

Workplace Strategy

1: Workplace strategy defined

A set of design principles and statements focused on making workplaces more productive. It is not necessarily about an actual office; that is an office design brief.

2: Where to start

What attributes would give you a sustained competitive advantage? E.g. speed to market, risk reduction, product innovation. Translate these attributes into a list of behaviours and characteristics to be encouraged or discouraged in your workplace. Use this question as the starting point: "How can we design the workplace to promote the positive aspects and mitigate the negative ones?"

3: Create a vision

Do corporate values align with the company's vision? Behaviours identified may not appear unique or novel, but when put together they contribute to a set of corporate values: staff working in multi-disciplinary problem-solving teams, sharing and leveraging ideas and individual learning, keeping sensitive data inside the business, accuracy and risk avoidance, excellent time management, etc.

4: Corporate message

Workplaces give off a corporate message. It could be vibrancy and openness, safe and secure, dull and boring, etc. You need to define the 'corporate message' so that designers of specific schemes don't speculate or experiment. Spend time on this area to ensure that new designs remain recognizable to staff, so they see the DNA of the old in the new.

5: New ways of working

'Tele-working', 'hot-desking', 'desk sharing', 'tele-conferencing' -

they are not new, just slow to be adopted. They are a means to an end, and can only be effective if people understand how to effectively adopt them into their existing patterns of working. For this reason, adoption of new ways of working is an educational process, slow and considered. There is no 'big bang'.

6: Improved productivity

Improving space 'productivity' is a commonly stated benefit of good workplace design, but near impossible to measure, let alone define. It is far better to focus on removing unproductive elements (unavailable desks, unused meeting rooms, faulty technology components). Start there first.

7: Face to face

Possibly because of the increasing opportunities to work productively away from the office, many now cite maximizing the opportunity for face to face meetings as a primary aim of their workplace strategy. Setting up meetings must be easier, places for chance encounters more likely (such as reprographic hubs), distance barriers removed.

8: Change opportunities

Workplace strategy provides the

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opportunity to introduce and co-ordinate other initiatives such as waste recycling, off-site storage and paperless office technologies. New policies in HR can be accommodated, such as better personal storage and disabled access. As ever, the best change point is the move to the new office or the big office refurbishment.

9: Understanding new 'spaces'

'Drop in areas', 'touch-down' desks, study booths, soft seating areas, etc. The key to understanding if these are appropriate is to understand why people go to these spaces and what they actually do when they are there. Again, they are a means to an end; access to the most appropriate environment to be productive.

10: Design manuals

For most of us, workplace strategy only makes sense when transposed into a guide. Designers and managers alike need a design manual which can be used to make up actual schemes. Some big organizations have these on line, but, frankly, all you need is a basic compendium of office design layouts and modules with examples that local designers can refer to. The key is to differentiate between standards which must be followed and options and suggestions.

11: Defining needs

The 'manual' should include a system for business units to define their requirements in a structured way (e.g. in an Excel spreadsheet) and calculate space utilization and budgets. In this way, early modelling of a business unit's needs in accordance with standards and targets can be worked up by local management.

Workplace Strategy **continued**

12: Mandatory standards

Workplaces usually depend upon a small number of critical design features such as secure point of ingress/egress, break-out areas with refreshments, a reliable room booking system, good acoustic separation. These mandatory standards must be specified in a design manual.

13: Space utilization

The design manual should include targets for space utilization (See *20 Thoughts on Benchmarking*). Examples of seating modules, meeting rooms and so forth must show how these targets can be achieved.

14: Allowing for cultural differences

One of the reasons why workplace design manuals are effective tools for defining better workplaces is that they are open to local interpretation. New office layouts are 'OK' as long as they meet the mandatory standards in the manual. Essential cultural nuances can then survive.

15: Consolidated purchasing

An oft cited advantage of standardization is that it allows consolidated purchases of components, i.e. leverage of economies of scale. But experience suggests volumes have to be very large for suppliers to take an interest, and even then, there is some doubt as to whether it is worth the time and effort for the discount obtained.

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16: Emotional connection

Some office designers also work on retail and leisure schemes. They can be articulate about how design aspects connect with occupiers' emotions. They can create a 'design vocabulary' that produces the right corporate message and emotional responses. Their ideas and observations can make a huge impact on how a scheme is received by the workforce and visitors.

17: Art in the workplace

This should be discussed in conjunction with Corporate message in point #4. Options and scope are enormous. People really connect with artwork, from notice board snap shots to fine art in prominent positions. Likewise, some images are unacceptable, even on the back of locker doors.

18: Handle with care

The workplace revolution has been going for some time; the workplace is not changing as fast as some would like us to believe. This is the real world, not a social experiment in a lab. Ideas on workplace need to be handled with care. If in doubt, you need more research, more consultation.

19: Keeping it on the agenda

The agenda item 'workplace design and productivity', and the question "What can make our people more productive, more cost-effective?" needs to be discussed regularly by those who have a stake in it. Be wary of excluding staff from this discussion. Workplace strategy formulation is far more of a consensual process than say, corporate strategy.

20: Five more sure-fire ways to fail

Not an exhaustive list:

- a) lack of clear vision, ownership, leadership;
- b) lack of integration of all the elements;
- c) Lack of support for mobile and flexible users, e.g. lack of small meeting rooms;
- d) poor office services to support the new regime; and
- e) victory of the individual over the team requirement, i.e. one rule for them, but not for me – see (a) above.

This document is part of the "20 Thoughts on..." series, available at www.casp-r.com

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