

The Four Keys to a Successful Workplace



Am I the only one who feels like workplace design is up for grabs these days? Work from home or come back to the office? Open plan or a return to partitions or walls? Desk sharing or jealously guarding my personal territory? On the one hand, we have so many more choices about how, where and when we work thanks to ever-evolving technology, as well as more autonomy given cultural shifts in expectations of work, employers and workplaces. And on the other, it's really hard to know what to do to get the best outcomes.

Following the popular trends and doing what everyone else is doing may feel like the best option. But benchmarking other organizations can only tell us what's commonplace—it doesn't tell us what's right for our particular organization with our unique set of circumstances.

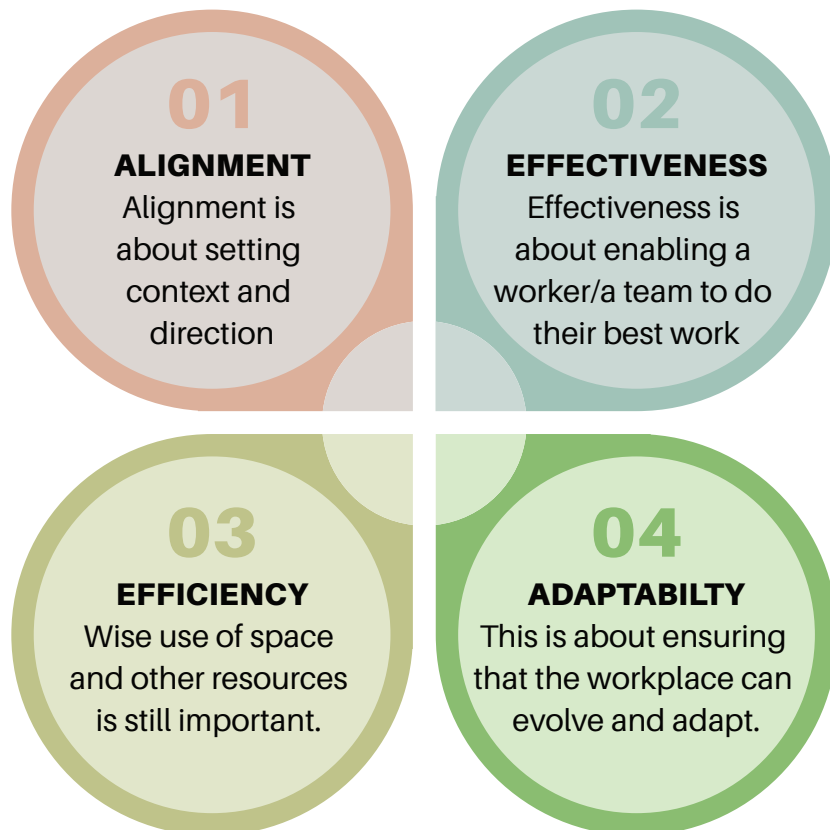
If nothing else, the negative headlines about open plan, for example, should demonstrate that it's not a universally great approach.

So how DO we get it right?

The Purpose of Workplace Strategy

Workplace Strategy is powerful and takes a holistic look: to see each organization as a unique and an interdependent eco-system of activities that is constantly adapting over time. The end result is a strategy that echoes this dynamic: a workplace that "fits" now and can also easily evolve over time. As we say in our [whitepaper], "Workplace strategy involves creating an ecosystem of spatial and behavioral norms designed specifically to support key business processes and organizational management practices—which in turn help organizations achieve their business goals"

As complicated as that may sound, we've figured out over time that the best workplace strategies consider four key (and highly interdependent) areas: Alignment, Effectiveness, Efficiency and Adaptability.



Key #1 to a Successful Workplace: Alignment

Alignment

Alignment is about setting context and direction: what's the organization's culture – what are their current social norms (what we're calling unwritten rules) and their future aspirations and expectations? What is their business strategy now and for the next few years? What's their current workplace like—who gets what and why?

The underlying big idea behind Alignment is that of “fit” or consistency. The workplace should reinforce their culture and aspirations. The process of developing the strategy to reflect those things is also its own form of alignment when the organization actively participates in translating their behaviors and functional requirements into their unique, tuned and tailored workplace design.

Challenge: Defining Organizational Culture

After getting the organization to invest in letting themselves be known, the next toughest challenge is to pin down their culture. That's because it is expressed with actions, with behaviors, with “how we do it here”—not with mission or vision statements. At HNI we believe that an organization's culture is actually the sum of their unwritten rules: those unconscious, invisible ways we agree to behave when we're in group settings (and even when no one's looking).

That these unwritten rules are unconscious and invisible—especially to outsiders—makes it pretty hard to “see” them. And to determine which ones might be blocking the adoption of a new, helpful-to-the-organization's-success behavior. We're speaking and writing about unwritten rules: how to “see” them, how to import a new one that's more aligned with the organization's best intentions and business goals.

Calls to Action

Our call to action to organizations, then, is to take the time to let your consultant get to know you and your realities: your business goals and how you plan to achieve them, including work processes and activities, culture, and organizational structures that are needed to achieve those goals. Let your consultant explore the range or variety of work practices and behaviors they encounter, so those variations are all appropriately supported.

