

The Great Office Debate

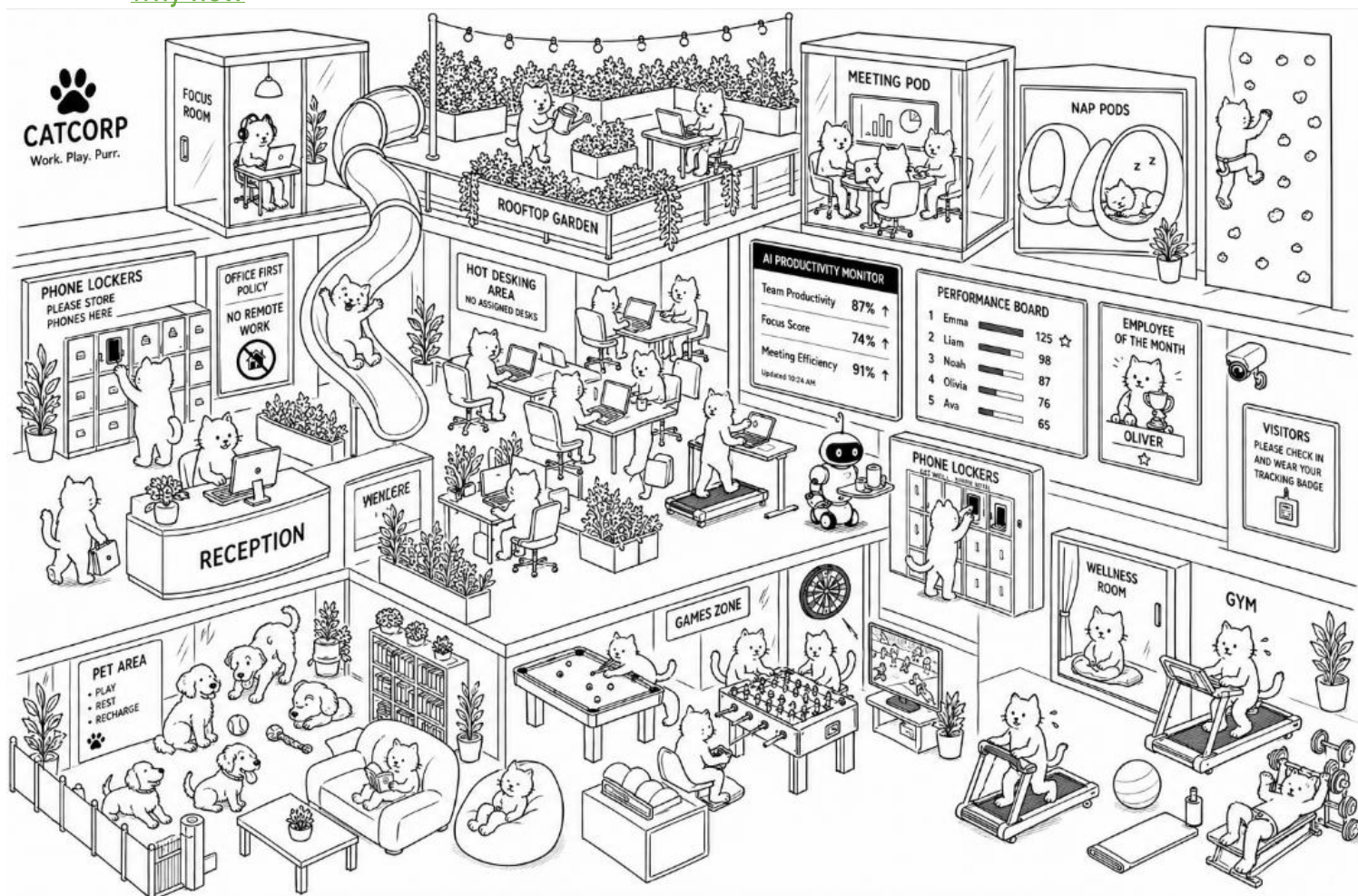


Warm up

- What does a great workplace look like to you?
- What is more important: a high salary or a good work-life balance? Why?
- What would make you leave a job, even if the salary was good?
- Do you think people work to live or live to work in your country?
- What do younger employees expect from employers today?
- What has been the biggest change in the workplace over the last 10 years? Has it been positive or negative?
- Has technology improved the way we work? Why or why not?
- What do you think workplaces will look like in 20 years?



