Optimising performance: defining, designing, maintaining and evolving workplace experiences

Workplace experiences - the science series
Bringing the workplace experience to life

At the start of our research project into the workplace experience, we set out to understand how the world of work is changing, how businesses are responding and how the physical space can be used as a productivity tool.

Rather than simply looking at superficial trends in workplace design, we wanted to really interrogate the science behind how we work; to identify how the physical environment affects employee and business performance and, ultimately, how it can be harnessed to drive greater productivity.

We began by looking at academic expertise around how we, as individuals and as groups, react to our surroundings and how those reactions shape positive, and negative, behaviours.

We then looked at examples from the world of retail and hospitality – sectors which have long spearheaded this level of emotional connection to drive sales and brand loyalty. By taking lessons from the consumer world, we’ve sought to get under the skin of the modern knowledge worker – recognising that attracting, retaining and developing the best talent is competitive, and negative, behaviours.

However, it also means shaping our own business to ensure that we are practicing what we preach. This year we opened a new flagship headquarters for Interserve, where the design, delivery and management of the working environment will be guided by our research series. By making this investment, we’re not only ensuring that our own teams are able to deliver an exceptional service for our customers, but are also creating a live laboratory where we can continue to test, evaluate and shape the future of the workplace.

We’ve then used this knowledge to create a methodology that translates what we’ve learned for a commercial environment, acting as a framework for shaping and maintaining successful workplaces.

By establishing this scientific approach, we’ve sought to explain the value of the workplace, rather than simply its cost to businesses as a physical space. As technological and social trends continue to drive change in the way that we work, successful businesses need to recognise the inherent value as a factor that can maximise, or mar, employee performance.

As we reach the end of our research series with Advanced Workplace Associates (AWA), we are now taking the lessons we’ve learned to build and maintain even more productive working environments. That means applying our expertise to our work for our customers, to ensure their continued success and enhancing the performance of their portfolios.

Executive summary

This is Interserve’s fifth and final report for our research programme workplace experiences. The science series, our two-year study with AWA, to understand and shape high performance working environments.

Throughout the programme, we have highlighted the strong competition for talent that is raging in the knowledge economy. From legal practices and financial institutions to government departments and major players in telecoms, media and tech, organisations are striving to secure, maintain and develop the people and skills they need to thrive in the digital age, and beyond.

Marshalling this talent effectively through the design and performance of the spaces we work within is essential to gaining competitive advantage - meaning that the management of the workplace needs to be placed at the centre of business strategies.

In this final report, we revisit the key lessons we have taken from our programme: the need to understand the aims and ambitions of employees to get the most from them in the workplace and to ultimately design working environments accordingly.
The growth of the knowledge economy means we need to think differently about how we approach the workplace. Knowledge workers - employees that think for a living - increasingly hold the key to economic success. As global economists point to a new era driven by digitisation and automation, businesses will increasingly battle to secure the agile, problem-solving and creative skills that they need to thrive in this new world, which can’t be replicated by a machine.

The specialist knowledge of these workers - from designers, consultants, engineers and lawyers to brand managers and software engineers, renders them hugely valuable. Attracting these people into work is only the first challenge; having invested in good recruitment, businesses then need to retain their interest and enthusiasm to get the best from these teams, and to encourage them to invest in the long-term success of their firm.

KEY FINDING: Businesses need to understand employees as consumers of the workplace to get the most out of their teams. And the working environment needs to reflect social and demographic trends seen in the wider world.

THE KNOWLEDGE WORKER AS A WORKPLACE CONSUMER

By learning from the retail and hospitality sectors, we can shape strategies that recognise the employee as a workplace consumer.

In the modern world of the knowledge economy, we can no longer simply make a distinction between consumer and worker behaviours, but instead tailor the workplace experience to suit the workplace consumer. Taking trends from retail and hospitality, this means creating multi-sensory workplace experiences that work functionally and generate a positive - and productive - emotional response.

As in the world of retail, achieving this relies on getting under the skin of our workplace consumers - identifying target consumer populations and creating tailored experiences which reflect the specific needs of each correspondent segment. Evolution and change are then essential to keeping these audiences engaged. Just as consumer industries need to track trends to stay ahead of the competition, the workplace needs to be a dynamic experience. Whether expressed through sights or sounds, the best working environments need to plan for the systematic introduction of future waves of experience enhancement.

