

The birth of the office biome

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A shift in work attitudes, health and safety expectations and - most importantly - an emphasis on the value of employee wellness have brought about massive changes in workspace design with the focus on creating a balanced and healthy office biome.



A biome is a natural environment that has all vital resources functioning in harmony with one another. If you take the concept indoors and to the office in particular, it encompasses a range of variables, from air quality and viral load to human density and traffic, and light and noise levels, all of which can be tracked and responded to in order to create an optimal environment (or biome) for its users.

“ Our post pandemic world is demanding that office biomes function better and are more focused on creating healthier and happier environments for the people who operate in them. Just as smart homes, with their remote alarm, air conditioning and water irrigation systems are a reality, smart offices are here to stay. ”

Working smarter for the future

A return to the workplace after the pandemic was inevitable, and so too is the knowledge that the workspace as we knew it before 2020 may never be the same. This is top of mind for the team at interior architecture firm Inhouse, who use insights gleaned from their Ergosense data capture system to rethink and design optimal work environments for their clients.

“There are a few ways of looking at creating a healthy work biome,” says Aidan Hart, creative director at Inhouse and the co-creator of Ergosense, the software system Inhouse uses to capture data before they begin an office design rethink.

“The first is taking office layouts and spatial elements into account. But other factors such as lighting, temperature, noise and even hygiene are also paramount.” While Ergosense monitors allow the design teams to rethink existing spaces, they also allow them to monitor new builds with a view to workshopping relevant responses as and when they are needed.

Goodbye sick buildings

Poor air quality, general hygiene and inefficient heating and air-conditioning management are just some of the factors that contribute to “sick buildings”, a common occurrence in both post World War II buildings that were never designed with people in mind, as well as the office blocks of the '80s that were focused on fitting as many cubicles onto one floor as possible.

Sick buildings have also been attributed to rapid spreads of viruses in offices and in a post-Covid-19 world, this knowledge is enough to spark panic and shutdown any office environment.

Ergosense receivers can measure noise levels and counter them with white noise, viral loads can be monitored so that relevant health measures can be applied, and even practical considerations like heavier bathroom traffic can be recorded in order to deploy relevant cleaning services.

Smart lighting monitors read when a space is occupied so that task lighting is only active then and adjusts according to the ambient light in the office, while elements like responsive temperature adjustments ensure each and every zone is comfortable and adjusted according to the number of people currently occupying it.

“Aside from resulting in healthier environments for its occupants, the energy savings implications are also significant. Using data to design better biomes means we can fulfill sustainability mandates for companies much more efficiently,” explains Hart.

Putting more home into the office

“ With a growing number of staff returning to offices – even if not full-time – more focus is being placed on creating environments that are conducive to employee wellness. ”

Working from home has changed employee needs and expectations, and this has had a significant impact on office design with the creation of hybrid spaces that incorporate and embrace home elements, creating a sense of comfort and putting an emphasis on employee wellbeing.

Hart says: “Creating ‘good for you’ hybrid offices that feel like home has meant a total rethink around how office spaces are designed. We spend a lot of time focusing on the psychology behind the architecture of a space – how to make people feel good in a space is our major driver.”

One major change is that highly desked offices of the 2000s are set to be replaced with more flexible spaces. Inhouse is putting privacy back into offices in a big way, making pause areas smaller and creating more pods where people can work or talk discreetly without being part of a loud and often unproductive open plan space.

With the advent of Zoom meetings, breakaway rooms trump boardrooms and glass walled offices with doors are becoming popular, allowing people to get on with work without being interrupted unnecessarily.

“We know that people want their time in office to count and they want to be efficient. We work hard to make that happen by creating spaces that fulfill their comfort and efficacy expectations,” says Hart.

“ Creating work environments that are healthy and based around the people that occupy them is essential for the post-Covid-19 workforce. ”

“Building healthy work biomes will be key to staff retention, productivity and ultimately positive company cultures,” says Hart. “It is exciting to be part of an integrative approach that marries technological considerations with practical

requirements relevant to the humans who operate within them.”

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