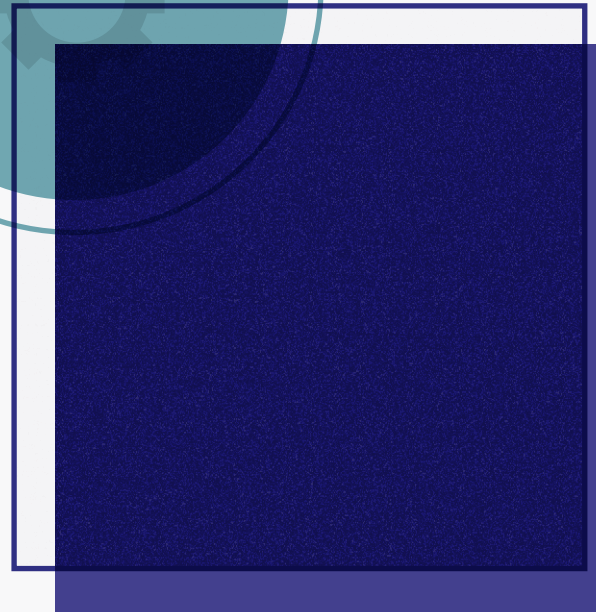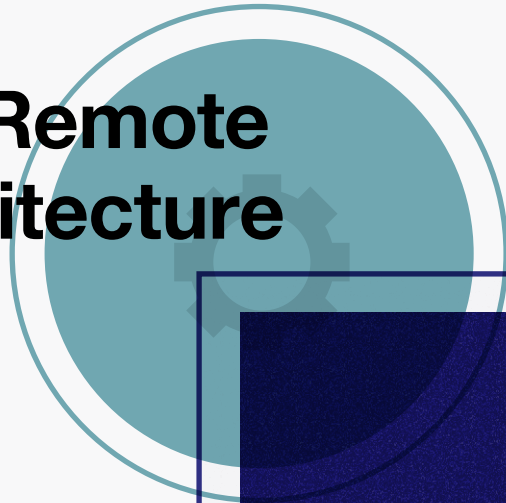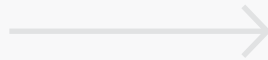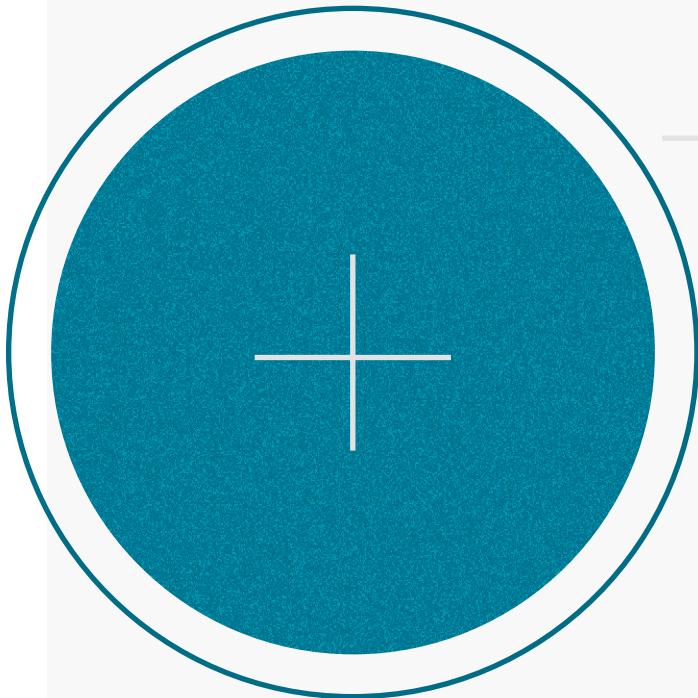# Challenges and Opportunities of Remote Work Within Architecture and Design Firms
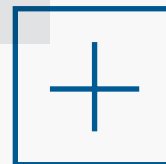
Knoll

The Survey

Knoll surveyed 50 architecture and design firm leaders in North America in the fall of 2021.

The online survey was conducted in September and October and reached firms with broad practice areas and workforces ranging from fewer than 10 to more than 1,000, with the majority (52%) comprised of 10-99 employees.

Prior to Covid, the majority of firms did not have a formal remote work option, so the pandemic-induced remote experience prompted introduction of new policies, procedures as well as opportunities.

