The Enticing Workplace:
Attracting People Back to the Office

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The COVID-19 pandemic forced most office-based employees to work from home, and since "gaining permission" to work this way, many now prefer to work remotely rather than commute to the office.

Some organizations are encouraging, even dictating, that their workforce return to the office, but the response from employees has been slower than employers had hoped.

Office workers are literally voting with their feet. It seems that the office cannot easily compete with the option and personal benefits of working from home.

Consequently, many offices are underutilized, with a high proportion of desks remaining empty for most of the week despite the space being heated, cooled, lighted, serviced, and maintained. This is clearly not a sustainable approach to office design and operation.

We conducted a research study to explore what employees say would attract people back, and to understand the underlying, real concerns of workers about returning to the office. Furthermore, we aimed to investigate what employees see as benefits and advantages of working from home as compared to the office.

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Methodology

Following initial qualitative interviews, an online questionnaire survey was designed and launched. The respondents rated 51 possible influences to indicate whether they were better supported working from home or in the office. The 51 influences were presented in four groups, as questions relating to work activities, facilities and indoor environment, personal benefits, and sense of purpose. The respondents then identified the most important influences attracting or discouraging them from returning to the office and rated their overall preference for home versus office.

Each of the 51 questions was answered using a five-point scale, which we then grouped and converted to the percentage of respondents answering: "better at home", "indifferent", or "better in the office". Chi-square tests were computed to check for statistically significant differences between subgroups of respondents.

A sample of 490 valid responses was created by direct email invitations and through sharing across social media platforms. The respondents were a mix of workplace experts and employees who were not freelancers and had worked both at home and in their employer's offices.

Office Best Supports Socialization, Connection, and Company Culture

Respondents were asked to consider 11 different work activities and rate how each was supported best between their home and the office. A higher proportion of respondents consider their home better for conducting confidential calls or meetings, for work requiring concentration, and for feeling productive overall.

In contrast, very few respondents consider the home to support teamwork and collaboration, managing or mentoring a team, improving knowledge through interactions or eavesdropping, or socializing with colleagues. The majority consider these activities to be better supported in the office, along with holding meetings, making key business decisions, enhancing creativity and innovation, reducing isolation and loneliness (an increasing health issue in the UK), and delineation between work and home life. For some, the office also offers a more consistent daily routine.

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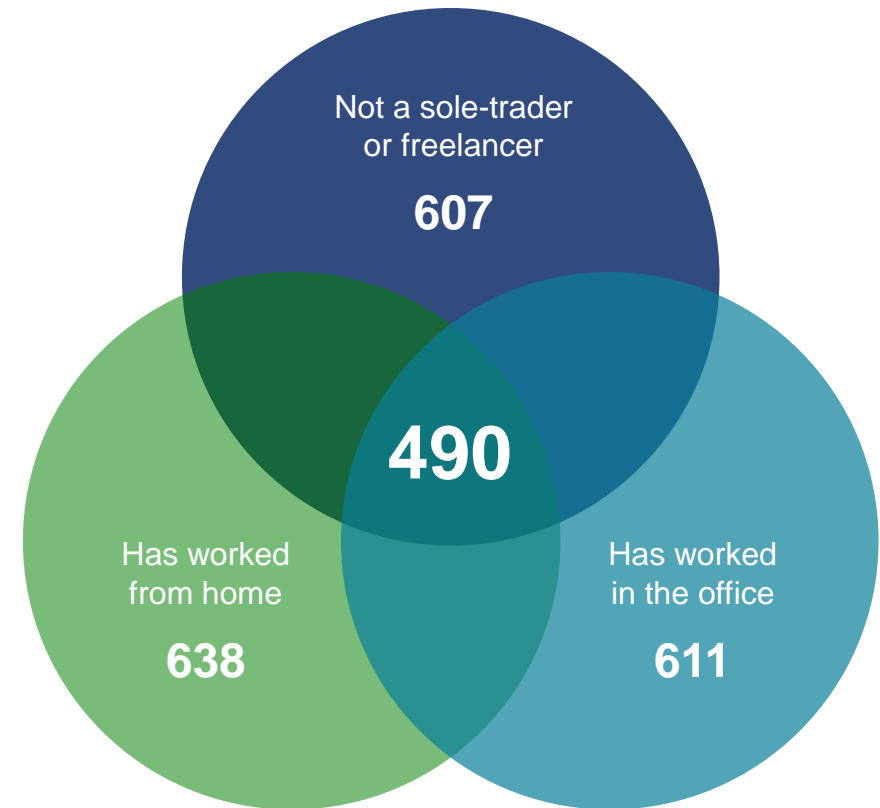
The office fares better for supporting sense of purpose (with the exception of reducing the impact on the environment). The majority of respondents believe the office better supports connection and reward, particularly connecting with colleagues, aligning with the company culture, experiencing leadership and motivation, and reducing the "fear of missing out" (FOMO).

Increasing a sense of purpose and belonging, through strong leadership, motivation, connection and culture, should attract people back the office. Workplace design and the relevant facilities can help foster the organizational culture, but ultimately it comes from the leadership team. Regular events (like lunch and learn or socials), clubs and classes, or wellness facilities all help to make the office a more attractive destination.

Respondents rated socializing and connection as the most prominent reasons for favoring the office. In contrast, travel cost and time, work requiring concentration, and control over noise and distraction are the main influences discouraging working in the office. The challenge to architects and designers is to create workplaces that better support and encourage socializing and teamwork, but simultaneously offer more privacy along with minimising noise and distraction. Preferences regarding "creativity and innovation" are balanced, with some overall preference for the office; this reflects the need for both individual thinking and interactive development in creativity.

Home Preferred for Focused Work and Personal Benefits

Regarding facilities and environmental conditions, a higher proportion of respondents reported that their home is preferred for the indoor environmental conditions. This is most likely because they have more control over this environment. Nevertheless, the office having a poorer perceived environment than the home is a disappointment, if not a surprise: a poor outcome for the workplace industry, which requires fixing.

