Work&Place

W&P The power of deep engagement

[2019 Award-Winning Article] As workplace strategists and designers better understand their role as "systems designers," deeply engaging and involving users is both powerful and critical.

WORKPLACE DESIGN   DESIGN   EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE   ENGAGEMENT   FACILITIES MANAGEMENT

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Note:

The *Work&Place* Editorial Advisory Board applauds this article as one of the eight best articles we published in 2019. We recommend it highly for its candor, its thoughtful critique of workplace design practices, its highlighting of science and data, and its call for engaging end users early in the design process.

Usually considered a curse, the phrase "May you live in interesting times" is meant to be ironic. Interesting times – like the ones we're in now – are full of change and disruption. Trying to keep up with the pace of technology and its impacts, like way faster business cycles; "passing the baton" from Boomers to Millennials to Gen Z; responding appropriately to the huge interest in wellness and engagement – those are only a few of the challenges organizations are trying to navigate.

It's not surprising that we long for simpler times when things weren't so interesting, and, in our world, "workplace" success was defined using straightforward metrics like square-foot-per-person or cost-per-seat.

But here we are, and there's no going back.

The way we think about the workplace has changed. No longer a factory for white collar processing tasks, it is now an "ecosystem": a dynamic series of places where work – and socializing, learning, and playing – happens. Where workers' experiences *matter*. Quite a lot, actually.

So, too, have our measures of workplace success changed – to borrow a phrase from CoreNet's 2020 predictions – "from cost control to value creation."[i] From focusing on effectively and efficiently "managing *supply*" (space) to "satisfying *demand*" (what workers need to be effective) in all its new forms: whether that is for amenities in a vibrant neighborhood, for flexible hours, or for support for wellness.

Science has clued us in on what helps people perform at their best[ii], and we're starting to build this knowledge into our workplaces in three major categories that correlate to knowledge worker productivity: *organizational* and *management* factors, like encouraging teams to develop social cohesion; *environmental* factors, i.e., promoting group identity or providing great indoor air quality; and *cognitive* factors, including healthy hydration and nutrition to optimize brain function (See Figure One).
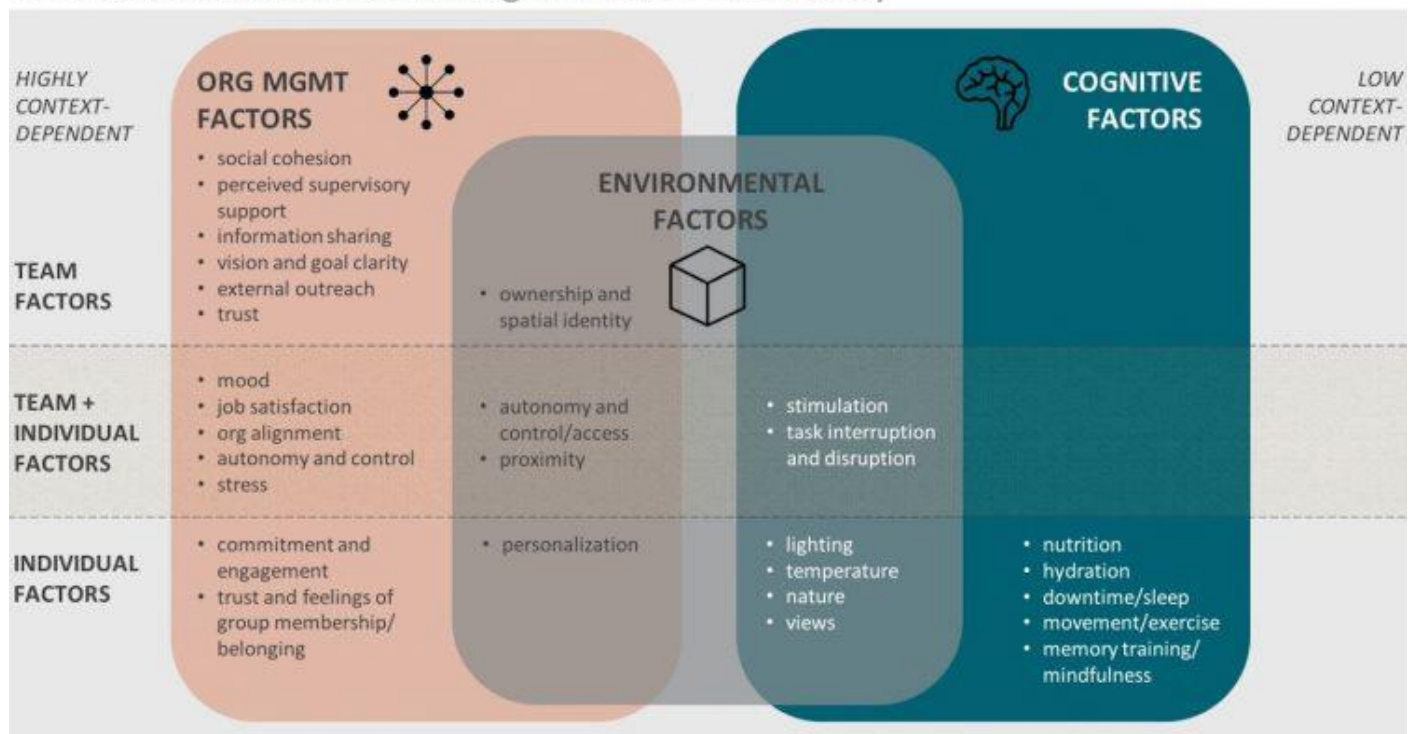

