

# Redefining the Sustainable Workplace



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Business leaders are more focused than ever before on employee health and well-being -- especially as they create a new balance between physical space and remote working.

Air, light, furniture, plants, food, meeting spaces, and even commute quality all have a significant impact on how people and customers feel about where they work. Schools, retailers, and municipal buildings are all tackling the complex issues around health, safety, and cost as they create and maintain sustainable workplaces.

We reached out to the movers and shakers of the green building movement and gathered their perspectives on the challenges facing businesses as they adjust to the sustainable -- and healthy -- new normal. This report includes their insights and predictions.



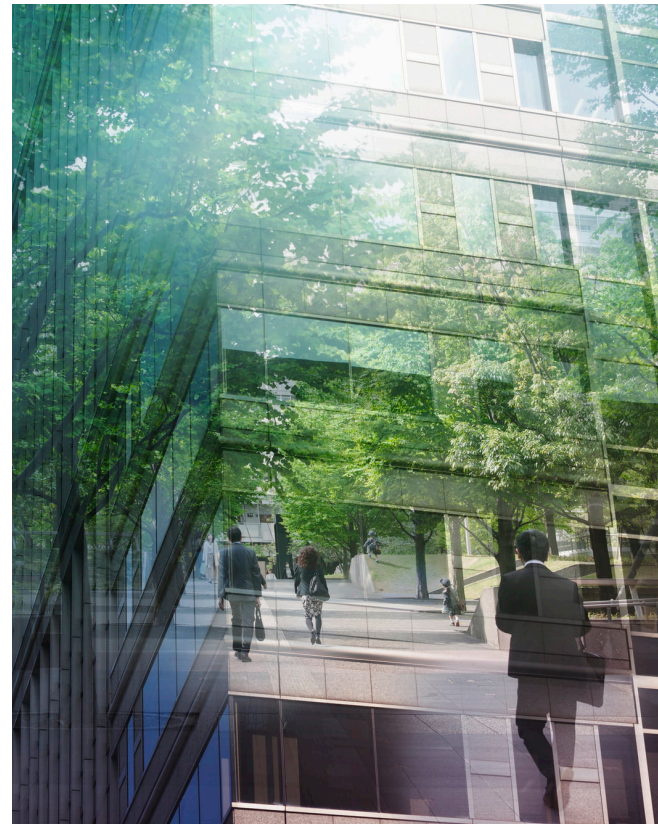


# What is Today's Workplace?





Google “healthy workplace” and you’ll find more than 300 million results. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified our definition of health and wellness and prompted architects, building managers, construction companies, and product developers to re-think how to create



spaces that are both safe and sustainable.

More people are working from home than ever before and the amount of time spent in conventional office buildings is certain to decline as companies adapt to remote work arrangements. But a number of structures and businesses are immune to this trend.

Each of these spaces needs to be convenient for workers and conducive to productivity. The sustainable workplace movement has led to the need for workplaces to be carbon-neutral, energy-efficient, and health-focused. We are in the early stages of defining what healthy work environments need to be heading into the future. Air quality, social distancing guidelines, and cleaning products and procedures are more important than ever before.

Today's employees will want to know, “Is this company culture and mission right for me?” and “Will I feel safe and productive in this environment, and is the company doing its part to preserve the planet?” In fact, 40 percent of millennials choose jobs based on the

sustainability policies of companies and brands.

Here's what constitutes a workplace today:

- Office Buildings
- Co-working Spaces
- The Hybrid Workplace (home and office)
- Retailers
- Restaurants
- Schools
- Hospitals and Healthcare Facilities
- Prisons
- Factories
- Theaters and Entertainment Spaces
- Farms
- On-the-Road (transportation centers, drivers and pilots)
- Hotels
- Convention Centers
- Stadiums

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We can see that the availability of technology to connect to teammates, wherever they are, can make a huge difference in the ability to collaborate and move large projects forward. One thing we are definitely seeing, though, is that people working from home are more open to being their authentic selves and are happier, so a sustainable and productive workplace should strive to be more like home in as many ways as is possible.” - **Jon Smieja, Corporate Sustainability Manager, Andersen Windows & Doors**

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We'll see flexibility and the ability to avoid crowding: open stairwells and spaces that can easily be reconfigured for groups or solo work. Workplaces will be flexible, where spaces can accommodate both collaborating and social distance.” - **Sara Neff, SVP Sustainability, Kilroy Realty Corporation**

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# Who is Defining the Workplace?



