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THE FUTURE OF EVERYTHING

How the Science of Color Boosts Productivity at Work

Emerging trends include immersive color-coded spaces, exclusive suites and flexible workspaces

By Brett Berk

April 9, 2025 11:00 am ET

Warm, energetic orange that fosters group socialization. Peacock blue saturating a [private nook](#) for focus. Coal-black doors, signaling a no-go zone reserved for executives.

As more companies call employees [back to the office](#), they are also rethinking workplace design in hopes of boosting productivity and motivation. New uses of color will be a big part of that, say design and furniture firms that are developing what is next for the workplace.

A deeper understanding of the impact of color on human psychology could offer fresh tools to help shape behavioral changes in the office. [Recent research](#) suggests that [the use of certain colors](#) can enhance people's sense of well-being or even increase alertness.

Workers' preferences shifted during the [work-from-home era](#), when they got a glimpse of colleagues' home-office setups on video calls. "People enjoyed being surrounded by colors that were more reflective of their personality," says Andrea Magno, director of color marketing and design for paint giant Benjamin Moore. When they returned to the office, she says, they wanted to carry on this sensory experience.

To lure employees back to the office postpandemic, many companies opted for nature-based colors—blues, browns and greens—meant to foster a sense of health and well-being, says Kelly Jahn, a commercial architect and professor of interior design at Rochester Institute of Technology.



Tones of green have been found to be ideal for reflection. PHOTO: BENJAMIN MOORE

Moving forward, office decor will increasingly be used to signal a workplace ethos, such as trust, collaboration, tradition or experimentation, says Jahn. “It is the vibe of the company.”

Here are some emerging office color trends, so you can read the room.

Saturating for focus

A new generation of workers and office designers, raised on an unremitting stream of attention-grabbing online imagery, is changing [the approach to coloration](#). “Current students definitely prefer more color,” says Jahn. “They are bold, maximalist.”

Research suggests color can have a powerful effect on workplace engagement. “Saturated colors have the capacity to change our respiration, our blood pressure, and even our body temperature,” says Joseph White, director of design strategy for [MillerKnoll](#), the world’s largest office furnishings company, which is now forecasting color palettes we will see in office spaces over the next 10 years.

White [references a study](#) that divided student participants into either a pale-colored or richly colored room. Participants in the pale-blue or pale-yellow room had lower heart rates and were more relaxed. But, those placed in vivid yellow or vivid blue rooms experienced higher reading comprehension scores.



MillerKnoll is experimenting with single-hue office chairs in which all components are one uniform color. NAUGHTONE; KNOLL

On social media, [immersive color-coded spaces](#) with similar hues on the floor, walls and ceiling are known as “color-drenched.” They excel at creating visual allure and stimulating thought, and are especially useful when work groups are brainstorming a path forward, says MillerKnoll’s White.

Color drenching can also reduce inhibitions, says Leatrice Eiseman, executive director of the Pantone Color Institute, an authority in the industry, which designates a color of the year that often bleeds into fashion, design and consumer goods. Such workplace environments conjure this sense of coloring outside the lines. “When you’re happier, it is just logical that is going to increase productivity,” says Eiseman.

The monochromatic approach could also extend to furnishings. MillerKnoll is experimenting with single-hue office chairs, in which all components including metal knobs, padded vinyl-arm cushions and upholstered seating surfaces are one uniform color. There are manufacturing challenges getting diverse materials to hold the same hue and tone, but such furniture reduces “optical static,” according to White. “If you’re wanting a space for concentrated analytical reasoning, it helps to simplify as much visual complexity as possible,” he says.

Color-coded collaboration

As [return-to-office mandates](#) expand, companies are pursuing flexible spaces that can accommodate individuals, as well as small groups and large communities. They would also be multipurpose—incorporating uses from social gathering to self-reflection. And each space would involve different color palettes, says MillerKnoll’s White.

After surveying scientific research, MillerKnoll came up with its own scheme for the best use of color. The company found that soothing colors such as sage green are ideal for reflection, while warm colors like oranges and yellows stimulate community socialization; cool blues are optimal for group meeting spaces, in which time seems to pass more quickly; [spaces for individual focus](#) should avoid red, which degrades analytical performance; and community assembly spaces should have a balance of warm and cool hues to foster diverse approaches.



Monochromatic office chairs can be challenging to manufacture, but aid analytical reasoning, says MillerKnoll. PHOTO: HERMAN MILLER

MillerKnoll's White envisions the creation of mobile vertical partitions, with color-coded sides, that can be used to create makeshift enclosures, providing different palettes for different kinds of gatherings. "More high-tech solutions with color-changing walls will absolutely become available."

Benjamin Moore's Magno sees another possibility: To create flexible workspaces, permanent features such as walls and flooring can be neutral, allowing influential colors to be integrated into movable objects like furniture. "You could have a colorful focal point, but still maintain that flexibility of a neutral canvas," she says, "so you would be able to adapt."

Return to hierarchy

Following the upheaval of the pandemic, which challenged traditional workplace pecking orders, office design has trended toward neutral colors such as creams and botanic soft greens that aimed to help calm and unify, says Jahn of RIT.

But now, some executives are beginning to seek distinction and exclusivity in the workplace. "We're starting to see darker colors, darker tones, darker shades, even blacks," in requests for

C-suites in office designs, says Jahn. “Ones that are less welcoming, creating a sense of privacy and hierarchy.”

[Hierarchy in an office environment](#) isn’t inherently bad, according to MillerKnoll’s White. It can be helpful, even desired, he says. “It can show you where to go to get what you need, impart a sense of stability or coherence, and ultimately make clear what people and organizations value,” White says. “However, extreme hierarchy is rarely a good thing.”



Office designers are starting to seek out darker colors for C-suites, says Kelly Jahn, in black, of the Rochester Institute of Technology. PHOTO: ELIZABETH LAMARK

Hierarchy is often expressed through contrast, says White. With color, this can be achieved by juxtaposing color temperatures, values, levels of saturation and palettes, he says. He [cites a study](#) that found that when people are seen against a warm-color background—versus a neutral- or cool-color background—they are perceived to have a warmer personality.

But using color to visually delineate hierarchy in the extreme can greatly impact how employees feel. “It is possible to apply color in ways that make a space feel off-putting,” he says, noting that using darker colors on the ceiling can be disorienting, placing people on edge.

Whether this color strategy becomes widely used in the future remains uncertain, but White says he has detected a craving for such order. “There are those that are now salivating at the opportunity to return to a command-and-control dynamic.”

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