Workplace

Agile office design must put workers before fashion

As people's ideas about workspace transform, it is important to look past ping-pong tables and funky social areas, writes Richard Beastall

The greatest threats to the success of agile workspaces are homogeneity and design concepts that sit at odds with an organisation's ethos. Much has been written about the need for collaborative and flexible working environments – we all want transformative spaces that attract the best people – but problems arise when a company's brand is sacrificed for novelty and the latest design fads.

Authenticity should be one of the building blocks of workspace design. This will keep plans unique and enable a company to embrace progressive working practices while maintaining a culture inherent in the values that employees and clients place on it. Brand character sits at the very core of workspace design and corporate blue chips and professional services ignore this at their peril.
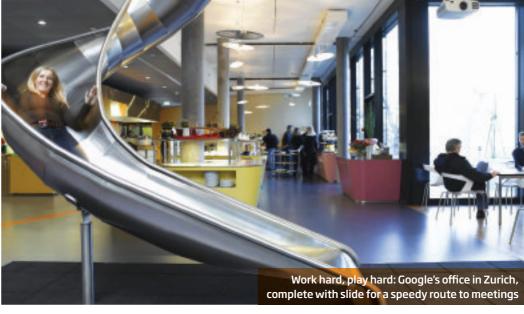
The commitment in time and money needed to transform an entire working space can be immense, often with an outcome that affects the entire workforce and clients. The objective is to ensure a positive impact that supports wellbeing, working practices and character.

The outcome goes wrong when fear of competition from the rapidly-developing tech and creative sectors has excessive influence on other sectors' design concepts. This can result in unnecessarily trendy offices for organisations whose passion, expertise and dynamism is communicated more conservatively. This mismatch in design and working ethos actually hinders progress and damages employee engagement because the company character becomes confused.

Working for everyone

Not everyone wants to recline with their laptop in a hammock sling or sit in an Astroturfed meeting room for a client meeting, and an employer shouldn't force this on employees if its organisation is founded on a more professional gravitas. Workspace design should be grounded on knowledge, science and art, and has to be absolutely appropriate for that individual organisation, with the concept created from the organisation's personality.

Agile working is here to stay; the agile workplace is not a fad but a design-led response to factors

Work hard, play hard: Google's office in Zurich, complete with slide for a speedy route to meetings

such as methods of communication, workplace wellbeing and technology, which allows people to work on the move and wherever they choose.

Today's workspaces not only need to cater for Generation Z, who have been raised in a mobile, globally communicative and sophisticated media and computer environment, but also baby-boomers, whose working landscape has been an office – often their own – and their own personal desk space. Success lies in the ability to turn a traditional workspace into one where people don't feel their personal space has been removed, and be progressive, yet inclusive enough, that people don't feel they need to do 'real work' at home.

There's no longer such a strong distinction between a Google-type environment and the corporate environment. Each is developing spaces for employees to create things and share knowledge; the ethos is the same, but how space is created has to be different. Contrary to a belief shared by some, open plan is not necessarily representative of a collaborative or agile environment. As a one-size-fits-all concept, it can be easy to dilute

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the internal character of a business through uniform wide spaces that remove all recognition of a diverse workforce and a business's core activities.

Another belief is that it was start-up tech firms and the emergence of the creative industries that changed the traditional office, introducing the open-plan format and subsequently the agile workplace. However, financial institutions and professional services have been challenging the traditional working landscape for many years, exploring how to further engage clients and employees and deliver a competitive edge within the market. And with mental and physical wellbeing integral elements of workplace design, the necessity for employers to be authentic in their brand values cannot be lip service. Today's employees want to know their working environment is looking after them.

The workplace, working practices and attitudes towards work have undergone the greatest transformation in decades and this should be championed and progressed. Every brand is perfectly able to deliver a space that inspires and excites people and makes the most of how every generation prefers to work – the trick is to remain true to who you are throughout the process.

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