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The top two influences that are considered better supported at home, and by an overwhelming majority of respondents, are privacy and control over noise. Densely planned large open-plan environments can decrease privacy and increase noise, losing attraction to most office workers.

The office appears to compete most poorly with working from home in the area of personal benefits. Most of the respondents deem their home to better support most personal benefits, especially those related to personal pressures, such as reduced travel costs and time, improved work-life balance, access to childcare, managing a health condition or disability, and taking advantage of the weather conditions (avoiding poor and enjoying nice weather). While it's difficult to overcome such working from home benefits, organizations could consider assistance with travel costs (like subsidized rail tickets), access to nearby childcare, and flexibility over work hours and workload.

The Longer an Employee has Worked from Home, The More They Like It

A proportion of respondents who had been working at home for less than one year prefer to work in the office. This may be linked to the time they joined their organization, with new recruits wanting to spend more time with colleagues and their managers for mentoring, knowledge, and career progression. Alternatively, those new to working from home may have poorer equipment, technology, or ergonomic set-up than those established during or before the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, a higher proportion of those respondents working at their kitchen table are more likely to prefer working in the office.

Conversely, those with a home office feel their home better supports them, especially in terms of ergonomics and storage, but also for a sense of purpose and reward. Other pre-existing factors affect the experience: for example, a higher proportion of employees working for small and medium sized enterprise (SME) prefer working in the office, especially regarding a sense of purpose. It is possible that SMEs engender a more entrepreneurial, motivational, loyal and flourishing culture compared to some public sector workplaces.

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The survey also revealed that a higher proportion of respondents working in office-based teams prefer the office, relative to those working alone or in distributed teams. Again, this was more evident for supporting teamwork, meetings, reward, and career progression. The proportion of respondents in the public sector working in office-based teams was like that in SMEs, so it's unlikely to be the cause of the difference in preferences between SMEs and public sector.

Assigned vs. Unassigned Desks

A more controversial finding is that a higher proportion of respondents who have assigned/allocated desks prefer working in the office compared to those with unassigned desks. If more employees are working from home, then an organization might decide to implement unassigned desks (shared seating, hot-desking) to increase the desk utilization and reduce unused space.

However, the survey indicates that unassigned desking may discourage occupants returning to the office, thus further reducing utilization. While it's not sustainable to have empty desks most of the week, it's important that the transition to unassigned desking is managed well, and the implementation made for genuine reasons.

Consistent with the effect of having an allocated desk, those with a private office were the most likely to prefer working in the office. Those who did not use a desk as such but worked elsewhere (a focus pod/room, meeting room or breakout space) were least likely to prefer working in the office.

There's No Difference in Preference between Generations

Unlike many reports in the popular press, the survey did not reveal any statistically significant differences in preferences between age groups or generations. Generational differences may be confounded by other factors, such as tenure, career stage, or home circumstances. For example, the survey did show that a higher portion of single parents (or other lone adults living with dependants) are most likely to prefer the office.

Personality Type Is an Important Factor

Respondents were asked to rate how introvert or extrovert they considered themselves. Extroverts are more likely to prefer working in the office compared to introverts. This is in line with other research that shows extroverts are easily distracted at home and prefer the company of their work colleagues to working alone. Extroverts believe the office better supports creativity, teamwork and meetings, and leadership/management. It's important to recognize that employees with different personalities and backgrounds will have different preferences and reasons for returning to the office, hence different contexts in which they're most productive, when determining what will attract them and what discourages them.

One of the research objectives was to compare the views of those working in the workplace industry to the views of others, to gauge whether professional advice reflects occupant views. There were only minor differences in how the office supports various aspects of working. A higher portion of workplace professionals believe the office better supports a sense of purpose and belonging, along with culture, leadership, reward, and creativity. These are important influences but not necessarily strong enough alone to attract people back to the office and not the ones discouraging a return.

Overall Worker Preference

Respondents were asked on a scale from 0 to 100%, considering all 51 influences, whether they considered their home or the office a better place to work. Approximately one-half said their home and approximately one-third said the office, showing that the office requires some improvement to entice people back.

Multiple linear regression analysis was used to predict the overall rating using the responses to the 51 influences. The individual influences predicted the overall rating with a correlation of 0.79 (63% variance) which is quite good. The desk area, space, layout, and density explained most of the variance ($r^2=37\%$, r = 0.61). As found in other recent research, over-densification of workspaces can lead to increased noise and distraction, reduced privacy, and issues with other environmental conditions, thus discouraging people from returning to the office. Work requiring concentration was also a key predictor.

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Taken together with other findings in the study, we see that the home better supports focused work, and the office better supports activities facilitating team development. While the home is clearly a better setting for concentration, confidentiality, and personal productivity, the office needs to better support collaborative activities to entice people back.

A recap of the recommendations for attracting people back the office, based on the survey results, is as follows.

- Reduce distraction and noise and provide privacy; also offer some control of other environmental conditions.

- Provide spaces for focus and concentration.

- Also provide spaces for collaboration, teamwork, socializing and connecting.

- Offer more options for travel (costs/time), work hours, wellness and childcare.

- Emphasize and enhance the reasons to visit office (connection, culture, belonging) through events, key meetings, social gatherings and leadership.

- Recreate a motivating culture through leadership, encouragement, loyalty and work ethic.

- Consider the employee's differences and personal circumstances: discover what will attract different groups back to the office.

- Implement unassigned desking with caution and provide allocated desks to those who genuinely need them – generally or on particular days.

Specific Findings

A visual breakdown of survey results by question.

