

What Matters in Workplace Strategy

Goal: Agility

Fifth in a series of papers about workplace strategies and what goals they can and should successfully achieve: Agility, the notion of "future-proofing" the workplace to easily adapt to change will be covered next. Alignment – ensuring that the workplace reflects the unique context of a given organization; and Effectiveness – focused on the performance of the workforce; and Efficiency – using space, capital, or any other asset wisely, with as little waste as possible were described in the second, third, and fourth papers, respectively.

Many organizations are working to become increasingly innovative, nimble, and adaptable; positioned to take advantage of the next big thing or manage the unforeseen, or at least make change easier and quicker.

Physical flexibility is key, but there is a second topic – *situational awareness* or being conscious of what's happening around us and adaptable in the realm of thought and behavior is equally important. Let's talk about physical change first.

One approach to reducing the complexity and costs of change is to avoid it. One could create a universal environment – a consistent, repeatable combination of spaces that will support almost any use or user. Churn-cost management programs have traditionally worked towards the goal that as much as possible – you move people, not architecture or furniture. This can work for both day-to-day intradepartmental moves as well as interdepartmental re-stacks, since Engineering is set up just like Marketing. But the trade-off is that one-size-fits-all rarely fits anybody really well, and people adapt to it instead of the other way around.

A second approach is to allow for variety based on functional differences. While this is certainly more complex than one-size-fits-all, it can still incorporate efficiency strategies, and can be a great way to both educate the workforce and get their ongoing participation and support. There are several elements that come together to make this idea work.

First, when designing each space type, find the balance between those things that are common to all employees or job functions and can be standardized with those that are unique to a particular job function or employee like differences in the type of storage provided; for example, shelving vs. filing. The split may well be 80% standardized, 20% job-specific. In a perfect world, these differences may be accommodated with product that is highly moveable or mobile, making it easy to convert an area or office for one purpose to another, perhaps even by the occupants themselves.

Second, consider standardizing on the menu of support spaces designed to provide places for team work (like project worksessions), services (like copiers), or amenities (like food or recreation), but assigning them (especially those to support team activities) to different departments or teams based on need. This approach addresses the differences between job functions by varying the number or arrangement of those standardized space types. For example, Finance may need a one-to-one ratio of workstations to staff, two small conference rooms that can be assigned for periodic heads-down work, and a central file room. By contrast, Sales may only need five touchdown seats for their whole group, and need a central copy/fax/supply business center about the same size as the Finance file room.

Third, consider developing a system of protocols that determines (a) the "big rules" that get made and held to at a corporate level, like brand compliance or overall space allocation; (b) the decisions and choices that can be made at a business unit level, like whether they'd rather swap that fourth small conference room for two quiet rooms; and (c) those decisions or choices that can be made at an individual or team level, like what the rules are for scheduling quiet rooms, or, in the case of mobility programs like those at Capital One or Hewlett Packard, whether individuals opt to become a mobile worker and give up their assigned workstation for the freedom to work anytime, anywhere. Look for the correlations between these choices and what is easy to change or reconfigure.

Now let's turn to the idea of situational awareness. I want to promote the idea that *the way* workplace consultants do things is as valuable as the outcome. More specifically, by making the discovery process more visible to clients, we do much to diminish any impressions that workplace consultation is merely trend-following or a retread of the previous success of the consultant. If the client can see how we get from point A to points B, C, and D and how consultants translate clients' image, requirements, goals, and values into physical form, they then begin to value our ability

to make those connections and successfully interpret their uniqueness.

More importantly, clients who understand the process – because they're part of it – become more conscious of their work practices and see the linkages between work and place. The organization learns, and when things change again, they know how to get to a new outcome by retracing the causal links they uncovered the previous time.

To summarize the themes of this and the preceding papers, successful workplace strategies go far beyond cost reduction. They provide opportunities to align the goals and aspirations of the organization with the work environments of their staff (Alignment), and they support the staff's own ability to make their best contribution to the organization and to themselves (Effectiveness). They use the assets of the organization wisely (Efficiency) and are in position to take best advantage of predictable and unpredictable events in the future (Agility).

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About the Author

Jan Johnson, FIIDA, LEED® AP, is Vice President of Design and Workplace Resources at Allsteel. Jan leads the Allsteel Workplace Advisory team and the development and delivery of content and tools that support clients and design organizations as they plan, design, and manage work environments. With both an interior design degree and MBA, she has worked as an interior designer and strategic planner for her own firm and Perkins+Will, and as a workplace consultant for HOK/Consulting, prior to joining Allsteel.