

# FEATURE ARTICLE

## 7 Key Changes in the Future Workplace

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When Albert Einstein was teaching at Princeton, his assistant noticed that Einstein's exam question was the same question that he gave to the students a year ago. His assistant whispered to Einstein, "Professor, you gave the same question as the last year to these students..." Einstein answered "Yes, it is the same question. But the answers have changed since then."

One of the questions that are constantly going around in the field of workplace design, strategy, and management is what the future workplace looks like. When I think about people searching for answers for the same question on how the future workplace looks like, I cannot help myself thinking about this anecdotal story about Einstein. People constantly ask about the future workplace: drivers of changes,

how changes will impact the workplace design and management, and how to proactively prepare the changes. And yesterday's answers cannot be the answers for today or tomorrow. This is because the workplace is always changing to cope with the evolving business models, advancement in business process and technology, and economic impacts from various economic, political and cultural shifts surrounding corporates. In this article, I would like to share my thoughts on seven major changes coming to our workplaces right now in the leading companies and others in the near future. These seven changes are: Workplace Wellbeing, Agility and Innovation, Choices and Blurring Boundaries; Diversity & Individuality; Corporate DNA & Tailored Approach; Evidence-Based Workplace Design and Management; and Automation and Artificial Intelligence.

### **1. Workplace Wellbeing:**

- ⊗ Workplace wellbeing on the bottom line & engagement: There is growing evidence from business case studies and the advancement of neuroscience that highlight the contribution of wellbeing-enhanced workplaces on the organizational bottom line and more engaged workplace culture
- ⊗ Balance between body and mind: with increased cognitive overload and mental blocks and obesity epidemic, environmental interventions in the workplace is becoming more and more important as long-term solutions to support a balanced human body and sensory system by addressing physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and environmental aspects of wellbeing.
- ⊗ Engagement and winning the talent war through workplace wellbeing: Organizations are learning that workplace wellbeing is a critical business strategy to address engagement and talent war internally and the triple bottom line of sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) externally.

### **2. Agility and Innovation:**

- ⊗ Economic unease and the need for innovation: As economic turbulences and cultural shifts continue, uneasy business climates push organizations to be more innovative to survive and thrive in the innovation economy.
- ⊗ Exploration of various workplace design and management strategies: Organizations continue seeking various workplace design and management strategies and explorations of new business models to cope with economic challenges.
- ⊗ Focus on less-hierarchical organizational structure: Organizations are less focusing on the traditional hierarchy of the organization and putting more emphasis on the flattened organizational structure and freedom/autonomy in order to bring out the highest potential of employees for them to produce more innovative outcomes.

### 3. Choices and Blurring Boundaries:

- ⊗ Concerns with soaring real estate costs and changing demographics: More organizations are feeling pressured by hiking real estate costs. They are also facing challenges with changing demographics and how to support them in order for them to be able to work at their full capacity.
- ⊗ Choices as a strategy for real estate cost reduction and meeting various needs of diverse demographics: Providing choices is becoming a viable strategy for organizations to address better space utilization within a reduced footprint while offering options to people. For instance, concerns with choices for where, when, and how to work are leading to explorations in alternative work arrangements, including free address, hot-desking, activity-based work, etc.
- ⊗ Flexibility as a top priority: Flexibility is even more important now than before. Soaring real estate costs along with the need of choices require more flexible space planning (expandability, convertibility, and versatility of spaces) and diverse technological supports for people to be able to work anywhere and anytime.
- ⊗ Blurring boundaries between different types of spaces: In order to address choices, organizations are exploring ideas of integrating spatial characteristics from the first place (home environment) and the third place (coffee shop environment) to the workplace (the second place). Also companies in different types of industries are experimenting other industries' successful spatial and design components in search of innovative workplace solutions (e.g. tech companies vs. financial companies or hospitality companies vs. institutional organizations)

### 4. Diversity & Individuality:

- ⊗ Different generations, working styles, and value systems in one workplace: Due to financial insecurity, baby boomers want to remain in employment while the majority of the current workforce will be millennials in the near future. When Homeland Generation starts joining the workforce, the demographic landscape of the workplace will be extremely diverse. With the global workforce moving around to different regions of the globe for economic and cultural opportunities, influx of people from different cultures will make the workplace landscape even more complex.
- ⊗ Different physical capacity: The workplace needs to accommodate different physical needs between older generations and younger generations. Older generations will require more ergonomic supports as well as physical comfort for their diminishing physical capacity. These support include furniture ergonomics as well as auditory, visual, olfactory, and thermal comfort.
- ⊗ Individual workstyles: In addition, different generations and people from different cultures mean different work styles and preferences in the workplace. In order to support their full potential, workplace design and management need to focus on accommodating individual work styles. For

instance, quieter spaces to focus and spaces to reflect and contemplate may be critical for people with more introverted nature in the open office environments.

