MARCH 2026

Unassigned Seating Models



savills.us



Assigned or unassigned: why a thoughtful approach to seating matters more than the model

Most organizations have moved past the early uncertainty of **return-to-office planning** and into a more stable rhythm of in-office expectations, even as attendance levels and policies continue to adjust. Yet one topic continues to generate outsized friction for leaders and employees alike: seating.

Assigned or unassigned. Team-based or function-based. Hoteling, free-address, activity-based working, first-come-first-served day use. What often begins as a **space planning decision** quickly becomes something more complex, touching **culture, trust, equity, and the day-to-day employee experience**.

The challenge is not deciding which seating model is "right." It's recognizing that seating decisions carry meaning well beyond where people sit, and that many organizations are actively reassessing the choices they made during early RTO efforts. Seating is no longer a neutral operational decision. It is a visible signal of priorities and flexibility.



Why seating feels harder than it should

Prior to 2020, seating was relatively straightforward. Desks were assigned or unassigned, attendance was more predictable, and space largely reflected organizational hierarchy and how teams worked. Today, ambiguity persists not because organizations lack direction, but because many are still calibrating what success looks like in a **hybrid world**.

Some organizations are trying to increase office attendance over time. Others are accepting current utilization as the baseline. Many are intentionally supporting flexibility. Attendance patterns vary by team and by day, overlap is inconsistent, and seating strategies are expected to absorb this adjustment in real time. Broader **economic uncertainty** and the accelerating impact of AI only add to that complexity.

As a result, employees experience seating decisions emotionally, not just operationally. When unassigned approaches are not clearly defined, people worry about whether they will find a seat near their team. When exceptions are inconsistently applied, **fairness is questioned**. When employer requirements change without explanation, trust erodes. These reactions surface quietly as **anxiety, disengagement, resentment or resistance** to coming into the office at all.

A desk is personal. It is where people start their day, anchor their belongings, and orient themselves socially. When that anchor shifts, even well-intended changes can feel disruptive if they are not carefully managed.

Why early RTO seating decisions are being revisited

During COVID and the period that followed, many organizations moved to **unassigned seating** and reduced overall seat counts as attendance became unpredictable. As employees began returning to the office in greater numbers, some attempted to retain these unassigned models while simultaneously increasing in-office requirements. In many cases, this caused friction, particularly when requirements were unclear or unevenly applied.



In response, a number of organizations reverted to assigned seating as a stabilizing move. Assigned seats offered clarity, reduced the visible risk of employees arriving without a place to sit, and helped reinforce attendance guidelines. For some, they also served as a cultural signal of continuity or fairness.

As environments have settled into more consistent patterns of use, many of those same organizations are encountering familiar challenges: underutilized seats, limited flexibility, growing exception lists, and increasing administrative burden. At the same time, fully unassigned models have not proven to be a universal solution, particularly where teams need regular proximity to one another or where capacity fluctuates by day.

What we see across markets is not a wholesale shift from one model to another, but a growing willingness to reassess where organizations sit along the continuum. Partial assignment of seats, team-based neighborhoods, or a fusion of approaches are being explored as ways to retain structure while reintroducing flexibility.

This reassessment is not an indictment of earlier decisions. It reflects a more realistic understanding of how seating strategies perform once expectations, behavior, and communication are tested over time.