As in the consumer world, negative experiences have the biggest impact on brand satisfaction and loyalty. Inconsistent and poor experience leads to loss of trust and belief, so the design of workplace experiences need to be robust and fault free. The ambition for organisations should be to deliver a consistently high experience every day, or at the very least a robust workplace plan to resolve issues should be in place.

KNOWLEDGE WORK IS A TEAM SPORT

Strong, cohesive working communities are essential to maximising productivity.

Whilst knowledge workers often undertake parts of their role alone, working on analytical tasks, developing concepts, reports and graphics, the real power comes through the collective brainpower of an organisation’s communities. Allowing knowledge to flow easily enables new and better ideas to be generated and valuable developments to be expertly executed with cross disciplinary teams.

Community productivity relies on six factors: social cohesion; perceived supervisory support; Information sharing; vision and goal clarity; external communications; and trust. As we look to design increasingly high performance workplaces, we need to ensure that the physical and managed working environment brings these to the fore, creating physical, digital and psychological experiences that encourage people to work together to generate new ideas and innovations.
BOOSTING COGNITIVE CAPACITY

THE SEARCH FOR THE PERFECT WORKPLACE

Boosting cognitive performance relies on interrogating the way we experience the workplace, both in terms of our sensory experience, but also the emotional connections we develop.

Our behaviour at work, as in our home lives, is shaped by our experiences - how we react to what we see, hear, feel, taste and smell. In the past these influences were at best poorly understood or not considered, and at worst ignored in the workplace. In our knowledge economy, however, these workplace experiences become essential.

Why? Firstly, because poor experiences act as distractions, diverting attention from essential tasks and hindering productivity in our knowledge workers. People need to be able to focus their cognitive energy - their brain power - on things that create commercial value and not on overcoming workplace distractions and failings.

Secondly, getting these experiences right not only avoids a negative reaction, but can encourage a positive one. Scientific study from the consumer world around how people respond to light, sound and spaces can be used to create a workplace that is not only frictionless, but actively business-supporting - ensuring that the optimum environment is created for employees which maximises their ability to do their job.

Ultimately, organisations need to create workplace experiences that act as powerful recruitment and retention tools, authentically articulating organisational personality and cultural behaviours that inspire loyalty in employees.

DESIGNING WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES

KEY FINDING: Successful businesses need to understand how workers respond to their environment, shaping the workplace accordingly to ensure they attract, retain and develop the best talent.

THE PRODUCTIVITY PUZZLE

The nature of knowledge work means that we need to understand performance and productivity in terms of boosting cognitive capacity.

Unlike manufacturing and heavy industry, we can no longer measure productivity simply in terms of products shipped per hour, transactions per agent and so on, because knowledge work is not linear and homogenous, but highly varied.

Boosting performance in knowledge-based businesses relies on maximising the cognitive performance of the brain - or brains - within an organisation to deliver commercially valuable outcomes, services or products. Our experiences - noise, light, temperature, sense and smell - all have an impact on this performance and the ability to divert our attention from intellectual tasks.

This may seem exaggerated, but imagine you work in a loud, noisy office with unwelcoming smells coming from the employee kitchen. The combination of these factors puts demand on your brain: to keep you cool, focusing on quieting the background noise and trying to ignore the kitchen smells. All of these distractions have a knock-on impact on intellectual performance - ultimately hampering productivity.

In designing the workplace experience we need to create ‘frictionless’ experiences that do not create additional demands on our knowledge workers’ cognitive resources. Doing so will help ensure that team’s energies are devoted to ‘frictionless’ experiences that do not create additional demands on our knowledge workers’ cognitive resources.

Having identified the needs and motivations of our employees, as workplace consumers, we then need to design buildings and spaces which enable them to perform to their best ability.

Effective workplaces don’t simply occur but need to be actively designed. The first step is to identify the brief for what we want to achieve. Getting this right relies on bringing in the right people for the job, establishing a series of workplace experience ‘guardians’ who can facilitate the design process.