Creating a safe and sustainable environment has long been a team effort. Every building, remodeling, relocation, or expansion project creates an opportunity for companies to rethink their sustainability strategies. The CEO, CTO, and Human Resources leaders play a greater role than ever before in decision-making. Before the pandemic, the sustainable building movement was already on the upswing, with the number of LEED-certified projects growing each year.

Now industry leaders are collaborating and problem-solving at an unprecedented level to achieve green building goals. What's more, social distancing has prompted the industry to get more creative about how and where they share information and results. Webinars, online gatherings, and digital reports like this one give the industry new sources of knowledge and insights.

As we think about the sustainable workplace, we look broadly at the overall structure, but each element of a building plays a role in sustainability.

- **Floor coverings:** Non-toxic, easy on the feet, and attractive
- **Air:** Clean, well-circulated, and contaminant-free
- **Lighting:** Conducive to safety and productivity
- **Plants:** Biophilic design has made its way into offices, schools, and other structures
- **Food:** Offering healthy options and waste-free packaging is now imperative in cafeterias and restaurants
- **Waste Management:** Reduce, reuse, and donate are the principles that the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) recommends for commercial structures.
- **Water Management:** Focus on water usage can lead to a savings of up to 40 percent and contribute to employee health
- **Floor Plans:** Social distancing while fostering collaboration is necessary
- **Conference Rooms:** Energy-conserving

lighting, user-friendly technologies, and sustainable materials abound

- **Outdoor Spaces:** Outside the four walls, employees want to gather and enjoy fresh air and sunlight
- **Elevators:** Accounting for 2-10% of a building's energy use, these installations are going greener while passengers go up and down
- **Energy Usage:** Green builders offer more options for lighting, heating, and cooling than ever before
- **Communications and Distancing:** Staying connected while remaining germ-free is essential
- **Transportation:** Energy-efficient commuting systems, bike racks, other green options encourage a culture of sustainability
- **Freight and Delivery Systems:** How businesses send and receive goods and services is a clear sign of their commitment to a sustainable workplace.
- **Location Expansion:** As companies open new headquarters or outposts, they are taking sustainability into consideration



## Who is Making the Decisions?

Building and maintaining more sustainable workplaces is a collaborative effort. Municipalities, builders, developers, multi-family building owners, property managers, and CEOs of companies all have an obligation to think differently about the places they create and upgrade. Working with sustainability professionals, they must create a roadmap for how they will create structures and environments that reduce waste and foster employee/customer health.

As decision-makers open and construct new locations they have an opportunity to go green from the very beginning of their projects. Retrofitting and enhancing existing structures can be more complex, but provided that the work team is open to new ideas, learn from other projects, and take the time to assess costs and benefits, they will discover cost-effective solutions.

Collaboration is the keyword in sustainable building. Our next report will deal with how to “sell-in” sustainability to management and organizations. [Subscribe here](#) to get an advance copy.





# Life Outside the Office: How Work Will Transform Where We Live





We are starting to see a migration out of big cities. Remote workers are choosing communities based on the quality of life factors and not just office location. This will give rise to a focus on sustainable neighborhoods. The eco-community was once a fringe concept, embraced only by people who chose to live “off the grid.” But big cities, towns, and other geographic areas are now creating environments that promote sustainable lifestyles and values, without compromising comfortable amenities and convenience.

Whether people work in a city or town where they live, work from home, or some combination, more of them will be asking the question, “How green is my space?”

We reached out to a diverse panel of industry thought leaders to gather their perspectives on the sustainable workplace of the future. Air and light quality have long been topics of discussion around healthy workplaces, but savvy companies -- and the professionals who help them build and remodel -- are taking a more holistic look at sustainable workplaces.