Our call to action for designers and workplace consultants is to advocate for the upfront work needed to develop a solid understanding of their client organization. The return on this investment by both parties will be a workplace that well and truly ‘fits’ the organization, and with the best odds of effectively and efficiently enabling the organization now and into their future.



Key #2 to a Successful Workplace: Effectiveness

Effectiveness

Effectiveness is about enabling a worker/a team to do their best work. To be engaged, productive, healthy and committed. It suggests we look for those activities that are critical to the business of the organization, and probe for what's needed to support them spatially, technologically, behaviorally. And that we share the best available science and best practices about [knowledge worker performance.]

Challenge: Applying Performance Science

The hurdle waiting for us after we've convinced an organization to invest in thorough needs analysis is to apply all that we now know about individual and team performance. Some of those things we now know are much easier than others. LEED and WELL standards spell out very clearly what environmental factors and self-care choices correlate to wellness or individual cognitive performance—things like daylight and views, good hydration and exercise. Science also identifies environmental factors that correlate to team performance: enabling a team to create a sense of ownership and spatial identify for their team's space correlates to their effectiveness as a team.

The more difficult factors to integrate are those that make the case for the unwritten rules that govern how we treat each other. Science has identified the top six factors that correlate to knowledge worker productivity and they are largely about interpersonal dynamics:

Social cohesion amongst the team

Perceived supervisory support (the belief that my boss has my and my team's back)

Information sharing

Goal clarity

External outreach (to be open to updating one's mental models or approaches)

Trust

Calls to Action

Organizations: do not listen to the voices who try to convince you to skip a thorough needs analysis process. That's terrible advice. A robust needs analysis process will create greater understanding of the processes and behaviors that then become the basis for workplace design and engender support among the employees that participated in the interviews and focus groups. Way less "change management" will be needed, because most workers will understand the tradeoffs that need to be made and feel good about their contributions to the quality of the resulting designs. Also consider how to weed out dysfunctional and transplant supportive unwritten rules aligned with those factors known to correlate with performance.

Designers and workplace strategists: demonstrate to your clients the power of investing in effectiveness efforts like needs analysis and applied science.



Key #3 to a Successful Workplace: Efficiency

Efficiency

Wise use of space and other resources is still important. We can no longer afford to have spaces sit empty or badly underutilized. But the space-saving approaches that many organizations use to reduce space may also be undermining productivity, and that's not good math, even if the savings are easier to quantify.

Doing more to understand how best to support solo and teamwork will help us identify potential ways to maximize utilization. Some workers/teams can and should give up having a permanently assigned seat, while for others, the disruption, reduction in productivity, and sense of disenfranchisement they experience may not make desk sharing cost effective.

Challenge: Getting the 'Mix' Right

Thorough needs analysis helps us to make well-educated guesses about what range of space types in what quantities and in what proximities are needed. Utilization tracking—be it low tech or high tech—helps us to make informed adjustments once use patterns settle in. If we find, for example, that large meeting spaces usually only have 2-3 people in them, we might divide those large rooms into twice as many small ones. Or if a smaller space for focused work is only infrequently used, let's investigate why – is it too close to noisy functions, or is on a corridor so widely used that users feel like they're on display, or is the furniture just not conducive to long hours of heads down computer work?

This is a great segue to our fourth key consideration: adaptability. We'll make the case for planning for change in the next post; but until then.

Calls to Action

Organizations: do not sacrifice alignment or effectiveness to efficiency. It's not a worthwhile trade-off. Yes, individual spaces can get smaller – but don't go too far. Three members of Jacobs wrote a great paper to answer "How Dense is too Dense."

And check in with teams to see what's working and what's not and fix the stuff that isn't.

Designers and workplace strategists: Demonstrate that thorough needs analysis and fixing the mix increases overall utilization. Build in physical flexibility – using modularity and "kits-of-parts" to make the fixes as easy as possible to make..



Key #4 to a Successful Workplace: Adaptability

Adaptability

This is about ensuring that the workplace can evolve and adapt over time to keep up with the organization. About designing for change. We're talking physical flexibility approaches like modularity, interchangeable kits-of-parts, and plug-and-play infrastructure. We're talking operational approaches, like budgeting for annual change vs. waiting until a lease expires or a move is necessary. And user-based approaches, where workers are enabled to self-perform a select set of adjustments, rearrangements or repurposing as they need to.

Challenge: Budgeting for Continuous improvement

The third capability we outlined above is perhaps the biggest change to the status quo. We have historically thought we were done when an organization took occupancy. We tended to try to minimize the changes we made once we were years into a lease, and put off major changes until a new lease gave us more TI dollars to start over.

While lease terms are shortening in some markets and circumstances, and there are now several forms of variable spaces that give our clients' organizations more spatial flexibility, we believe designing for adaptability is a virtuous circle: workers better understand the link between what they do/how they behave and their physical (and virtual) environments, which, in turn, enables them to continuously adjust and adapt their environments to their needs and preferences. Read more about the benefits of engaging and empowering workers in our whitepaper [Worker Effectiveness and Role of Place](#).

Calls to Action

Organizations: think of the workplace as an ever-changing ecosystem to be tuned and tailored over time. Invest in building capabilities and continuous budgeting to monitor and evolve it over time.

Designers and workplace strategists: build in physical flexibility and inform and empower workers to make that ongoing evolution the new normal, and as easy as possible.