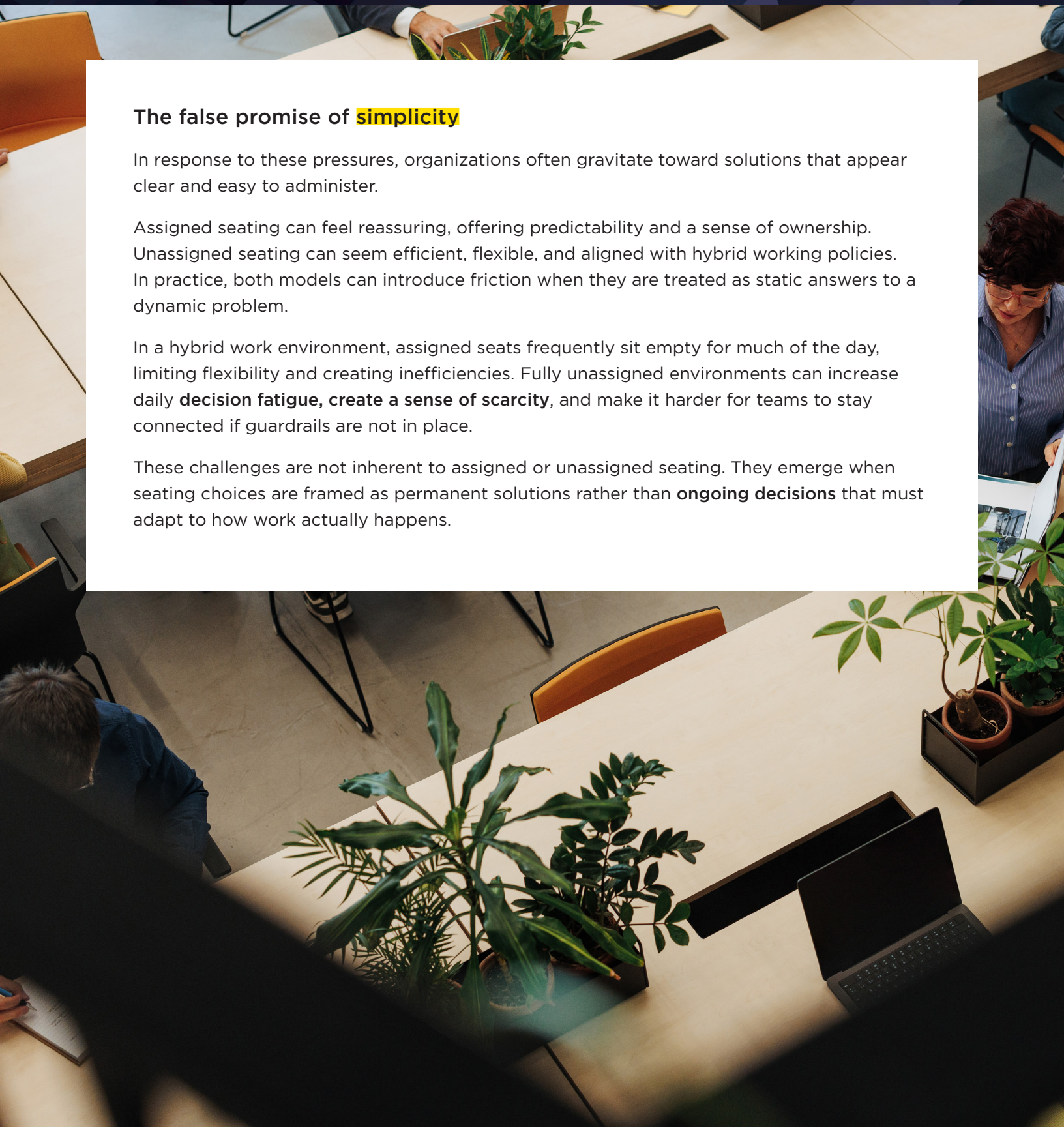
The false promise of simplicity

In response to these pressures, organizations often gravitate toward solutions that appear clear and easy to administer.

Assigned seating can feel reassuring, offering predictability and a sense of ownership. Unassigned seating can seem efficient, flexible, and aligned with hybrid working policies. In practice, both models can introduce friction when they are treated as static answers to a dynamic problem.

In a hybrid work environment, assigned seats frequently sit empty for much of the day, limiting flexibility and creating inefficiencies. Fully unassigned environments can increase daily **decision fatigue, create a sense of scarcity**, and make it harder for teams to stay connected if guardrails are not in place.

These challenges are not inherent to assigned or unassigned seating. They emerge when seating choices are framed as permanent solutions rather than **ongoing decisions** that must adapt to how work actually happens.





Why thoughtful structure matters

One consistent insight across workplaces is that employees value flexibility, but not at the expense of clarity.

