

Workplace Effectiveness Has Declined, People in Unassigned Seating are Struggling the Most / Gensler's 2020 U.S. Workplace Survey

by Mallory Budy

Of the many annual, quarterly and topical reports regularly put forth by design firms, one of our favorites is **Gensler's** Workplace Surveys. Starting in 2005, the firm has published a series of Workplace Survey reports covering the disparate workplaces of various corners of the world.

What we like in particular about the Gensler reports is their willingness to tackle very specific issues, rather than succumbing to pressure to include every popular topic and buzz word of the moment.

Gensler's recently released "U.S. Workplace Survey 2020", continues that focus, and last week we caught up with **Janet Pogue**, Workplace Leader and Principal at Gensler, who oversaw the creation of the report, to chat about its findings.

"With every one of these studies through the years, we have had a core set of questions that we pose that remains constant," said Ms. Pogue. "But with every survey, we also try to focus on something new. We try to pull out a meaningful finding from the year prior, and then peel back the layers of that topic."

"Last year, we learned that 5% of the workers surveyed reported sitting in unassigned seating. That's a significant number, and we were also witnessing the impact of unassigned seating with our own clients. And so we wanted to peel back the layers of that onion further."

"The office is still the most preferred place to work – as long as it is well-designed. If the office is not well-designed, the most preferred place to work is at home. There's a message to designers there that place matters."

"We've found for the second year in a row that mostly open environments with ample on-demand privacy spaces are the most effective work environments and provide the most optimal workplace experience. But this year, we saw a drop in the amount of these types of work environments – those with adequate privacy spaces – from 26% last year to 15% this year."



Brex, San Francisco, California

"And one of the most surprising things we found is that even people in unassigned seating who say they enjoy the unassigned seating still report struggling to perform."

Notable Findings:

> **Workplace effectiveness and experience have declined**, "a consequence of continued dramatic shifts in the way people work. The effectiveness of the U.S. workplace is declining across all the work modes Gensler tracks, with 2020 registering the lowest effectiveness numbers we've measured since beginning our Workplace Surveys in 2008.

This comes amid growth in a wide range of mobility solutions. Our data suggests that many forms of mobility – the ability to work away from the office for part of the week, then work in a variety of spaces in the office – are aligned with greater effectiveness. But overall, the decline in performance suggests that increased mobility in aggregate has not yet improved employee effectiveness or experience."

Ms. Pogue: "This is the first time we've ever seen workplace effectiveness and workplace experience drop. This year we saw the lowest workplace effectiveness numbers since we started tracking it."

> "We've asked respondents for the workplace typology where they work – and what their ideal typology might be. **Roughly 1 in 7 workers currently sit in a mostly open environment – and when asked about their ideal workplace, they tend to prefer more private environments. However, when our data is segmented to show how each typology performs, mostly open environments support more choice, provide a wide variety of spaces, and are correlated with greater innovation and effectiveness overall.**"

> **People without assigned seats are struggling, even those who like it.** "Unassigned seating is on the rise – our data shows 10% of the U.S. workforce no longer has an assigned seat

3x

Increase in unassigned seating by workers at large companies in past 4 years

25%

Increase in urban Class A U.S. office rents 2010 to 2019

(Source: CBRE Economics Advisory)

3.6%

U.S. unemployment rate, the lowest since 1970

(Source: American Time Use Survey as of February 2020)

20%

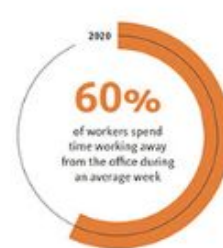
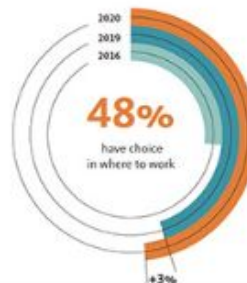
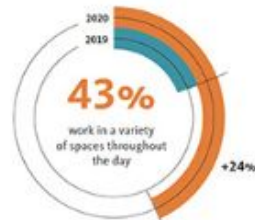
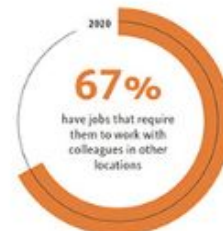
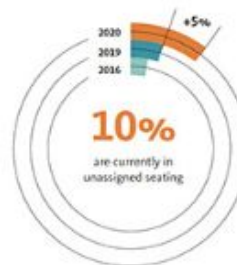
of the global coworking footprint is located in the U.S.