Our goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities architecture and design firms face while working remotely.

We also sought to learn about what aspects of their experience they were planning to integrate into their future workplace on a permanent basis.

Find complete survey results here.

RESPONDENTS' DEMOGRAPHICS

22%

14% 30% 18%

16%

- Midwest U.S.
- Northeast U.S.
- Western U.S.
- Canada
- Southern U.S.
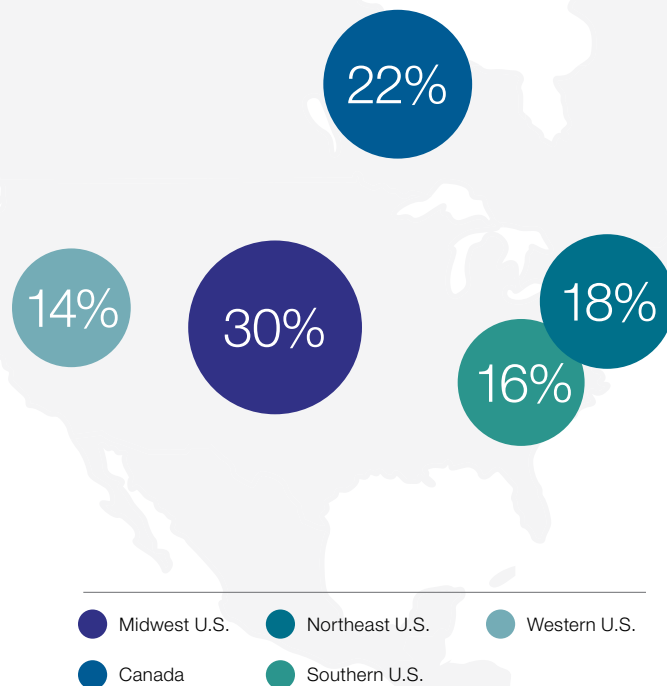
PRE-COVID-19 REMOTE WORK OPTIONS

Prior to Covid-19, did your firm offer formal remote work options?

49%
AD HOC:
ONLY WHEN
NECESSARY

33%
NO REMOTE
OPTIONS

18%
YES, REMOTE
OPTIONS
AVAILABLE

FIRM SIZE

8%
Fewer than 10

10%
1,000+

13%
500-999

17%
100-499

52%
10-99
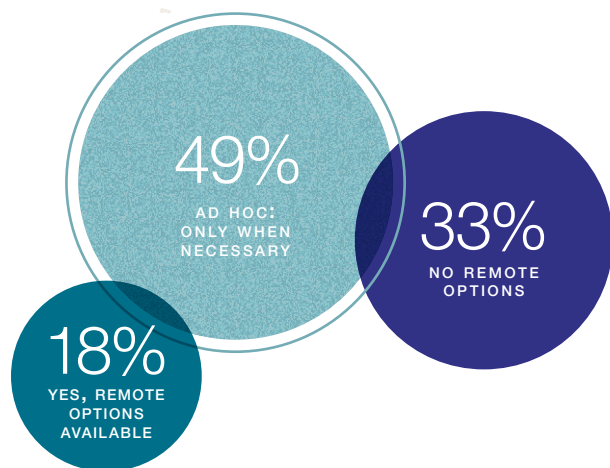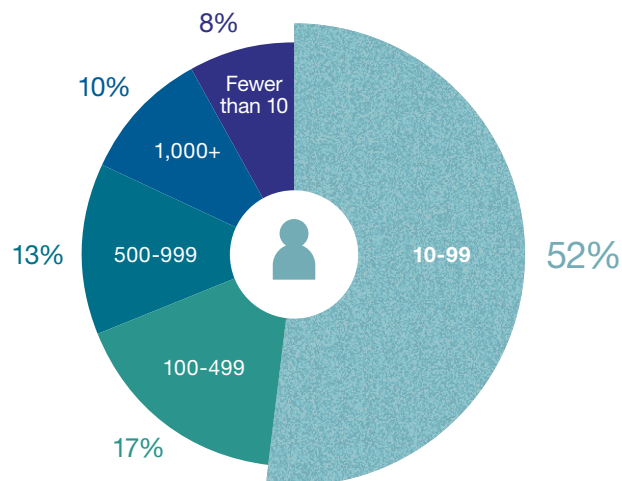
# Some aspects of remote work have been successful for A+D firms

Nearly three-fourths of respondents felt that remote work has been successful for their firm. However, "successful" did not necessarily translate to productivity gains. While just under a third felt their employees were more productive, another third felt productivity levels were unchanged from their pre-Covid workplace and slightly more than a third felt their employees were actually less productive working remotely.

