

Who Runs the Office? a post Pandemic thesis

The corporate office, long been considered a fixed overhead, is undergoing a profound transformation. The seismic shifts in working models, accelerated by the global pandemic, have challenged the fundamental purpose and utility of physical workspaces. As we look toward 2025, the office is evolving from a perceived cost center into a nimble, strategic asset. What once resided squarely in the realm of the CFO or COO now drives productivity, fosters innovation, and sustains corporate culture.

This evolution is giving rise to a growing imperative for the Chief Information Officer (CIO) and Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) to take the helm of workplace decision-making

BTP: Before The Pandemic

For decades, the office was the undisputed workplace of knowledge workers—where professionals gathered daily to deliver value. Real estate, in turn, became a major line item, second only to workforce costs, and was managed primarily for space utilization and operational efficiency.

Decisions concerning office space revolved around square footage, lease terms, and streamlined facility management. As the executives responsible for cost control and operational oversight, the CFO and COO were the natural stewards of this domain.

Emergence of the Flexible Work Model

The forced global experiment in mass remote work during COVID-19 revealed that, for many roles, being physically co-located five days a week is not essential for task completion.

What did prove critical, however, was ensuring connectivity, reliable video communication, and the presence of strong leadership and resilient company culture. While this realization disrupted long-held assumptions within the corporate world, it also prompted a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the office's true value.

For some individuals and routine tasks, productivity could be maintained—or even improved—when working remotely. Yet, the organic collisions, informal knowledge sharing, mentorship opportunities, and shared experiences that drive innovation, build trust, and reinforce organizational culture remain difficult to replicate in fully virtual environments.



A new steady state is beginning to take shape

Enterprises continue to experiment with the most effective work models for different roles.

Research by Microsoft has shown that while remote work may initially boost task-based productivity, it can, over time, impair creativity and deep collaboration. The ability to turn to a colleague for quick brainstorming, spontaneous discussion, or a simple question not only enhances critical thinking but also reduces cognitive load.

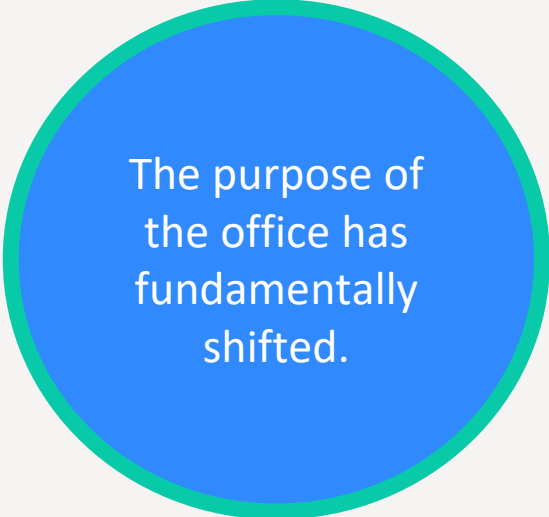
This point is reinforced by psychological studies, including Philip Tetlock's 1983 research, which demonstrated that explaining and defending ideas leads to improved thought processes.

The physical office serves as the natural environment for these interactions—nurturing collective intelligence that surpasses individual productivity.

In this setup, the purpose of the office has fundamentally shifted. No longer just a place for only task execution, it is now a curated environment designed to drive collaboration, innovation, and cultural cohesion.

In a hybrid reality, not **every** employee needs the office at **all times**—but the value of the physical workspace actually grows. Humans need it to support relationship-building, real-time problem-solving, and awareness across teams in ways that virtual tools alone can't replicate.

This evolution directly intersects with the strategic priorities of the CIO and CHRO, as they shape the modern work environment that empowers both human connection and digital enablement.



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The Technology Imperative: The CIO's Ascendancy in Workplace Strategy

In today's digital enterprise, technology has evolved from a back-office function into the engine of an agile, intelligent workplace. This shift positions the Chief Information Officer (CIO) as a central driver of workplace transformation, with the modern office emerging as a tech-enabled, data-rich environment. A successful hybrid workplace in 2025 depends on a technology foundation that spans across several core areas—many of which are now under the CIO's strategic ownership:



1. Seamless Collaboration:

Meeting spaces must support high-quality, inclusive experiences through advanced audiovisual systems, enabling remote participants to feel equally engaged and present.

2. Data-Driven Space Utilization:

Real-time insights into how and when space is used are critical for workplace optimization. This requires the deployment of internet-connected sensors and analytics platforms—technologies squarely within the CIO's remit.

3. Employee Experience Technologies:

Mobile tools for navigation, room booking, colleague location, and service access have become standard. These systems shape the digital employee experience, a domain increasingly led by the CIO.