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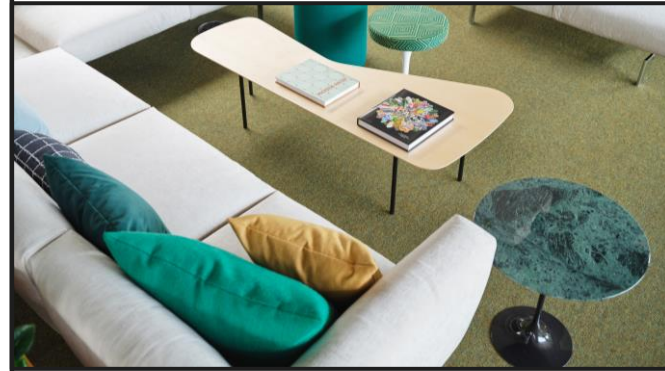
Rating Scales

For each of the following **work activities**, do you personally find it is better supported in the office or at home?

|	**Much better at home**	**Better at home**	**Little difference between the home & office**	**Better in the office**	**Much better in the office**
Holding team meetings	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
	% home		% indifferent	% office	
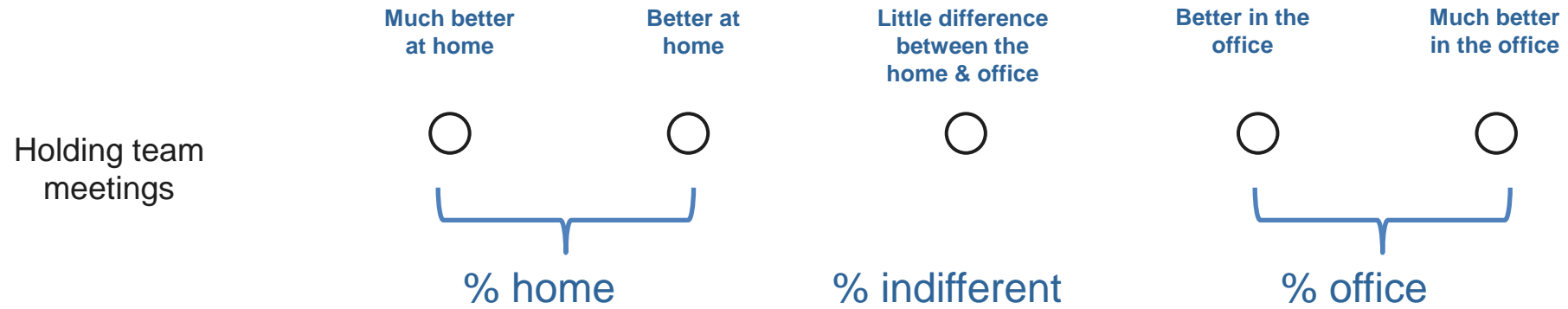
Workplace Activities

For each of the following **work activities**, do you personally find it is better supported in the office or at home?
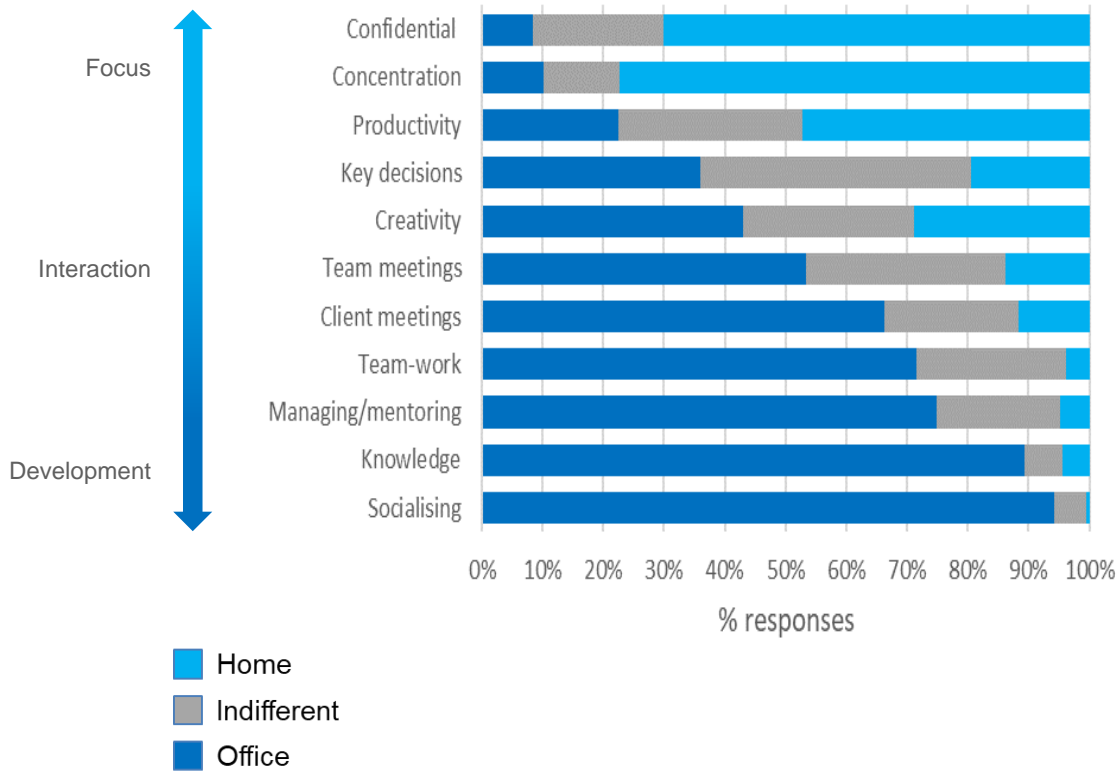
Facilities & Environmental Conditions