(Source: GIGAC – Global Coworking)

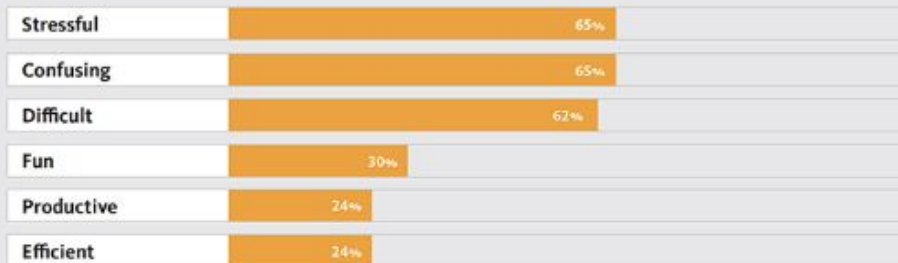
24%

of U.S. workers do some or all of their work at home

(Source: America Time Use Survey)



"The workplace is more complex than ever before. Organizations are leveraging mobility to improve flexibility, real time change, and efficiency."

What do U.S. workers think about unassigned seating?

For workers not currently in unassigned seating, the percent who agree with each of the above statements about unassigned seating.

at work, doubling from 5% in 2019. While the idea of unassigned seating (also known as “hot desking,” “dynamic seating,” “hoteling,” etc.) isn’t

new, its recent growth in application is notable. The larger portion of working population in unassigned seating now lets us look more deeply into the quali-

ties of their experience at work, and begin to understand the implications of this trend for workplace effectiveness and experience.”



SentryOne, Charlotte, North Carolina

"The reviews are mixed: many workers in unassigned seating want their seat back, while many are happy with the scenario. Taken as a whole, our data suggests unassigned seating has a negative impact on performance and experience – a challenge to a dominant narrative centered around the increased choice and freedom that should follow suit. For the people who like unassigned seating, the negative impacts are diminished. Those workers report slightly lower performance, but a slightly better experience than the average worker."

>"How do you fix unassigned seating? The ability to focus is hardest hit; the most important solution is privacy. The biggest difference: **unassigned seating is a particular challenge to the ability to focus and to work with colleagues virtually.** And as a result, our data suggests workers who spend a significant amount of time collaborating with others in person may be the most apt to thrive in unassigned seating. Those who need significant amount of time to focus, less so."

"Providing the right suite of alternative workspaces or amenities can make a sizable impact – in particular, workers in unassigned seating struggle to find private places to work, and places to take phone calls. They also struggle with the basic issues that come with losing a desk – storage, cleanliness, comfortable seating, and overall noise."



Etsy, Brooklyn, New York

PREFERRED PLACE TO WORK, PEOPLE IN LOWEST-PERFORMING WORKPLACES

- 1 Home
- 2 My company's workplace
- 3 Coworking
- 4 Coffee shop

PREFERRED PLACE TO WORK, PEOPLE IN HIGHEST-PERFORMING WORKPLACES

- 1 My company's workplace
- 2 Home
- 3 Coworking
- 4 Coffee shop

"The office is still the most preferred place to work – as long as it is well-designed. If the office is not well-designed, the most preferred place to work is at home. There's a message to designers there that place matters."

Most important design factors for unassigned seating:

- | | | | |
|---|--|---|----------------------------------|
| 1 | Ample private spaces, reservable and on-demand | 5 | Maintenance and cleanliness |
| 2 | Spaces to support virtual collaboration | 6 | Ergonomics and comfort |
| 3 | Enough work settings for everyone | 7 | Noise management |
| 4 | Personal storage | 8 | Technology to support group work |



CBRE Headquarters, Los Angeles, California

>“Fixing unassigned seating requires more than just the right workplace. **Worker perception and participation are a significant barrier.** For workers not currently sitting in unassigned seating, its perception is neutral to negative – two-thirds of U.S. workers agree it sounds confusing

and stressful, while less than a quarter think it sounds productive or efficient.”

“By role, those in more senior positions are more likely than other workers to express positive impressions of unassigned seating, though they are no more likely to be in unassigned seating at this time.”



Confidential Tech Client, Santa Clara, California

ROLE

MANAGEMENT	17% RECEPTIVE	45% NEUTRAL	38% NOT RECEPTIVE
PROFESSIONAL/TECHNICAL STAFF	11%	27%	62%
ADMINISTRATIVE	11%	29%	60%

INDUSTRY

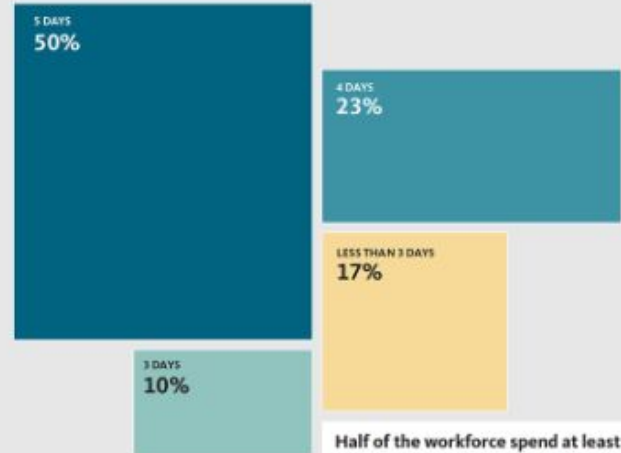
TECHNOLOGY	27% RECEPTIVE	40% NEUTRAL	33% NOT RECEPTIVE
CONSUMER GOODS/RETAIL	20%	34%	46%
MANAGEMENT ADVISORY	20%	38%	42%
FINANCIAL/INSURANCE	18%	34%	48%
SCIENCES	10%	34%	56%
MEDIA	10%	59%	31%
NOT-FOR-PROFIT	10%	30%	60%
ENERGY	9%	32%	59%
GOVERNMENT/DEFENSE	9%	27%	64%
LEGAL	7%	28%	65%

