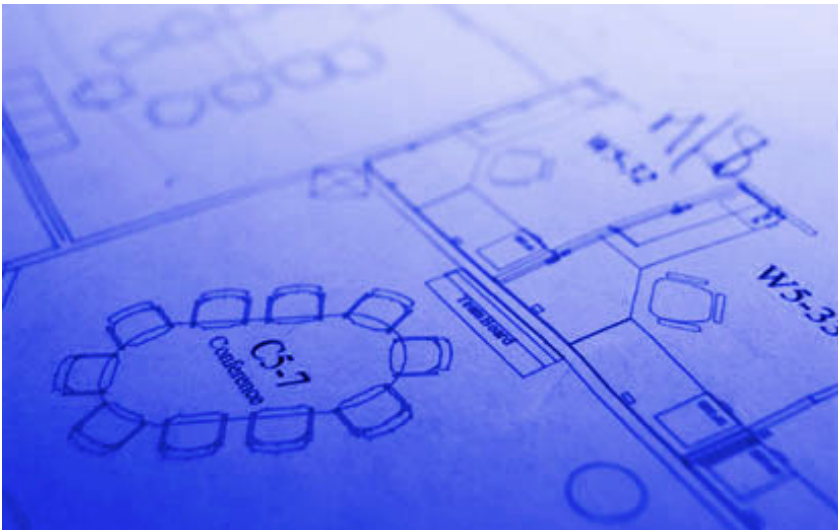


## Engaging on Workplace Change

*Even the best workplace change programmes can be undermined by poor engagement*

When a decision is made to refurbish or relocate there are a plethora of decisions and actions to be dealt with relating to financing, leasing, design and construction. Too often engaging the business and employees does not seem like a priority in the early stages of a project. However, the benefits of many rational and well-planned changes are undermined because they are “imposed” upon the workforce. A perfectly good workplace design can negatively impact workforce morale, business culture and productivity if employees feel excluded from, or at worst, resent its implementation.



A good workplace change engagement programme should help achieve the following:

### **A business led design**

effective engagement is vital in order to write a full “business-led” brief for the design team. An architect cannot be expected to design a workplace

which supports both the individual functional needs of employees and the strategic aims of the business, unless that insight is drawn out through engagement and communicated clearly.

### **An efficient move process**

A badly organised move can cost money, disrupt business operations and irrevocably damage occupants’ first impressions of a new workplace. A good engagement programme will identify potential obstacles, define information requirements, give clear instructions on how employees should prepare for the move and (perhaps most importantly) instil in each individual a sense of responsibility for the success of the move.



### **Strong employee ownership of the workplace**

A well designed workplace can instil a sense of pride the workforce, and positively impact morale and culture. These positive impacts can be enhanced when employees have been involved in and have ownership over the design outcome and working protocols. Conversely, lack of ownership, or at worst resentment, can produce severely negative impacts and undermine and otherwise successful project.

### **Quick realisation of post move benefits**

An effective engagement programme will use communication to familiarise employees with the new space prior to their move. The workforce should know what changes are being implemented, and how their behaviour is expected to adapt. Enabling employees to “hit the ground running” ensures the full business benefits of the improved workplace can be realised quickly.

**The tools of engagement (workshops, brochures, surveys) are varied and their applicability depends upon the challenges in hand. However, the following guidelines should be considered to develop a successful methodology:**

#### **Communicate the strategic objectives**

All employees should understand the “bigger picture” driving the workplace change. Why are they being asked to endure upheaval and adapt to a new working environment? What are the key strategic objectives of the change? Even if the decision to relocate or refurbish has been made at a senior level without their consultation, they should know why that decision was made.

#### **Set clear parameters**

Engagement is not always about asking what employees want and trying to fulfil their wishes. Normally there are a number of issues (such as budget, location) which have been predetermined at a senior level, driven by strategic factors. A good employee engagement programme should be restricted to those issues which can be influenced by the participants. Clear parameters should be laid out openly to participants.

#### **Involve leadership**

As well as understanding the needs of employees, a good engagement process unearths the workplace needs of “the business” as translated by senior management. These 2 sets of needs can conflict at times - for example, employees may like to be located with their immediate team in a segregated area whilst managers recognise the opportunity cost of poor cross-team collaboration. The decision on which need to prioritise is an internal decision, but the role of the engagement process is to highlight the potential discrepancy.

#### **Send a broad invitation to participate**

Generally it is unfeasible to fully engage with every employee impacted by a workplace move. However, all employees should ideally be given the opportunity to participate. There are quick and cost effective ways, using electronic communication, to achieve a universal invitation.

#### **Prioritise preferences**

A poorly structured engagement programme can simply produce an endless wish list of employee preferences. Few programmes have an boundless budget or floor plate to play with, so preferences must be prioritised if the output is to help the design team.

#### **Design impactful communication**

For employees to feel a sense of ownership over both the workplace change process and outcome they must be kept informed throughout the change period. Given the deluge of information most employees receive every day workplace communication pieces should be short and concise. Designing them with a consistent theme makes them stand out and creates a reassuring sense of consistency through the term of the project.

#### **Link design outcomes to engagement**

Employees can be sceptical of engagement programmes, not necessarily believing that their input will influence the final workplace solution. Once a design is confirmed, the impact of the engagement findings on the final design should be communicated to the workforce. This may include highlighting areas where it was not viable to fulfil employees preferences and explaining the rationale behind that decision.



#### **Implementing the guidelines**

A good engagement programme helps to deliver a strategic workplace – a space which is cost efficient, functional, and helps achieve the company’s brand and cultural aspirations. Property teams should plan their engagement programme at the point of project sanction, allowing time to develop a business-led brief prior to the design phase commencing. Whether using workshops, interviews, surveys or other tools following the

guidelines above should generate focussed, valuable outputs and build employee ownership over the new workplace before the move takes place. Neglecting the engagement process means risking a final design which, even if aesthetically pleasing, is overshadowed by poor functionality, negative influence on individual productivity, unintended cultural implications and a confused or inaccurate brand message.

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*The Workplace Intelligence Unit was founded by forward thinking inc. and Herman Miller*

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