For each of the following **facilities & environmental conditions**, do you personally find it is better supported in the office or at home?
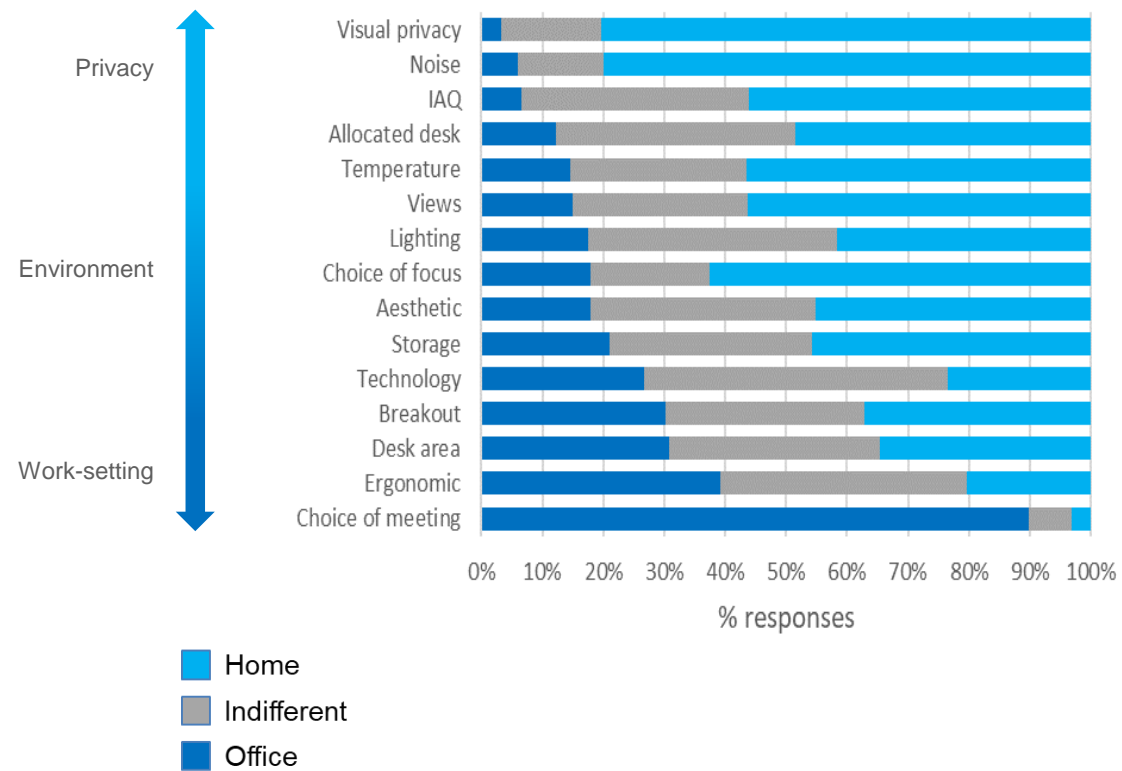
Benefits & Convenience

For each of the following **benefits**, do you personally find it is better supported in the office or at home?
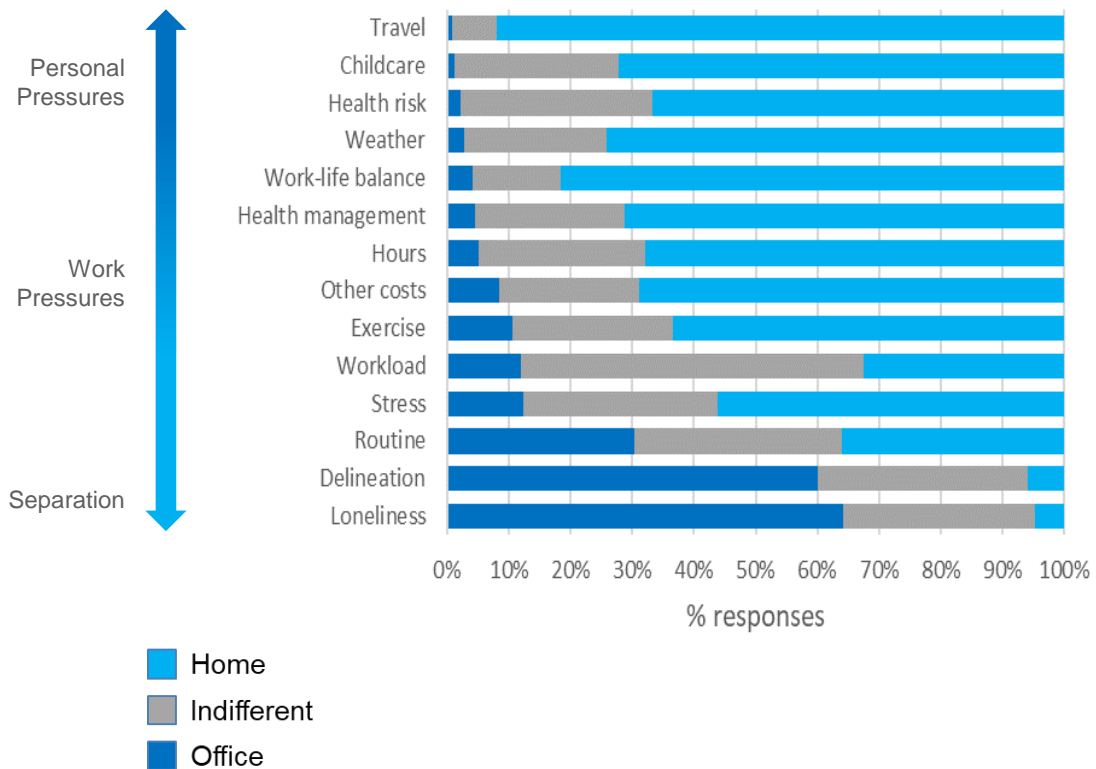
Sense of Purpose

