



Position paper on  
the future of work at  
ETH Zurich

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# 1. The future of work

The future of work refers to the ongoing evolution of the workplace, including changes in the types of jobs available, the skills and competencies required and the ways in which work is organised, managed and performed. These changes are being driven by a complex interplay of technological, social, economic and demographic factors (Harvard Business Review Press, 2021). It is often misleading to refer to the future of work as something that is yet to happen. We are already in the process of working through the themes that apply to it. It is therefore essential to note that certain changes associated with the future of work are not futuristic ideals but current trends that require strategic planning and proactive implementation in academic institutions today.

The emergence of Industry 4.0, also known as the Fourth Industrial Revolution, is an example of a significant change that is affecting the world of work. It involves the integration into industrial processes of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence<sup>1</sup>, the internet of things and cloud computing, leading to increased efficiency and automation of routine tasks. In this increasingly digital work environment, it is crucial to understand that human skills are not diminishing but growing in significance, as these are the abilities that machines cannot replicate. Consequently, new job roles requiring a mix

of technical and non-technical skills are emerging, encouraging collaboration and interpersonal communication. A new term coined “STEMpathy” highlights the growing importance of empathy skills in STEM fields and is gaining traction (Engelbert and Hagel 2017). STEMpathy refers to combining technical expertise with human empathy to address the needs of diverse communities and develop innovative solutions that prioritise human experience. STEM professionals are consequently required to appreciate human needs and emphasise the humanisation of technological advancements in product design and development.

In the future of work and the ongoing evolution of the workplace, institutions such as ETH Zurich need not only to adapt to the changes that lie ahead but also to develop new strategies and skills to remain competitive. Beyond that, ETH faces the challenge of transforming the way work is carried out while simultaneously safeguarding the quality and delivery of its core responsibilities, which include education, research, knowledge transfer and outreach. In the process, it must prioritise the well-being and engagement of its employees and remain focused on attracting and retaining the best talent.

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<sup>1</sup> We use this term broadly, including aspects like complex algorithms, machine learning and artificial intelligence.

## 2. The purpose of this position paper

This position paper provides an in-depth overview of the significance of the future of work within the ETH Zurich context. It not only examines the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead but also sheds light on ETH's goals and positioning in relation to this critical subject. Furthermore, the paper provides employees with practical recommendations with regard to how to contribute to ETH's future work goals. In recognition of the dynamic nature of the future of work, the paper captures the current perspective on the understanding that the landscape may evolve.

In keeping with the participative culture at ETH, the paper adopts a comprehensive approach by incorporating the perspectives of the ETH community across diverse hierarchical levels, departments, technical, administrative and scientific staff members. Namely, it incorporates the results of a wide-ranging survey conducted in 2022 – the ETH Future of Work Survey – which was carried out by the Office of Personnel Development and Leadership (VPPL) at ETH in collaboration with the FHNW School of Applied Psychology. The position paper also considers the outcomes of various interviews and discussions held with ETH professors and other employees, further enriching the analysis. Finally, it encompasses targeted strategic deliberations held by Executive Board members in April 2022 that explored various facets of the future of work. These discussions spanned topics such as sustaining

employee engagement and establishing the appropriate real estate structures and conditions necessary for the evolving landscape of work.

It is noteworthy that both the ETH Future of Work Survey and the interviews were spearheaded by the office of Personnel Development and Leadership. This underscores the unit's dedication to promoting a forward-thinking work environment and acknowledges that the successful implementation of forthcoming changes hinges on the commitment of ETH employees and their openness to help shape future work trends at ETH.

This paper and its outlined positions establish the foundation for upcoming discussions, projects, and anticipated structural changes. A prominent change entails the expansion of flexible workspace concepts that include desk-sharing solutions and a more flexible approach to utilizing infrastructure overall, in accordance with a desire for increased working location flexibility among ETH employees. This transition not only conforms to the evolving sentiments of ETH employees but is also in line with sustainability and cost-saving objectives. Implementing this shift demands a collaborative effort among various administrative divisions at ETH, under the leadership and guidance of the Executive Board Domain for Infrastructure, to align people, organisation, space and technology.

# 3. ETH Zurich and the future of work

This section discusses a selection of emerging themes that are relevant to the future of work at ETH Zurich, including their implications, challenges and opportunities as well as ETH's position on them. The themes were selected based on the available literature on the topic (Donkin, 2010; Harvard Business Review Press, 2021), recurring topics identified during an ETH internal information-gathering process and external influences that continue to evolve, such as budget cuts, climate considerations and requirements outlined by the Swiss federal government. They are not independent concepts but highly interconnected and exert a dynamic influence on each other (see figure 1). Hence, a holistic approach is instrumental in effectively addressing challenges and opportunities in the rapidly transforming world of work. Viewing the selected themes collectively, this paper offers a clear perspective on ETH's strategic focus and approach to shaping the future of work more broadly.



## 3.1. Flexible and remote working

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated the adoption of remote working, hybrid working and flexible hours. It compelled many employers to implement remote and hybrid work arrangements due to concerns about employee health and safety,

as well as government regulations. This shift enabled employees to work from home, allowing them more flexibility in terms of work hours and location, while others who would have preferred to work on site were (partly or temporarily) forced to work from home. Nevertheless, the pandemic experience has highlighted the potential benefits of remote and hybrid working, such as an improved work-life balance (Hilbrecht et al., 2008), reduction in commuting time and expenses (Tremblay & Thomsin, 2012), greater autonomy (Harpaz, 2002) and increased creativity and productivity (Baudot & Kelly, 2020; George et al., 2022); this is provided that employees do not work solely from home (Barrero et al., 2023).

