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Strategies for Post-COVID Workplace Design

In the last issue of Office Options, Alasdair Hood discussed how Context uses workplace surveying and data collection to uncover the key factors impacting post-pandemic workplaces and the implications they're having for businesses and their workers.

In this edition, he shares some of the design strategies his team employ to address those factors and develop new workplace environments that meet the evolving needs of a new working paradigm.



1 EMBRACE NEW RHYTHMS AND WORKPLACE PRACTICES

The impact of market forces is generally associated with the supply and demand of goods and services, but now they extend to work/life balance as well. Like it or not, COVID-19 irrevocably altered work practices and worker expectations. If organisations are to continue attracting and retaining the best staff, the first strategy they must adopt is embracing the new rhythms and practices that emerged from pandemic-enforced isolation; to better align with a workforce now accustomed to greater flexibility. The extent to which organisations adopt change will alter from business to business, but the underlying principle remains: no matter how attractive an office space may be, it will struggle to succeed as a well-inhabited workspace unless coupled with some level of flexibility supporting a lifestyle balance.

2 THINK LIKE A COMMUNITY

In one form or another, all societies are organised into communities with neighbourhoods. Workplaces can be considered in the same way. By adopting good urban design principles, businesses (particularly larger-scale ones) can incorporate many of the features that

make well-designed communities so successful. Providing clusters of amenities (neighbourhoods) within larger floorplates (communities) not only provides order but offers a sense of belonging when staff use the office less frequently. Knowing where they'll find their team, and locating other colleagues elsewhere in the office improves efficiency and, importantly, worker perceptions related to the value of coming in.

3 ADOPT BROKEN PLAN ARCHITECTURE

Expansive, open floorplates have underpinned the workplace strategies of most large organisations over the past couple of decades. Fostering connectivity and collaboration, they removed barriers, both physically and metaphorically as managers emerged from their offices and sat with staff in open plan arrangements.

Post-COVID work patterns mean the once-buzzing open environments now feel vacant and grossly under-utilised, but the answer is not as simple as reducing leased space to suit daily volumes. What happens when everyone comes in at once?

A key driver drawing workers back to the office is face-to-face collaboration, so environments must support the types of activities that promote this.

Rather than open-plan, the community-building strategy with smaller-scale neighbourhoods supports a 'broken plan' approach – breaking down the scale of spaces that teams work in to help them feel more compact and vital. Visually separated zones reduce the impression that areas nearby may be uninhabited.

4 DESIGN FOR POSITIVE, AND AVOID NEGATIVE ADJACENCIES

Well-designed communities share amenities. Offices should be the same. Common activities like open meetings, collaborative sessions and casual interactions are supported by amenities like meeting tables, leaners with barstools, whiteboards and soft seating. Because these activities form only part of a typical working day, it makes sense that these features be shared.

Whiteboard spaces, open meeting tables and lounge chair arrangements all serve as intersections between adjacent teams, but they can also be the cause of dysfunctional workplaces. When collaborative activities encouraging noisy interaction are located next to focus zones, one negatively impacts the other. These types of distractions are a key reason workers give for staying away.

Designing for positive adjacencies, and eliminating negative ones, is fundamental to creating well-functioning working environments and should be an integral consideration for organisations when planning their workplace layouts.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alasdair Hood is Head of Design at Context, an integrated design practice with 100 staff, located across four studios throughout NZ. He specialises in strategy and design and has a breadth of experience with clients of all scales across a range of industries from workplace, retail, and hospitality to residential. Innovative and forward-thinking, he works with some of Aotearoa's best-known companies and brands to design places and spaces that support stakeholder needs, while understanding commercial requirements. He is currently providing strategic consultancy and design to blue-chip organisations on their future workplace planning.

5 RECOGNISE THAT NEW WORK PRACTICES REQUIRE DIFFERENT AMENITIES

More than any other, the mass adoption of remote work has altered the tools and amenities that workers require to do their jobs. Mobility has increased drastically with laptops, tablets and other mobile devices becoming commonplace. This has prompted a shift in the types of physical amenities offices must provide to support mobility. Online meetings now outpace face-to-face interactions three to one. The flexibility offered by many organisations means in-office days don't necessarily



align for all workers, so even when working in the office, colleagues still need to connect with colleagues who aren't.

Amenities experiencing lower utilisation such as mid to larger-sized meeting rooms have now become dead zones with their function increasingly shifting online. Often, participants who may be in the office together, still prefer to join a meeting separately from their own desks because meeting software like Microsoft Teams, Slack and others offer better audio and sharing experiences when used from individual devices. This in turn has generated strong demand for single-person, enclosed meeting spaces or 'phone booths' where participants can join from an acoustically secure environment.

6 OFFER RELEVANT AMENITIES AND INCENTIVES

Lifestyle balance is not just about work or life, it's also about life at work. While there may still be room for a foosball table in the staff café, what workers value in a post-COVID world are amenities and incentives that make a material difference in supporting their new work/life approach.

With emphasis firmly on climate and wellness initiatives, it follows that amenities

such as secure bicycle parking and recharging, supported by well-appointed end-of-trip facilities are sensible, if not vital pieces of infrastructure workers appreciate.

If part of an organisation's strategy includes a move from their existing premises, considering new locations that are close to public transport, shops and supermarkets, will increase the likelihood workers will make the commute. Where public transport is limited, consider how parking might be optimised with space sharing and cost subsidisation.

7 GIVE WORKERS A LITTLE OF WHAT THEY LOVE AND PLENTY OF WHAT THEY DON'T HAVE AT HOME

The comforts of home are hard to leave. Whether the commute is painful, or their home environment is simply more attractive, many workers find it difficult to head out the front door.

Considering the office as an extension of the home and fitting it out to reflect the attributes that workers appreciate in their domestic lives helps ease the psychological transition between home and work. While retaining core functionality, residential aesthetics including colours, furniture and generous indoor planting all contribute to a less commercial, more homely feel.

Kitting out end-of-trip facilities with the useful features found in the home, from hairdryers to ironing boards, make cycling, running or walking commutes more manageable, and providing high-quality social spaces with good coffee as a genuine alternative to the local cafe, are all incentives to come in.

If you're thinking about reimagining your workplace, we'd love to help. Get in touch at hello@context.nz