

# Making the Workplace Work for Introverts

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After enjoying the comfort and psychological safety of working from home during the pandemic, introverts are more reluctant than most to return to the office. Though they represent up to half of the population, most workplaces and practices make it impossible for them to do their best work. Now more than ever, organizations that want to attract and retain top talent must create work environments that support this often-overlooked personality type.

Estimated to comprise a third to a half of the U.S. population, introverts will never be the loudest voice in the room and as a result, silently live in a world not designed for them. Nowhere has this been more evident than in workplaces around the world. It's no wonder employees who self-identify as introverts feel twice as negative about returning to the office as extroverts.<sup>i</sup>

“**The pandemic may have been a lonely experience, even for introverts, but for many whose traditional office space was noisy and over-stimulating, working in the comfort of home was a welcome relief.**”

Many introverts also felt a greater sense of equality through the increased use of virtual tools such as meeting polls, chat, and collaborative documents. Using these and other communication channels gave a new voice to introverts and others who find

it hard to break into conversations at work. With all eyes open to the importance of having a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace, it is crucial for organizations to take these and other lessons from the pandemic to heart in how they design the “Future of Work.” Unfortunately, this lens is not applied globally.

Recent research found that 66% of executives were designing their post-pandemic workforce policies with little to no direct input from their people.<sup>ii</sup> This strategy risks alienating employees. If employers want their employees to return to the office and do their best work when there, they need to provide places and spaces that support both the work and the people doing it.

Developing a more detailed understanding of employees will lead to smarter design decisions. Since we know a high percentage of people lean toward introversion or ambiversion—a mixture of introversion and extroversion—it is important to understand the science behind these personality types.



## Introverts at Work and in Society

Science has shown that the key difference between introverts and extroverts stems from how they respond to the neurotransmitter dopamine. This brain chemical causes us to seek external rewards such as raises, promotions, status, sex, food, recognition, and even social media approval. While introverts and extroverts have similar dopamine levels, it affects each personality type's reward system differently.

“At the expectation of, say, getting the phone number of an attractive person or earning a promotion at work, extroverts become more energized than introverts,”<sup>iii</sup> says Scott Barry Kaufman, scientific director of the Imagination Institute.



Extroverts typically enjoy a noisy, bustling environment and lots of social interaction because their brains love the dopamine rush, but the stimulation is exhausting for introverts. Introverts do not dislike people; they just might prefer a quiet evening at home over going out for drinks after work. They are often social but prefer exchanges in smaller doses, with fewer people, and in familiar settings.

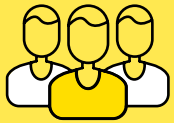
Introverts are not always comfortable “thinking out loud” and may prefer to process information before they speak. As a result, they often respond to questions in writing after they have had time to compose their thoughts. In group settings, they are likely to be listeners rather than talkers and wait until called on rather than trying to break into conversations. Most importantly, introverts genuinely suffer in an environment that is too stimulating or does not allow them to get away when they need to recharge.

Extroverts, who by some measures account for over 90% of top managers,<sup>v</sup> get their energy from being around people. They enjoy a busy environment and often assume everyone feels the same way. This unwitting bias plays out in office design which has favored open, social, and collaborative spaces over privacy in recent years. Post-pandemic designs are catalysing this trend. Organizations that want to draw people back to the office and increase diversity must address the need for quiet and privacy within their workplace.



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Other research shows that while the sight of a new human face is stimulating for an extrovert, it produces very little response in the introvert brain.<sup>iv</sup>



## Planning the Introvert-Friendly Office

### STEP 1: Look at the office through the introvert lens

Savills has strongly advocated that companies engage with employees before making any major changes to the work environment.<sup>vi</sup> You will not know what your people need unless you ask them. Start with an employee survey that probes for an understanding of the nature of the work and how they experience the workplace. If, for example, collaborative teamwork is essential to your core business, consider that while some team members will thrive on constant interaction, others may need places to escape the excess stimulation.

### STEP 2: Ask questions differently

Surveys and interviews need to go beyond questions about job function, individual preferences, and program requirements. This information is essential, but we also need to capture qualitative data. Often the most important insights come from simply talking to people—in focus groups or other safe settings—about what they need to be more successful and engaged in their work.

These small casual listening sessions can provide leaders with a more nuanced understanding of what is working and what is not across the various personality types.



### STEP 3: Remain open to a diversity of space types

The days of blanket design solutions and work practices are over. Offering choice and flexibility are key to accommodating not just introverts but a wide range of personalities, cultures, and age groups.

The most successful workplaces include a variety of space types that promote choice, autonomy, and flexibility, giving employees the freedom to select the setting that best supports the work they are doing at any given moment. For introverts, this can be a lifeline. After the big meeting, they may want to decompress and process thoughts and information in a huddle room.

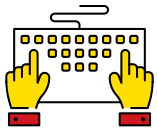
Introducing space choice and thoughtful features that offer more than just collaboration opportunities has multiple benefits. It provides a more welcoming environment for introverts and ambiverts while offering the flexibility needed to accommodate growth and future changes.



### STEP 4: Ease the transition

As much as people may want to flip a switch and feel “back to normal” in the post-lockdown era, some may need more time to transition than others. Understanding that not everyone will jump at the chance to rejoin the corporate office, leaders can take a policy or program approach that allows their people to ease back in.

Many companies have helped ease the transition by providing training on how to use different work settings, adopting new work practices, creating and encouraging participation in DEI affinity groups, and giving employees greater flexibility in where, when, and how they work. These strategies can help introverts adapt to new ways of working and gain comfort in the in-office experience and all it offers—connecting with colleagues, mentorship opportunities, access to leadership, and more.



## Giving Introverts their Due in the Workplace

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**When I was young, all I wanted and expected from life was to sit quietly in some corner doing my work without the public paying attention to me.**”

*Albert Einstein*

“

**Everyone shines, given the right lighting.**”


*Susan Cain, author of “Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking”*




Where would we be without introverts like Bill Gates, Steve Wozniak, Eleanor Roosevelt, Warren Buffett, and Albert Einstein? For businesses to truly reap the benefits of introverts’ contributions, it is time to integrate their needs and preferences into the workplace. Making room for all personality types and work styles shows that all employees are valued equally. And who wouldn’t do their best work in that setting?

Sources:

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- ii. Future Forum Pulse, “The great executive-employee disconnect: Study of global knowledge workers shows the view of the office looks different from the top,” 5 October 2021. [Link](#)
- iii. Granneman, J. “Why Introverts and Extroverts Are Different: The Science,” [Link](#)
- iv. Psychology Today. “Introversion,” [Link](#)
- v. Grant, A., Gino, F., and Hofmann, D. “The Hidden Advantages of Quiet Bosses,” Harvard Business Review, 2010. [Link](#)
- vi. Humphrey, R. “Is Open Plan Still Viable? Taking Stock in the Post-Pandemic Era of Work,” Savills, 13 April 2022. [Link](#)



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