1. Look at the office below. What do you notice? Would you like to work there? Why or why not?





2. Choose one option from each category to create your ideal workplace. Compare your choices with a partner and discuss the questions below.

Category	Option A	Option B	Option C
Location	Fully remote	Hybrid	Office
Schedule	Fixed hours	Flexible hours	Four-day week
Working hours	Early start / early finish	Traditional 9-to-5	Choose your own hours
Office layout	Open-plan	Small shared office	Private office
Online Meetings	Cameras on	Cameras off	Optional
Technology	Minimal AI	Some AI assistance	AI for most tasks
Communication	Mostly email	Mostly messaging apps	Mostly face-to-face
Dress code	Formal	Smart casual	No dress code
Management style	Close supervision	Regular check-ins	Complete autonomy
Teamwork	Mostly individual work	Mix of both	Mostly teamwork
Workspace	Assigned desk	Flexible desk sharing	Work wherever you want
Employee benefits	Higher salary	More holiday	Wellness and lifestyle benefits
International work	Local office only	Occasional travel	Frequent travel
Decision-making	Managers decide	Shared decisions	Employees decide most things
Company culture	Professional and formal	Friendly and relaxed	Fast-paced and competitive
Workplace perks	Free meals	Gym membership	Home office budget
Performance reviews	Annual reviews	Monthly feedback	No formal reviews

- Which of your choices do you think most people would agree with?
- Which feature would have the biggest impact on employee happiness?
- Would your ideal workplace be successful? Why or why not?



3. You are going to listen to a business leader discussing AI and the future of work. Before you listen, discuss these questions with a partner.

1. Think back to when you first started working. What did you find difficult at first? What helped you gain experience?
2. Were there tasks you found boring or pointless at first but later realised were useful?



4. Listen to Daniel Mercer, Chief Operating Officer of NorthStar Consulting Group, discussing one of his biggest concerns about AI in the workplace.

a. Choose the best summary.

1. AI will replace most CEOs within the next ten years.
2. AI may remove opportunities for young employees to gain experience.
3. Companies should stop using AI until more research is available.
4. AI will create more jobs than it destroys.

b. Why does Daniel mention presentations, data analysis, reports and meeting notes?

1. To show which tasks employees dislike most.
2. To give examples of work AI often does badly.
3. To show how basic tasks can help employees learn.
4. To explain why junior employees are less productive

c. Daniel says, "You can't remove the first few steps of the ladder and expect people to reach the top." What does he mean?

d. Underline two concerns Daniel raises.

1. Future employees may gain less experience.
2. Companies may stop hiring managers.
3. Work may become more mentally demanding.
4. AI will eventually stop working.
5. Salaries will decrease significantly.

e. Daniel argues that making work more efficient does not necessarily make it better for employees. How does he support this idea?



5. Daniel's comments were later shared online. Read the comments below from professionals who watched the talk. In pairs or small groups, discuss which comment you agree with most and why.

Peter Jones, Operations Director

"AI may remove repetitive tasks, but it also makes monitoring employees much easier. Companies can track how quickly people respond, how much work they complete and even how they communicate. Increasing productivity might mean losing privacy and feeling constantly observed."

Hannah Brooks, Psychologist

"One thing Daniel didn't mention is confidence. Many people develop confidence by repeatedly doing small tasks well. If young employees are expected to start with complex work immediately, they may become more anxious, not more capable."

Emma Lewis, Head of Innovation

"One unintended consequence of AI is that it's replacing hundreds of small workplace conversations. In the past, junior employees learned by asking colleagues questions. Today, many prefer asking AI instead of speaking to a colleague. The answers may be faster, but they miss the mentoring, relationships, and confidence-building that often come with those conversations."

Rebecca Stone, Learning & Development Director

"I think Daniel may be idealising the past. Many junior employees spent years doing repetitive work without actually learning very much. Perhaps AI will force companies to stop using boring tasks as a training method and start investing in real mentoring, coaching, and development instead."

Victor Meyer, Entrepreneur

"The assumption that people learn best by making mistakes at work may no longer be true. Pilots train in simulators. Surgeons practise before operating on patients. Perhaps future employees will need to learn through AI-powered simulations instead of spending years doing routine tasks."