From December 2020 to March 2021, the ETH Zurich Work and Organizational Psychology Group conducted a study on COVID-19-associated remote working and virtual collaboration experience (Bienefeld et al., 2021) while COVID-19 restrictions were still in place. The study found that ETH employees generally expected continued flexibility in terms of workplace and working time after the restrictions were lifted, with a majority expressing a desire to spend at least two days working remotely. These findings were supported by the ETH Future of Work Survey, which revealed that, on average, ETH employees aspire to work from home approximately 35% of the time. Significantly, the distinction between scientific and technical-administrative staff was relatively minor,

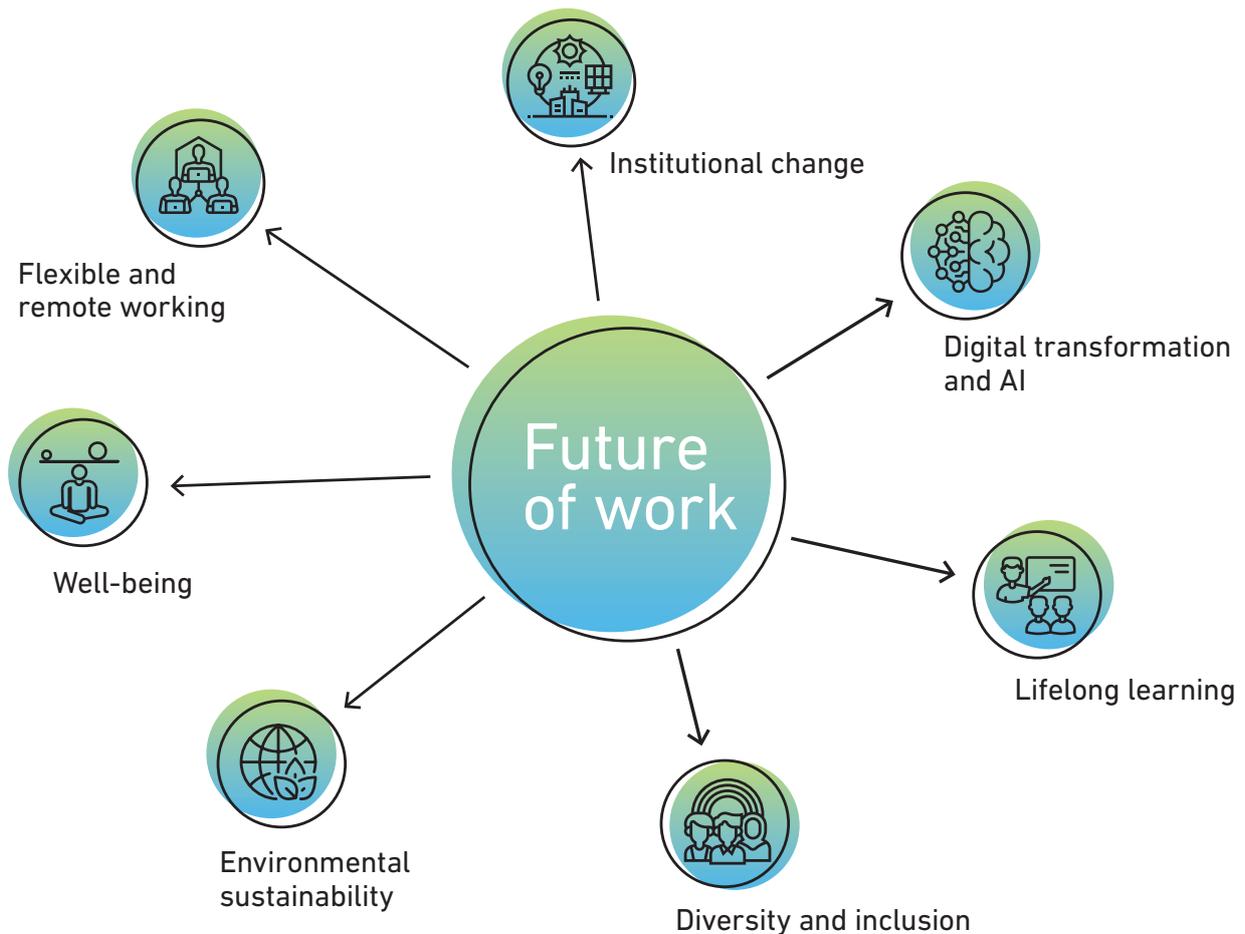


Figure 1: Emerging themes in the future of work at ETH.

with only a 10-percentage-point difference. To be specific, technical-administrative staff expressed a preference to work from home for about 40% of their time, while scientific staff indicated a desire to work from home 30% of the time. The study also identified the top three reasons for employees' preference for remote work: the elimination of the commute (79% agreement), autonomy with regard to location and time management (78% agreement) and a better work-life balance (69% agreement). These same reasons have been identified by other Swiss-wide studies (Weichbrodt, 2022).

The suitability of working from home varies depending on the nature of an employee's tasks and may also differ across different stages of their career. For instance, employees whose roles involve staffing a reception desk or serving as technical laboratory

assistants and working primarily in a lab may find remote work unsuitable. In line with this, the results from the ETH Future of Work Survey showed that the typical amount of time employees currently spent working from home and the amount of time they would prefer to work from home corresponded with whether their working tasks could be performed from home or not. This reveals that, in most cases, an employee's desired share of remote work time will likely not conflict with their job profile and task requirements. The survey also highlighted the increased relevance of on-site work, particularly in early career stages, where respondents indicated they worked from home 17% of the time, compared to 30% at later career phases. Notably, even if a significant portion of work could be performed remotely (e.g. 80% or even up to 90%), the average desired

rate of time spent working from home did not exceed 50% and, in most cases, not even 40%. These findings underscore the importance of in-person collaboration, emphasizing the need to strike a balance between remote and in-person interaction to ensure the right fit for individuals, teams and the institution. It recognises that fostering a sense of connection, collaboration and camaraderie is crucial for overall success and that physical interaction plays a vital role in achieving this, especially now that flexible work arrangements are being embraced.

While surveys and research consistently highlight the numerous positive effects of remote work on individuals, teams and institutions, it is crucial to remain mindful of the potentially negative impact arising from this work arrangement. The aforementioned study (Bienefeld et al., 2021) showed that remote working was not embraced equally by everybody. Employees who generally prefer to work in teams were less satisfied with their jobs and felt more isolated during the pandemic. The ETH Future of Work Survey showed that the loss of identification with the organisation or the team and the blurring of work-life boundaries that led to longer working hours and overwork were employees' biggest concerns<sup>2</sup>. Other negative impacts of working from home that can be found in the literature include, for example, communication and collaboration challenges (Waizenegger et al., 2020) and reduced visibility and career advancement opportunities (Khalifa & Davison, 2000). Specifically, remote workers may have fewer opportunities for face time with managers, colleagues, or clients, which can result in fewer prospects for professional development, mentoring and career advancement (Khalifa & Davison, 2000). These

possible negative impacts, the conditions under which they occur, and how they can be avoided are currently of great interest (Badura et al., 2021; Tamers et al., 2020). Despite these concerns, the ETH Future of Work Survey revealed that, on average, ETH employees expressed a desire to allocate approximately 10% more of their time to working from home compared to the three months preceding the survey. This result was similar across all the employee populations at ETH (see figure 2).