How successful would you say the shift to remote work, due to COVID-19, has been for your firm?

74%
SUCCESSFUL

10%

16%

● Neutral   ● Unsuccessful
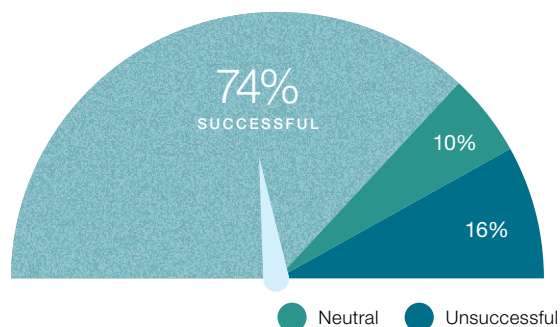
Compared to pre-COVID-19, how has your average employees' productivity changed since going remote?

33%

32%

35%
LESS PRODUCTIVE

● Neither more nor less productive   ● More productive
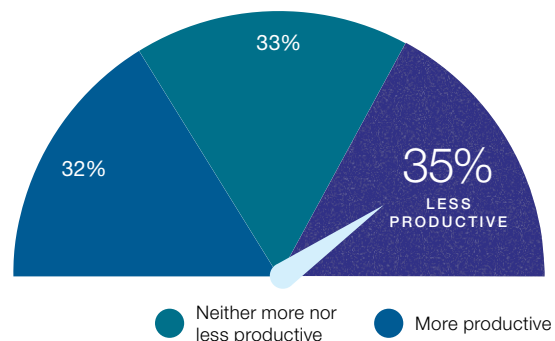
However, principals noted that effectiveness of most of the firm's activities suffered due to Covid.
Despite utilizing different tools and approaches, respondents felt virtually all interpersonal tasks were less effective while working remotely during Covid.

Among the least successful activities were related to coaching, mentoring and onboarding new employees, where nearly three-fourths reported drops in efficacy. Ideation and collaboration were also deemed much less successful while working remotely.

In the cases of tasks that likely benefited from new technology platforms, such as project/task management and client presentation/connection, principals reported similar levels of success as pre-Covid.

How would you describe how effective your firm has been at performing activities with employee working remotely?

● Coaching and Mentoring Employees

● Presenting and Connecting with Clients

● Managing Projects and Tasks

24%
BETTER THAN
PRE-COVID

67%
SAME AS
PRE-COVID

77%
WORSE THAN
PRE-COVID
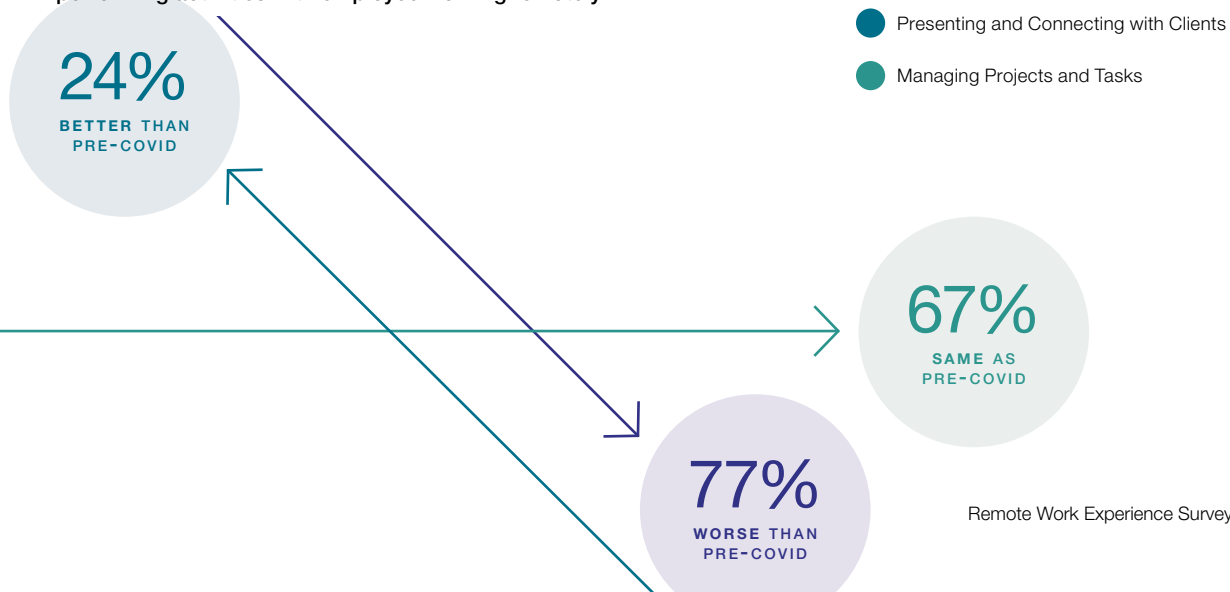
Remote work creates significant struggles for employees

