

What Matters in Workplace Strategy

Goal: Effectiveness

Third in a series of papers about workplace strategies and what goals they can and should successfully achieve: Effectiveness refers to the performance of the workforce – whether they have what they need to be as productive and to add as much value as possible. Efficiency, about using space, capital, or any other asset as wisely as possible; and Agility, the notion of “future-proofing” the workplace to easily adapt to change will both be covered in subsequent papers. Alignment – ensuring that the workplace reflects the unique context of a given organization – was described in the second paper.

It seems obvious to say that work environments should support the work being done in them, as well as the larger objectives of the organization. But in practice, we have typically focused on optimizing “supply,” or the management of space, rather than satisfying “demand,” or the goals of the business and the needs of the users of the space.

This is not to fault real estate professionals and facilities managers. Their mandate has been the efficient management of tangible assets; their mantra: faster, better, cheaper. But efficiency, without balancing it with effectiveness, can fail to support the broad diversity and change most organizations are now experiencing.

So how can we strike the right balance between efficiency and effectiveness?

We suggested above that employees’ performance will be enhanced when the work environments where they do individual and group activities are designed to support those activities. Again, this is probably a fairly obvious statement, but how we get there can be challenged by a number of very legitimate trade-offs. So we’ll talk about designing for effectiveness, and how we can manage some of those trade-offs.

Planning for a Range of Functions

Many design organizations have developed very effective tools for “profiling” work practices. They investigate what kinds of activities are happening – like how a given employee spends their time in tasks from administrative to supervisory to answering complex emails – to better understand what range of activities are taking place and what tools or resources are needed during each activity.

They also probe for the amount of time a worker spends out of the office; or, when in, the time alone compared with other team members. They delve into when, where, and how communication happens – are meetings scheduled and predictable or unscheduled and highly erratic, or some of both? Are workers project-oriented, and their activities

dependent upon which phase of a given project they’re in? As the picture emerges of how workers work, the designers compare data to be able to see the patterns – what aspects are consistent across all teams or functions, and what aspects appear to be unique to a given team or function.

In a previous role, I worked on a project where our goals were both Efficiency (cut real estate requirements in half) and Effectiveness (give employees what they needed to be the most productive) as well as Alignment (help product development teams improve their speed to market and the innovation of their products). We interviewed and observed a representative cross-section of staff and were able to identify eight categories of job functions that shared many similar characteristics (we eventually grouped them into just four). Knowing how these eight worked as individuals and groups or as members of cross-functional teams, and how their activities might change over the life of a project made it possible to model typical environments for each of these job functions.

The opportunities for efficiency came from finding what was common to these different groups – getting to only eight, and eventually four, different worker types, for example – and having that become the basis for what could be standardized. The differences could be addressed with what we considered manageable levels of customization necessary to make people more effective.

In the above situation, we developed four new workstation designs that were all the same 8' x 8' size (this was back when that was the average size; it's now 6' x 8'), but varied slightly in aspects of “division” – how high the panels were and how fully they enclosed the worker; in “surface” – how much and how deep the worksurfaces were and how they were arranged; and in “storage” – how much and what kind of storage did they need at their fingertips versus close by. For example, workers doing programming for new software had the highest panels and were placed in the quieter areas of the floor since they spent a great deal of their time in heavy concentration.

They had surfaces big enough to hold multiple monitors, which lined their station so they could have a colleague sit next to them and view their monitor. They had shelves for manuals, but not much in the way of filing space.

The differences in how people work were made easier to manage by using stackable panel add-ons, mobile surfaces, and having both a bookcase and a file cabinet in our "kit-of-parts." Other companies may make different trade-offs – using only one height of panel, for example – to limit the variations they need to manage. Another company, on the other hand, might give each worker the same set of components, but allow them to configure them in any way they choose.

In the above example we also spent a lot of time understanding the range of group spaces each kind of worker needed. Instead of using a "one-size-fits-all" approach to assigning conference rooms and other collaboration support spaces, we assigned kinds and quantities based on usage patterns. So teams of certain types of workers got two or three conference rooms, while others got one or none because they needed project rooms or because they didn't meet frequently enough to need a conference room of their own.

Did we meet our goal of a 50% reduction in space? Well, we got really close – more like 40%. But by thoroughly understanding the nature of the work they were doing, we were also able to provide workplaces much more conducive to the work activities that would meet their business goals for innovation and speed to market as well.

This paper is adapted from an article that first appeared on the CoreNet NYC Chapter website in 2008.



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