Taking into account the pandemic's impact, the preferences of ETH employees and the advantages associated with remote work, the Executive Board Domain of Personnel Development and Leadership at ETH issued an information sheet outlining the principles, requirements and general conditions governing working from home arrangements at ETH. It also released the following statement: "The Executive Board of ETH Zurich would like supervisors to facilitate the option of working from home for their employees wherever this is feasible due to operational requirements. However, exclusive work-from-home arrangements are normally not desirable." To enable employees to enjoy a positive working-from-home experience and mitigate any potentially negative effects on the individual and on the institution, guidelines and tips were published on the ETH website.



### 3.2. Digital transformation and artificial intelligence

Digital transformation and artificial intelligence (AI) are already having and will continue to have a significant impact on the future of work at universities. Digital

<sup>2</sup> The study measured subjective concerns, not the factual loss of identification or blurring of boundaries.

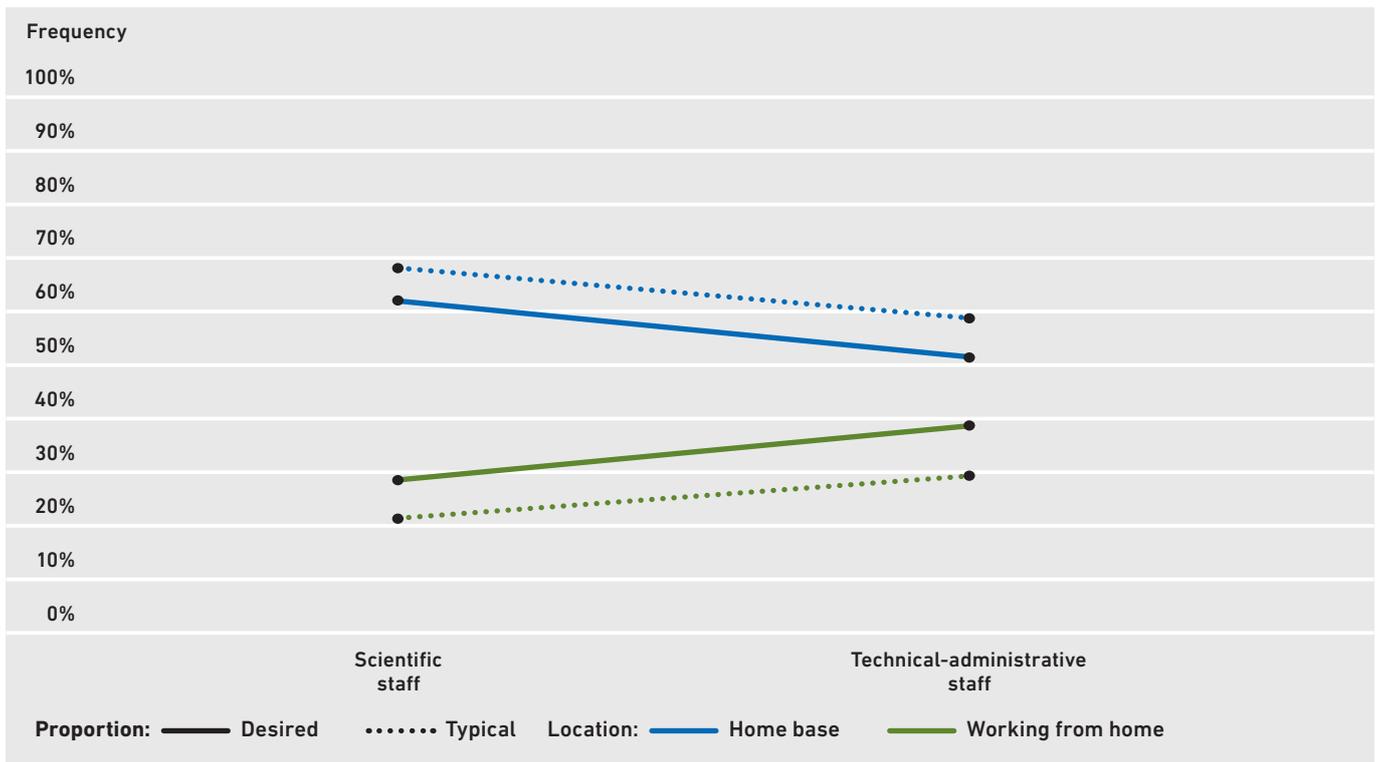


Figure 2: Comparison by function: Typical and desired proportions of working time at locations<sup>3</sup>

technologies have the potential to automate many administrative tasks that are currently performed manually, such as processing student records, admissions and scheduling appointments, freeing up time for staff to do other work. As digital technologies and AI continue to advance, their impact on collaboration for both scientific and technical/administrative staff is becoming increasingly evident. These technologies enable seamless communication, knowledge sharing and virtual collaboration among team members, regardless of geographical location. Scientific staff can leverage digital platforms and tools to collaborate on research projects, share data and facilitate real-time discussions, fostering innovation and accelerating scientific breakthroughs. Similarly, technical/administrative staff can benefit from streamlined processes, automated workflows and efficient communication channels, enhancing their productivity and effectiveness in supporting university operations. Furthermore, these digital technologies and AI have the

potential to greatly improve lifelong learning opportunities for students and personnel by providing personalised and adaptive learning experiences based on people’s individual needs and preferences.

Academic and technical/administrative staff at universities need to be suitably equipped for the rapidly evolving digital and AI-focused future of work. The ETH Future of Work Survey showed that employees considered themselves “sufficiently qualified and well prepared” (approx. 88% agreement) with respect to the digital skills and competencies needed in the future of work. However, it is important to acknowledge that since this appraisal was subjective, there is a possibility that the perceived value could be overestimated, potentially overlooking any existing skill gaps that the respondents might not be aware of. Also, despite the overall positive assessments, there was some potential for

<sup>3</sup> Home base refers to an assigned workstation or location at ETH, including, for example, spaces in a desk-sharing zone.

improvement, especially when considering IT security and data protection. This is a critical finding, as universities handle enormous amounts of sensitive data every day, including student and faculty personal information, institutional and research data, and classified or proprietary information. Cybersecurity threats can lead to data breaches, intellectual property theft, reputational damage, compromised academic integrity and significant legal, financial and regulatory penalties. Moving forward into the future of work will require an investment in training and upskilling programmes that emphasise the relevant digital competencies.