Attracting the right talent and keeping people healthy and safe is vital to business performance.





## How Does a Sustainable Workplace Contribute to Productivity?

When workers and customers are healthy and happy they help build your bottom line. A healthier workplace can also ultimately save you on insurance costs and reduce sick days. Plus, customers will view your brand in a more favorable light, building your reputation and fostering sales.

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We expect a renewed focus will be placed on well-being, physical, and psychological security, change management, and technology. Design plays a critical role in incorporating all these aspects into the built environment, especially as we rethink office spaces for connection, collaboration, and social distancing. Flooring is one central design element that can shape an individual's perception, experience, and behavior. While we use floor design for aesthetics, branding, and wayfinding, it will also become more prominent in terms of safety -- especially to provide visual cues to occupants connected but at a safe distance.” - **Lisa Conway, VP of Sustainability, Interface, Inc**

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Sustainable building promotes improved thermal comfort, improved daylighting, and improved indoor air quality for building occupants. These conditions have been proven in numerous studies to promote the health and satisfaction of occupants who spend, on average, 90 percent of their time indoors.” - **Farah Ahmad, Architect- Sustainable Design, NYC School Construction Authority**



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When you think of the thread that ties the sustainable building to workplace productivity it is indoor air quality. Through Harvard’s CogFX study it has been shown that people perform cognitive tasks better in environments with better indoor air quality. Additionally, we’ve seen experts recommend higher ventilation rates are needed to combat COVID-19. Better indoor air quality and more fresh air are a win-win for health and productivity.” - **Jennifer Taranto, Director of Sustainability, Structure Tone**





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Fresh air, daylighting, thermal, and acoustical comfort all have a big impact on productivity. In a post-COVID-19 world, I think we need to ask ourselves what an increase in remote work and virtual offices will have on sustainable building, productivity, and work-live balance.” - **Todd Sims, Director of Sustainability, American Chemistry Council**



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Traditional office layouts get in the way of agility.” - **Lucas Hamilton, Manager, Building Science Applications, CertainTeed/Saint-Gobain**



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Employees are more productive in workplaces with LED lighting. They're not dealing with flickers, sounds, and harshness that traditional lighting systems can cause -- leading to headaches, aggression, and lack of focus.” - **Peter Hawksworth, CEO, Future Energy Solutions**





# Unique Features of Tomorrow's Workplace





In addition to the below predictions, workplaces are putting more focus on waste and water management and energy conservation. About 20 percent of all the energy we use in the U.S. comes from commercial properties. Water conservation and proper sourcing can have a huge impact on both costs and health.

The proper management of waste also presents a huge opportunity for conservation. Smart business owners and developers will look at every aspect of their structures and operations.

“I wouldn't be surprised to see easier access to healthcare in offices, micro-clinics, and virtual medicine.” - **Sims**

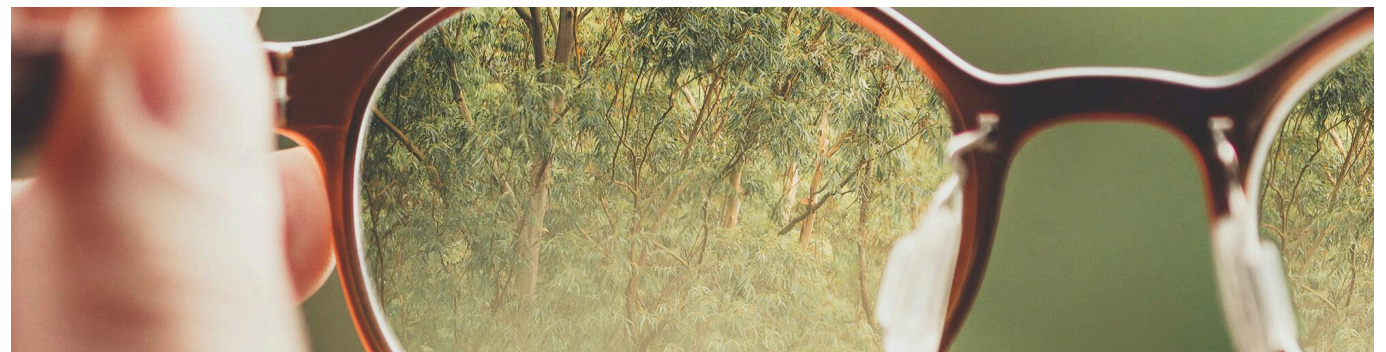
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“We predict that many companies will become aware of biophilic design and the importance of featuring natural settings within the built environment to improve occupant wellbeing, providing a sound and productive atmosphere for employees to perform at their optimal level. Beyond design, the workplace of the future will be safe, flexible, inclusive, and take responsibility for the mental health and safety of its employees.” - **Conway**