4. Secure and Scalable Network Infrastructure:

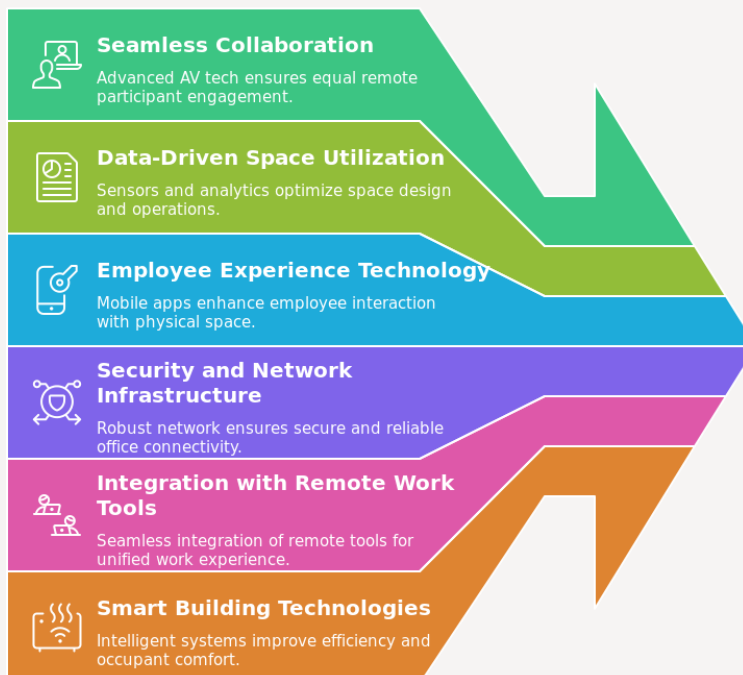
As more smart devices come online and reliance on cloud-based collaboration grows, the office network must be robust, secure, and future-ready—another core responsibility of the CIO.

5. Integration with Remote Work Tools:

The physical office must function as an extension of the digital workspace, integrating seamlessly with video conferencing, cloud storage, and collaboration platforms to ensure a unified employee experience—regardless of location.

6. Smart Building Technologies:

HVAC, lighting, and access control systems are becoming more intelligent and interoperable, increasingly managed via IP and web-based interfaces. These innovations offer both efficiency gains and improved occupant comfort, supported by advanced technology platforms under the CIO's purview.



The CIO now plays a central role in selecting, implementing, and managing the increasingly complex "WorkTech" stack. Value is achieved by secured integration of systems.

As IT evolves from a support function to the backbone of enterprise operations, workplace technology investments are no longer standalone decisions—they are integral to the office's overall effectiveness.

This makes the CIO pivotal in shaping the digital foundation of the intelligent workplace.

The People Imperative: The CHRO's Growing Influence on Physical Space

If technology is the nervous system of the modern workplace, then employee experience and organizational culture are its heart and soul—areas where the CHRO plays a pivotal role.

Engagement and retention continue to rank among the top strategic concerns for executive leadership, as highlighted in recent research, including the Chief Executive survey on 2024 C-level priorities. A positive, supportive work environment is a key factor in attracting and keeping top talent, as noted by Kundu and Lata (2017).

When designed with intention, the physical office becomes a powerful tool for the CHRO—enabling the cultivation of a strong culture, promoting employee well-being, and enhancing the overall workplace experience.

1. Cultivating Culture:

The office serves as a physical expression of an organization's values. Design choices—ranging from layout and brand to the types of spaces provided—signal what the company prioritizes. Collaborative zones emphasize teamwork; quiet areas support focus; and informal gathering spaces foster social connection and community.

2. Enhancing Employee Well-being:

Environmental factors such as air quality, access to natural light, ergonomic furnishings, and biophilic elements (like plants and greenery) all influence employee health and comfort. The CHRO recognizes the role these features play in creating a workplace that supports the HR KPIs

3. Driving Engagement:

A well-designed office accommodates diverse work styles by offering a range of environments tailored to different tasks and preferences. The ability to collaborate in person, participate in team rituals, and feel part of the organization's energy contributes meaningfully to employee engagement and satisfaction.