For each of the following **factors**, do you personally find it is better supported in the office or at home?
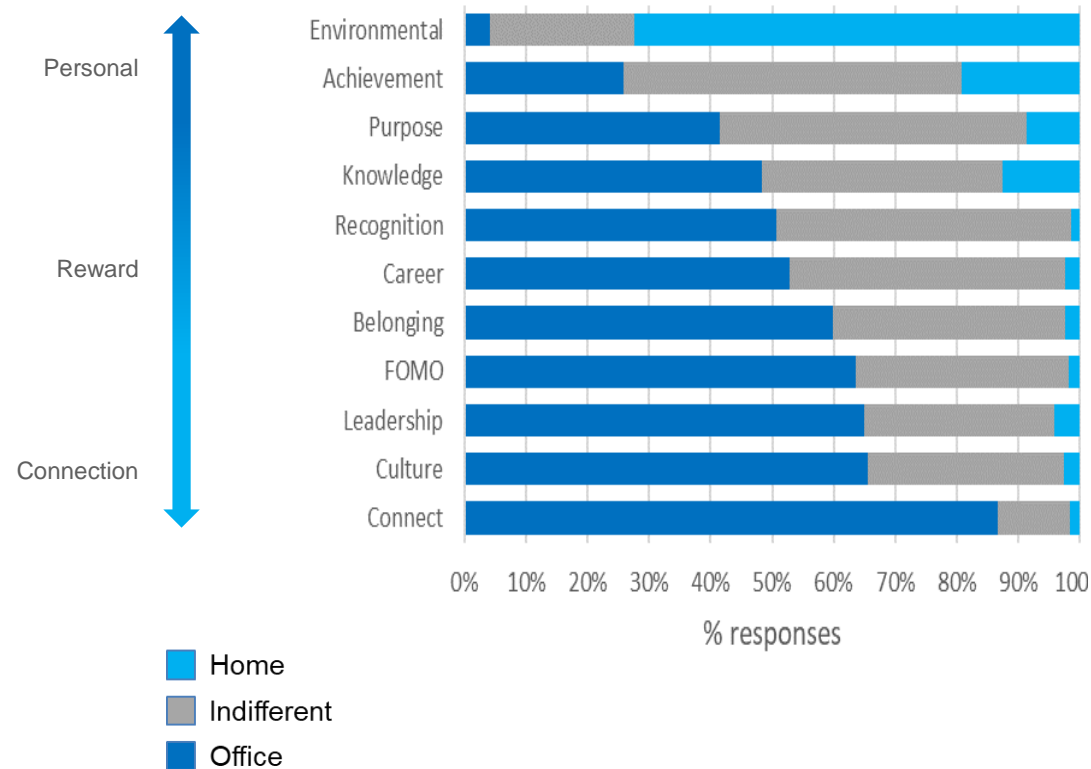
Most Attractive

Based on the eight factors you have already selected, overall which three most **attract** you to work in the office?
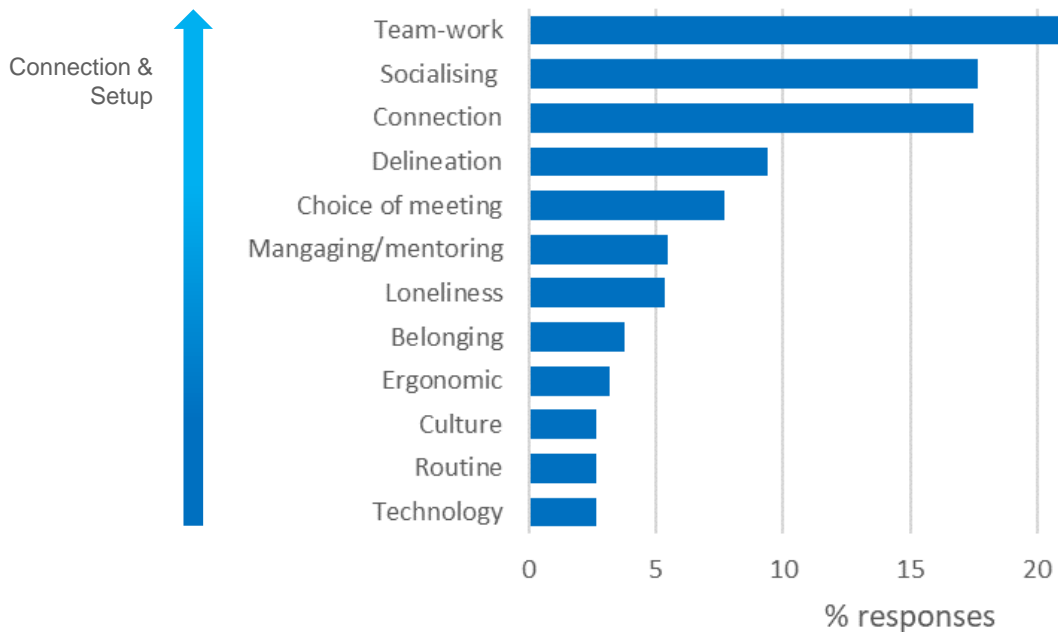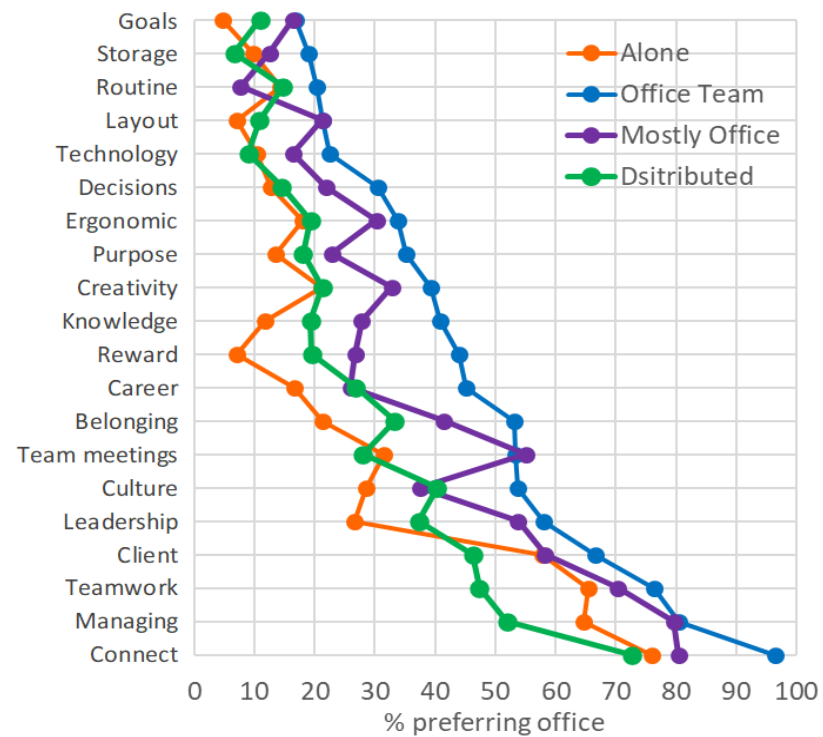

Most Discouraging

Based on the eight factors you have already selected, overall which three most **discourage** you from working in the office?