Under this group’s guidance, research is essential to establish the brief - taking into account competitor analysis, employee surveys together with an understanding of the business’ challenges, strategy, cultural priorities and available resource. Functional workforce needs can then be established through interviews, utilisation studies and on-line surveys.

All this is then brought together through a process of synthesis and innovation to generate a unique set of workplace experience goals which are bespoke to the business, detailing the characteristics and qualities the workplace experience must meet to deliver an experience aligned to the specific organisation’s needs.

We then move on to focus on journey design. Understanding the journeys that are made through the workplace is essential to our appreciation of employees’ experiences. Working with a comprehensive team involving designers, acousticists, environmental engineers, technologists, workplace users and facilities managers, workplace guardians need to work through each journey and destination within the building to determine how to deliver each mission using each sense.

Through multiple workshops using an agile design methodology, a blueprint is developed for each journey and destination, generating a specification. A review for consistency and affordability is performed continually to make sure trade-offs can be made early without impairing the experience.

From this stage, each element of each destination and journey is specified for procurement and delivery, and the process moves to a more traditional project delivery mode.

Workplace experience guardians work closely with the delivery team or project manager to make sure the spirit of the experience remains intact throughout the design process. In particular, they need to ensure that the brief remains fulfilled through phases of ‘value engineering’ to reduce costs. They test the design once it’s been implemented through design walkthroughs.

The final step is then to focus on how we undertake workplace management in the long term, which we review in more detail in our next section.

STAYING TRUE TO THE BRAND

The workplace should be a physical expression of a business’ brand, bringing this to life through its ‘personality’.

Commercial success for consumer-facing businesses relies on defining and articulating a distinctive brand which appeals to target audiences and distinguishes them from their competition. Organisations seeking to engage with employees need to establish the same approach: identifying the values, personality and culture that they need to build the right team.

The workplace then needs to reflect this brand. At an operational level, this means establishing a single tone, voice and set of behaviours across the team which correspond with the way that the organisation does business and acts towards its customers. These behaviours then also need to be reflected across written signage, documentation, service delivery style, spoken language, dress and recruitment.

KEY FINDING: Forward-thinking businesses need to create a coherent strategy for the workplace, setting objectives and goals that align with the organisation’s brand.
THE WORKPLACE EXPERIENCE DESIGN PROCESS

OWNERSHIP OF THE WORKPLACE EXPERIENCE

KEY FINDING: The workplace experience is not a one-off event but an ongoing process which needs careful management to remain successful.

MANAGING THE WORKPLACE - GETTING THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Creating high performance workplaces relies on creating an effective team which can shape, evaluate and reconfigure the working environment to respond to the brief.

Designing the experience is only the start of the journey. To shape business performance, the working environment needs consistent delivery to yield real results.

While there is a lot that you can do to physically design an experience, the final frontier is the human-to-human interface. Personal interactions underpin high performance workplaces, so it’s essential that ‘people’ people are selected and effectively trained to deliver the best possible experience to employees.

ENGENDERING A ONE-TEAM APPROACH

Management of the workplace means more than just physical space, but needs to coordinate inputs from HR, IT and property teams, as well as from the workers themselves.

Many team members, often from different supplier organisations, contribute to the working environment. We need to engender a one-team approach in which everyone feels responsible for the whole experience and works together to make great experiences happen.

In most organisations there is no single leader or team with responsibility for managing the workplace experience. In the knowledge economy where each worker is integral to business productivity, this must be addressed.

Doing so requires breaking down silo mentalities. Remembering that an ‘experience’ is perceived in the mind of every workplace user as one continuous stream of sensory impressions, the human brain doesn’t much care whether a moment within the experience is delivered by facilities providers, an in-house IT department, a specific supplier, or even a robot.

To deliver exceptional workplace experiences, we need to start viewing all the components that create an experience through one single lens. This includes traditional facilities services such as cleaning, catering, front of house and maintenance, but also other critical support services including HR and IT, which both contribute and respond to the employee experience.

A good example of another discipline where we’ve seen a similar shift of emphasis is in IT, where a traditional focus merely on service provision has given way to looking at how technological teams can drive benefits for business growth. We now need to emulate this approach in the workplace.

OWNERSHIP AND EVALUATION

Demonstrating value, not cost, is critical to building a case for a better workplace.

