

INSIDE THE MIND

The effect that office interiors have upon staff's morale and productivity has been a hot topic of conversation across the FM industry for quite some time now. FMJ takes a look at the research several companies have actually conducted whilst finding out how to improve their office layouts

This is a question that has been pondered by workplace furniture manufacturers KI Europe and business psychologists OPP who hosted a multi-disciplinary panel discussion to explore the impact of personality type in the workplace.

The panel was based upon OPP's primary research study: 'Type and Work Environment', a survey which clearly demonstrated that many people feel that their workplaces are a source of dissatisfaction. Open-plan offices, which account for up to 70 per cent of work spaces, were found to reduce motivation, productivity, happiness and a sense of wellbeing.

Perspectives were given by CIPD and BIFM, the discussion highlighted the challenges felt by Human Resources and Facilities Management teams.

In the course of the discussions four key themes were outlined:

► **Human Resources and Facilities Management are two sides of the same coin: but they're not communicating**

Spatial design and office layout has an enormous impact on the daily experience of employees. HR teams implicitly understand that comfortable, motivated employees are more engaged and productive.

However, to a large extent, office design and layout is the reserve of Facilities Management.

Concerns over cost and footprint can take precedence over matching the space to the job function and the preferences of the workers themselves.

Businesses are missing a trick, and wasting money, by not considering the whole picture.

► **Paying attention to personality preference isn't self-indulgence: it's plain good business**

Organisations can use awareness of MBTI personality type to improve communication, manage conflict, build resilience and improve productivity. All of these things have marked impacts upon the quality of work, employee satisfaction and retention.

John Hackston, head of research and development at OPP, explains: "Our research clearly demonstrates that physical space has a profound effect on employees. For example, introverts who work in a private office are significantly more likely to rate themselves as satisfied with their job; extraverts prefer to have more people around. Some personality types love the idea of a clear desk policy, while others find this unnecessary, even oppressive. These insights can provide the basis for adapting almost any office to be a more enjoyable and motivating place to work for all."

However, this shouldn't be the sole reserve of HR. All parts of the business can take advantage of an understanding and appreciation of personality difference.

► **A workspace should reflect the nature of its people, not just the nature of the work being done**

Of course, one size does not fit all – each individual and the culture of their organisation is different. That is why a prescriptive approach to office planning based on the nature of the work being done may fall flat. The ideal space in which to collaborate, focus or socialise will vary from person to person. Dictating and defining such activity-based 'zones' in an office can therefore become redundant, and lead to the under-utilisation of space.

Considering personality preferences from the outset can help organisations get the mix right when creating an office landscape rich in variety and choice. They will be able to make more informed decisions about the appropriate use of space and provision of furniture, and thereby deliver a better return on investment for the business.

► **A considered and productive workspace needn't cost the earth**

Facilities managers are answerable to their business, and are often driven by cost. Even the most wonderful solutions can't be adopted if they're unaffordable.

Companies such as KI Europe are responding. Thorough consultation, intelligent design and modern manufacturing techniques can combine to create practical and cost-effective workplace



solutions that provide variety and choice without sacrificing valuable space. As OPP's study found, the least expensive solutions can often be the most effective. Both introverts and extraverts attached great importance to personalising their own work area, questioning the more draconian implementation of hot-desking and clear desk policies. It isn't just about procuring the right furniture for the right workspace, it's about understanding how people wish to use it.

Jonathan Hindle, group MD, KI EMEA expanded on the opinion that HR departments have failed to take advantage of non traditional ways of getting the best out of staff. HR often focuses on raising employee engagement through means they have a direct influence over – training, management structures, salaries, benefit packages. However, the physical environment itself can have a dramatic impact on the average employee's day. Proximity of breakout and dining facilities, rooms to have confidential meetings or make sensitive phone calls, appropriate storage for personal or job-related materials, adjacency to amenities – these are just a few examples of elements of the physical environment that can help improve the worker experience.

But these are seen as the domain of the facilities manager – whether in terms of workplace design, furniture procurement, or expenditure. HR invariably hold a wealth of knowledge that could help Facilities Management make better decisions regarding the working environment, and could do even more to gather and interpret data from employees. In addition to direct feedback through regular surveys, HR could also use psychology and psychometric tests such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (which they may already use for other purposes), to better understand the diverse needs of their teams in terms of their workspace. It goes without saying that one size doesn't fit all, that one person's ideal work environment might be another's worst nightmare.

A better understanding of who needs what, from a psychometric and practical perspective, can help HR and facilities management to work together to get the mix right. This type of internal communication is essential to enrich the organisation as a whole, rather than data being held in silos. In addition to gathering data through surveys, simple motion sensors can be fitted to monitor the actual, rather than perceived usefulness of space and furniture

– helping to measure the overall effectiveness of an evolving workplace strategy.

We have seen this approach work brilliantly at some of our clients. Societe Generale approached their recent transition to a new way of working in a very democratic way, appointing 'champions' and gathering feedback from their staff. Through this process, they discovered the need for more collaborative

areas, quiet zones and small meeting rooms – all of which have been overwhelmingly well received across the organisation. This helped them define their space planning and furniture procurement strategy – in their case, our integrated workstation and storage solutions were pivotal to creating the ideal environment they needed

in this transition to 100 per cent hotdesking. They also discovered an unexpected love for our sit-stand desks. Subsequent projects have therefore seen a huge increase in the provision of these types of workstation. The first of its kind for Societe Generale, this 'Work Smarter' pilot scheme was conducted

For the customer, however, leaving the office furniture decisions until last can be not only costly, but potentially catastrophic.

with a view to be rolled out globally. Their excellent, timely, thorough and democratic approach to internal communications seems to have played a vital role in the success of both planning, and implementation of the revolutionary new workplace strategy and its enthusiastic adoption.

How about the actual items that make up an office? The furniture for instance. Century Office are a leading UK office and contract furniture supplier, with over 35 years' experience in the industry. They provide workplace solutions and offer a tailored approach for architects, interior designers and facility managers for small offices to large corporations as well as educational facilities.

Sarah Bays, director at Century office gave her thoughts. "It is not unusual for a customer to call with a requirement for office desks, chairs, etc for 10-20 staff and to need delivery in less than a week! For the office furniture supplier that may not be a problem – stock items can generally be delivered within a few days.

"For the customer, however, leaving the office furniture decisions until last can be not only costly, but potentially catastrophic.

"When we plan to move house, or build an extension, the style of the building and the number of rooms is the first priority. Once that is decided, and often not until the works are practically complete, we start to think about the furnishings that we would like; what will fit and suit the style of each room etc. With office design, however, it is imperative that the internal space works for your business and this should be established at the building design/selection stage.

"Calculating the number of desks that will fit into an area is not sufficient evidence that the building is suitable; there are numerous other factors that your advisers can work through to assist the client in making the right decision.

"At this stage we always encourage our clients to include employees as part of their decision making process. And consider how their teams work, what configurations of desks they require, as well as the types, sizes and quantities of workspace and storage staff need – some may need much more or less than others."



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