## **5. Corporate DNA & Tailored Approach:**

- ✿ Understanding Corporate DNA: Analyzing and understanding “who we are” as an organization (corporate DNA) will be a fundamental approach to workplace design, strategy, and management in order to implement workplace solutions that drive successful business outcomes. Understanding the corporate DNA of each organization will become key to the successful workplace design and management.
- ✿ Bye, bye to chasing trends: Insecurity with the constantly changing workplaces have driven workplace design, strategy, and management professionals to relentlessly pursue buzzwords and hot trends. Many of them have shown a tendency to gravitate to the most popular buzzwords/ trends or, some time, the most promising buzzwords/ trends as if those are somehow proven solutions for different types of businesses/industries and organizational structure and culture. However, leading organizations have learned that the one-size-fits-all approach has never been successful and will never be. Now is the time to move away from chasing the buzzwords/ trends and applying cookie-cutter-type-solutions.

## **6. Evidence-Based Workplace Design and Management:**

- ✿ Validating strategies and assumptions: There is a great quote that people use for managing and improving something in businesses: “You cannot manage what you cannot measure.” This is altered from the original expression by the famous business visionary, Peter Drucker: “If you cannot measure it, you cannot improve it.” These fundamentally mean the same thing: you cannot determine the success of what you implemented unless you define and track the success. While this idea has been incorporated to the field facility management among the leading professionals in their practice, it has not yet been implemented as a routine standard practice in the workplace design and management practice. However, in the future workplaces, validating strategies and assumptions will become important as part of a routine practice to design and manage workplaces along with the practice of incorporating feedback/ lessons learned to future projects for the improvements.
- ✿ Use of monitoring systems and data analysis: With the advancement in technology and methods, workplace management and monitoring systems will become more available and prevalent in the near future. Data-driven practices will be incorporated to systematically design and manage workplaces based on the analyses from these systems from space utilization to even employee health. I can articulate three major monitoring practices in the workplaces as follows.

- Environment monitoring: To provide optimum environments, monitoring systems will be implemented to measure from indoor air quality to space utilization. Some of the examples include monitoring outdoor air levels to determine whether to open windows, indoor carbon dioxide levels and automatic alarm systems, occupant sensors and daylight harvest, and the number of people and frequency related to the use of various spaces.
- Workplace performance monitoring: To tie workplace design and management strategies to specific business outcomes, monitoring systems will be implemented. More comprehensive workplace metrics and diagnostics, connecting dots between 3Ps of the workplace: place, people and process, will be utilized to link the workplace to the organizational performance and the bottom line.
- Employees' physical and mental health monitoring: The future workplace will not only monitor and analyze the environments and workplace performance but also a comprehensive monitoring system for employee health, both physical and mental health. These employee health monitoring systems will be integrated to the workplace management system to manage employee physical fitness, vital signs, food/beverage consumption, and stress levels to name a few.

## **7. Automation & Artificial intelligence:**

- Replacement of human jobs with robots and artificial intelligence: While it is quite yet undetermined how this will pan out at the moment as it is still early to predict in terms of workplace design and management, jobs with repetitive and predictable components are likely to be examined for a possibility of being replaced with robots and artificial intelligence.
- Focus on human-essential job functions: Workplace design and management practices are likely to be more valued for jobs that human collaboration/ interaction and creative skills are essential to the job functions.
- Polarization of workplaces: With the replacement of humans with robots and artificial intelligence, organizations that human-essential job functions are not a critical part of the business are likely to less value the important of the physical workplaces. However, the physical workplaces may become tremendously important to the organizations that human-essential job functions are the major component of the business. Thus, workplaces are likely to be polarized between two groups: a group where the physical workplace is a vital component to the success and the other group that diminishes the meaning of the physical workplace.
- Resistance and battles: With a potential to create major economic distress to those who lose jobs and families, it may bring a social movement to fight back against such a business practice to emphasize humane management and human dignity.