4. Supporting Inclusive Excellence:

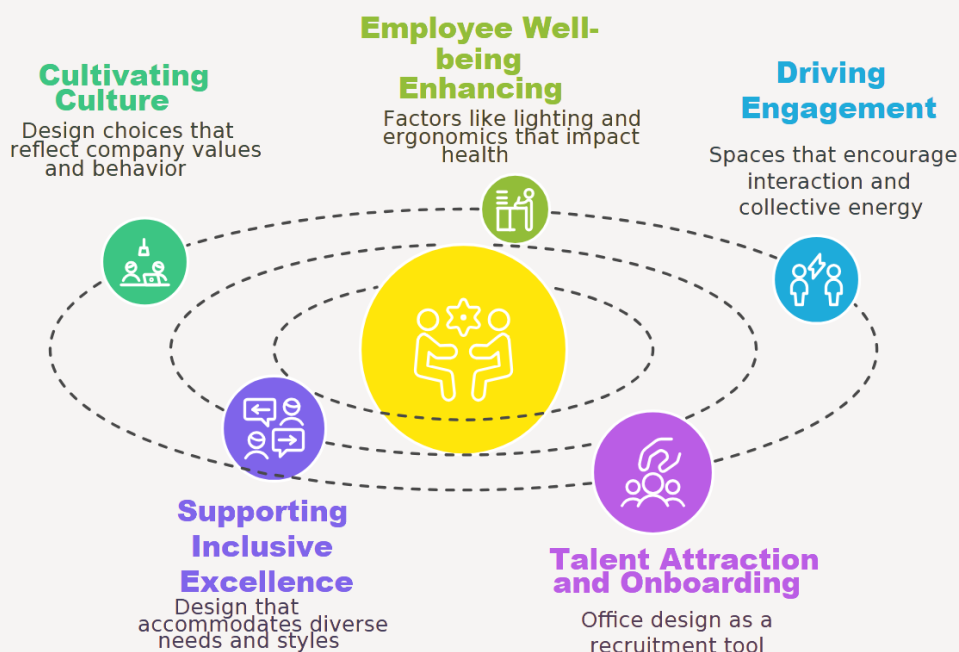
An inclusive, thoughtfully planned office design addresses the needs of all employees—including those with disabilities, diverse working styles, and varying preferences for privacy or social interaction. The CHRO is uniquely positioned to align physical space with the organization's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals, ensuring that the environment reflects and reinforces inclusive values.

5. Talent Attraction and Onboarding:

For many candidates and new hires, the physical office is their first real encounter with the company's culture. In the era of hybrid work, a well-designed, hybrid-first workspace can be a powerful differentiator—enhancing recruitment efforts and enabling a smoother, more connected onboarding experience than fully virtual alternatives.

The CHRO brings a deep understanding of employee needs, workplace behavior, and the cultural vision of the organization. As the architects of the employee journey and leaders of talent strategy, CHROs play a critical role in shaping how the workplace supports people.

Office design, facility operations, and working hours must align with HR strategy to effectively enable talent acquisition, development, and retention. The CHRO's perspective ensures the office functions not merely as physical infrastructure, but as a strategic asset that advances company-wide goals.



Convergence of Roles: the Age of AI

As AI-powered agents become embedded across the enterprise, the traditional boundaries between the CIO and CHRO are beginning to blur. These intelligent digital assistants are not just tools—they are evolving collaborators. Employees increasingly rely on AI agents to schedule meetings, generate content, analyze data, assist with decision-making, and even initiate workflows. The result is a fundamental shift in how work gets done.

Rather than simply performing tasks, employees are beginning to orchestrate and manage an ecosystem of AI agents that continuously learn, improve, and augment their productivity. This shift elevates both the technical and human elements of work, requiring close coordination between those who manage the technology (the CIO) and those who understand the people (the CHRO).

In the coming decade, the office is reimagined as a physical-digital convergence zone and thus will play a vital role in supporting this transformation. It becomes the grounding space where the human-machine collaboration happens in real time, supported by robust IT and physical infrastructure, intuitive interfaces and tools that make the new employee super productive, aligning both operational goals and employee needs.

In this context, the strategic alignment between the CIO and CHRO is no longer optional. Whether through co-led initiatives, shared governance of AI tools, or joint ownership of the digital employee experience, the workplace of the future demands an integrated approach. AI does not just enhance individual performance—it redefines the operating system of the enterprise, with the office as its physical and cultural platform.

Conclusions

The post-Covid era has fundamentally transformed the corporate workplace. The office is no longer a mandatory location merely housing necessary tools, but a strategic environment whose value is measured by its ability to enhance productivity, innovation, and collaboration.

This shift calls for a re-evaluation of C-suite leader best positioned to manage workplace transformation and drive the change, strategically manage costs, and champion a future-oriented workplace strategy. While finance and operations remain crucial stake holders, strategic ownership of the modern workplace is increasingly moving toward the Chief Information Officer (CIO) and the Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO).

The CIO provides critical technological expertise to build an intelligent, data-driven, and seamlessly connected hybrid workspace. Meanwhile, **the CHRO** delivers vital insights into culture, employee experience, and engagement—transforming the workplace into a desirable destination for enterprise productivity.

As organizations prepare for a hybrid future, characterized by close human collaboration with AI agents, viewing the office as a strategic asset rather than a cost center becomes essential. Empowering the CIO and CHRO to help shape this core aspect of business infrastructure will be instrumental in unlocking its potential as a powerful driver of enterprise success.