Challenging this traditional structure is where workplace experience guardians can play a part. Having worked on the initial brief, they need to play an ongoing role in managing the working environment as employee and organisational needs evolve over time.

‘Experience based’ measurement systems should be designed to proactively understand how well the experience is performing through the eyes of different employee groups. It should develop a cascade of consistent service levels and measurements all aligned to the workplace experience brief.
Organise a workplace experience delivery team led by workplace experience guardians, inviting all the ‘sub silo’ leaders to get involved. The purpose: to build relationships and bond the group together.

Review all your employee touchpoints against the workplace experience brief.

Review your services, environments, contracts and service level agreements to establish whether they are in alignment with the workplace experience brief.

Set up a series of experience measurements across all touchpoints to provide a set of monthly reports that indicate how well the overall experience is performing.

Review the measures with the workplace experience guardians and plan to evolve/improve towards the outcomes defined in the workplace experience brief.

Develop new initiatives designed to promote understandings and practices that will lead to enhanced personal and team performance.
Practical advice for creating better workplaces

In the knowledge economy, businesses which recognise the value, not simply the cost, of designing, delivering and curating excellent workplace experiences will reap the benefits of investment. In the following pages, we identify six practical areas for businesses to focus on to retain a competitive advantage.

1. Establish a strategy for the workplace which aligns with commercial objectives

Successful businesses recognise the value of the workplace in the knowledge economy. There needs to be senior buy-in.

For too long the physical working environment has been seen as an unavoidable cost, rather than an asset with the potential to shape organisational performance. In the knowledge economy, workplace experience teams need to work closely with senior decision makers to ensure the physical experience of work reflects and responds to commercial strategies.

The workplace experience team needs to be in constant dialogue with business leaders, winning their trust and acting as a confidential adviser to ensure strategic decisions are shaped - not simply accommodated - by physical workplaces.

Recommended steps:
- Build a stakeholder plan for your organisation including key departments and consider team-specific requirements.
- Encourage an environment for fostering innovative ideas, points of view and value-added suggestions in workplace arrangements.
- Regularly engage with performance, service and quality improvement processes and plans at a senior level.
- Create access to data from multiple sources which can be analysed and translated to add value: reacting to requirements; driving change for immediate improvement and tactical action; and feeding into longer-term strategy.

Successful workplaces will rely on close collaboration between multiple support service lines, under the remit of a workplace experience delivery team. The impetus to create this approach needs to come from senior management as a strategic initiative and to secure buy-in from existing business divisions.

Training for the employee community involved in delivering the experience (directly or indirectly) will ensure everyone understands what is to be achieved and feels part of one team. This team will need a shared understanding of how they, collectively, impact workplace experiences and performance. By playing this role, they can also be a source of intelligence - expert witnesses to how the workplace is used and empowered that advise on, not simply deliver, facilities services.

By sharing the purposes and missions of the workplace experience with members of this community, they will have a greater level of understanding of the link between what they do and the performance of the organisation. As a consequence they should recognise that their role has a higher level of importance, leading to higher levels of engagement.

Recommend steps:
- Establish a clear shared vision and purpose for the team, with links to business performance and the workplace experience design.
- Encourage social cohesion through co-locating members of the new team and by using social tools like Slack, Yammer or Microsoft Teams to connect silos and sub-silo contributors into one team.
- Develop and maintain trust between in-house teams and suppliers, delivering on promises and demonstrating honesty. Trust is critical to a truly collaborative environment and freedom from fear allows creativity in thinking and innovation, fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Contracts and performance management mechanisms also need to reinforce transparency and honesty.
- Hold social events bringing together everyone involved in delivering experiences to build relationships and trust.
- Provide training workshops to develop a common language and understanding associated with workplace experiences and professional service management.
- Provide time for teams to come up with innovative ideas to improve the workplace experience and/or improve efficiency.
- Recognise that there may be multiple organisations involved (some external) and ensure that objectives and contract arrangements do not create conflict.
- Review contracts across all sub silos and re-align them such that service provision is consistent and in line with the “workplace experience brief” – taking theory into practice.