Virtually all aspects of work were found to be more challenging for employees while working remotely.

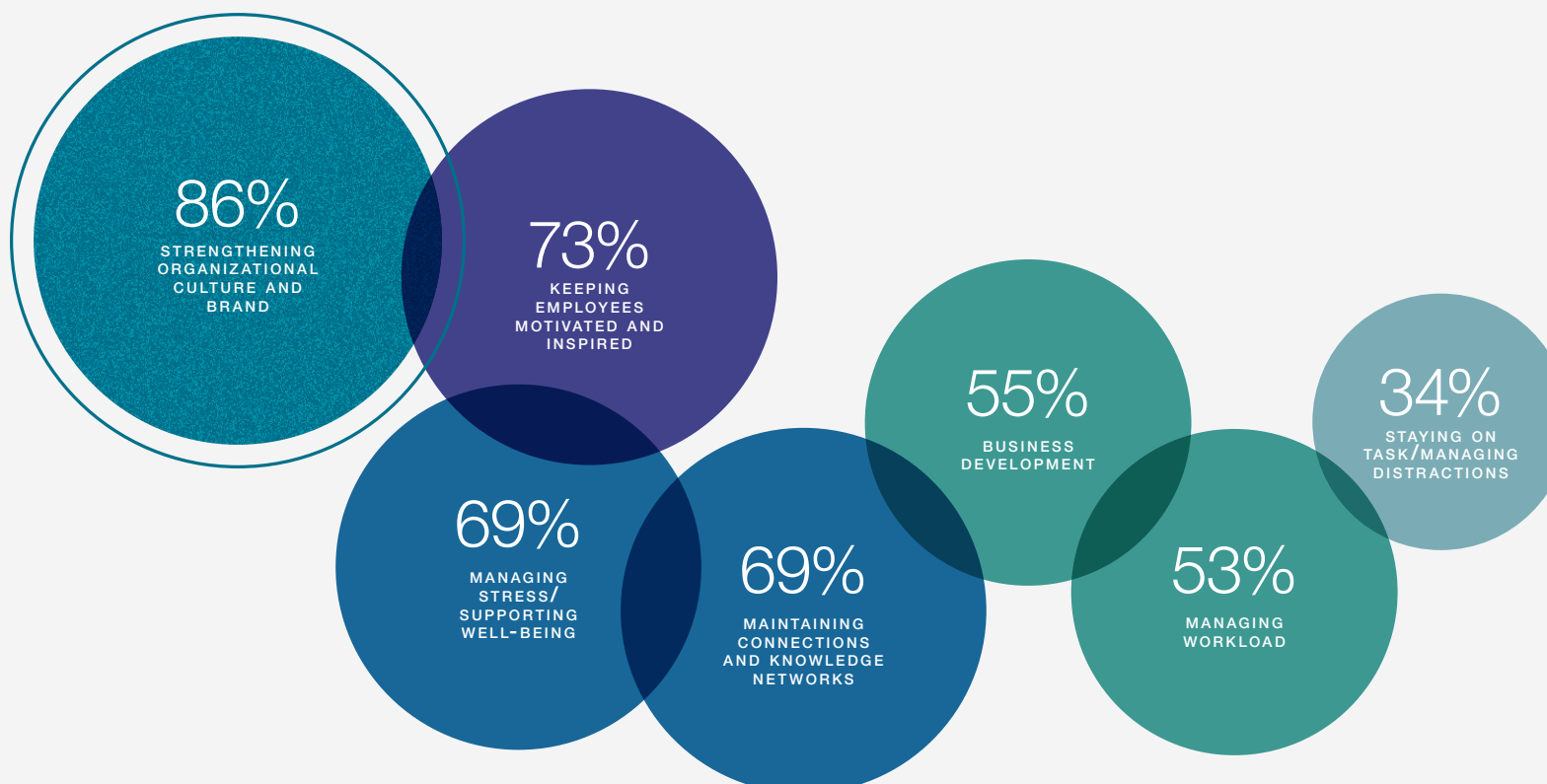Managing "soft skills" and relationship-focused work were deemed the most challenging elements of remote work by A+D principals. In particular, strengthening organizational culture and brand (86%) and keeping employees motivated and inspired (74%) were cited as the two most difficult challenges.