Rachel Caruana, Head of IT

"Companies are not responsible for giving employees easy work simply to help them gain experience. If AI can complete a task faster and more accurately, continuing to pay people to do it makes little business sense. Young professionals may need to take more responsibility for developing their own skills instead of expecting employers to provide years of training."

Gerunds and Infinitives

When we use two verbs together, the second verb does not always have the same form. Compare:

- I enjoy working from home.
- I want to work from home.

Gerunds (-ing form): *enjoy, avoid, stop, consider, keep, learn by, be good at*

Some businesses are considering reducing working hours.

Infinitives (to + verb): *want, need, decide, hope, plan, expect*

Companies need to rethink how people gain experience.

⚠ Watch out!

Some verbs can be followed by both forms, and sometimes the meaning changes. Some verbs can be followed by either form, but the meaning changes. Common examples include *stop, remember, forget, try, regret, and mean*.

stop doing = finish or quit an activity

The company stopped using the old system.

stop to do = pause one activity in order to do something else

She stopped to answer a phone call.



6. Go back to the comments on the previous page. Find as many examples of gerunds and infinitives as you can. Add them to the table below.

<u>Gerunds</u>	<u>Infinitives</u>
<i>it also <u>makes monitoring</u>...</i>	<i>are expected to start with complex work</i>
<i>mean losing privacy</i>	
<i>develop confidence by repeatedly doing small tasks</i>	<i>force companies to stop using boring tasks</i>
<i>learned by asking colleagues questions</i>	<i>need to learn through AI-powered simulations</i>
<i>prefer asking AI</i>	<i>simply to help them gain experience</i>
<i>instead of speaking to a colleague</i>	<i>continuing to pay people to do it</i>

<i>spent years doing repetitive work</i> <i>stop using boring tasks</i> <i>start investing in real mentoring, coaching and development</i> <i>learn best by making mistakes</i> <i>instead of spending years doing routine tasks</i> <i>take responsibility for developing their own skills</i> <i>instead of expecting employers to provide years of training</i>	<i>need to take more responsibility</i>
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7. AI is not the only thing changing the way people work. Some companies are also rethinking how employees communicate and make decisions. Read about Amazon's meeting culture. Choose the correct form of each verb.

Why Amazon Meetings Start in Silence

Imagine *to arrive / **arriving*** at a meeting, and nobody speaks. Instead, everyone sits quietly and starts reading.

This is a normal part of meeting culture at Amazon. In 2004, the company stopped *to use / **using*** PowerPoint for internal presentations. Instead, employees are asked *to **prepare** / **preparing*** a written document explaining an idea or problem in detail. These documents can be up to six pages long.

At the beginning of the meeting, everyone spends time *to read / **reading*** the document silently before the discussion begins. The idea is to give everyone enough time *to understand / **understanding*** the issue properly. It also helps presenters to avoid *to rely / **relying*** on impressive slides or presentation skills to sell an idea. The quality of the thinking, rather than the quality of the PowerPoint, is supposed to take centre stage.

Writing one of these documents isn't necessarily easy. Jeff Bezos has said that a strong six-page memo can take a week or more *to write / **writing***. Producing one may involve *to rewrite / **rewriting*** it several times, sharing it with colleagues and editing it again.

The approach is part of a wider culture that aims *to keep / **keeping*** decision-making efficient. Amazon has also tried *to reduce / **reducing*** unnecessary processes and

meetings. CEO Andy Jassy has even criticised the problem of having “pre-meetings” before the meetings where decisions are actually made.

Amazon believes that written narratives make it easier for people to understand complex issues and ask better questions. But they also demand a lot more from the person preparing them.



8. Write a short opinion piece (80–100 words) on the next page. Use gerunds and infinitives where appropriate. You may consider:

- whether this approach would work in your workplace
- whether you would prefer a written document or a presentation
- the advantages and disadvantages of starting meetings with silent reading
- whether this approach could lead to better decisions

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9. Match each sentence (a–b) with the correct meaning (i–ii).