2. Coordinate delivery of the workplace across existing silos to engender a ‘one team’ approach

Collaboration between multiple support lines needs to be established by the workplace experience delivery team.
3. Ensure that the workplace acts as an extension of the business’ brand

The workplace experience team needs to be able to fulfil the requirements of the brand, acting as advocates for the business to both employees and end customers.

A critical part of the workplace experience is the daily interface between employees and the services provided, regardless of whether they have a front of house or back of house role. Businesses need to ensure that their values are defined and translated into everyday behaviours and language. Increasingly, the personality, style, education level and competence of people needed to deliver services will need to reflect these requirements.

The language used in daily communications with employees through verbal interaction, signage, email, work sites, notices and so on needs to be consistent. For instance, do you want a humorous tone or a serious one? Formal or colloquial? Safe or innovative? These factors will have been defined in the workplace experience brief.

4. Empower the workplace team to act as integrators, not just facilitators and provide them with the digital tools to do so:

Using the new combined resources of the workplace experience team, businesses should look beyond the traditional role of facilities management to reflect the needs of a modern workforce to shape better performance. Taking on some of the functions of a traditional HR team, for example around wellbeing, will help to break down silos.

In this way the workplace team will establish a dialogue with employees which supports better communication and loyalty, acting to support internal communications teams as the interface with management structures.

Taking advantage of new technology is also essential to shaping the workplace around the needs of teams and individual workers to increasingly personalise experiences. For instance, we can build up a picture of each user and their habits and service consumption. Using social tools including LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook we might even be able to personalise the way reception teams greet an individual or visitor.

Space utilisation information can also be used by employees too. Users working in an agile environment can access information about the status of the workplace from apps and screens and choose places that best suit them and their task needs, for example choosing quieter areas for tasks that require concentration. We can show employees where space is available on other floors in a way that we simply aren’t right now.

Smartphone apps will be used to deliver new services providing information on menus, ordering food in a restaurant, booking a gym session or a massage, finding and booking a meeting room, finding the location of a colleague or department.

Recommended steps:

- Define the detailed behaviours and competences you need, based on your organisation’s personality defined in the workplace experience design process. To clarify these, give situational examples showing how you do and do not want people to behave in a variety of circumstances.
- Recruit, coach and manage performance to these behaviours.
- Design work wear based on the personality you wish to portray.
- Be clear about the ‘voice’ you want and provide examples to all service delivery teams involved in communications with employees and clients. Be vigilant and be aware of communications that don’t portray the right ‘voice’. When we talk about ‘voice’ we’re really talking about the style of communication between those responsible for service provision and the buildings’ population.

5. Invest in technology to manage and measure workplace performance

Technological trends including the internet of things afford us unprecedented ability to measure how the workplace is used and therefore how it performs.

Access to data is essential to driving performance across all areas of business. As new technologies come forward, we will increasingly use data to shape, monitor and evaluate the success of the workplace.

Workplace management technologies are developing quickly, allowing us to monitor the performance of the workplace experience without the need for surveys and questionnaires, but in real time. We can forecast service failures and fix them before employees experience them.

Sensor technology and the Internet of Things increasingly allows us to monitor the performance of systems and processes that contribute to the workplace experience. In this way, we can create measurements that help us understand the quality of the experience through the eyes of employees. Because we can understand the location of individuals and the journeys they make through the workplace, we can now measure the effectiveness of the workplace experience for specific employee groups or segments and take action to address these.

Consider this series of experiences: a person arrives at the office and has to wait five minutes for a lift. They go to the café for breakfast, but they must wait another five minutes only to find that the café has run out of milk. They go to find a desk on their floor, but it’s crowded and they can’t get the seat most suited to their needs and have to sit on another floor. They connect their laptop but the Wi-Fi network drops and when it comes back they’ve lost data from a piece of work they were doing. They go to a meeting room and they can’t easily connect to the screen or have a poor video experience. At lunch they go to the restaurant and have a long wait for a reduced menu.

We can now monitor all of these systems and services and look at the data associated with an individual’s experience to calculate its effectiveness, understanding the experience through the employee’s lens.

From our research, we know that noise levels, lighting levels, humidity, temperature, air quality and workplace utilisation all have an impact on knowledge worker productivity. These can be monitored to fine levels of granularity so that the workplace team can intervene to keep the environment in balance to maintain the workplace experience.