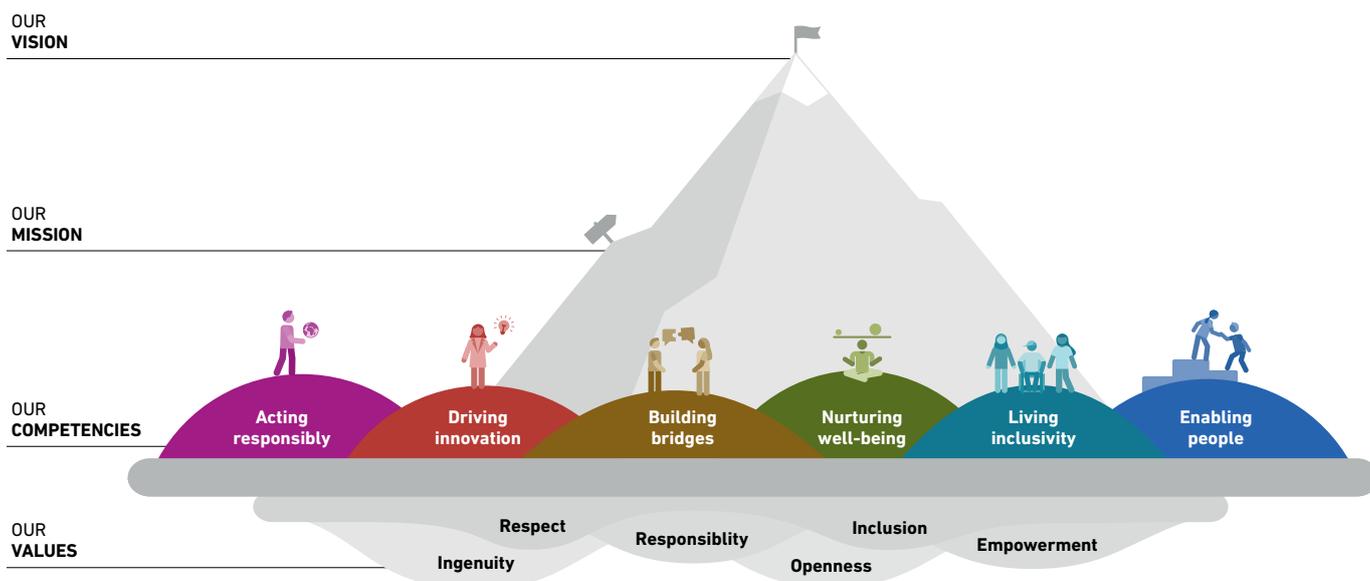
Strategic foresight methods, frequently employed by the ETH Strategic Foresight Hub (Office of the President), offer invaluable assistance to universities in navigating the challenges and opportunities presented by the future of work in the context of digital transformation and AI. Foresight practices enable universities to proactively anticipate and adapt to emerging technologies (Howard, 2019). As academic institutions integrate AI, they bear a significant social responsibility to consider its global implications and impact on future generations. Prioritising transparency, fairness and equity in the ethical use and development of AI is of paramount importance. Moreover, universities must continually monitor and evaluate the effects of these technologies on their staff, students and academic research, ensuring that innovation is aligned with the institution's academic mission, facilitates knowledge transfer, enhances educational experience and upholds academic values (Taebi et al., 2019). By embracing strategic foresight methodologies and maintaining a strong ethical compass, universities can effectively navigate the complexities of the future of work and ensure that their endeavours contribute positively to society.



### 3.3. Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is an ongoing process that involves acquiring and updating the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to adapt to evolving technologies, as well as shifting social, economic, and environmental contexts. It entails stepping outside of one's comfort zone which means to venture beyond familiar boundaries and embrace new experiences, challenges, and growth opportunities. It involves pushing oneself beyond routine and familiarity to explore uncharted territory and expand personal horizons (Covey, 2020). Lifelong learning is essential in the context of the future of work. Universities such as ETH ensure that their staff and faculty are well-equipped to thrive in the evolving work environment by offering lifelong learning opportunities, facilitated, for example, through initiatives like the Life Long Learning Hub. Moreover, it fosters a culture of continuous learning, ultimately supporting key institutional missions such as teaching, research, and knowledge transfer.

As AI and new technologies continue to shape the workplace, experts and scholars are predicting a higher demand for social and leadership competencies that cannot be replicated artificially such as empathy, authenticity and the ability to inspire and motivate high-performing teams towards achieving complex goals (Engelbert & Hagel, 2017; Harvard Business Review Press, 2021). Universities must therefore prepare their students and staff to harness these critical human competencies that will remain relevant as workplaces evolve. This is exactly what the Rectorate at ETH has done by implementing the [ETH Competence Framework for](#)



ETH Social and Leadership Competencies (Graphic: ETH Zurich / FS Parker)

students and also what ETH is focussing on in its strategic HR plans. Specifically, in the year 2022, ETH Zurich’s Executive Board formally approved six social and leadership competencies that pave the way and provide the framework for lifelong learning at ETH (see figure 3).

Leading teams remotely also requires additional competencies and skills, which include, for example, the ability to develop and preserve trust. In the virtual space, team leaders need to adopt methods to motivate their teams to engage in continuous communication, to build a foundation of trust with each team member and to foster collaboration and build a sense of belonging (Weigel et al., 2020). In the ETH Future of Work Survey, in which employees in a leadership position were asked to rate the degree to which their leadership style fit mobile-flexible working, the average rating given was 67%. Just under half of the respondents said that they had changed their leadership behaviour because team cohesion was proving more challenging to maintain. This further emphasises the relevance and importance of developing social and leadership competencies, such as the

ability to build bridges, nurture well-being and act responsibly. Section four of this position paper provides specific recommendations on how to develop and apply the ETH social and leadership competencies in the context of the future of work.

Beyond that, ETH Zurich values both internal and external job mobility, recognising its importance for continuous learning, skill development and adaptability in the future of work for scientific and technical/administrative staff. By also promoting open positions internally, the institution encourages its employees to explore diverse roles, expand their skill sets and gain valuable insights into various aspects of the organisation. However, it also recognises that external candidates may be considered, thereby ensuring a fair and inclusive approach to hiring the best talent. Additionally, ETH supports external job mobility by providing career advice and coaching to non-permanent scientific staff and offering opportunities for technical and administrative staff to enhance their skills, ensuring their employability in the external job market.



