

In a recent *Perspectives* I wrote that the ‘future of work’ debate had been dominated by the perceived shortcomings of the office workplace, as expressed through staff satisfaction surveys. I suggested that the debate was based on a largely context-free list of wishes and desires (pre-pandemic workstyles are the ‘bad old ways’; hybrid is the future; we’re all digital nomads now), and caricatures and parodies (most offices are oppressive, insufferable, unhealthy, unattractive and unfit for purpose); while the real estate industry is full of dinosaurs.

Little surprise, then, that the raft of proposed ‘solutions’ should revolve around re-designing the workplace, to create ‘experience’.

But I argued that in doing so there is a danger that we deal with the symptoms rather than causes of dissatisfaction; and that the real causes lie in work itself and how it is changing, rather than in the place of work. In this *Perspectives*, I would like to expand on this and suggest four areas in which the ‘future workplace’ narrative needs to change rapidly and thoroughly before we chase the chimera of the perfect workplace, based on notions of yesterday’s work.

Corporatism is dying

The large, multilayered, bureaucratic behemoths that bestrode the twentieth century economy are being challenged by new economic models and new ways of working.

Previously, corporate workplaces resembled military structures, with officers, NCOs and men. The latter were assembled into platoons, undertaking tiny, abstract aspects of the overall operation and without sight of the greater plan. They were corralled and directed by NCOs who received daily operational orders from the officer class, some distance away on another, usually higher, floor of the building.

Now, vertical integration of supply chains is being challenged by ever more specialist input and at the same time work processes are being fundamentally reconfigured by technology, often resulting in a relentless effort to pare costs. The result is that the shape of organisations is changing.

In the twenty-first century knowledge economy, corporatism is ceding to a more variegated economic landscape of large and small businesses, engaging in complex business ecosystems. While in the past new businesses had to invest in expensive and long-term assets, including ICT systems and real estate, today’s technological landscape enables them to compete globally with relatively little capital outlay, using cheap and ubiquitous technology – *without creating vast hierarchical armies*. They do not aspire to having corporate bureaucracy; they comprise skilled and motivated people, with significant intellectual capital, working in specialist areas.

We now operate, largely, in a ‘weightless economy’, and real estate will have to become ‘less heavy’. We also have discerning customers (business and individual) who have choice. We have large and small firms with the same workplace expectations. This does not require a new workplace design, it requires emerging models of workplace provision to evolve. Flexible terms and service provision must

lie at the core of the mainstream offer, but providers need to go further and build business communities and innovation districts.

Corporate culture is yielding to individualism

The corporate structures of yesteryear live on today in the management cultures of particularly larger organisations. Many workplaces ossified into rigid (social) hierarchies, graded according to the authority granted to each level to plan and execute their own work while planning and supervising the work of others who did not plan or make decisions, but delivered assigned work.

It was the role of management to instil a common corporate culture, almost a sense of identity, as if being part of a sports team: all aligned to a shared set of goals. The problem is that in the knowledge economy the managerial demiurge loses its meaning. Workers do not need to be corralled and closely supervised. Many can work independently. Harry Braverman's distinction between conception (thinking, planning) and execution (doing) of work ¹ no longer holds sway because there is much less 'doing'. There is, in short, a growing mismatch between the traditional imperatives of management and the new aspirations of workers.

Yet, the workplace debate takes place almost entirely within the design and advisory community. It is extremely rare to see contributions from people who actually manage businesses. We undertake workplace satisfaction surveys, but we fail to question workers about management regimes, team dynamics, career paths and workloads (the 'workplace culture'). While we are measuring satisfaction with the workplace 'hardware', we are not applying the same rigour to the workplace 'software'. Yet the influence of the latter over the former can be overwhelming.

Many businesses have a singular focus on profit (topic for another discussion) but then camouflage this in a saccharine covering of corporate culture – hard and soft benefits designed to 'attract and retain' the 'best talent', while nurturing a shared sense of purpose. This might have worked when the choice was working for Corporate A or Corporate B, but in the new network economy, when many of us have choices and intellectual capital, the workplace is no longer an anchor. It is simply a setting within which certain personal, or individual, needs are met.

Workplace provision will need to address individualism through a shift in management thinking from imposing a unifying, 'one size fits all' corporate culture to balancing its corporate priorities with the diverse needs of the individuals making up the workforce.