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|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1a. The company <u>stopped using</u> the old software. | i. Pause to do something else. |
| 1b. We <u>stopped to discuss</u> the problem. | ii. Stop an activity completely. |
| 2a. I <u>remember meeting</u> my manager for the first time. | i. Remember something you need to do. |
| 2b. <u>Remember to send</u> me the report this afternoon. | ii. Remember something from the past. |

- 3a. We tried using AI to take meeting notes. ~~i. Make an effort to do something.~~
- 3b. We tried to finish the project by Friday. ~~ii. Test something to see if it works.~~
- 4a. She regrets leaving her previous company. ~~i. Sorry about what you are about to say.~~
- 4b. We regret to inform you that your application was unsuccessful. ~~ii. Regret something from the past.~~
- 5a. Working from home would mean spending less time commuting. ~~i. Have something as a result.~~
- 5b. I meant to reply to your email yesterday. ~~ii. Plan or intend to do something.~~
- 6a. I'll never forget giving my first presentation. ~~i. Forget to do something.~~
- 6b. I forgot to attach the document to my email. ~~ii. Remember something from the past.~~



Optional task/Homework: 10. Create the ideal company.

Work in pairs or small groups. Imagine you are launching a new company. Decide what your company does and design its workplace culture. Your company should be attractive to employees, but it must also be realistic and successful.

Make decisions about:

- where and when employees work
- which tasks humans still perform
- how inexperienced employees gain practical experience
- how meetings are organised
- how decisions are made
- how employees receive feedback
- how the company prevents stress and burnout
- which benefits and workplace perks it offers
- what makes its culture different

Include at least one unusual or controversial policy. For example:

- meetings begin with silent reading
- employees are not allowed to use AI during their first six months
- there are no managers
- salaries are completely transparent
- employees choose their own working hours
- performance reviews are completed by AI

Prepare a short presentation. Explain the reasons for your decisions and use at least four gerunds or infinitives.

Audio

Daniel Mercer
Chief Operating Officer, NorthStar Consulting Group

People often ask me whether AI will replace managers, directors, or even CEOs.

Honestly, that's not really what worries me.

What worries me is what happens when AI replaces beginners.

I've worked at NorthStar Consulting Group for nearly thirty years, and during that time, I've watched hundreds of graduates join the company. Many of them arrived with little practical experience. They learned by doing the work nobody else wanted to do: preparing presentations, analysing data, writing reports, taking notes in meetings, and fixing mistakes.

Most of them hated it. At least at first.

But those tasks were never really about presentations, spreadsheets, or reports. They were about learning. They taught people how businesses operate. They taught them how to communicate, how to solve problems, and how to make decisions. Most importantly, they taught them how to make mistakes when the consequences were still small.

Today, artificial intelligence can do much of that work in seconds.

It can draft reports, analyse information, summarise meetings, and create presentations faster than most junior employees. From a business perspective, the benefits are obvious. Our competitors are investing heavily in these tools, and we are too. If we don't adapt, we will become slower, less efficient, and less competitive.

The reality is that AI is coming whether we like it or not. But I think we're overlooking something important.

Every profession has a training ground. Junior lawyers review documents. Junior accountants check figures. Junior consultants build presentations. That's where people get experience. That's where they develop judgment.

If AI starts doing all of that work, where will future experts come from?

Every director in this company started at the bottom. Every manager made mistakes. Every leader learned through experience. You can't remove the first few steps of the ladder and expect people to try to reach the top.

And there's another concern that I rarely hear people discuss.

Many experts believe AI will make work easier. In some ways, they're right. AI will remove a lot of routine work. But routine work also creates balance.

A normal working day includes simple tasks and difficult ones. Some activities require intense concentration. Others give you a chance to think, to recover, or simply just to switch gears.

Now imagine a workplace where AI handles all the routine tasks.

What's left?

The difficult client conversations.

The strategic decisions.

The complex problems.

The high-pressure situations.

The work that demands creativity, judgment, and responsibility. In other words, only the hardest parts of the job will be left.

Sometimes I wonder whether we're creating a future where people complete fewer tasks but feel more exhausted. Not because they're working longer hours but because every remaining hour requires them to perform at their highest level.

I believe AI will transform business. I believe it will improve productivity dramatically. I believe it will create enormous opportunities. But the question that keeps me awake at night isn't whether AI can do the work. It's this: if AI does all the beginner work, where will beginners come from?