Managing stress and supporting well-being was noted as considerably more difficult remotely (69%) as was maintaining connections and knowledge networks (69%). Complex interdisciplinary tasks such as business development and managing workloads were noted as difficult by a majority of respondents (55% and 53% respectively).

Additionally, complications with technology, samples/materials and ergonomics also factored into whether individuals were thriving in their remote situations. Interestingly, the challenge of managing distractions was essentially an even split as to whether it was easy, difficult or neutral for workers, which likely had to do with the quality of their personal remote work/work-from-home situation and physical work setting.

> "The mental health piece was a big one for our people these past 2 years and so we are incorporating more CEUs and open discussions about wellness and mental health challenges in the workplace."

Firms that designated remote work challenges as difficult.

86%
STRENGTHENING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND BRAND

73%
KEEPING EMPLOYEES MOTIVATED AND INSPIRED

55%
BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

34%
STAYING ON TASK/MANAGING DISTRACTIONS

69%
MANAGING STRESS/ SUPPORTING WELL-BEING

69%
MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS AND KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS

53%
MANAGING WORKLOAD

The remote work experience is driving changes in future workplace strategy

In contrast to the less than 20% of firms that offered formal remote work options pre-Covid, nearly two-thirds of firms are considering a hybrid approach going forward.
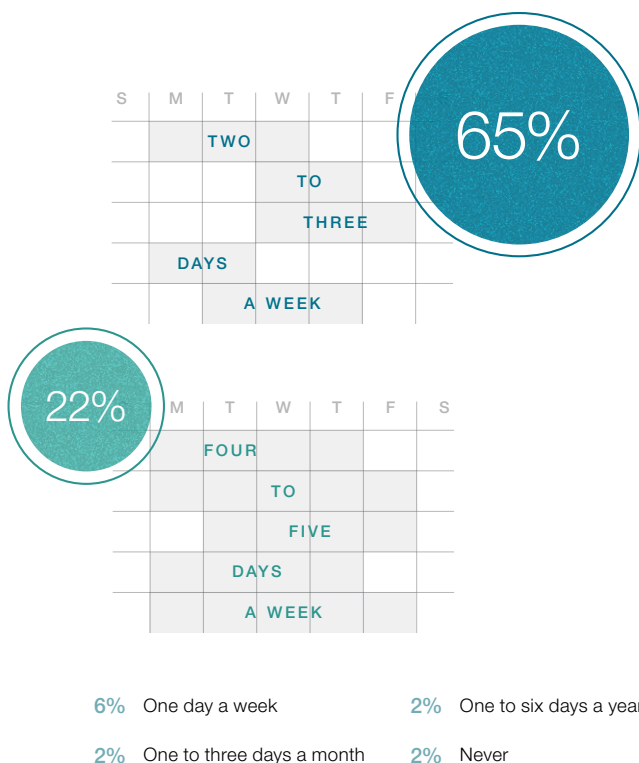
Nearly all firms (93%) feel some in-office time is necessary on a weekly basis to maintain a distinctive firm culture, with 65% settling on a mix of two to three days a week. Only 6% felt one day a week was appropriate, and 22% felt four to five days a week would support firm culture.