Career versus contract

It has long been the case that 'job security' is in decline. Certainly, in white collar work since the recession of the early-1990s, the search for corporate efficiency has been relentless and job turnover has risen. A key outcome has been a shift in the relationship between employer and employee: from one based on a desire for long-term commitment by both sides, towards a recognition that job interviews are about agreeing medium-term contracts.

For growing numbers, this is literally the case: contingent workers taken on to complete a defined set of tasks in a given time. But it is also the case for a growing proportion of the 'permanent' workforce. The expectation that one might remain on the same payroll for multiple decades is becoming an historic curiosity.

The outcomes are many, but loyalty is harder to develop (either side of the contract) and investment in career development shifts from a corporate to a personal responsibility. At the same time, increasing percentages of desks are occupied by 'contingent workers' who have no emotional investment in the corporate body. Overall, the workforce is more transient; it is no longer a 'second home'.

Crap work

This is perhaps the most controversial of the causes of workplace dissatisfaction described here. I have borrowed and adapted the terminology from David Graeber's *Bullshit Jobs*. It is an uncomfortable situation to recognise, let alone to admit to being part of, but many jobs in the modern office economy simply don't matter. If they ceased to exist, no-one would really notice.

Those who work in bullshit jobs are often surrounded by honour and prestige; they are respected as professionals, well paid and treated as high achievers – as the sort of people who can be justly proud of what they do. Yet secretly they are aware that they have achieved nothing to earn the consumer toys with which they fill their lives; they feel it's all based on a lie – as, indeed, it is.²

A little bleak? Perhaps. But not all office work is a daily journey of joyous innovation and creativity. In fact, I'd wager, most is not.

The CEO of HP, Enrique Lore, recently referred to an [employee survey](#) involving 15,000 office workers across 12 countries. Key among the 'HP Work Relationship Index' findings was that just 27% of knowledge workers feel they have a healthy relationship with their work. Further, only 25% feel they consistently receive the respect and value they deserve. Respondents said they yearn for purpose, empowerment, and genuine connection to their work, but just 29% say their job consistently fulfils these needs. 83% of people say they are willing to earn less if it means feeling happier at work.

On the one hand, much of the workplace narrative revolves around designing space for creativity, collaboration, innovation; around serendipity at the water cooler, and about removing obstacles that might have a fractional impact on productivity. But on the other hand, the plain fact is that much office work is dull, repetitive, reactive and routine. It is often accompanied by unrealistic targets and unsympathetic management (features the workplace culture seeks to hide). And yes, some workers need to be present and supervised.

Some crap jobs exist in the long shadow of AI, and will disappear as suddenly as clerks, file managers and secretaries did. Others are just pointless, giving the worker little satisfaction or sense of purpose. Either way, we have a rump of workers who gain little from their daily interaction with the workplace. They don't need a new workplace design; they need new work.

What does it all mean?

Clearly the nature of work is changing: rapidly and universally. In recent years, ESG, health and wellbeing, productivity, and 'workplace experience' have all become staple components of the workplace design agenda. And workplace design will continue to respond to the everchanging social, business and economic landscape. But herein lies a critical point.

Workplace design will always be catching up; it cannot lead, with some sort of design determinism. Form will follow function. It will always be possible, at a point in time, to say that workplace design is behind the pace. The world of work is evolving rapidly; but not all at the same time, not all at the same pace, and not all in the same direction. In some cases it might be a decade or so before we really understand the nature of changes in work, and it is arrogant to suggest that we can design 'perfect' workplaces in this context.

As the supply industry gears up to create 'workplace experience' as a means of competing with working from home, we need to recognise that no amount of experience will overcome antipathy toward traditional management structures and corporate culture. Nor will it resolve a deep sense of unfulfillment with work itself.

And this sense of unfulfillment will express itself in dissatisfaction with the physical environment. In this respect, chasing workplace satisfaction is a rather pointless exercise. Beware the snake oil salesmen: all workplaces are not failing; they're just evolving to the next phase.

Too much workplace design and debate takes place in the real estate echo chamber of workplace consultants, change consultants, furniture suppliers, interior designers, surveyors and so on. If we are to seriously address the underlying cause of workplace dissatisfaction (i.e., work itself), then we need to engage with business. If we can align the best thinking in 'workplace' (and there is plenty of it out there) with positive and progressive management thinking, then real strides might be made in increasing worker satisfaction.

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² Graeber D (2018) *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* Simon & Schuster p15