Figure One: The Science Behind Knowledge Worker Productivity[iii]

We know, for example, that providing autonomy and control is related to both individual and team performance. Daniel Pink, in his book *Drive*,[iv] takes it even one step further, as he describes a compelling study from Cornell:

*...the benefits that autonomy confers on individuals **extend to their organizations**. [emphasis added]. For example, researchers at Cornell University studied 320 small businesses, half of which granted workers autonomy, the other half relying on top-down direction. The businesses that offered autonomy grew at four times the rate of the control-oriented firms and had one-third the turnover.[v]*

Science also tells us that granting teams the ability to "own" their neighborhood and create a spatial identity is "good." The act of doing so builds that all-important social cohesion, *and* – especially if the team displays their work-in-progress or celebrates their successes – also supports information sharing to others in related teams and reinforces their focus and priorities.

Over the last decade or more, our workplace-making industry has made a sizeable shift towards "activity-based" planning – workspace planning using activities or work processes (vs. status) as the basis for design. This approach results in a range of settings to support the broad range of activities – individual and group – that is now understood as making up a day-in-the-life for most knowledge workers. This and other emerging workplace models emphasize quality user experiences that help them do their best work.

Yet at the same time, our industry appears to have less and less patience for thorough needs analysis or design studies: We sometimes jump straight from cursory test fits to construction documents, rather than investing the time and effort to involve a healthy cross-section of users and delve into how work is happening and what activities make up their most business-critical work processes, and then exploring how best to design the space, allocate resources and encourage supportive behaviors.

Said another way, and perhaps stating the obvious, if we do help organizations make this shift to "activity-based" workplace planning, doesn't it – by definition – mean we/they need to know much more about the activities that make up work (and socializing, learning, and playing)?

I would argue that this kind of investment provides an equally valuable second benefit – as we bring along those workers, get their best ideas, and demonstrate how what they do is linked to space, resources and behaviors, we are creating both informed consumers and stewards of our workplaces.

And, importantly, we also enable them to self-perform some portion of the upgrades to their space themselves. Their continued engagement in making the workplace work for them only makes it more relevant and adept at meeting their needs and preferences.

This approach also makes financial sense: If we accept the 3-30-300 rule (the average order of magnitude between a company's costs per square foot for utilities @ $3; rent @ $30; and payroll @ $300), focusing on the factors that will make the workers more effective and productive will have a significantly higher payoff than focusing only on space efficiency.

So even though moving at the speed of technology has become a wide-spread expectation, there are huge benefits to organizations to invest in robust needs analysis – analysis Into how work is happening now and what those business-critical processes and activities we have to get right are; into how we create great user experiences; and into what we need to stop doing, start doing, and keep doing to leverage what we now know about knowledge worker productivity.

The time spent will be well worth it and has a huge added benefit: workers *want* to participate and be engaged; and involving them will satisfy that desire and give us far better information about what is truly needed.

And no, we're not advocating opening Pandora's box – we don't have to open the flood gates to every whim and wish-list item. People get overwhelmed with too many choices, so establishing parameters and setting boundaries is a *good* thing. Involvement and participation don't create chaos, nor does the involvement have to drag on for months.

Those readers who know me will very likely have heard the following story already, but for those that have not, I want to share a career-altering event that pushed me to the point of view I am advocating here.

In my first job as a consultant (vs. interior designer), I was assigned to Sun Microsystems to act as a liaison between HOK (my employer) and Sun's Real Estate and Workplace Effectiveness teams. In the early weeks of my sitting at Sun's Mountain View campus, I was told that Sun had an intranet, enabling any employee of Sun – all 65,000 of them – to go online and order furniture for their office (Sun's primary facilities were 100% one-size-fits-all small private offices at the time).

I have to admit, my first reaction to this discovery was to gasp and express my sheer horror, and say something like "That's awful, please let me fix that." The Sun person then proceeded to double down and explain that "if that's your reaction, you clearly don't get it" and explain that:

- it's only six items – which are already part of the 'kit-of-parts' that make up a standard office layout: a binder bin, bookcase, lateral file, deck chair, guest chair, small table – not the whole world;
- there is a check-and-balance system – at the end of the month, Joe's boss sees what Joe and his colleagues have ordered. If Joe is secretly taking things home and selling them on E-Bay it may take a few weeks to catch on, but we will, and go have a little chat with Joe;
- Sun doesn't believe there are that many Joe's in the world; the company subscribes to a sociological principle called 95/5, which says 95% of the population will do the right thing, while only 5% will game things. Sun did the math – if 5% abuses this privilege, that costs Sun $x; and if they hire the three 'furniture police' they knew I was going to suggest, that would cost 2x. Letting a small percentage of their employee population cheat was cheaper and did **not** send the message that "You're children and we don't trust you."
- these are low-cost items in the larger scheme of things. If a worker who feels loved and supported spends five more minutes a day in productive discretionary effort, that lateral file pays for itself in about a week.

