

Commentary on the ‘future of work’ during and since the pandemic has been dominated by the perceived shortcomings of the office as a place of work. The result is an emerging orthodoxy about the ‘end of the office’ as we know it, 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 inhuman, oppressive, insufferable, over-bearing, unhealthy, unattractive and unfit for purpose); while the real estate industry is full of dinosaurs. Events are ‘unparalleled’, ‘unprecedented’ and ‘revolutionary’; the new possibilities are ‘liberating’ and ‘boundless’.



Mercantile agency Dun, Barlow & Co, Broadway, New York c1876

Narrowly defined propositions routinely support a narrative that is widely distributed, but rarely challenged.

Reductio ad absurdum. It can be no surprise that the raft of proposed ‘solutions’ should revolve around workplace design and management. But there is a danger in doing so that we deal with symptoms rather than causes. To get a little closer to the cause, it is helpful to have a longer term perspective than post-2020.

Historic office Essayist and poet Charles Lamb worked for the world’s first global company – the East India Company. In 1822 he wrote a letter to his friend William Wordsworth:

I grow ominously tired of official confinement. Thirty years I have served the Philistines, and my neck is not subdued to the yoke. You don’t know how wearisome it is to breathe the air of four pent walls, without relief, day after day, all the golden hours of the day between ten and four, without ease or interposition. ¹

Charles Dickens’ Poor Clerk in *Sketches by Boz* (1836) daily attended a

dingy little back office into which he walks every morning, hanging his hat on the same peg, and placing his legs beneath the same desk ... There he sits til five o’clock, working on, all day ... only raising his head when someone enters the counting house...

Also in 1836 Balzac wrote *Les Employés*, about life and advancement in the government bureaucracy of France. *Les Employés* were the bureaucrats whose bureaucracy Balzac derided as “*the giant power wielded by pygmies.*”

Corporate office A century after Balzac's 'big government' came 'big business', the rise of corporatism. The number of large bureaucratic organisations mushroomed as increasing specialisation in work led to the rapid expansion of workers to manage, supervise, co-ordinate and administer the new routines of white collar workers.

The workplace rapidly ossified into a rigid (social) hierarchy, 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 work or make decisions, but delivered assigned work. Many 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.

On the shop floor, a corps of supervisors acted as an information conduit between management and problems arising in the production process.... Information was starkly centralised in a bureaucratized hierarchy, workers' informational input to the production process having been brutally reduced by de-skilling and a minute division of labour. ²

The management demiurge The twentieth century was the golden age of corporatism, and of William Whyte's *Organisation Man*. ³ Large manufacturers, banks and insurance companies, advertising and media businesses, lawyers and accountants all concentrated into large headquarter buildings. Layer upon layer of management evolved, as companies sub-divided, amoeba-like, into complex departmental structures. Charles Wright Mills referred to the 'managerial demiurge', and brilliantly captured its suffocating oppression.

Seen from below, management is not a Who but a series of Theys and even Its. Management is something one reports to in some office ... it is a printed instruction and a sign on the bulletin board; it is the voice coming through the loudspeakers; it is the name in the newspaper; it is the signature you can never make out, except that it is printed underneath. ⁴

Even without the loudspeakers and bulletin boards of yesteryear, management remained an 'it' rather than a 'who' in many corporate offices. And the reason is clear: as Braverman put it, "*the purpose of the office is control over the enterprise, and the purpose of office management is control over the office*". ⁵

It is in such observations of the office from times past that we can get closer to causes rather than symptoms in today's workplace conversation.

For almost three years now we have been bombarded with countless posts, articles and papers speculating on the future of the office workplace in a post-Covid world. Reading across this vast output, one could be forgiven for concluding that Dickens' Poor Clerk is alive and well nearly 200 years later.

Evolution versus revolution But the fact is that we did not enter a revolution in March 2020, we entered one in the 1980s when IBM launched its personal computer; and this has been playing through, via the internet, the laptop, the smart phone and social media, ever since.