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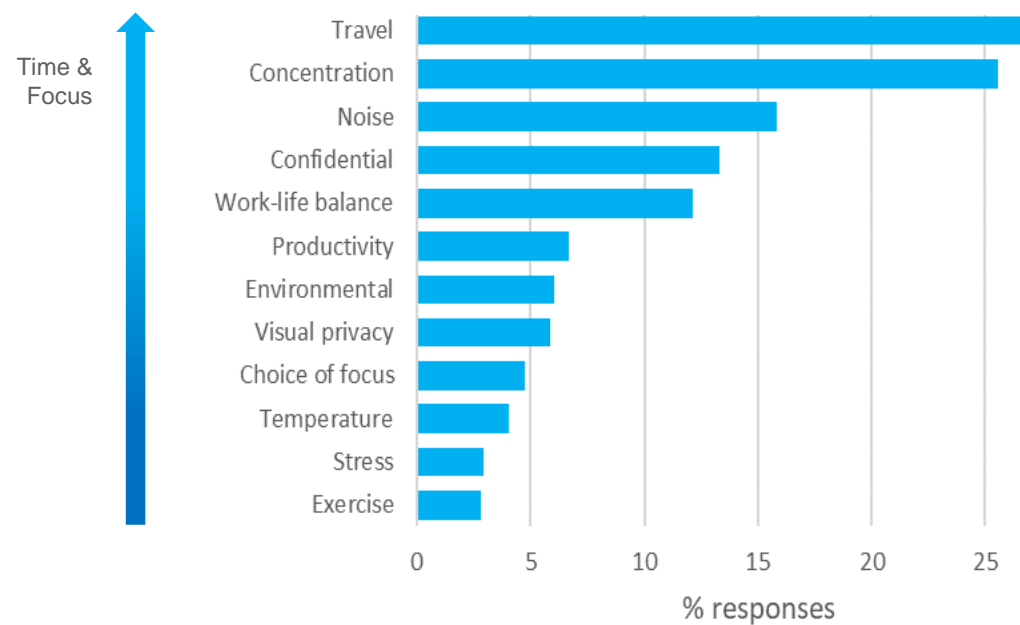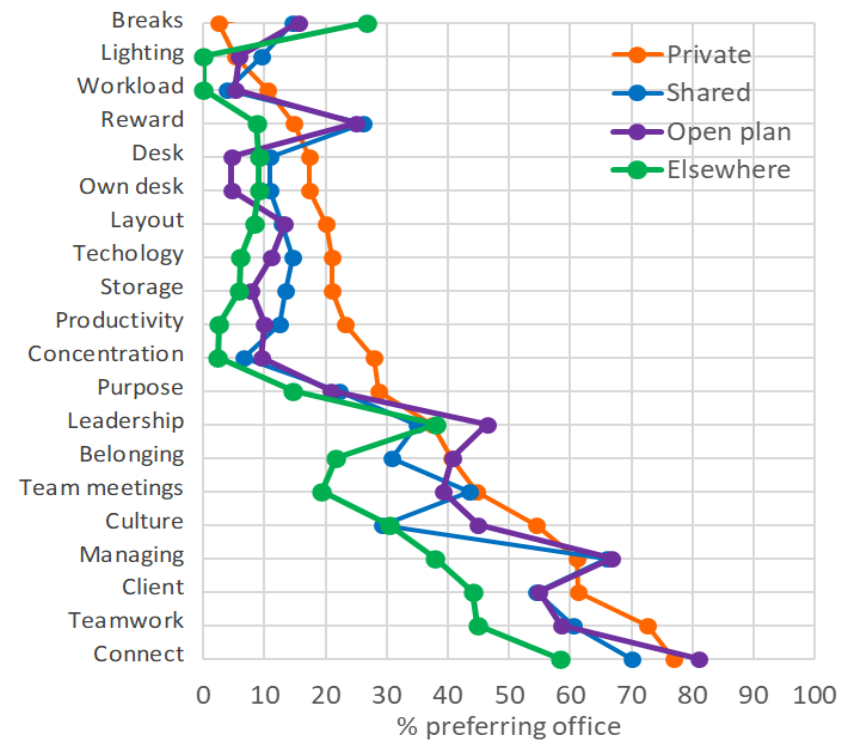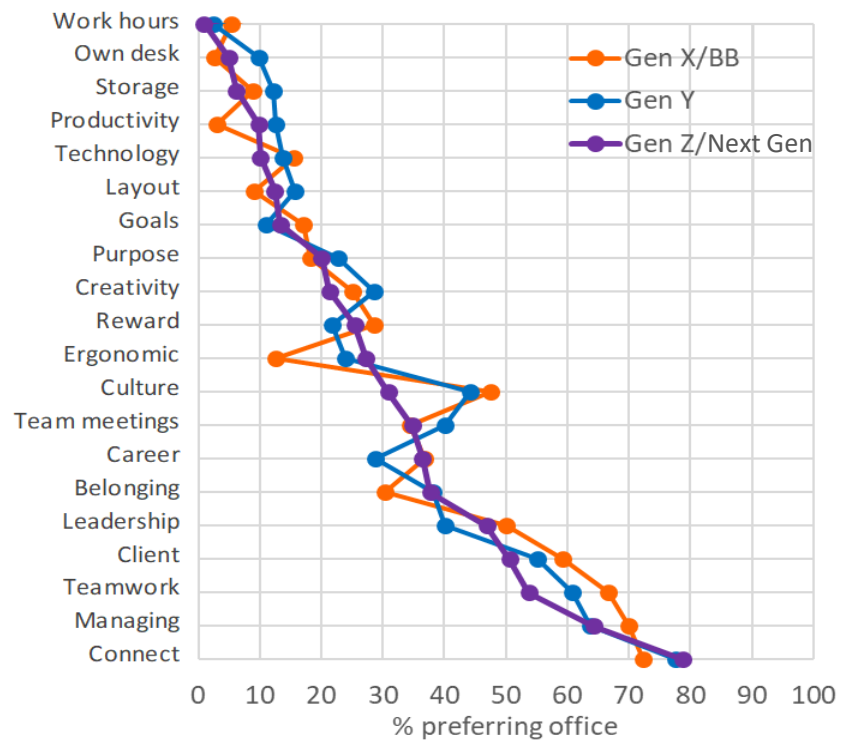
Different Office Practices