Unlimited choice often creates more stress than freedom. **Team-based neighborhoods, home bases**, or other forms of light structure help reduce uncertainty while still allowing space to flex. They support collaboration, reinforce team identity, make it easier for managers to engage with their employees, and help leadership understand how space supports work.

At the same time, flexibility remains essential. Hybrid environments benefit from the ability to absorb growth, accommodate cross-functional work, and manage peak days without constant restacking or disruption. The most effective approaches balance structure and choice rather than favoring one exclusively.

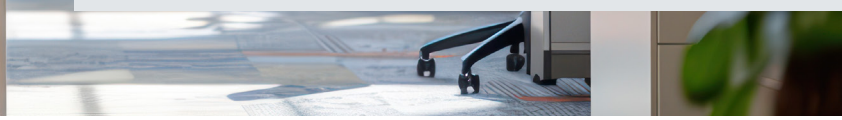
Data informs decisions, but context gives them credibility

Utilization data, attendance tracking, and reservation tools provide valuable insight, but they do not tell the whole story. Attendance varies by role, season, project cycle, and life circumstance. Data without context can lead to decisions that feel disconnected from lived experience.

Organizations that use data as a **conversation starter rather than a verdict** tend to build more trust. Regularly reviewing utilization against policy, accounting for temporary fluctuations, and clearly explaining how data is used helps employees understand that decisions are being made thoughtfully and fairly.

Transparency matters. When people understand the reasoning behind seating decisions, they are more likely to accept outcomes, even if those outcomes require adjustment or compromise.