Receptivity to unassigned seating by role and by industry



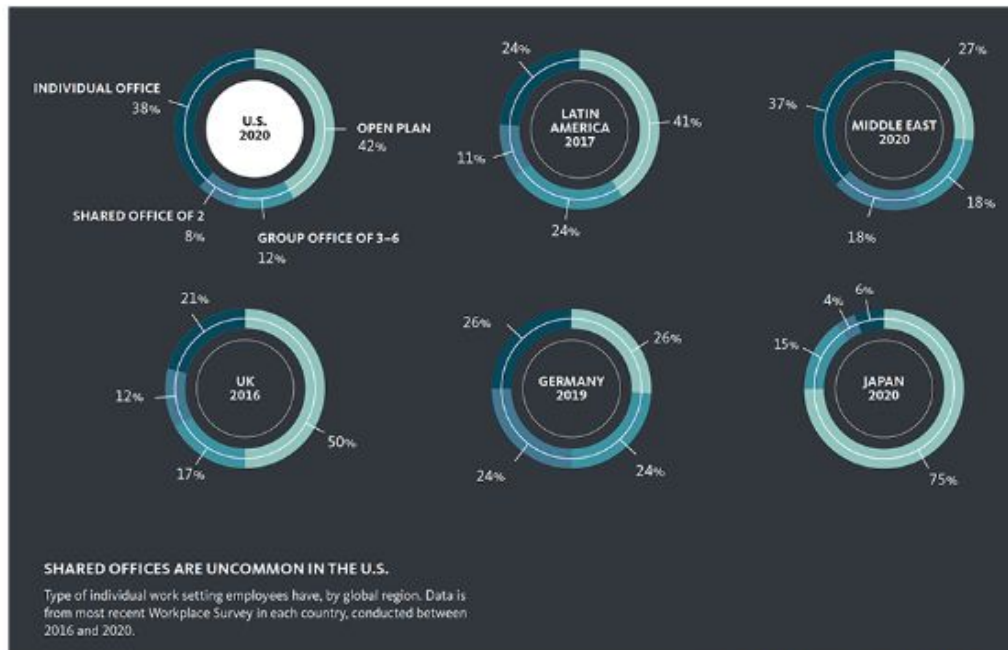
The Collective, Seattle, Washington

TIME SPENT IN THE OFFICE



Half of the workforce spend at least one day per week away from their primary office.

Percent of respondents within each mobility profile.



"Ultimately, any workplace transition's success will lean not only on the appropriateness of the strategy to workers' needs, and organizational culture and processes, but also on how the change is communicated and managed. Similar to broader discussions around open working environments, a key barrier to adoption is negative perception – that sentiment must be addressed for any strategy to succeed."

> "Out-of-office mobility is also a key strategy to improve workplace effectiveness and experience. People still spend the majority of their working time in the office – and that time, and the quality of that environment, are directly associated with higher performance. Interestingly, the ability to work away from the office for a portion of one's workweek also shows positive benefits – effectiveness outside the office brings effectiveness back to the office too."

"While broad measures of autonomy and mobility – like having choice in where to work during an average day – are unequivocally associated with higher performance, the right amount of time working in versus away from the office is far from universal. Overall, mobile workers tend to have higher effectiveness (WPI) and experience (EXI) scores. These workers are also the most engaged. Mobility may put pressure on how teams collaborate, but those who are most mobile are also highly likely to have an awareness of what their colleagues are working on."

> **"In an era of choice, the office is still people's preferred place to work, but only if it's designed to support their work.** The more choices people have in where to work, the more important it is to understand their preferred work settings. We asked respondents a simple question – where would you prefer to work among four options: a coffee shop, a coworking space, your home, or your company's workplace? The workplace and people's homes consistently outrank the other choices, but another interesting insight also emerged. When we segment our data

research

between those with the highest and lowest WPI scores, we found that the workers with the highest WPI scores – those with the best performing, best designed workspaces – prefer working from their company's office location above all other places. For those whose workplaces aren't performing, they would rather work from home."

Head to [Gensler.com](https://www.gensler.com) to read the full report – you won't be disappointed! ■