Going forward, the majority of firms intend to incorporate remote work into their workplace strategy, with an expectation of some in-office time on a weekly basis.
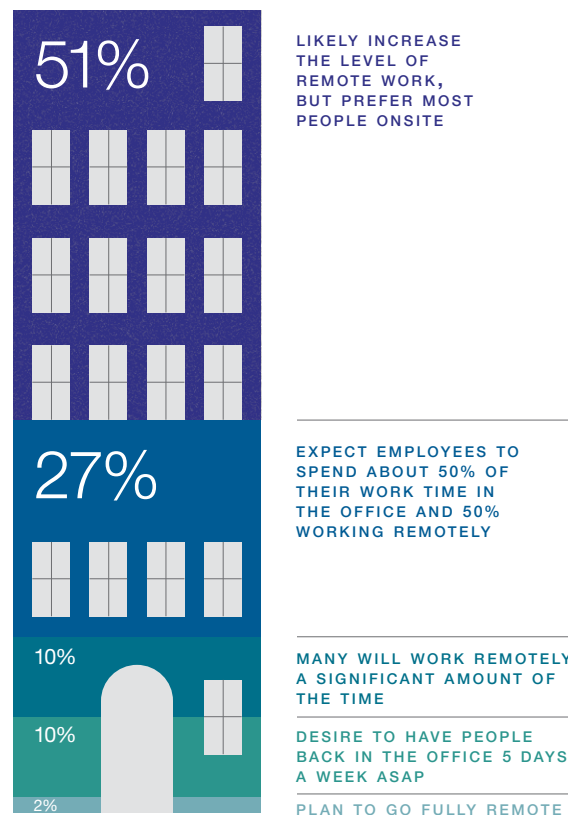
About half of firms plan to increase the level of remote work, but noted a distinct preference for most of the staff to be onsite. Splitting office/remote time 50/50 was the plan for 27% of firms. Just 2% plan to go fully remote and 10% expect the majority of time will be remote. And 10% of firms noted a preference for eliminating remote work and returning to 5-days-a-week in the office as soon as possible.

"The one piece of work that suffers from remote location work is the ability to immediately react and put out project fires as they arise. If no one is in the office to pull materials and resources, the task rests on the few present in the office-disrupting their work."

In the future, how often do you think a typical employee needs to be in the office, if at all, in order to maintain a distinctive culture for your firm?

S	M	T	W	T	F
		TWO			
			TO		
				THREE	
	DAYS				
			A WEEK		

65%

22%

	M	T	W	T	F	S
		FOUR				
			TO			
				FIVE		
		DAYS				
			A WEEK			

6% One day a week   **2%** One to six days a year

2% One to three days a month   **2%** Never

Which of the following statements best describes your future strategy around remote work at your firm?

51% LIKELY INCREASE THE LEVEL OF REMOTE WORK, BUT PREFER MOST PEOPLE ONSITE

27% EXPECT EMPLOYEES TO SPEND ABOUT 50% OF THEIR WORK TIME IN THE OFFICE AND 50% WORKING REMOTELY

10% MANY WILL WORK REMOTELY A SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT OF THE TIME

10% DESIRE TO HAVE PEOPLE BACK IN THE OFFICE 5 DAYS A WEEK ASAP

2% PLAN TO GO FULLY REMOTE

Firms are adapting strategies, spaces and technology to embrace a mix of remote work in the future

Going forward, most firms are planning changes to support a strategy incorporating a degree of remote work over the next 12-18 months. Nearly three-fourths plan to offer greater flexibility than previously, with 61% planning to establish some variation of a hybrid work schedule (i.e. select days for in-person and remote work).

Echoing trends seen across many industries, many A&D firms (39%) are planning increased numbers of collaboration and social spaces to support group gathering, ideation and collaborating, with a comparable number (33%) planning to embrace unassigned spaces for individual work.

Technology remains integral to successful hybrid work. Leveraging technology and collaboration tools to connect a hybrid workforce factors into most plans.

Close to half of firms are planning increased technology and/or video within their office space. Nearly all firms adopted technology-based tools during the remote work experience with plans for continued future use. Some 94% reported using virtual collaboration tools such as Miro and Mural, and 90% of firms adopted messaging platforms such as Slack and Microsoft Teams.

