

WorkTech Sydney: Culture Clubs and Intuitive Design

By Caroline McLaren and Diana McLaren



Photo Credit – Harry Aznavoorian

Offices continue to evolve thanks to the ongoing improvements in telecommunications; it turns out that we no longer need to be in the same building to do our work. This has changed what we need from workspaces and we're all moving forward, but these changes are accelerating rapidly. So if you didn't get a chance to attend the floating bubble that was WorkTech Sydney, then we have the highlights for you.

Your office is your culture club

Your office isn't just an office anymore, it's a culture club; and no, that's not a reference to the amazing 80's band. This is about knowing that since we don't need to work from offices anymore, you need another reason to get people in the door.

Many companies are recognising that offices are essentially “culture clubs” – spaces in which to bring their company culture to life. At Airbnb, they showcase the best of their products by creating featured meeting rooms decked out to emulate some of their most popular Airbnb locations.

At his creative agency, Robbie Robertson redefined their office and enabled employees to bring their full selves to work. Removing the reception area, and creating a kitchen environment (think coffee and flowers) made for more productive team members and (interestingly) more engaged clients.

Redefining your office as your “culture club” also means redefining the team that coordinates it. Many cutting-edge organisations, like Airbnb, Spotify and Atlassian have scrapped the old-school real estate and HR teams, in favour of an integrated “employee experience” or “workplace experience” team. This recognises that in order to deliver a truly human-centered design, you need an integrated cross-functional team.

If you're in real estate, you're in the performance and healthcare game

If you're in real estate, you are now a healthcare professional, congratulations! We know that our physical and mental health is affected by our physical space. But now we have quantifiable data so if you aren't thinking about it, someone else is.

Everyone has had the moment in the office of being just a little too hot or too cold to concentrate. The WorkTech Sydney audience was acutely aware of this fact when Jessica Cooper from Delos mentioned it; the venue resembled a tent floating on Sydney Harbour on a classic Australian summer day. What's more important is the implications of this; that as real estate professionals we ought consider ourselves employee productivity enhancers, and even preventative healthcare professionals.

Depending on the industry, up to 90% of business costs are spent on people. Simple calculations on direct employment demonstrate the cost of sick days. The more subtle effects link directly to employee engagement and the disturbing Gallup engagement survey results.

Over at DELOS, the WELL certification initiative is helping to link workplace design metrics directly to human health system outcomes. For example, the cardiovascular health of a building's inhabitants can be improved by installing stairwells. At Macquarie Bank's new HQ in Martin Place, rescued chickens and a veggie patch on the roof driven were encouraged by their WELL certification process to improve employees' health.

Removing the distance dynamic from communications

Accelerated Serendipity... there's an 'App for That'. It is perhaps the favorite buzz term of offices – communications that limited to the physical space, but not anymore.

If you've ever driven a car in California, you'll know the pain of the four-way stop sign. Everyone stops – regardless of road conditions - and it's often difficult to tell who has right of way. Research has shown that roundabouts are faster and safer than four-way stop signs and police-managed interactions. The tools influence the outcome. The rules of engagement are equally critical in workplace communication.

The recent approach to designing a new office building has been about organizing business units into the stack so that the right business units are placed next to each other for "serendipitous encounters" that will hopefully result in collaboration. For anyone that's familiar with MIT Professor Allan's research, they would realize this is a uncanny approach, as his research has found that if you sit more than 50m from a colleague (and let's face it – many office floors are wider than 50m) then your chance of real world or email communication is highly unlikely.

Dr. Agustin Chevez from HASSELL was delighted to be able to share with the WorkTech Sydney audience the results of a research collaboration between HASSELL and Optimice (Social Network experts) that recreate this result again in 2015. Better yet, he found a tool that 'broke' this traditional notion that if you're sitting too far from someone, your chance of communication is unlikely. In this case, Yammer (a social enterprise platform) was assessed against this metric and it found that individuals were far more likely to communicate with each other, even when sitting at a distance from colleagues.

Chevez's research has found that individuals do have a preference for different communication methods, depending on the purpose. For simple information exchange, online tools are preferred. Naturally, idea generation and social interactions are more likely to place in the real world. This research further goes to

support the importance of offices as “culture clubs” for idea generation and social interaction. However, the research on Yammer indicates that people don’t need to be co-located in order for information to be exchanged in the same way it did prior to social enterprise platforms.

If it’s not intuitive, it’s not sufficient

The individuals using workplaces have increasingly high expectations based on their consumer experiences (think: the iPhone), meaning nothing less than intuitive easy-to-use environments will be successful. And this might not be an easy benchmark to step over but it’s one you must if you want to move forward with the team.

For anyone that’s ever taken the shorter route across the park – following the trodden dirt path – you know that individuals rarely do what they’re told, unless it’s the most convenient option. People will use things how they want rather than the purpose they are designed for.

In the workplace industry, it’s easy to jump to the conclusion that employees are simply not trying hard enough to adjust to changes. However, the JLL team pointed out if employees are not adopting new space design and technology, it’s up to us as real estate professionals to solve. They advocated for ongoing behavior changes that can be promoted well before any office changes.

Will Walker at Macquarie Bank – known for leading the way in enabling staff with technology to embrace an activity-based work environment – was quick to point out that technology should never be used simply for technology’s sake. He considers the user, culture and the benefit to be paramount in any decision about the implementation of technology. The benchmark for new employee workplace experiences becomes “Is this completely intuitive?”.

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