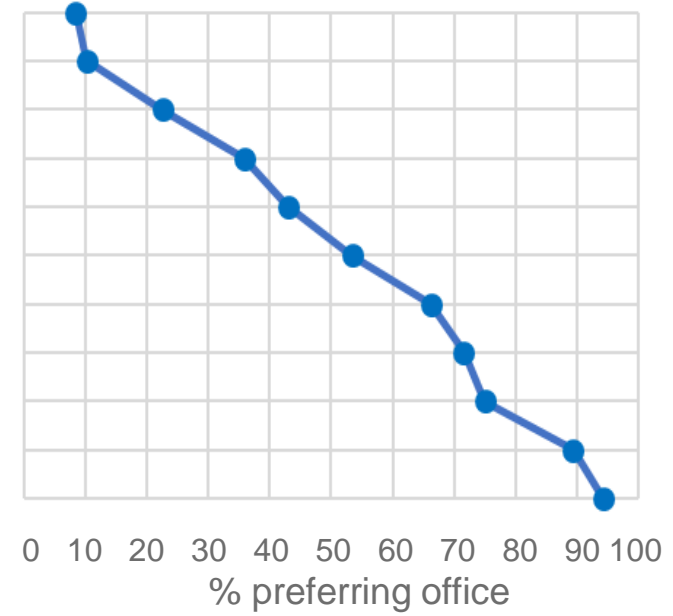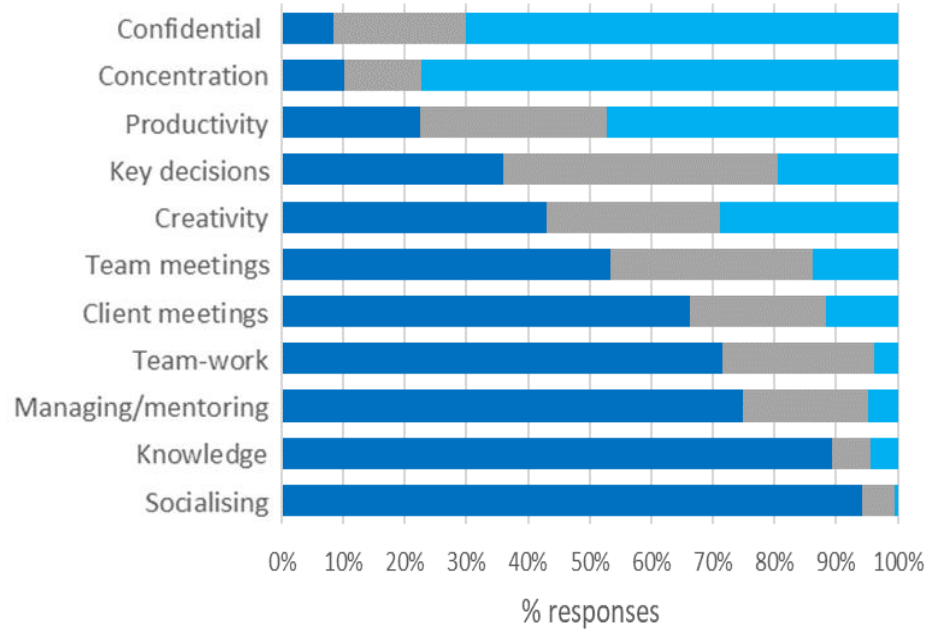
Organization
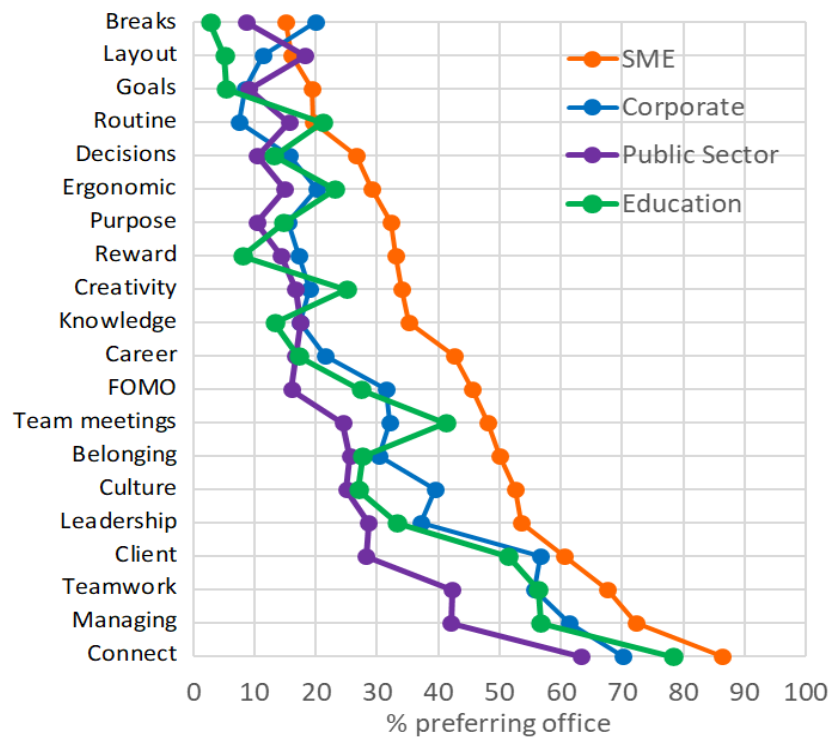
Team Base
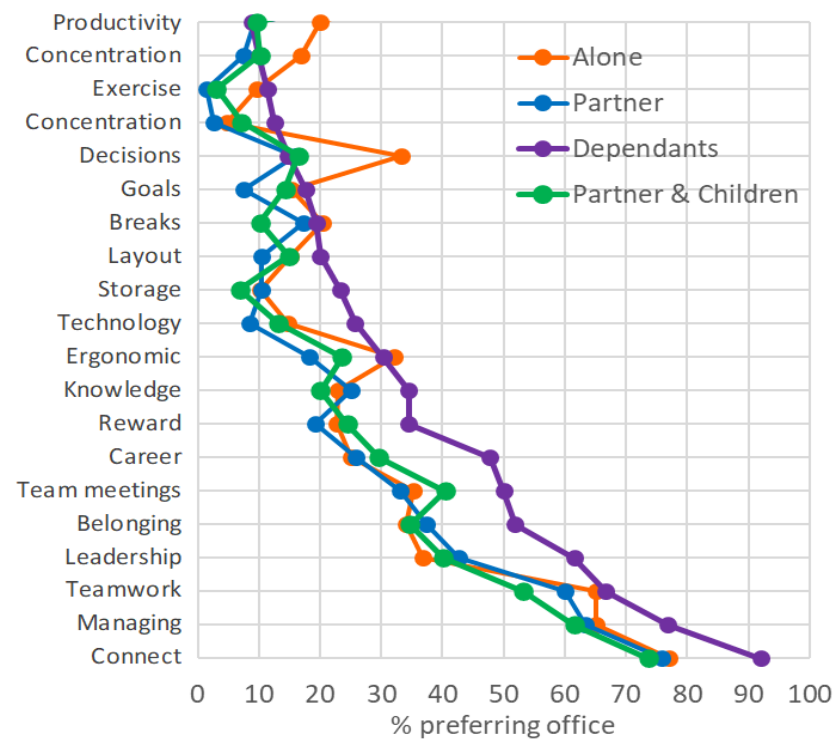