Similarly, videoconferencing platforms were adopted by 60% of firms and 27% of firms pivoted to AI and/or VR tools to supplant physical mockups or tours.
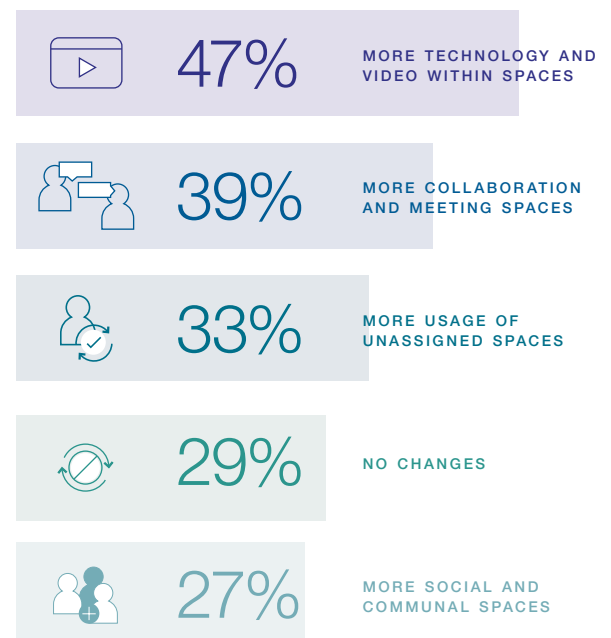
"We have always allowed flex time and work from home. We have now implemented a free address system which helped us to offer additional group space and amenities."

What changes are you making to your workplace practices/strategies in the next 12-18 months to support remote/hybrid work?

S	M	T	W	T	F	S

73%
ESTABLISH A MORE FLEXIBLE WORK SCHEDULE
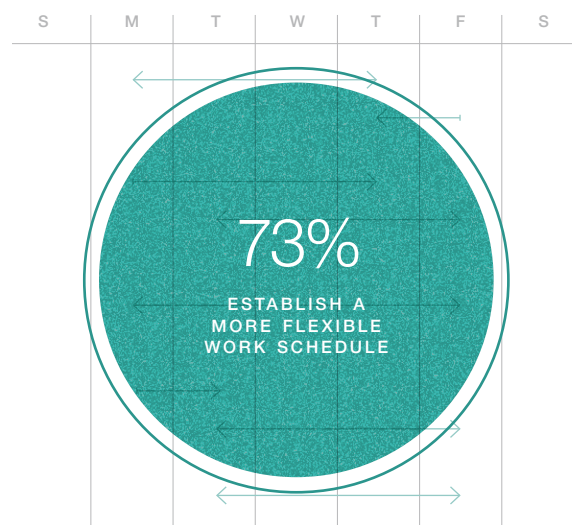
67% Increased tools for virtual collaboration

61% Creating opportunities for connections

61% Establishing a hybrid model

2% Never

What changes are you making to your physical workplace(s) in the next 12-18 months to support remote/hybrid work?

47% MORE TECHNOLOGY AND VIDEO WITHIN SPACES

39% MORE COLLABORATION AND MEETING SPACES

33% MORE USAGE OF UNASSIGNED SPACES

29% NO CHANGES

27% MORE SOCIAL AND COMMUNAL SPACES

The physical office remains integral to the success of A&D firms

While a hybrid workforce will no doubt be part of most firm's plans, the physical office retains a vital role in supporting business goals as well as employee development.

More than 80% of firms feel that the physical office will be important for key functions such as collaborating and team projects, supporting firm culture and brand and coaching and mentoring employees.

Similarly 78% of firms consider the physical workspace important for training and development, as well as and ideation and innovation. Nearly two-thirds consider the office important for attracting and retaining top talent as well as meeting with clients.

The office also was considered important for the maintenance of materials and resources (59%), something not easily replicated at home efficiently, as well as supporting employee productivity (57%).

"We created three collaboration opportunities per week, each with distinctive formats and venues. Employees were strongly encouraged to participate in all three. We believe all enhanced connectedness within the organization."

Firms that considered the physical office important for various objectives.

86%
COLLABORATING AND
TEAMING ON PROJECTS

84%
SUPPORTING AND BUILDING
FIRM CULTURE AND BRAND

82%
COACHING AND MENTORING
EMPLOYEES

78%
IDEATING AND INNOVATION
ON NEW IDEAS

78%
TRAINING AND CAREER
DEVELOPMENT

65%
ATTRACTING AND
RETAINING TOP TALENT

65%
MEETING WITH
CLIENTS

59%
MAINTAINING MATERIALS/
RESOURCE LIBRARY

57%
SUPPORTING EMPLOYEE
PRODUCTIVITY