### 3.4. Diversity and inclusion

An inclusive workplace is one that embraces and respects diversity, equality/equity<sup>4</sup> and fairness among all employees, regardless of their background or identity. Universities, as key influencers in society, have a crucial role to play in setting an example for diversity and inclusion. By actively promoting diversity, equality and inclusion, and by taking concrete steps to address barriers to or discrimination or inequalities in opportunity, universities can establish a culture that fosters fairness and equity. This inclusive work culture goes beyond mere compliance and serves as a catalyst for creativity, innovation and productivity while also supporting the well-being and motivation of staff. Consequently, an inclusive environment not only enhances job satisfaction, employee engagement and retention rates but also plays a vital role in attracting and retaining top talent (Mor Barak et al., 2016).

The future of work also entails taking different lifestyles, preferences and needs into consideration to offer flexible working conditions that allow people to balance their various life domains. The ETH Future of Work Survey showed that there is no one-size-fits-all approach at ETH, where a diverse range of employees with unique perspectives, needs and circumstances contribute to the rich fabric of the academic community.

Looking ahead, the promotion of inclusivity at universities will become even more critical due to several factors shaping the future of work. There is a growing need for

interdisciplinary science, where collaboration across different fields and perspectives is essential for solving complex problems (Facilitating Interdisciplinary Research, 2004). Demographic changes, too, necessitate an inclusive approach to cater to the needs of a diverse student and faculty population. Shifting attitudes and increased societal awareness have heightened expectations for inclusive practices in all areas of life, including academia. Lastly, in the face of intensified global competition, universities are constantly challenged to attract international talent, and an inclusive environment plays a vital role in achieving this goal (Harvard Business Review Press, 2021).

Considering these current and expected developments in the future of work, ETH recently defined “living inclusivity” as one of its six social and leadership competencies. As the latter provide the framework for all personnel development and other HR-related processes (such as recruiting), this creates awareness of the topic and enables all employees to benefit from improving their understanding and shaping their behaviours and attitudes towards a culture of inclusion and belonging. Furthermore, a diversity strategy<sup>5</sup> will serve as a unifying framework for ETH’s widespread efforts to recognise and harness diversity, foster inclusion and guide ETH’s departments and Executive Board domains in aligning with these objectives. It will provide essential guidance and direction in embracing inclusion as a core value throughout the institution.

<sup>4</sup>In the sense of non-discrimination and providing people with an equal chance to access and benefit from the same opportunities, resources and rights.

<sup>5</sup>The diversity strategy is currently being developed and will be based on the upcoming diversity strategy for the ETH Domain.



### 3.5. Environmental sustainability

Universities bear a societal responsibility that encompasses the imperative to minimise their environmental footprint. By incorporating sustainable practices, such as making better use of space and buildings, switching to renewable energy sources, reducing the consumption of fossil-based materials and services and preserving resources on campus, universities can align their values with the need for environmental protection. Sustainability initiatives in universities, such as facilitating and promoting the efficient use of space and resources and significantly reducing emissions, also lead to cost savings, which can be redirected towards supporting new infrastructure, education and research.

Flexible workspace concepts involve employees sharing desks and workstations designed to enhance their experience while reducing the space and resources needed for traditional office set-ups. This is achieved by introducing innovative features, known as new zoning elements, in addition to the standard desk. These elements transform the conventional workspace into a versatile one, offering a broader variety of work areas to accommodate different work approaches across functions of a scientific and administrative nature, for example. The concept goes beyond mere space reduction, considering what people require from an office, the reasons for their presence, and how the office space is in alignment with and supports their individual working styles. By sharing infrastructure (e.g. desks, laboratories), universities can reduce their material footprint, cut their energy consumption and minimise the waste generated by underutilised workstations. By embracing desk-sharing, universi-

ties can demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility and sustainability while also benefiting from a workspace that is more flexible, mobile and adaptable to the changing needs of the workforce.

On 18 December 2020, the Swiss Federal Council mandated the ETH Domain to introduce mobile-flexible working and desk-sharing for standard office workplaces that are not tied to specific technical or structural infrastructure. The aim was a desk-sharing ratio of 0.8 workspaces per full-time equivalent or lower. The surge in demand for remote work, ambitious carbon emission reduction targets, potential budget constraints and rising inflation are necessitating an increase in desk-sharing practices for technical, administrative and scientific staff. In terms of sustainability and cost considerations, ETH must take prompt action to prevent offices, laboratories and workstations from being underutilised. The successful implementation of this change requires a collaborative effort across various administrative units to bring together people, organisation, space and technology. This initiative will be led and guided by the Executive Board Domain for Infrastructure.

A prominent example showcasing the effective implementation of a flexible workspace concept, including desk-sharing, can be observed in the ETH Octavo building, which will house, as of spring 2024, three Executive Board domains along with their administrative teams: Infrastructure, Personnel Development and Leadership, and Finance and Controlling. In keeping with the Swiss Federal Council's directive, workspaces in the building are generally shared. Following the principles of the shared-desk system, dedicated spaces for focused work and confidential discussions are provided, while designated meeting zones and informal collaboration areas serve as ideal places for breaks and spontaneous interaction. The

ongoing assessment of spatial organisation, with a focus on user experience and space efficiency, ensures regular evaluations and improvements. Technical and administrative staff impacted by the transition to desk-sharing report a largely positive experience, with many initially sceptical individuals now embracing the new working arrangement.

The Octavo building serves as a valuable model for ETH to test and promote flexible workspace concepts across various parts of the institution, including among scientific staff. However, recognising the distinctive nature of scientific work and the unique needs of scientific staff compared to their technical and administrative counterparts is crucial in this



respect, highlighting that Octavo cannot be applied simply as a blueprint. Developing shared office spaces for scientists necessitates careful consideration of these intricacies. Scientific workspaces are distinct learning and working environments where regular interaction, of both a formal and informal nature, must be enabled. Additionally, acknowledging that scientific tasks often require heightened concentration makes the provision of ample quiet spaces of paramount importance. Further distinctions emerge among staff engaged in experimental versus non-experimental work who require nuanced solutions for their division of time between the laboratory and desk. An effective process to enhance desk-sharing among scientific staff at ETH must take these factors into account. It must prioritise the efficient utilisation of office and laboratory spaces and minimise vacancies while optimising cost savings for reinvestment in research and teaching endeavours. The Executive Board Domain for Infrastructure will lead an initiative to establish such a nuanced flexible workspace concept within the academic units and work together with the Executive Board Domain of Personnel Development and Leadership, and Corporate Communications. Such a process will be highly participative and commence with a thorough needs analysis. The resulting concept will be crafted to be broad enough for efficient use across ETH while remaining specific enough to cater to the diverse needs of scientific units, research fields and methodologies at the institution. Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the potential components inherent in such a process. The specific form that such a process will take will be defined by the Executive Board Domain for Infrastructure.

