

HUMAN CAPITAL

HIC
ISSUE 6.8

PROFILE:
SAP

EXPERT INSIGHT:
HRIS



**International
sourcing &
recruitment**

Offshoring

**Mobility &
relocation**

Migration

on the move

HR & GLOBALISATION

Corporate conflict: creating Respectful Workplace Programs

FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION

Thinking about the workspace as a key lever for building human capital can help to position HR professionals as strategic business partners, writes *Dr Suzanne Perillo*

The construction of the first purpose-built office building began in Italy, in 1560. Motivated by the need for a larger space, a desire for increased efficiency, easy supervision and greater worker accessibility, the administration and magistrates of the Medici government were moved into the Uffizi in Florence, in 1581. More than four centuries later, how has our thinking about the space in which we work evolved?

Much continues to be written and espoused about the way people experience and perform work. Typically, the contribution of the physical environment to employee performance does not share the spotlight. Relationships between people at work are obviously important – and so is the quality of the relationship between people and their workspace.

The prospect of a new, or redesigned, workspace provides an opportunity for deepening the connection employees have to their work, each other and their company's vision. Deputy MD of Australian workspace design and manufacturing company Schiavello, Peter Schiavello, notes: "More than ever before, it's critical that organisations attract, inspire and retain capable and progressive people. A custom-built workspace is a vital but often underutilised resource for attracting talented employees and creating conditions that enable them to innovate."

The workspace-performance link

Thinking about employee performance is complex. Jobs can be enlarged and they can be enriched. Monetary and non-monetary motivators can be used to reward and recognise performance. People must be independent and competent at teaming. Formalised workplace training can be used to correct skill deficits. Informal learning sees knowledge grow. Leadership is not the same as management. It is therefore not surprising that designing and configuring high performing workspace is also complex work.

Financial and technological reasons are important reasons for thinking strategically about workspace – but not exclusively so. Poor workspace design has been linked to decreased motivation, lower levels of productivity, feelings of isolation, obstructions to effective teamwork, higher levels of employee stress and turnover, wasted work time, reduced decision making quality, employee turnover and sick building syndrome. When it comes to thinking about what makes workspace effective, issues related to functionality, safety and physical comfort make it to the discussion table. Workstation size, furniture, partitioning, storage, noise, light and ventilation are important considerations. Increasingly, attention is being paid to factors such as informal communication and the ability to switch between individual work and teamwork.

"A custom-built workspace is a vital but often underutilised resource for attracting talented employees and creating conditions that enable them to innovate" – Peter Schiavello



Zero Waste headquarters



Zero Waste headquarters

Opening connections

Since the 1980s, there has been a shift towards more open office layouts. For an increasing number of companies, such a shift is a strategic one. For international law firm Nagashima Ohno & Tsunematsu, the desire to be part of growing trends towards openness, comfort and employee wellbeing played a key role in the design considerations for its new head office in Japan. Hisako Iwai notes: "The expanding of the office was timed perfectly to put our ideas towards the company's future into effect. We aimed to create an office environment to provide a high quality legal service and to enhance the organisational functions, corporate structure and staff support system."

Now quite familiar with the notion of knowledge workers, it is not surprising that the shift away from enclosed offices has moved way beyond the option of high partitions and cubicles. The vision of an office space filled with employees sitting uniformly in rows of desks is consistent with a desire to eliminate communication. By comparison, clusters, pods, hives and dens are examples of workspace configurations designed to reduce hierarchy, encourage communication and facilitate faster decision making and transparency.

Consistent with the assumption that work is a social activity, design trends have seen the size of individual workstations reduce and spaces that support collaboration, impromptu interaction and employee mobility increase. Both teams and individuals can be beneficiaries. Teams can be better positioned to meet tight deadlines and perform multidisciplinary work through increased opportunities to source information and develop new ideas.

Individual work can also benefit from the efficient sharing of information and the receipt of prompt feedback.

The workspace can also be viewed as a tool for leveraging employee learning and development by enabling access to company 'know-how' that circulates informally. High levels of access and proximity to others – including management, shared information displays, glazed partition systems and breakout areas – are workspace design characteristics that facilitate opportunities for individuals to participate in a dynamic and daily learning process.

Cultural manoeuvres

Reinforcing, or contributing to a shift in, organisational culture, the workspace can help employees to 'find their way'. The reinforcement of company values and brand attributes was a critical consideration for KPMG throughout the design process for its new headquarters in Adelaide. Facilities manager Belinda Powell comments: "In line with KPMG values, we wanted the business to demonstrate it was open with communication through transparency and the encouragement of teamwork."

Workspace can also act to reinforce a cultural commitment to environmental sustainability. Determined to demonstrate leadership in green practices, sustainable materials and methods of construction were design priorities for Zero Waste SA's new headquarters. "We needed to show that we're putting our money where our mouth is in terms of leading the way, not just in waste management, but also sustainability. We thought it would be very useful to have a case study that others can either emulate or learn from," says CEO Vaughan Levitzke.

Personalising space

For employees, corporate social responsibility counts and so does the opportunity to make decisions about the workspace, especially when it comes to personalisation and privacy. In a recent study conducted by Schiavello, 58% of employees participating in the first stage of a research project investigating various psychological and ergonomic aspects of effective workspace design felt very strongly about the importance of 'workspace-personality fit'.

Research revealed that the desire and ability to personalise workstations was a key issue. The display of photographs and visual accessories, the leaving of work on desks and the re-orientation of furniture also emerged as common behaviours when personalising workstations. Workspace personalisation was also associated with the ability to adjust privacy levels and to reconfigure open workspaces into smaller areas for working in groups.

Relationships are the key to enabling organisational innovation. People matter and so does the space they work in. It is time to blur the distinction between workspace and HR strategy and facilities and people management. The sociospatial relationship can be an active agent in the realisation of business objectives – and with imagination, exponentially so. **HC**

About the author

Dr Suzanne Perillo is an organisational psychologist with Schiavello. For more information, phone: (03) 9330 8727 or e-mail: sperillo@schiaavello.com

The best employers to work for work with Onetest.



Find out how Onetest is helping some of Australia's biggest brands recruit, develop and retain talent with sophisticated yet simple online employment solutions.

1300 137 937 www.onetest.com.au