Measuring how a building is used will enable us to reshape the experience in response to the results, adapting meeting room space to respond to how it’s used and what frequency; swapping out or rearranging furniture and floorspace, or even shutting down parts of the building when utilization is low.

Recommended steps:

- Establish methods for measuring and evaluating the working environment to reflect the workplace brief.
- Determine metrics that will enable you to evidence the success of the workplace.
- Re-evaluate the data you receive on workplace performance in accordance with the brief at regular intervals and ensure if continues to correspond to commercial needs.
A fundamental understanding of the requirements of the workplace experience – as defined by a business’ brand values – will be needed across the whole supply chain to bear results. They must be translated into supplier selection processes, governance procedures and relationship management regimes.

The traditional approach of planned or reactive tasks based on specific service disciplines will be replaced with a holistic view of the service showing a joined up, cohesive service picture across all elements that make up the experience. Successful businesses will increasingly manage all services as co-ordinated parts of an integrated cohesive experience.

The supply chain strategy should therefore be aligned to the workplace experience brief and procurement decisions must be driven by the need to fulfil this brief – not simply by cost. The brief should form the basis of contractual requirements and experience level agreements clearly defined with clarity of ownership of who needs to do what and how to keep the experience friction-free.

Ultimately this will require the buy-in of corporate property teams, facilities teams, procurement and other support service lines including IT. In the future workplace, the cost of quality experience will matter, but the value of that experience will matter more.

Key supplier selection points:
- The selection process should involve all stakeholders.
- All service specifications should align to each other and to the workplace experience brief and design.
- Selection criteria must be based on cultural and behavioural alignment to the workplace experience brief. The supplier’s processes in recruiting, training and retaining people should also conform with the behaviours outlined in the brief.
- Suppliers need to demonstrate their desire to participate in programmes that will produce innovation in the workplace experience.
- Suppliers must agree to integration training and wholeheartedly playing as one team.
- Suppliers need to demonstrate how they will maintain/enhance their part of the workplace experience during changes in people or ownership and other factors external to the contract.
- Governance structures facilitate and foster a one-team ethos at strategic, tactical and operational levels.
- Commercially the relationship should be mutually beneficial and provide long term benefits to all parties and encourage co-creation of enhanced experiences and value.
Towards better workplaces

Through our research, we’ve established the huge potential that the workplace holds to boost organisational performance and productivity in a knowledge economy.

Creating better working environments requires a new approach and direction from senior decision makers, seeing it as a central element of a commercial strategy, rather than simply a square foot cost.

In our science series project, we have sought to elevate the workplace to become recognised as a serious concern for successful businesses looking to attract, maintain and nurture the people they need to meet their commercial objectives.

Taking these lessons forward will rely on effective coordination driven by board-level sponsorship to challenge traditional ways of managing space, invest in technology and build working environments that reflect their businesses’ brand and values.

Just as the world of business continues to evolve and adapt, we now need the workplace to catch up to ensure it can act as a catalyst for greater productivity and better performance.
About Interserve
Interserve is one of the world’s foremost support services and construction companies. Everything we do is shaped by our core values. We are a leader in innovative and sustainable outcomes for our clients and a great place to work for our people. We offer advice, design, construction, equipment, facilities management and frontline public services. Headquartered in the UK and FTSE listed, we have gross revenues of £3.3 billion and a workforce of circa 75,000 people worldwide.

Website: www.interserve.com
Get in touch:
Jeff Flanagan
Managing Director - Commercial, Interserve
E: jeff.flanagan@interserve.com

About Advanced Workplace Associates (AWA)
AWA are a group of great people from different disciplines who have a common outlook on the way work should be. We love to improve organisations through new ways of thinking and working. Our approach is a unique blend of scientific analysis, creativity and cultural change - we use all three to make a change at work. Since our birth in 1992 we’ve worked with organisations of all sizes in most sectors. The common denominator: people. All our clients are looking to optimise the use of their people and offices to improve business performance.

Website: www.advanced-workplace.com
Get in touch:
Andrew Mawson
Founder, Advanced Workplace Associates
E: amawson@advanced-workplace.com