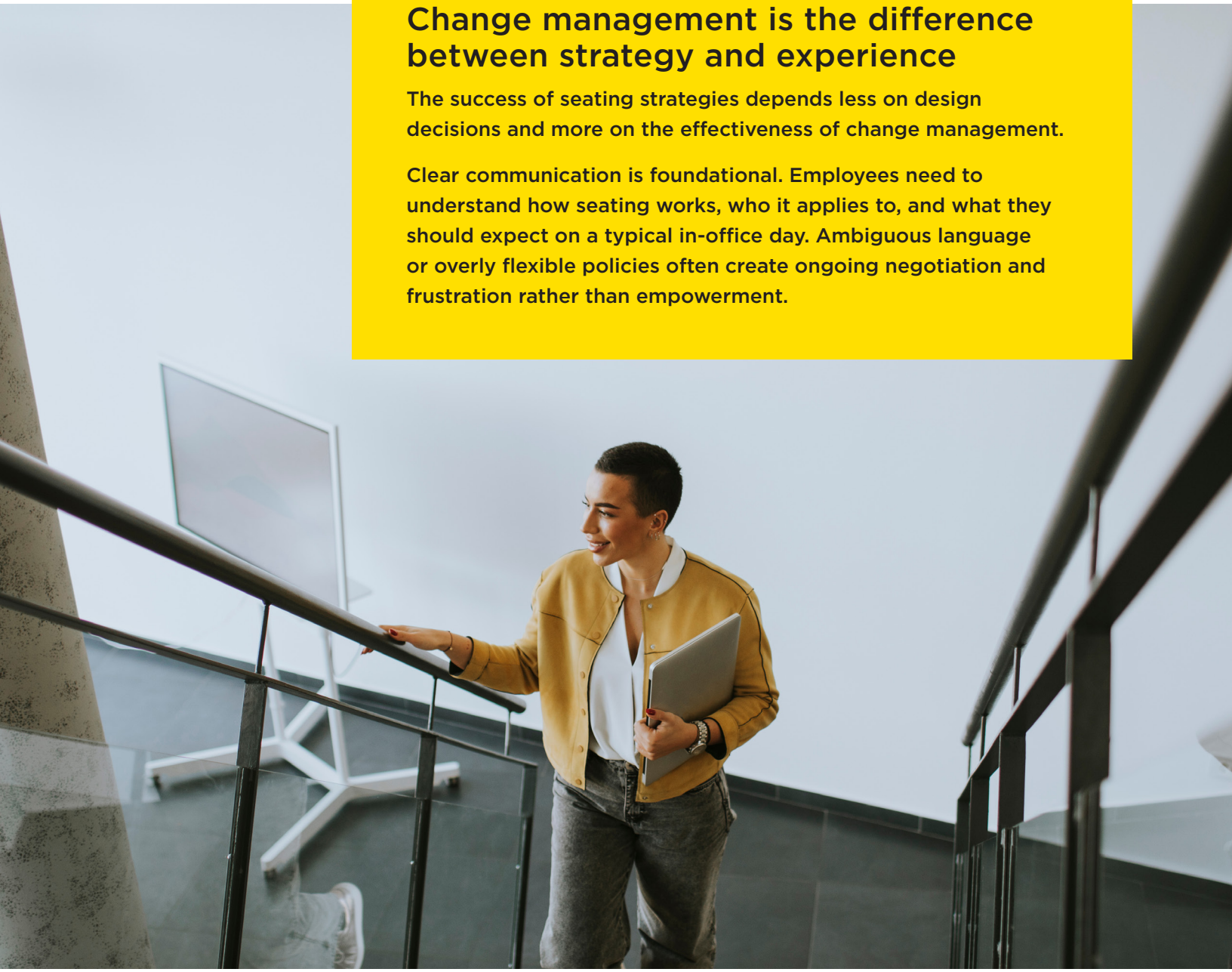




Change management is the difference between strategy and experience

The success of seating strategies depends less on design decisions and more on the effectiveness of change management.

Clear communication is foundational. Employees need to understand how seating works, who it applies to, and what they should expect on a typical in-office day. Ambiguous language or overly flexible policies often create ongoing negotiation and frustration rather than empowerment.



Transparency around exceptions is equally important. Most organizations need exceptions, whether for role requirements, confidentiality, or accessibility. When the criteria for those exceptions are undefined, they are perceived as favoritism. When they are clearly articulated, they are more likely to be accepted as necessary.

Consistency and reinforcement complete the picture. Managers need guidance and support to uphold requirements, especially during periods of high attendance or transition. Without that reinforcement, even well-designed strategies can slowly unravel through day-to-day workarounds.

The benefits of getting it right

When seating strategies are approached thoughtfully, the benefits extend beyond employee sentiment.

Facilities teams see fewer **move, add, and change requests**. Real estate leaders gain flexibility to **right-size portfolios** over time. Offices feel more active and intentional, even with fewer seats. Onboarding becomes easier, growth more manageable, and future changes are less disruptive.

These outcomes are measurable, but they are rarely the primary motivation for revisiting seating. More often, they are the result of aligning **space, policy, and experience** in a way that supports how people actually work.

A more intentional path forward

There is no universally correct seating model for any workplace. What matters is the **quality of decision-making** behind it.

Organizations navigating this most effectively are asking better questions: What culture are we trying to support? How often are people in the office? What are they doing when they come in? Where does proximity matter most? How are exceptions handled, communicated, and reinforced? Leadership recognizes that seating strategies may evolve over time as non-traditional work environments remain an ongoing operational reality.

Today, seating is one of the most visible expressions of a company's **workplace strategy**. Getting it right does not require a perfect answer. It requires a **thoughtful one**. When that foundation is in place, seating stops being a source of tension and becomes what it should be: a quiet enabler of **better work, culture and connection**.



Contacts

Benay Josselson
Executive Vice President
M: +1 914 772 1921
bjosselson@savills.us

Tonya M. Williams
Senior Director
O: +1 713 795 2470
tmwilliams@savills.us

Jamie Feuerborn
Senior Managing Director
O: +1 212 588 3403
M: +1 347 342 7429
jfeuerborn@savills.us

savills.us

The information in this publication is gathered from multiple sources deemed to be reliable at the date of publication, however Savills has not verified such information. The information contained herein may contain errors or omissions and is presented without any warranty or representation as to its accuracy. No material may be used in whole or in part without prior permission of Savills.

© 2026 Savills. All rights reserved.