In September 2022, the Office of Personnel Development and Leadership interviewed a cross-section of ETH professors

(seven in total and predominantly department heads) to find out their views on the future of work at ETH and their experience with desk-sharing. The statements provided during the interviews substantiated the assertions mentioned earlier regarding the unique characteristics of scientific work and collaboration. As the prevalence of desk-sharing continues to grow among scientific staff, it becomes crucial to enquire about and address any specific concerns raised by professors and other scientific personnel. One concern that surfaced in the interviews with ETH professors related to the question whether employees can identify with ETH if they do not have their own desk. While some felt that identification is reduced in a desk-sharing set-up, others were convinced that identification can also be established through other factors such as cooperation, common projects and good leadership. Research shows that desk-sharing is associated with an increase in organisational identification, while employees assigned desks identify more strongly with the team (Millward et al., 2007). It also shows that, when applied moderately, desk-sharing can even have a positive impact on employee commitment (Worek et al., 2019). The findings also suggest that individual differences, including personality differences, may impact a person's response to specific workspace arrangements, although more research is needed (Bos et al., 2017). Assessing the specific needs of distinct groups of scientific staff and implementing a feedback mechanism as depicted in table 1 will play a crucial role in catering to individual differences. By fostering more flexible ways of working and collaborating that take individual needs and preferences into account, ETH has the potential to enhance both work outcomes and the overall employee experience.

To successfully implement flexible workspaces, including desk-sharing, for scientific staff, it is crucial to extract valuable insights from desk-sharing practices that have proved effective in similar work environments. Notably, prior examples have illustrated the effective deployment of desk-sharing environments within scientific and experimental settings. For instance, Balgrist Campus serves as an example of how scientists, including ETH members, medical practitioners and non-academic organisations, can work and collaborate effectively in a shared workspace. Building on these successes, it is now essential to implement

additional pilot projects and corresponding evaluation processes. This will further refine the approach and facilitate a seamless transition to flexible workspaces within the unique context of scientific work environments.

To achieve ETH's goal to significantly reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, changes that are in alignment with the future of work must be integrated seamlessly with this goal and require a collective effort. Beyond initiatives like desk-sharing, a multifaceted approach will be necessary to curb emissions at ETH effectively. For instance, expanding remote work options will reduce emissions

Process steps	Examples
1. Clear framework conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Define transparent solution-oriented goals and project organisation.</li> <li>→ Identify project sponsors.</li> <li>→ Provide clarity about roles, responsibilities and timelines.</li> <li>→ Define the broader organisational context.</li> <li>→ Outline interfaces between organisational development and real estate strategy.</li> </ul>
2. Needs assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Select user representatives from the departments who act on behalf of end-users in the design, development and evaluation of products, services or systems and who play a crucial role in ensuring that the outcome meets the needs, preferences and expectations of actual users.</li> <li>→ Conduct a comprehensive survey and/or interviews to understand the specific needs and preferences of scientific staff.</li> <li>→ Identify the balance between laboratory work and office work, the need for quiet spaces and any other specific requirements.</li> </ul>
3. Categorisation of staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Group staff based on their roles, functions and tasks to allow for tailored space allocation, resource planning and personalisation of workspaces.</li> </ul>
4. Designated spaces and required technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Create dedicated areas for quiet, focused work where scientists can concentrate without any disruptions.</li> <li>→ Designate specific areas for team meetings, informal/formal collaboration and group discussions.</li> <li>→ Implement technology solutions to facilitate virtual collaboration when team members are not physically present.</li> </ul>
5. Flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Provide flexible arrangements for those who need to move frequently between the laboratory and office.</li> </ul>
6. Change management activities: training and guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Strategically implement a communication plan for stakeholder engagement, emphasising a change story to align with organisational objectives and to foster commitment. Provide clear guidelines on how to use shared spaces effectively.</li> <li>→ Offer training sessions on utilising shared resources and maintaining a collaborative and respectful working environment.</li> </ul>
7. Identify pilot projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Integrate proposed initiatives strategically for seamless implementation within the portfolio.</li> <li>→ Review lessons learned post-implementation to be factored into future decision-making and continuous improvement.</li> </ul>
8. Monitoring and feedback mechanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Establish a feedback system to continuously improve flexible workspace arrangements.</li> <li>→ Regularly gather input from staff to address any concerns or adjust the workplace arrangements as needed.</li> </ul>

**Table 1: Possible process to develop and implement a flexible workspace concept with desk-sharing among scientific staff**

successfully by eliminating the daily commute, thereby having a significant impact on the carbon emissions associated with transportation. Furthermore, ETH launched an [air travel project](#) in 2017 (including an [interactive data dashboard](#)) focused on collecting and reporting data, setting clear targets and promoting transparency and initiatives to minimise the environmental impact of air travel.



### 3.6. Well-being

Employees are increasingly looking for work environments that consider their well-being, and private organisations and public institutions are becoming more interested in delivering on this expectation. The reasons for this are manifold – from well-being as being simply an important outcome in and of itself (Inceoglu et al., 2018) to boosting performance, job satisfaction and reducing costs for the employer and society as a whole (Kowalski & Loretto, 2017; Page & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). The challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic further underlined the importance of employee well-being and physical and mental health.

In recent years there has been growing interest in work-life balance in academia and the impact the academic working environment has on employee's well-being (Fontinha et al., 2019, 2019; Rosa, 2022). The changing working environment to a more digital and remote one is in many ways an opportunity to improve conditions for employees as was discussed in section 3.1. However, as was also mentioned, it can have negative impacts on employee health and well-being. Research shows that this depends on the structures that are put in place and on the way in which

team leaders, supervisors and employees shape the future of work (Inceoglu et al., 2018; Ott et al., 2021; Page & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). For example, when it comes to digital and remote work, roles and expectations should be clarified both at the institutional level and within the individual teams (Ott et al., 2021). So, when people started returning to the office at ETH, after the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic was over, in March 2022, the Executive Board Domain of Personnel Development and Leadership introduced a two-phase initiative for the future of work. In the first phase (return to the office), an open dialogue, on topics such as roles and expectations, was explicitly encouraged as workshop materials and platforms for communication and discussion were introduced. The success of such open discussions depends on the psychological safety employees experience at work. A psychologically safe work environment refers to one where everyone feels comfortable sharing ideas, expressing themselves freely, and participating in discussions without fear of retribution. Nurturing a psychologically safe environment has also been found to be a key factor in employee well-being and in mitigating the detrimental impacts of working from home in the new digital age (Parkin et al., 2022). Furthermore, in the ETH Future of Work Survey psychological safety was subjectively reported to have a significant and large effect on creative thinking, which in turn was reported to be associated with both work engagement and team performance.

