WE WON'T GET NO SATISFACTION …. AND NEVER WILL

Regular readers of Perspectives will know that our writing seeks to bring, well, perspective to current real estate issues by contextualising them and providing evidence-based reasoning. So, I wish at this point to issue a health warning on what follows, because I plan to share a secret that some readers might finding shocking. Here goes …

Office workers have been dissatisfied with their workplaces for … 200 years. Yes, there are countless documented complaints and general dissatisfaction with office workplaces stretching back through every era to when modern offices emerged in the early-nineteenth century.

There. The cat is now out of the bag. I feel a lighter burden for sharing.

Seriously though, I want to place today's tsunami of workplace (dis)satisfaction surveys into perspective.

The extended East India House, c1880, by Thomas Malton

Essayist and friend of Wordsworth and Shelley, Charles Lamb worked as a clerk at East India House, for the East India Company. Almost exactly 200 years ago, on 20th March 1822, he was near morose in his latest letter to his dear friend 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 …. Oh for a few years between the grave and the desk! [1]

It is clear that as well as the long hours and poor working conditions, management-worker relations were frayed: Lamb fumed at a top-down initiative to cut costs, including retraction of the annual £10 holiday allowance; turning Saturday from a half-day to full working day; taking away holidays on Saints' Days; taking away the perk of sending private letters postage free from India House and, perhaps most resented of all, the introduction of a clocking in/out system.

Lamb occupied the first corporate head office building of the first global corporation. And here we are, two centuries later and, apparently, most office workers remain dissatisfied with their work environments.

We – broadly the designers, providers and managers of office space – are either extremely slow learners, or there is some deeper issue at work here.

My own explanation is that homo sapiens do not like organised, controlled work. There is a long-term (in an evolutionary sense) mismatch between physiological and cultural drivers. In this context, when asked about their work experience, the physical environment is a useful proxy for expressing dissatisfaction about work itself.

Dickens, as usual, captured the issue beautifully in the context of his own downtrodden life in 1836-37, in describing the persona of a clerk, and the

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 till five o'clock, working on, all day, as regularly as the dial over the mantel-piece, whose loud ticking is as monotonous as his whole existence. [2]

But both Dickens and Lamb refer to the relentlessness of work. And they sat on wooden stools rather than Herman Miller's latest Aeron chairs. Such testimonies are legion, but space does not allow more here.

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. The former have less bureaucracy, less routine, less process, *less management*. The same basic office, but entirely different cultural (managerial) experiences.

In short (while not giving it a free pass), dissatisfaction of the workplace needs to be re-interpreted as a dissatisfaction with work generally, and with management in particular. In 1951, Charles Wright Mills expressed the issue clearly:

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. [3]

Even without the loudspeakers and bulletin boards of yesteryear, management remains an 'it' rather than a 'who' in many corporate offices. 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*".[4]

And yet, we continue to obsess with workplace satisfaction surveys focusing on space planning, ergonomics, air quality, noise and so on. We do not, with the same rigour, question office occupiers about their management regimes, team dynamics, career paths and workloads. While are measuring satisfaction with the workplace 'hardware', we are not doing the same with the 'software'. Yet the influence of the latter over the former can be overwhelming.

To be blunt (excuse me): are we measuring workplace failings because it is easier than measuring management failings? Or just 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 part of the story. This is an important point because when mainstream media headlines shout that "modern 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 workers".

My good friend and workplace guru Dr Nigel Oseland captured the issue well. "*Workplace comprises work and place, it's that simple. We tend to measure the place (hardware) but not the work (software)*". Oseland went on to correctly observe that this is usually because workplace consultants "*are not given scope to ask questions on organisation, management, colleagues, rewards etc.*" [5]

On this basis, we could continue measuring the hardware for another few decades, but it will not lead to increased satisfaction. Workers will continue to reflect dissatisfaction with work, management and culture through the proxies of layout, furniture and temperature.

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 surveys are depressingly predictable. In the same way that we all know what the result of a utilisation survey will be before we collect the data (45-50% in case you didn't know), we also broadly know the outcome of a satisfaction survey.

So, we must be clear about what we are doing, why we are doing it, and how we expect to act on the results. In conducting satisfaction surveys, we must be clear about what are we actually trying to fix. Above all, we must be transparent when publishing surveys or advising clients, that we are only measuring part of the story.

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.

If ever there was a case for 'people and place' to be co-operating then, surely, the workplace satisfaction survey has to be it. Just imagine the impact our work could have then!

Coda: 'The great resignation' There has been widespread commentary in recent times, mainly emanating out of the USA, but jumped on with enthusiasm on social media platforms, about the 'great resignation'. The idea being that the pandemic had driven a new set of values in which people were quitting office work en masse in favour of 'more balanced' lives. Whilst writing this *Perspective*, the US Department of Labor published March 2022 data showing that, instead of shrinking, the US office workforce grew by c750,000 between 2020 and 2022. [6]

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[1] Talfourd TN (1838) *The Works of Charles Lamb Vol 1* Harper & Brothers, New York p196
[2] Dickens C (1836) *Sketches by Boz* p138
[3] Mills CW (1951) *White Collar* Oxford University Press, New York p80
[4] Braverman H (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism: the Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* Monthly Review Press, New York p302
[5] Oseland N (2022) *per comm*
[6] US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf