What Matters in Workplace Strategy

It shouldn’t be surprising that what we normally refer to as the workplace is actually a lot more than the physical environment where work happens – work is more than the doing and its output. Work has a huge interpersonal aspect – how passionate we are, how we gel as a team, how effectively we communicate. How well we do our jobs is not only a factor of our technical skills or experience, but of our skills at interpersonal engagement, and how well we “fit” with our particular organization’s way of doing things.

Rather than thinking about work, then, in a mechanistic way – input goes in, process happens, and outcomes come out the other end – consider that work environments are rather complex eco-systems with many interweaving elements and dependencies. Some causal relationships are obvious – change an environmental condition, like lighting or ambient temperature, and productivity will be affected; while others aren’t so easy to spot – consolidate all the meeting spaces into one area on the floor, and the impact may be that critical conversations aren’t happening anymore. But what that affects may be much harder to single out.

So how do we make sense of this eco-system in ways that help us to know what to do, and to predict what benefits or impacts it will have? Rather than boil the ocean, let’s break this down into a few manageable ideas.

Four Key Principles

Having been a workplace strategist myself, and observed colleagues help organizations sort out how to approach the design of their work environments, I have come to believe that all the issues and goals that invariably come up fall into one or more of four interconnected topics.

Alignment

The workplace must be in context; it must consistently materialize and effectively respond to business strategies, economic realities, organizational culture, and demographic and social changes. Organizations that don’t “walk the talk,” for example, or acknowledge and respond to the realities around them create tremendous stress for their employees when those employees can’t reconcile what they hear with what they experience.

Effectiveness

The work practices of individuals and teams needs to be well enough understood to inform what they’re provided. Performance is enhanced when there is a “fit” between what people do and how they do it, and what the workplace(s) they use provides them. Effectiveness supports Alignment when the workplace is also consistent with cultural norms, and the work practices being supported are in turn congruent with business goals.

Efficiency

This is exactly what it sounds like – using real estate and other assets and resources as wisely as possible. Efficiency links to Effectiveness, for example, when the space that’s saved by shrinking individual work areas is reallocated to “group” activities, like informal conference areas or team project rooms, because they are where important group work happens.

Agility

This principle includes both the notion of flexibility or physical adaptability and the idea of user choice and control. MIT’s Bill Porter uses the expression “situational awareness” in this context to suggest that when workers understand how the work they do relates to the place and the tools they have to do it, they will use those resources more effectively, and be better at adapting it to (quickly and intelligently) morph as they need it to.
So while there are always trade-offs, these four principles don’t have to be in conflict – Efficiency doesn’t have to sacrifice Effectiveness, and building in Agility doesn’t have to add costs.

Consider using these four topics as a checklist. These principles can frame the discussion, and organizations can evaluate a trend’s applicability to their situation, e.g., whether they’re a candidate for open plan or mobile work; or to plan a response to a shift in business conditions, e.g., how best to downsize without undermining productivity. These topics then become tools to understand that organization’s particular goals or constraints, and how the physical workplace can support them.

This paper is adapted from the article “How People and Culture Matter in Workplace Design” which first appeared on the CoreNet NYC Chapter website in 2008.

About the Author
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