The option to work from abroad, provided that the necessary requirements are met, is another flexible work arrangement that could contribute to the promotion of well-being among ETH employees. Such an arrangement would offer staff numerous benefits, including the chance to enjoy extended stays in foreign countries after

attending conferences. They could take advantage of this opportunity to immerse themselves in different cultures and expand their professional networks. Additionally, having the flexibility to spend time at home with their families during the holiday season, especially when the campus is closed, fosters a better work-life balance and strengthens personal relationships.

Recognising the increasing importance of well-being in the future workplace, ETH Zurich defined “nurturing well-being” as one of its six social and leadership competencies with the aim of focusing explicitly on this topic and creating widespread awareness and engagement with it. In addition, ETH has offered its employees [lunchtime events on the topic of health](#) since 2012, with each event focusing on a different aspect of health. For example, one focussed on the positive impact of mindfulness meditation techniques on improving mental and physical health. As further personnel development training will be based on the six social and leadership competencies, more support will become available that enables the nurturing of employee good health and well-being. Section four of this position paper also includes recommendations on how to nurture well-being in the future work setting.



### 3.7. Institutional change

The future of work brings forth significant trends and challenges for universities, thereby necessitating institutional change. In the context of a rapidly changing environment with shrinking certainty and predictability, the ability to adapt to changes quickly is becoming crucial. Universities, however, are complex bureaucratic institutions with multiple layers of hierarchy and complex ac-

ademic structures that can make it challenging to respond rapidly to change. To thrive in this evolving landscape, universities must embrace a clear goal that is aligned with the demands of the future of work. This goal will empower institutions to overcome bureaucratic obstacles and cultivate the flexibility necessary to enable them to navigate change effectively. ETH Zurich has formulated goals for the future of work in section 4.

In order to address the challenges of our time and prepare for future crises proactively, ETH President Joël Mesot initiated the [rETHink project](#) in 2020. The project was conducted to define the roadmap for the university’s ongoing institutional and organisational development and to ensure that ETH Zurich remains competitive in the future. The rETHink project aimed to further strengthen individual responsibility at all levels, establish excellent professional structures throughout the university for student support and personnel leadership, strengthen strategic and operational leadership at all levels and foster and further develop collaboration and core values to promote a sense of belonging among all members of the ETH community.

The rETHink process not only laid the groundwork for the future of work initiative but also led to the implementation of effective measures, including the establishment of a new Executive Board Domain of Personnel Development and Leadership. This Executive Board Domain assumed primary responsibilities in HR consulting and operations, while placing a strong emphasis on leadership development, lifelong learning, diversity and inclusion. The rETHink project triggered valuable initiatives and discussions centred around values and cultural change, which are essential for success in the future of work. Moreover, by fostering collaboration among faculty and staff from all levels of the

university structure, the rETHink project cultivated a culture of open discussion and flattened hierarchies. While effecting change in large public institutions can be challenging, the rETHink project served as a compelling demonstration of how change can be brought about.

Like many universities around the world, ETH faces significant budget cuts due to a decline in public funding. Equipped with the institutional experience and skills developed during rETHink, it will have to act with speed, creativity and agility to respond to this significant reduction in resources. Several cost-cutting measures have already been implemented. The challenge for ETH and other universities is to find ways to manage costs while delivering a high-quality education and research that enable society to face the even greater crises and challenges that lie ahead. The rETHink project served as an organisationally initiated change that played a vital role in preparing ETH for future challenges. However, it is important to recognise that external influences such as budgetary changes also act as drivers for progress, prompting further adaptation and innovation. In fact, the integration of organisational initiatives goes hand in hand with externally driven changes, thereby creating a powerful synergy that paves the way for a successful and resilient future for ETH, both inside and outside the future of work context.

In the future of work, as institutions undergo transformative changes, it will become increasingly crucial to apply methods to measure the impact of these changes and maintain flexibility to adapt and adjust as necessary. One effective way of achieving this is by conducting regular employee surveys that encompass a wide range of topics related to both present and future ways of working. These surveys can serve as valuable tools to gauge the effectiveness of new

work structures, identify areas that require improvement and gather valuable insights from those employees who are being affected directly by these changes. By embracing this proactive measure, organisations can ensure that they remain flexible and responsive in an ever-evolving work landscape, recognising that the future of work is not a distant concept but a reality requiring continuous adaptation.

Ultimately, it is the employees themselves who have the power to shape their own future of work at ETH. While institutions play a crucial role in driving transformative changes, it is the collective efforts and active participation of all employees across the institution that truly drive change forward. In doing so, embracing a growth mindset, which is the belief in the ability to learn, develop and adapt through effort and perseverance (Dweck, 2017), is key. By cultivating a mindset that welcomes challenges, seeks out learning opportunities and embraces innovation, all members of the ETH community can take ownership of their professional growth and contribute to a culture of continuous improvement. This growth mindset empowers individuals to navigate change, overcome obstacles and drive progress in shaping a dynamic and effective future of work at ETH.

## 4. ETH Zurich's goals for the future of work

This paper offers an analysis of the crucial themes related to the future of work at ETH while underlining the significance of individual contributions in initiating and sustaining institutional change. Building upon the insights gained, ETH has established the following goals for the future of work:

We create a work environment that fosters ambitious goals, team spirit, well-being and personal development while nurturing a mindset based on trust and personal responsibility. We carefully consider the institution's needs, the organisation of work and the diverse life situations of our employees in a balanced manner. On-site personal interaction enhances creativity and innovation and fosters trust. Through flexible workplaces, we empower our employees to exercise greater scope for action and personal growth, while managing costs effectively. We establish hybrid work models by leveraging digital solutions in a targeted manner and enabling our employees to use them effectively. At ETH, our focus is on lifelong learning, ensuring that our employees are well equipped to meet both current and future demands. This approach contributes to sustainability and makes ETH an attractive employer that consistently adapts to the latest knowledge and developments and that people are proud to identify with.



# 5. Recommendations to all employees

This section offers suggestions and recommendations to all ETH employees regarding how they could approach and shape the future of work in its many facets. In many cases, the six ETH social and leadership competencies are applicable and instrumental in achieving this goal, which is why the recommendations are clustered accordingly.