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“A mandatory feature for the office of the future is communication. Offices will need to communicate better, or at all, about the features within the built environment of the workplace and how they contribute to health and wellness or benefit the environment.” -

**Taranto**  
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They will include high levels of virtual workspace interconnectivity to allow both work from home and much-improved video conferencing to reduce travel. Improved airflow, spaciousness, and outdoor access, with options to avoid communal dining. Advanced energy management systems will capture and control local energy flows.” - **Roger Duncan, Author, former Research Fellow, Energy Institute, University of Texas at Austin, and former General Manager of Austin Energy**



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After this extended period of working remotely for many workers, companies will make sure offices support different ways of working, a varied furniture pallet, and features of home-like access to natural light and ventilation. While it will also take some time to make people "comfortable" working in a large office, making modifications that can support increased comfort will also be key.” - **Smieja**



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Offices of the future should be mandated to utilize LED lighting because of the negative environmental impact of traditional lighting methods. Traditional lighting has a much shorter lifespan than LED lighting, is much less efficient, and when thrown away has harsh chemicals like mercury that can dramatically impact the environment.” -

**Hawksworth**





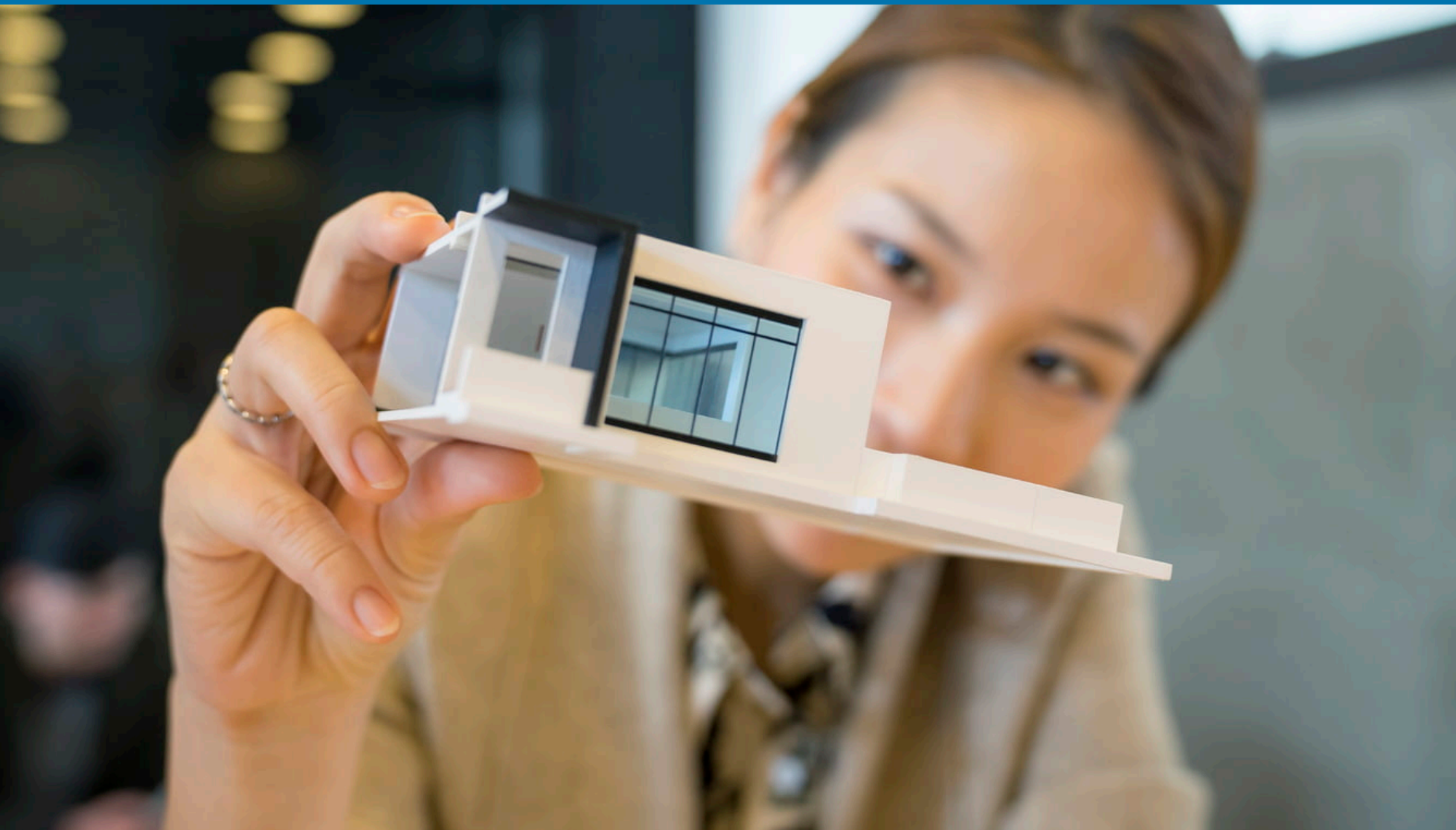
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Overall cleaning, social distancing, and awareness of health aspects will definitely be a priority in designing spaces. People will still want to work in offices but with maintaining distance due to which more real estate might be needed or companies may need to expand offices in other areas of cities besides downtown. Employers will also need to consider policy changes with respect to flexibility and offer better benefits that allow for working parents, care-takers, etc. to still excel in their jobs but not have to be in the office at traditional 9 to 5 hours.” -