This mindset rocked my world. I realized I was guilty of being predisposed to distrust. *And* that I thought my job was to set and defend the rules. Instead I now realized my job as a workplace strategist was to "design the system" (the parameters, the checks and balances, etc.) that enabled people to get what they needed with as little friction as possible.

Fast-forward fifteen years to Facebook's having bought Sun's old Menlo Park Campus and moved thousands of 'hackers' into a number of the campus buildings; and adding vending machines to each floor near the work areas: machines not filled with food or drink, but with computer peripherals.

Any employee can swipe their ID card and "vend" keyboards, laptop batteries and power cords, screen wipes, and other components. Much like Sun's allowing employees to order furniture themselves, Facebook is by-passing the lengthy, often discouraging justification/approval-required process of requesting an item, and instead is trusting its employees to know what they need and not abuse the easy access to such items.

All this variety, choice, and control creates new challenges for designers, planners, and facility managers, not to mention brokers and portfolio managers: how *do* we define "demand," how do we make sure we have the right "mix" of options (in the right proportions, so space is optimally utilized). How do we shift our mentality from event-based planning to on-going monitoring and adaptation? And perhaps most importantly, how do we involve and engage the people whose workplace we're designing to have them be co-creators and on-going stewards of their space and its

I believe our industry must emphasize four critical capabilities:

- **Understand the new geography of work** – given that workers are more mobile and have greater discretion for where they work; given the increased importance of virtual communication and virtual "place;" and given the increase in geographic dispersion of organizations and project teams, we need to better understand how people work in this new geography. What personal styles of working are they are developing? How can these styles can be supported through spatial, organizational and technological means?
- **Understand the "work" itself** – the business of the business at the level of the critical activities in which employees engage. A deeper understanding of work processes – and their requirements for both physical and virtual infrastructure – would allow us to base our workplaces on the *activities* that make up work: their flow, the resources needed to accomplish them, and even opportunities to reduce inefficiencies or "waste" in "lean" terms.
- **Understand human dynamics and social systems** – become students of all that we're now learning about how we assign meaning, make decisions, optimally perform, and use social norms to effectively co-exist.
- **Create a new kind of platform for support** – one that involves, empowers, and provisions workers as well as workplaces and *continues* to monitor work activities as well as changes in technology or business strategy to quickly and easily adapt to change.

While the second capability may seem to be the most challenging, I know the third and fourth are more far-reaching and industry changing.

That new kind of platform also requires us to loosen up and evolve from rule setters and gatekeepers to designers of workplace eco-systems that we – and our organization's workers – deliberately adapt over time.

It requires us to shift from an event-based model – where the planning and certainly the design process is complete on move-in and may only be re-visited during a major re-org or when a lease expires – to one that expects services to extend well beyond move-in – and way beyond moves, adds and changes.

We echo several of the already-come-true predictions in CoreNet's *Corporate Real Estate 2020* series report on Workplace:

- **From Facility Management to Work Experience Enabler.** CRE's role in major corporations will become highly strategic in support of the business's requirements. Metrics will shift to the support of the business: innovation, knowledge worker, and so on. *CRE executives will be "Experience Managers," offering employees an à la carte workplace experience with a menu of services, locations and support.*
- **From Owned to On-Demand Assets.** For many organizations, the need for owned real estate as we know it today will decline, replaced by a model where a combination of assets both within and outside the portfolio are leveraged to meet specific needs. *Corporations will increasingly turn to third parties to provide on-demand models of office space and technology to serve the mobile worker and knowledge work as a whole.*
- **From Workplace Mobility to Presence.** *Workplace will expand beyond a focus on "mobility" to include the concept of "presence," both physical and virtual.* Our focus on the expanding range of places where our employees are "present" and actively accomplishing the various requirements of their work is critical.[vi]

We have the opportunity to unleash the energy and know-how of our workers. We have the opportunity to move beyond optimally planning and managing space to optimally enabling the business of the business over time. To do so, we have to be willing to leave old models behind and learn how to translate business metrics and work practices into on-demand provisioning strategies. And to continuously improve our processes to do so.

Investing time and effort into robust needs analysis will return huge benefits to the organization and make their workers and their workplaces work even harder for them.

About the Author

Jan Johnson is vice president of design and workplace resources at Allsteel; she has spent her career strengthening the correlations between business strategies and the planning, design, and management of workplaces. She leads a key element of her company's research, mining science for insights into the effectiveness of work environments.

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