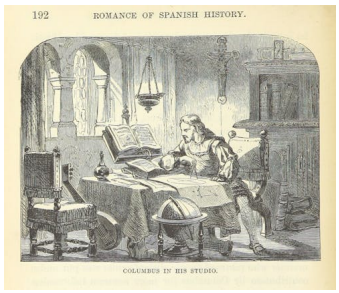

In the seventeenth century lawyers, civil servants and other new professionals began to work from offices in Amsterdam, London and Paris. British Museum/Flickr

For centuries people have been getting up, joining a daily commute or retreating to a room, to work. The office has become inseparable from work.

Its history illustrates not only how our work has changed but also how work's physical spaces respond to cultural, technological and social forces.

The origins of the modern office lie with large-scale organisations such as governments, trading companies and religious orders that required written records or documentation. Medieval monks, for example, worked in quiet spaces designed specifically for sedentary activities such as copying and studying manuscripts. As depicted in Botticelli's St Augustine in His Cell , these early "workstations" comprised a desk, chair and storage shelves.

Sandro Botticelli St Augustin dans son cabinet de travail or St Augustine at Work. Wikipedia Commons

Another of Botticelli's paintings of St Augustine at work is now in Florence's Uffizi Gallery. This building was originally constructed as the central administrative building of the Medici mercantile empire in 1560.

It was an early version of the modern corporate office. It was both a workplace and a visible statement of prestige and power.

But such spaces were rare in medieval times, as most people worked from home. In Home: The Short History of an Idea , Witold Rybczynski argues that the seventeenth century represented a turning point.

Lawyers, civil servants and other new professionals began to work from offices in Amsterdam, London and Paris. This led to a cultural distinction between the office, associated with work, and the home, associated with comfort, privacy and intimacy.

Despite these early offices, working from home continued. In the nineteenth century, banking dynasties such as the Rothschilds and Barings operated from luxurious homes so as to make clients feel at ease. And, even after the office was well established in the 1960s, Hugh Hefner famously ran his Playboy empire from a giant circular bed in a bedroom of his Chicago apartment .

A police station office in the 1970s. Dave Conner/Flickr, CC BY

But these were exceptions to the general rule. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, increasingly specialised office designs – from the office towers of Chicago and New

York to the post-war suburban corporate campuses – reinforced a distinction between work and home.

Managing the office

Various management theories also had a profound impact on the office. As Gideon Haigh put it in The Office: A Hardworking History , the office was “an activity long before it was a place”.

Work was shaped by social and cultural expectations even before the modern office existed. Monasteries, for example, introduced timekeeping that imposed strict discipline on monks’ daily routines.

Later, modern theorists understood the office as a factory-like environment. Inspired by Frank Gilbreth’s time-motion studies of bricklayers and Fredrick Taylor’s Principles of Scientific Management , William Henry Leffingwell’s 1917 book, Scientific Office Management , depicted work as a series of tasks that could be rationalised, standardised and scientifically calculated into an efficient production regime. Even his concessions to the office environment, such as flowers, were intended to increase productivity.

Technology in the office

Changes in technology also influenced the office. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Morse’s telegraph, Bell’s telephone and Edison’s dictating machine, revolutionised both concepts of work and office design. Telecommunications meant offices could be separate from factories and warehouses, separating white and blue collar workers. Ironically, while these new technologies suggested the possibility of a distributed workforce, in practice, American offices in particular became more centralised.

Why return to the office?

Anthropological research on how we interact with each other and how physical proximity increases interactions highlights the importance of being together in a physical space. The office is an important factor in communicating the necessary cues of leadership, not to mention enabling collaboration and communication.

Although employers might be calling their employees back to the physical space of the office again, its boundaries are changing. For example, recent " chip parties ", celebrate employees getting a radio-frequency identification implant that enables employers to monitor their employees. In the future, the office may be embedded under our skin.

While this might seem strange to us , it's probably just as strange as the idea of making multiple people sit in cubicles to work would have seemed to a fifteenth-century craftsman. The office of the future may be as familiar as home , or even our neighbour’s kitchen table , but only time will tell.

Dr. Agustin Chevez has received Government and Industry funding to undertake workplace research. Agustin is affiliated with HASSELL.

DJ Huppatz does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or

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