- Embrace sustainable practices like desk-sharing and minimising business-related air travel. Consider re-evaluating space utilisation by integrating the value of sharing into your work routine.
- When denying a request (e.g. regarding flexible working), communicate the reasons actively, transparently and respectfully.

## 5.1. Acting responsibly

### For employees in a leadership position:

- Navigate organisational change effectively by communicating the vision and purpose of changes early on and engaging employees in the change process<sup>6</sup>.
- Lead by example to give others clear guidance on how to manage flexible and remote working, how to draw clear boundaries between work and private life and how to be inclusive in an increasingly diverse working environment.
- Seek consensus actively within the team regarding how you want to work and collaborate in the modern (hybrid) working environment. Communicate the results to newcomers and review as needed.

### For all employees:

- Challenge one's own beliefs and perspectives about traditional ways of working and seek to change habits where helpful.
- Adopt a mindset of sharing and seeking opportunities to collaborate or share knowledge and resources.
- Engage in sustainable work practices, such as conserving and sharing resources.

## 5.2. Driving innovation

### For employees in a leadership position:

- Be bold enough to transform ways of working.
- Grant employees a period within which they can learn from and adjust to new ways of working.

<sup>6</sup> In the current case, with regard to flexible working; in the future, with regard to other significant changes.

- Create cross-functional and/or interdisciplinary teams to stimulate innovation and work on new, meaningful and sustainable solutions to problems.

**For all employees:**

- Adopt a flexible and adaptable mindset, recognise new trends and opportunities in ways of working together and try them out.
- View work as a set of activities instead of a place within which to perform them.
- Experiment with different solutions to the challenges associated with desk-sharing and other future work arrangements.
- Be open to and explore new technologies that support future ways of working.
- Co-create institutional change by engaging actively in change processes.

### 5.3. Building bridges

**For employees in a leadership position:**

- Engender trust in your remote team members' working processes, in their ability to manage their responsibilities effectively and work autonomously.
- Ensure regular communication inside and outside the remote working environment by making use of formal and informal online communication channels. Regular check-ins and one-on-one meetings can provide an outlet for openly communicate any concerns that an individual may have.
- Be available and accessible when remote employees need assistance or have questions, providing them with ample avenues for communication, such as instant messaging or virtual video conferencing platforms.

**For all employees:**

- Communicate proactively and give direct feedback when information is missing in the context of change processes or where there is a general lack of communication.
- Contribute to a community spirit by actively participating in remote gatherings, including turning on your camera during video calls and engaging fully in discussions.
- Actively embrace the unique opportunities provided by the physical workplace to foster spontaneous encounters and discussions. Ensure you are approachable and available to colleagues who might not typically reach out to you.

### 5.4. Nurturing well-being

**For employees in a leadership position:**

- Promote a work-life balance by providing flexible work arrangements, such as remote work options that enable employees to manage their workload and personal lives effectively.
- Encourage employees to set clear boundaries between their work and private life by, for example: turning off e-mail apps in their free time; informing others of their working times and availabilities; communicating their own boundaries to colleagues and giving feedback when these boundaries have been crossed; keeping track of working hours; and creating clear time slots for work and private life.
- Be mindful of possible negative signs, such as exhaustion or isolation in your team.

**For all employees:**

- Practice self-care by, for example, making time for exercise, meditation and relaxation to build up resilience against daily stressors.
- Communicate your own needs with regards to work schedules and your work-life balance, such as requesting flexible work hours, working from home to reduce daily stressors and communicating your availability.
- Respect your colleagues' time off and personal boundaries. Avoid calling or messaging them during their known non-working hours or when they are on leave.
- Discuss expected response times to e-mails and other forms of communication.

**For all employees:**

- Recognise the pivotal role inclusivity plays in facing the challenges that lie ahead, both within and outside the academic context.
- Encourage open and respectful communication in the workplace by being an active listener and valuing others' opinions.
- Beware of and actively prevent an 'us versus them' mentality that can arise from differing work preferences, such as working from home or on-site. This involves being aware of and addressing the underlying beliefs that contribute to such divisions.
- Take action to promote inclusivity by speaking up about instances of exclusion or discrimination.

## 5.5. Living inclusivity

**For employees in a leadership position:**

- Take advantage of opportunities to build a diverse workforce by hiring qualified individuals from various backgrounds, genders and cultures.
- Inform employees on the growing importance of inclusivity and diversity and communicate your expectations of promoting a respectful and inclusive environment.
- Distribute attention appropriately and communicate actively with all employees in a remote working environment.
- Factor people's different needs (e.g. in terms of career and life phases) and personality types (e.g. introvert/extrovert) into your decisions, which can influence how and where they work the most effectively.

## 5.6. Enabling people

**For employees in a leadership position:**

- Promote employee autonomy by providing employees with a sense of ownership and control over their work.
- Value results over mere presence in the physical workplace.
- Provide feedback instead of micromanaging. Empowered employees are free to explore within the framework of the objectives and necessary resources provided.
- Coach employees to enable them to develop the skills needed to solve problems independently in an increasingly complex work environment.
- Anticipate and provide the necessary training and resources to support employee upskilling and growth, for example, with regard to digital competencies.

**For all employees:**

- Take advantage of opportunities to up-skill in response to changing needs.
- Identify and pursue opportunities for your own career growth and skills development, in anticipation of evolving external demands and personal career goals.
- Encourage professional growth among your colleagues by sharing knowledge and expertise.

## 6. Outlook

The future of work is comprised of various themes, some of which are particularly relevant to academic institutions, as highlighted in this paper. More will certainly arise. As we are in the midst of the future of work, we are beginning to discover what works and what doesn't. The Swiss Confederation and the ETH Board provide a framework, and ETH positions itself accordingly, with appropriate structures and resources. However, real progress and success towards the future of work will depend on the individuals who take action to realize the institution's potential in research, teaching, and knowledge transfer. This requires embracing change, flexibility, innovation, and inclusivity to create a productive work environment. The leadership, faculty, scientific, and technical/administrative staff at ETH are critical in taking necessary steps towards achieving success and growth in the future of work. The rETHink project demonstrated that it is always better to be one step ahead, leading the way towards innovative and impactful solutions that can be applied as needed, rather than being caught off-guard by rapidly transforming environments. It is crucial that as individuals and as a university, we proactively embrace change and leave our comfort zone to not just anticipate the future of work, but also to shape it.

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