In 1996, I authored a paper, *Less a Castle, More a Condominium*, which argued that offices should be seen less as permanent and impregnable fortresses, and instead designed, delivered and managed more for short-term, on-demand use.⁶ And in 2009, I wrote a paper, [Space But Not As We Know It](#), which began by suggesting that workplaces were:

evolving from static office environments ... into dynamic meeting places ... office occupiers are introducing flexible working styles [hybrid working] to improve efficiency and effectiveness, allowing staff to become highly mobile and to make work-life choices.

The paper concluded:

*Expanses of largely sterile (and largely under-occupied), production line-style office space are yielding to more dynamic work environments in which team work, collaboration and meeting space occupy far greater proportions of space.*⁷

Hybrid working is not new; the scale on which it is practiced is new. And as many observers have agreed, now the genie is out of the bottle; it is not going back in. The pandemic accelerated a number of workplace trends, and broadened their application and acceptance; it did not create them.

Again, hybrid working is a symptom, not a cause.

The focus on place Despite the great leaps that have been made in the design and management of offices since the early-1990s, we continue to obsess about dissatisfaction with the *workplace*, focusing on space planning, ergonomics, air quality, noise and so on.

Yet office workers have been dissatisfied with their workplaces for 200 years. While both Dickens and Lamb refer to the relentlessness of work on wooden stools at high benches, which hardly compares to today's latest Herman Miller's Aeron chair, the fact is that for many people, for much of the time, office work remains mundane, repetitive and routine.

Complaints about the workplace are most commonly reported as the outcome of workplace satisfaction surveys, where workers are encouraged to self-report the quality of their workplace experience. The profile of satisfaction surveys has been raised during the Covid crisis by workplace consultants, change consultants, interior designers, surveyors and digital disciples to underpin claims that we need a new workplace design agenda – one based of providing 'quality of experience' to attract workers back to the office.

However, the focus on 'place' (symptom) has led to a near total neglect of the need for a deep discussion about 'process' (cause). The fact is that workplace satisfaction surveys utterly 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.

More importantly still there is an unrecognised probability that underlying dissatisfaction with workplace culture is expressed through the surrogate of the physical environment. I have witnessed many situations where poorer working conditions are accepted because of alignment between management and staff is high; while in modern, well-designed workplaces, satisfaction is very low due to underlying dissatisfaction with the demiurge.

Similarly compare daily attendance at offices (in the London context, which I research) in Shoreditch/Clerkenwell with Canary Wharf. Even anecdotally it is clear that activity in the smaller, SME dominated area is far higher than in the corporate towers of E14. The former have less bureaucracy, less routine, less process, *less management*. The same basic workplace, but entirely different cultural (managerial) experiences.

The chimera of satisfaction And this raises the important question: are we measuring workplace failings because it is easier than measuring management failings? Or is this because we are real estate professionals, and that is what we understand? Because, even when the quantitative results are blended with more qualitative feedback, we are still reporting on only part of the story. This is an important point because when mainstream media headlines shout that "*offices are failing to meet the needs of their occupiers*", they ought, in many cases, to be shouting "*management is failing to meet the needs of its workers*".

On this basis we could continue to measure the hardware for another few decades, but this will not lead to increased satisfaction; workers will continue to express dissatisfaction with work culture through the proxies of layout, furniture, lighting, temperature and so on. More investment in hardware will not resolve dissatisfaction with work itself.

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 for traditional management structures. In this respect, workplace satisfaction is a chimera.

None of the above is to suggest that we should not conduct workplace satisfaction surveys. I have spent over three decades collecting and analysing real estate data. I'm a great supporter of survey work. But workplace satisfaction surveys as currently deployed are depressingly predictable. And the needle of satisfaction is very unlikely to shift towards positive until feedback includes workplace culture.

Addressing the causes

And therein lies the challenge. How to take a more strategic role in corporate decision making to ensure that workplace transformation involves the software of workplace culture as well as the hardware of facilities services.

My own perspective is that *homo sapiens* is not physiologically designed to spend long, essentially sedentary hours undertaking often mundane, repetitive work. And psychologically we reject organised, closely controlled work processes. And all this becomes far more acute in a corporate office environment where much work involves intangible input and output. It is probably no coincidence that, as we emerge from the pandemic, levels of occupancy in SME offices are significantly higher than in large corporate offices.

There is a need to rebalance the focus on workplace with a more trenchant approach to work culture.

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