These seven changes are summarized below with an interesting image from an article of HR Review highlighting the research by Unum and The Future Laboratory. I originally created this material to facilitate a round table discussion for my presentation at the Northeast Summit on a Sustainable Built Environment: Health of Place at Yale University in April, 2017. While my seven changes do not exactly match the components in this image, it is quite exciting to just think about what the future workplace looks like! Regardless of how people define the future workplace and predict what changes would be prevalent, I believe the future can be in our hands. We need to remind us that we can be the ones that create the future instead of chasing trends and becoming a trend-follower. In this regard, I would like to end the article with a quote from Peter Drucker:

***The best way to predict the future is to create it!***

# The Future Workplace

A glimpse of the office of 2030 based on research by financial protection specialist Unum and The Future Laboratory

## Workplace Wellbeing:

- Growing evidence from business case studies & the advancement of neuroscience highlighting the contribution of wellbeing-enhanced workplaces on the bottom line & engaged workplace culture.
- Need of workplace environments supporting a balanced human body and sensory system by addressing physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and environmental aspects of wellbeing.
- Workplace wellbeing as a strategy to address engagement, health, talent war (competitive advantage), & a triple bottom line of sustainability (indicators of sustainability).

## Agility and Innovation:

- Economic turbulences and cultural shifts creating unease and consequentially diverse explorations in workplace design & management to cope with them.
- The need for innovation for organizations to survive and thrive in innovation economy.
- Less focus on traditional hierarchy at work but more emphasis on flattened organizational structures and freedom/autonomy in order to bring out the highest potential from people for innovative outcomes.

## Choices and Blurring Boundaries:

- Addressing high real estate costs and how to support changing demographics for people to be able to work at full capacity.
- Choices as a critical element to cope with the economic and cultural circumstances. Concerns with choices for where, when, and how to work, leading to explorations in alternative work arrangements (free address, hot-desking, activity-based work, etc.).
- Flexibility becoming more and more important. Soaring real estate costs along with the need of choices leading to flexible space planning (expandability, convertibility, and versatility) and diverse technological support.
- Blurring boundaries between different types of spaces integrated to workplace (e.g. the first place-home and the third place- café integrated to the second place-workplace). Also blurring boundaries between different types of workplaces (e.g. tech companies vs. financial companies or hospitality companies vs. institutional organizations)

## Automation & Artificial intelligence:

- Replacement of human jobs that have repetitive and predictable components with robots and artificial intelligence.
- Workplace design and management more focusing on jobs that human collaboration/ interaction and creative skills are essential to the job functions.
- Workplaces polarized between two groups: a group where the physical workplace is a vital component to the success and the other group that diminishes the meaning of the physical workplace.
- It may back fire to emphasize humane management and human dignity.

## Evidence-Based Workplace Management:

- A famous quote: You cannot manage something that you cannot measure.
- Need to validate strategies and assumptions and incorporate feedback/ lessons learned to future projects.
- Use of monitoring systems and data analysis to manage from workplace space utilization to employee health.
- Environment monitor: monitoring outdoor air levels to determine whether to open windows, indoor carbon dioxide levels and automatic alarm systems, occupant sensors & daylight harvest, etc.
- Workplace performance monitor: comprehensive workplace metrics and diagnostics, looking at 3Ps of workplace-place, people & process, to link workplace to the organizational performance and the bottom line.
- Employees' physical and mental health monitor: integrating health monitoring systems to the workplace to manage employee physical fitness, vital signs, food/beverage consumption, and stress levels.

## Diversity & Individuality:

- Different generations, working styles, value systems, and physical capacity in one workplace. (Baby Boom Generation who tries to remain in employment, Generation X, Millennial Generation & Homeland Generation who will soon join the workforce).
- Need to accommodate different physical needs (senior baby boomers vs young millennials) and work styles.
- Focus on creating a balanced workplace for thermal, visual, acoustic, and olfactory comfort between various people.

## Corporate DNA & Tailored Approach:

- Understanding who we are and what we do as an organization (corporate DNA) as a fundamental approach to workplace design and management.
- The need to overcome chasing trends and the one-size-fits-all approach.
- Understanding each corporate DNA will be key to the successful workplace design and management.

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Image credit: HR review (<http://www.hrreview.co.uk/hr-news/strategy-news/the-future-workplace-report-reveals-ways-workplace-will-change/53805>)