**Rami Vagal, Senior Manager of Sustainability, Mohawk Industries**



# Companies to Watch





This list is based primarily on the expert opinions of the people we interviewed for this report. As Sims says, "Companies with strong equity and diversity programs will lead change. We can't rely on the same voices that got us into this to also get us out of it."

Companies that have honest conversations about sustainability goals and accountability in reaching those goals, rather than continuing to move the goalposts, will thrive."

Humanscale, Superior Essex, Hightower, L'Oreal, Google, Salesforce, LinkedIn, Unilever, and Patagonia are all among Vagal's picks (in addition to Mohawk)

Offers Duncan, "The Bullitt Foundation in Seattle has created a very sustainable office building with the Bullitt Center. And some of the high tech companies such as Apple and Google are also creating some state of the art workspaces, including the incorporation of urban forests on outdoor spaces with wi-fi."

Ikea switched all of its stores to LED lighting in 2015 notes Hawksworth. "That highlighted the negative environmental, employee, and customer impact traditional translucent lighting had on their business."

WeWork recently showcased its proactive approach to increasing fresh flow of air in its co-working spaces around the globe, focusing on dilution, filtration, and thermal conditioning.

According to Taranto, "Unilever has been focusing on waste reduction, increasing positive social impact as well as reducing their overall impact on the environment. They are also transparent about the fact that they don't always hit their goals – honesty is important, it builds trust."



# How YOU Can Help Define the Workplace of the Future





1. **Look at your own workplaces** and those we frequent to get ideas and find best practices for the sustainable workplace.
2. **Stay engaged in the Greenbuild community.** Through our insight packed Greenbuild 2021 experience, live and virtual, you have access to these world class thought leaders.
3. **Add your voice.** We encourage you to comment on our social media channels to be considered as a source for one of our upcoming industry reports seen by thousands of sustainability leaders worldwide.
4. **Join our social community** of more than 77,000 green building and sustainability professionals.



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