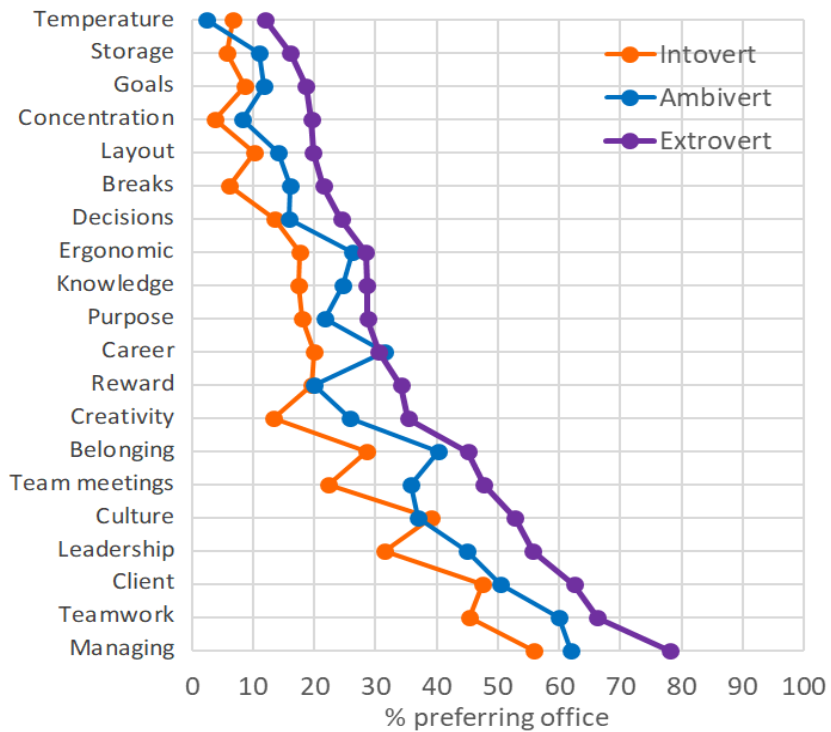
Assigned Desk
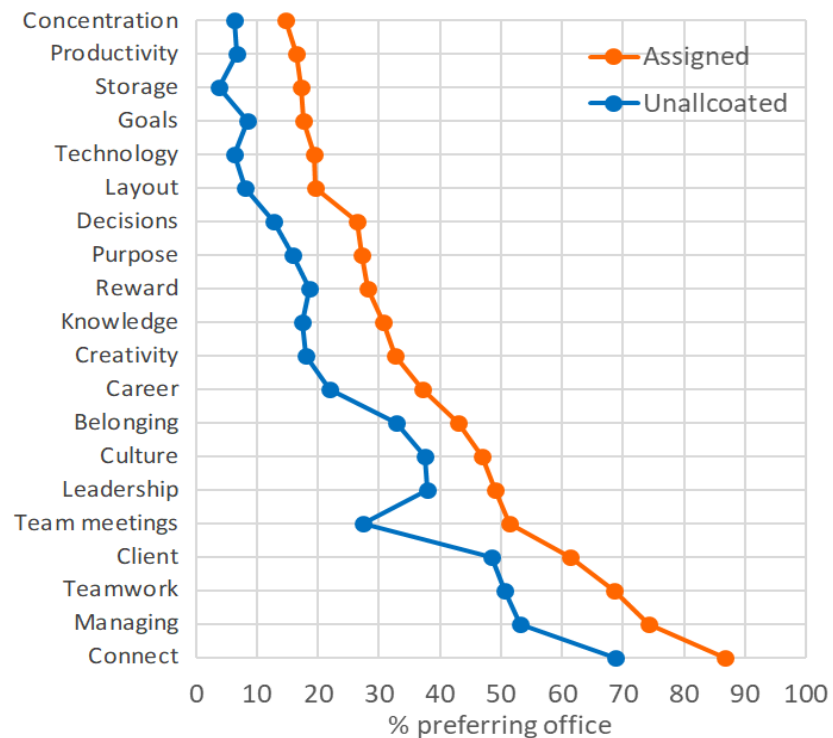
Office Desk

Age / Generation

Family Circumstances

Personality

Workplace Industry