

# THE WORKPLACE AS A DESTINATION

Dated work environments are unsuited for emerging patterns of work and are inhibiting workers from performing to their full potential **BY RICK THOMAS**

FOR many of us, a sizable portion of our time is spent at work. It is safe to assume that the nature of our job and the work environment will greatly affect our behaviours, well-being and personal life. It is perhaps unsurprising that the workplace has had many iterations over the past decades, with each wave of change seeking to address a range of workplace issues and challenges – be it raising productivity, improving staff engagement, controlling real estate cost or optimising space usage. In recent times, the advent of technology and flexible working have also altered the way that we work.

Caught in a state of change, corporates are increasingly looking to align the organisation's work patterns with the physical work environment/ space to improve performance and cut costs. In commercial real estate jargon, this is called workplace strategy.

It is a complex process that goes beyond office furnishing and interior decor. Workplace strategy entails a deep understanding of the firm's business goals and corporate values, and how its employees work and use space. These observations are then used to develop the most effective workplace strategy for the company.

Among the many tasks, workplace strategy consultants study space utilisation rates to identify places within the office that are under-used and areas where staff congregate most often. Such studies could turn up surprising results. For example, it was found that globally, about 70 per cent of meeting rooms are used by an average of two to three people, while the smallest meeting rooms in the workplace were often six-seaters.

Armed with such information, workplace strategy professionals can

help the firm develop the right solutions – for instance, activity-based working – to optimise space usage and improve efficiency.

An office that meets employees' needs and enhances their well-being, as well as reinforces the firm's values will also help to foster a stronger sense of identity and loyalty – creating a positive workplace experience.

## THE NEED FOR CHANGE

As disruptions continue to impact industries, organisations that ignore the changes in work patterns, workforce and work environment are likely to find themselves at a considerable disadvantage.

A workplace that is revamped in accordance with a company's mission and vision typically boosts employee morale and engagement, helps in talent retention, motivates staff to perform at their best, as well as increases business productivity. The management can also seek to drive cultural change, encourage positive behaviours and instill corporate brand values through workplace strategy.

Generally, a carefully considered and well-executed workplace strategy is seen as a leadership tool kit to create and maintain competitive advantage. A report by Gallup Inc noted that companies with highly engaged workforces outperformed their peers by 147 per cent.

With images and video clips of fancy offices widely circulated in the mainstream and social media, one would think the open-plan work concept is a recent invention. The truth is, the groundwork for open-plan offices was laid long ago when work benches were first introduced in workplaces in New York.

The tipping point would probably be around 2008, where the global financial crisis forced corporate real estate professionals to push boundaries and rethink how their organisations use space. The key focus was to reduce space usage and bring cost down. Companies – alongside workplace consultants – began to study how their employees work and took a deeper look at space utilisation within their premises.

Since then, the emergence of new technologies, proliferation of smart devices and a highly mobile workforce have further changed the way we work, and our workplace along with it.

In the past, about 70 per cent of the workspace in a traditional office would be allocated to individuals, leaving about a third of the space for collaborative or community spaces or for shared services. Currently, this ratio is fast approaching 50:50, given the rise of flexible working and continued evolution in work patterns.

## COMMON WORKPLACE PITFALLS

In re-designing the workplace, occupiers are faced with numerous challenges: catering to different working styles of staff; keeping pace with changing nature of work and technology shifts; optimising space utilisation; and ensuring the workplace strategy supports the firm's business goals.

It is tempting to cherry pick the best ideas and try to incorporate them in the office without the help of any workplace strategy experts, but here is where some companies falter. Colliers International notes that there are some common mistakes that undermine the efficacy of workplace strategy.

### • Lack of focus spaces

Too much open spaces can result in not enough enclosed spaces for focused work or private space for employees to collect their thoughts and recharge their batteries. People need a wide range of places that lets them choose and control where and how they work – also known as activity-based work.

Much criticism – largely around noise and distraction – has been levelled at open-plan work settings, and the topic has been well-discussed. A workplace distraction report by UdeMY said that noisy, interruption-prone offices make employees unmotivated, stressed and frustrated. Its poll of over 1,000 office workers in the US in February 2018 found that chatty coworkers (80 per cent) and office noise (70 per cent) were cited as the top distractors at the workplace.

### • Assigned versus unassigned

Hot desking or flex seating – both referring to unassigned seating – is becoming a norm, and will be the only way forward in a matter of years. While some companies have done away with assigned seats completely, others have adopted a mix of the two. Which model to adopt differs from company to company. The trick is to understand the way that employees work and use space before embarking on reformatting the office.

### • Desk camping and clear desk policy

We are creatures of habit – the implementation of a new and alternative way of working will most likely require a change management exercise to help sustain and maintain the new ways of working.

### • Technology and support infrastructure

The right information technology (IT) infrastructure and communicative technology must be set up to enable hot desking and facilitate a mobile work environment. This could include moving to cloud-based business systems where employees can access them remotely.

Dated work environments are unsuited for emerging patterns of work and are inhibiting workers from performing to their full potential. This is why the style in which people work should dictate the space in which they work, and not vice versa. Corporates who ignore workplace strategy do so at their own peril. ■

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