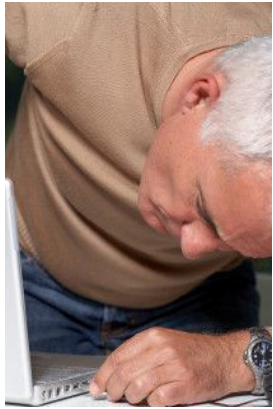


The flexible workplace: a case for change

Today's recessionary times place an emphasis in workplace strategy on reducing operating costs. It is possible, however, that this almost 'reactionary' mode of behaviour could misfire long term. Paradoxically, short term initiatives could lead to greater long term inefficiency as well as potentially damaging productivity and employee morale, if not handled well. More importantly, such actions taken in isolation could represent a missed opportunity to embrace a bigger agenda.



Our argument is that 'flexibility' is the key to long term effectiveness and effective cost management and that in many cases, a more 'flexible' working environment can already be supported by modern technology. A more *radical* and flexible approach to the existing workplace model will require upfront investment, new ways of thinking and confronting some established workplace 'taboos' but could offer significant advantages.

The case for change: push and pull factors

push

In looking at the case for change there are a range of 'push' and 'pull' factors. On the push side is the escalating pace of change demanding a high rate of expensive churn. Pressure on operating costs is encouraging firms to carefully examine their workplace needs, the costs and practicalities.

pull

On the 'pull' side are changes in the drivers of corporate value (the emphasis on developing the firm's intangible assets, for example, which demands a high level of effective internal interaction); changes in worker demographics (a younger workforce is likely to demand more flexible working practices), and the ever growing 'demand' to think more responsibly about the Corporation's impact on the environment – which will increase pressure to reduce the level of wasteful 'churn'.

Push

- Speed of change/response
- Pressure on costs

Pull

- New business models
- Changing demographics
- Growing demands of the Green agenda

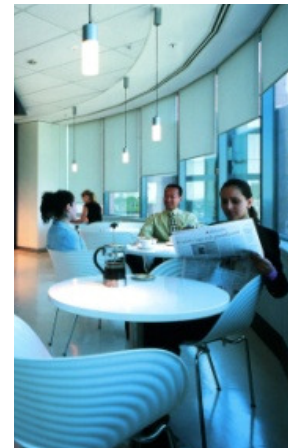
The flexible workplace model

Physical characteristics

In this context the ideal office landscape would be a 'flexible box'. One which minimises the practical and financial costs of 'churn', which allows a faster speed of response to changing organisational requirements and which is capable of being adapted to better support the evolving workplace support needs of the workforce.



Such an environment will feature a high incidence of 'plug and play' technology, easily adaptable floors and ceilings, greater use of wireless technology, more flexible furniture solutions and new approaches to space management.



Workstyle characteristics

The flexible workplace would feature a diverse menu of worksettings, perhaps fewer fixed workstations, more flexible and adaptable meeting spaces, space for touchdown and probably a greater range of flexible seating options – in fact, many of the characteristics which are already increasingly prevalent.

The objective will be to build in flexibility to adapt quickly and cost effectively to organisational change. The engineering challenges are surmountable and suppliers across a range of areas are developing products suitable for this kind of environment.

Strategic focus

The approach will be characterised by:

- A flexible infrastructure, enabling rapid and cost effective change
- Flexible ways of working which reduce space needs
- From insularity to interactivity and creativity. New ideas, new connections
- Workstyles and workplaces in tune with contemporary ways of thinking and working

Emotional challenges

Moving towards a more flexible model will involve facing some particular emotional key changes for employees. Traditional office landscapes in some respects offer visual status clues for some, who might prove reluctant to concede the traditional 'trappings of success'; a more fluid landscape will require reinterpretation of 'territory'; people will continue to want to personalise their spaces. The need for some sense of 'familiarity' will remain and employees will want to feel that they can maintain a good level of personal control over their working environment.

Benefits of flexibility

A focus on designing workplaces that are flexible in functional terms will support a more flexible and interactive working style. This is likely to enable companies both to minimise churn and operating costs and provide a more attractive and supportive workplace for today's employees.

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

www.workplaceintelligence.co.uk
