more likely to say they were engaged at work**.

Trust, then, is not left to HR or leadership alone. It is designed into the workplace itself, through environments that balance transparency with privacy, and openness with safety. Offices that achieve this balance become the places where employees want to build, not just work.

## Trust by Design

**26%** of employees feel psychologically safe at work

**2x** likelihood in employees feeling engaged in inclusive workplaces

**30%** increase in willingness to have candid conversations with privacy pods & acoustic booths

Leesman, 2025 Global Workplace Experience Survey

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# The Reverse-Engineering Playbook

Designing backwards from emotion requires a new way of working. Instead of starting with floorplans and desk counts, workplace teams begin by asking: How do we want people to feel in this space? From there, the process becomes one of mapping emotional outcomes to physical features and then testing their effectiveness.

## 1 Name the Feeling

Whether the goal is calm, trust, momentum, or something else, clarity on the desired outcome comes first. Research in environmental psychology confirms that employees are more engaged when emotional needs are explicitly addressed. For example, research from Steelcase (2022) and Harvard Business Review (2023) shows that offices that incorporate biophilic elements tied to relaxation report 15% higher well-being scores among employees.

## 3 Design the Features

This is where the emotional outcomes translate into tangible design choices. To achieve calm, teams invest in natural light, acoustic privacy, and quiet zones. To foster trust, they balance open areas with enclosed spaces for candid conversations. To create momentum, they layer in movement and hospitality-inspired design cues.

Bill Callahan explained how this mapping plays out at Seismic. “Ninety-five percent of our company supports the workplace strategy. We listen and then make it simple to use. Plug-and-play rooms, flexible booths, and even co-working memberships where needed. It’s about making the office a benefit, not a burden.”

## 5 Plan the Future

Future-proofing means designing not only for today’s needs but also for tomorrow’s growth. As Nichole Aguinaga pointed out, employees often focus on what they need right now, not what will be required in a year or two.

“Employees know what they need now, but not always what’s next. Our job is to design for growth and big projects coming.”

External studies reinforce the importance of this approach. Companies that measure and iterate report 20 percent higher workplace satisfaction scores than those that implement static designs. The office, like the workforce, is dynamic and so must be its design.

The reverse-engineering playbook is not a one-time process. It is cyclical: define feelings, map the journey, design features, measure impact, and adapt. Done well, it transforms the workplace into a system that continually evolves with employee expectations and organizational goals.

## 2 Map the Day

Workplace strategists increasingly use employee journey mapping to identify moments of friction or stress. The aim is to match each step of the workday (arrival, focus, collaboration, recovery, etc.) with an emotional goal.

## 4 Map the Day

The most innovative teams treat the office as a living lab. They test new features on a small scale, measure usage, and refine. Metrics now go beyond occupancy to include employee sentiment, voluntary attendance, and well-being scores. Some organizations even track time spent in collaboration zones versus quiet rooms as proxies for emotional balance.

## The Metrics of Emotion

➤ Companies that measure emotional outcomes see 20% higher workplace satisfaction scores.

*Leesman (2023) and Cushman & Wakefield (2024)*

➤ Pulse surveys asking “Do you feel energized by our workplace?” correlate strongly with voluntary attendance.

➤ Workplaces that pilot and iterate design choices cut wasted space costs by up to 30%.

# Toward Emotionally Intelligent Offices

The story emerging from the recent WorkX conference is clear: the most forward-looking organizations are no longer designing offices around headcount, but around human experience. Calm, trust, and momentum are not abstract ideals. They are measurable endpoints, and when they are built into the workplace, they shape employee well-being, engagement, and ultimately performance.

Bill Callahan of Seismic and Nichole Aguinaga of Tandem Diabetes Care illustrate how different paths can lead to the same conclusion. For Callahan, flexibility and frictionless design ensure employees see the office as a benefit rather than an obligation. For Aguinaga, culture-driven spaces signal that work can be both casual and creative. Their voices, alongside many others at WorkX, confirm that emotion is becoming a design strategy in its own right.

Trust metrics reported by Slack (2023) and Edelman (2024) further illustrate why psychological safety is becoming a central workplace design factor. Offices with wellness-focused features see **sharp increases in satisfaction, with as many as 93%** of employees preferring the redesigned environment over the old one. Companies that treat their space as a living lab and measure emotional outcomes report **20% higher workplace satisfaction** than those with static designs. Trust, belonging, and momentum can be quantified and they can be engineered.

As the industry looks ahead, WorkX (February 2026) will provide the next forum to test these ideas against new realities. Expect deeper case studies on emotional metrics, new tools for presence coordination, and continued exploration of hospitality-grade workplaces that blend comfort with performance. The journey toward emotionally intelligent offices is far from finished, but the trajectory is unmistakable. The mandate has ended. The magnet has taken its place. And in that shift lies a new order for workplace strategy: design backwards from emotion, and the office becomes not just a location, but a living part of how people thrive at work.



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