HNI

The Enlightened Organization & The Empowered Worker

Now that we are mostly coming out of the pandemic here in the US, it feels like we and our organizations are collectively staring at a giant RESET button but are not at all sure what will happen if we push it. May I humbly suggest we not leave it to chance, but rather seize this opportunity to set aside those past biases, habits or dysfunctional unwritten rules that contributed to massive worker disengagement or disenfranchisement—like:

How will we know they're working if we can't see them?
-or-
Coming in early and staying late is a sign of commitment.
-or-
Workers will take advantage if they have too many freedoms.

This is a huge never-before-in-our-work-lifetime chance to not just reimagine the physical workplace, but to design for diversity and inclusion, equity and belonging instead of compliance or conformity.

In almost all the conversations we are having with organizations as they grapple with their "return to the office" strategy, we have ended up talking about "means" vs. "outcomes." Most of us tend to jump to a solution before we have clarified what we are trying to solve for. Instead of announcing a new policy that workers must come in 3 days a week like Apple did back in June (a means to an end), start by defining the "outcomes" you want your organization to create. And once you have those in mind—like strengthening social cohesion and increasing worker effectiveness, or making workers feel included and successfully on-boarding new hires—involve individuals and teams in discussions about how the office or a potential distributed work program can best support those goals.

Make sure those means include factors known to correlate to performance and DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging)

Here are our top five recommendations:

1. Increase the **autonomy** individuals and teams have over their schedules, presence in the office, and how they get things done. On their website, Gartner recently shared research demonstrating the sizeable benefits:

   - "62% of knowledge workers are high performers when afforded significant work flexibility versus 27% of those provided with little flexibility.
   - Employees are 3 times more likely to be high performers when given flexibility over where, when, and how they work.
   - Among knowledge workers, high levels of enterprise contribution are most common among those who are fully remote.
   - Hybrid teams are most likely to show high levels of inclusion (fully on-site teams are least likely).

   And despite widely voiced concerns about culture and innovation,"Gartner "data shows that fully on-site teams are least likely to show high levels of engagement, trust or discretionary effort, are least comfortable taking risks and least likely to provide opportunities to innovate outside of meetings."

2. Balance those increases in AUTONOMY w/ more attention to **interdependence**: With more autonomy comes more responsibility to one's team and other colleagues. Encourage teams to create explicit agreements about how best they will work with each other: When is face-to-face THE best way to collaborate on a particularly wicked problem? What other types of activities/processes is the office best at supporting? How do we help each other "know what each other knows" and strengthen other elements of social cohesion when we are not always physically together?.

3. Tolerate **greater variety** in spatial accommodations, ways of working and those explicit agreements from one team to another. And rather than being afraid to ask for workers' perspectives, assume that they will rise to the occasion and involve as many employees as possible. If they embrace the outcomes and help shape the means, they are likely to be "all-in" and quite thoughtful (and helpfully realistic) about how best to get there from here. And they will end up with the complement of spaces and resources they need to get their most business-critical work done.

4. Instill in teams **a sense of territory and ownership** over their neighborhood-
especially if you are moving to free-address for workstations or offices.
It's a natural by-product of involving workers, and the science tells us
this correlates to team performance. Encourage expressions (totems,
physical or virtual bulletin boards, banners, etc.) of their collective
identity and pride in their work.

5. Manage that relevant variety and sense of ownership by designing spaces
to be way more easily adaptable over time. Said another way, **design for
things to change**. And encourage workers to suggest or even trigger the
modifications that improve the effectiveness of space or resources to support
their work processes. Things are changing faster and faster, and workplaces
must keep up to remain relevant and enabling.

And finally, worry less about having all the answers... better to ask
really great questions and trust that you're surrounded by smart,
well-intentioned people who want to help figure this out so that
everyone can thrive.

The Evolving Workplace:
How to Become and Stay Relevant

Given all that is being discussed and prognosticated these days about what's next
in workplace-making—much of which is on-point and insightful—we're adding
to this rich conversation with several viewpoints we'd like to share.
Our intent is to ask and answer what's really important to get right.

Start by taking a step back to consider the purpose of the office:

The highest and best use of the office is to promote social cohesion.

Several years ago, we sponsored research that found social cohesion to have
THE highest (scientifically proven) correlation to knowledge worker
productivity—specifically team productivity. More recently, my colleague
Jeff Leitner also identified studies that suggest that social cohesion is also highly
correlated to individual performance, motivation, engagement, and
learning outcomes; helps workers manage fear, stress, and anxiety;
and reduces burnout.

Workplace design can help organizations to strengthen social cohesion.

Social cohesion has four dimensions: Fairness (read: equity), Authenticity, Interdependence and Belonging. Both the design process (design as a verb), and its recommendations (design as a noun) can promote these qualities. For example, activity-based planning is inherently more equitable than status or one-size-fits-all as a way of allocating space and encouraging users to select the most supportive/ conducive space to perform a given task. Additionally, involving users in co-creating their activity-based neighborhoods increases feelings of interdependence and belonging, and can inspire a sense of on-going stewardship.

Ideation/Collaboration/Development activities are just easier and more effective face-to-face in appropriately provisioned settings.
While distributed work inherently gives workers more places to work—home, coworking, coffee shop etc.—and the autonomy to come and go as they need to, a tech and resource-rich office is an optimal place to do complex collaborative activities: problem solving, idea generation, process improvements. Having said that, it's equally important to create an equitable experience that can really engage anyone who joins the session remotely.

Then consider ways to reduce or effectively hedge against all the uncertainty swirling around us:

Organizations will go through a series of "shakedown cruises."
With all the best intentions, solid research and inclusive discussions about how things might work once folks come back, workers will very likely spend several months experimenting with distributed work patterns, free-address, technology and new team norms - while managers learn to support them more effectively. Plan for it.

Workers' behaviors and utilization tracking data will tell us how they're using the office over time.
And how the office is, in turn, supporting their needs and preferences. Analytics will tell us what spaces are oversubscribed and what's going unused—so organizations can make the physical changes that will "adjust the mix" - optimizing user experiences and space utilization over those many months, and into the future.

Workplaces should be designed for continuous improvement.
Consider using modular planning and a thoughtful "spatial kit of parts" that minimizes the effort and disruption of reconfigurations as organizations adjust the mix over time. Even after the shakedown cruise period, there will be internal changes and outside events that will require the workplace to evolve.