Fresh perspectives on the future of the office: A way forward

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ABSTRACT

The debate about the future of the office has taken on a life of its own as a result of pandemic-induced lockdowns. The viability and utility of the home/remote/anywhere working experiment at scale has opened up challenges and opportunities — so much so that the traditional ecosystem of commercial property investment is under challenge, together with the viability of the traditional office from both the suppliers' and users' perspective, and even the future of city centres is being evaluated. COVID-19 has shifted the focus to the people aspect of the equation and how and where work will be carried out, given the rise in importance of employee and community health and well-being. It has also highlighted the work-from-home versus living-at-work debate. This paper engages a broad range of diverse contributors with a wealth of experience and expertise in dealing with various aspects of the built, technological and workplace landscape, including the health, well-being, anthropological, behavioural change and sustainability factors. This wide-ranging holistic approach forms the basis for creating greater awareness and proposing frameworks and approaches within the corporate real estate (CRE) space to move forward.

INTRODUCTION

Until recently the demands of CRE were quite straightforward, guaranteed by the fact that people needed space to carry out their work and supply was limited, ensuring property values would rise. The institutions funded the development risk and leases underwrote capital value, this provided secure and steady income. Managing agents administered the service charge and collected the rent. Occupiers generally sought to minimise costs, so their needs were predictable in their quest to cut costs. So, fit-outs were quite generic with identikit office buildings spreading across city landscapes across the world.

Even pre-COVID, however, the 'build it and they will come' model was beginning to unravel as corporate occupiers sought to rethink their approaches to real estate, based upon efficiency, cost savings and client shifts in approach as overriding mantras. Subsequently, patterns of work started to change, bringing health, well-being,

sustainability and a 'people-first' focus to the front and centre. The ubiquitous explosion of technology in parallel meant that office work was beginning to migrate outside the confines of the office and could be done anywhere. The natural office/work chain no longer necessarily requires an office. Fundamental changes to business, the economy, society and the environment, having been thrown around in the pandemic, mean a likely seismic shift in the relationship between real estate, occupiers and investors.

Over the medium to long term, more and more occupiers will choose to turn some of their real estate 'on and off', rather like other corporate resources in their businesses (capital, human, equipment). There are, however, huge hurdles to overcome in structure, process and incentives. This is not helped by the fragmented nature of the real estate ecosystem where all the key stakeholders have different views and vested interests in how the system operates.

The first step for the property world is to step outside from a traditional predominantly introspective box and acquire fresh perspectives and opportunities in going beyond a 'one size fits all' mentality. This paper aims to inform and assist the CRE sector through convening a wide range of opinions and perspectives from a diverse range of contributors and through enabling engagement with many stakeholders to forgo traditional boundaries and mindsets. We set out to build a broader awareness of the multiple interconnections and based on a better understanding of the entire ecosystem and human behaviour, we can begin to formulate a new framing of a more human-focused way of living, learning and working.

The first step is to create awareness by examining the challenges faced by all the stakeholders in order to reframe our perspective.

CHASMS IN THE SYSTEM

The fundamental chasm is that we are still managing businesses and real estate using metrics from the industrial age, when we thought about humans in the same way as machines that needed to be housed efficiently in order to be productive. The arrival of knowledge work has changed all this.

Even pre-COVID, it was almost universally true that there was an element of white-collared work which did not have to be done in an office. The pandemic proved that we should gradually be moving into space as a mindset rather than a physical attribute. This will require major adjustments for many stakeholders and not just for those in the property world.

To inform our thinking, we recognise there are some significant obstacles impeding progress, especially in the post-COVID era: in real estate, the built environment, in organisations, in the way technology continues to rapidly disrupt and impact, and putting people at the centre of the proposition.

CHASMS IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND REAL ESTATE

Institutional barriers preventing mixed-use buildings

One of the deep-rooted problems is the way large institutions, real estate investment trusts, insurance companies and pension funds invest in property development. Commercial real estate is highly capital-intensive and even a modest building in London can cost many tens of million pounds to construct. There has to be some certainty over how that is going to be spent, how and when there will be a return on the investment in the long term, plus all the other factors which are basic economic realities.

Therefore, these institutions insist on a generic building design so that they can at any point in time put these buildings

onto the marketplace and have maximum exposure to different buyers. This is the reason for identikit business centres across the world with bog-standard square tall buildings, which can be sold quickly and easily across the marketplace, like any other commodity.

At the moment we are building 'Ford Motor car' buildings to satisfy institutional demands. In the future, we need custom-made buildings for different kinds of uses and to satisfy the requirements of the end user. A large part of that process needs to change to accommodate more mixed-use, multipurpose buildings.

Reshaping cities and the central business district (CBD)

Cities are entrenched in the networks that characterise the economy where you commonly have the seat of corporate power located in certain places and as a result goods, information, knowledge and technology flow through them.

Now with the dangers of the COVID pandemic (plus a heightened risk of future pandemics) and the increase in remote working, the CBDs are emptying out. If we think about it logically, the impetus and status of going to city centres to work is eroding, especially since only 12 per cent want to return to the office full-time and 72 per cent prefer a hybrid remote/office model. Future use of CBDs is already being questioned, if the majority of people are coming into a central city office for only two or three days a week. The flow on impacts on high-rent retail, attractions and shifts in incentives are enormous.

We cannot stop engaging with city centres because there is too much invested in them — literally, metaphorically and culturally. It is the way we engage with them that needs to be reshaped. It is time to reimagine city centres with a greater mix of uses and activities.

Going from castles to condominiums

Traditional company buildings were constructed like castles; these bastions of power were built to last for decades, with each organisation going into its own impenetrable 'work fortress'. What is needed, however, is a move towards a model where we are building condominiums[1] — built for short, medium and long-term requirements, on-demand and when required, with the added feature of the space being operated as a service.

The most recent reflection of that shift occurred over the last 10 or 15 years with the arrival of the flexible space market. Pioneered by Regus/IWG and followed by an expanding range of players — the most notable being WeWork — these organisations are providing space by the month, day or even the hour; even major hotel groups such as Marriott are getting in on the act. For the first time ever, the consumer of the built environment realises they have choice and the imperative for providers is to supply a wider range of alternatives tailored to their needs.

Real estate's state of play

There always has been a fundamental disconnect between the supply side/real estate providers viewing buildings which house workplaces as an asset, while occupiers see them at as a business resource or utility.

This partially goes back to the fact that providers see the institutions who fund their development as the 'client' and not the tenant or end users of their properties. Certainly, since the industry disruption from the flexible space players, there has been a slow shift to a more user-friendly mindset.

The other great impediment to progress, however, is the anachronistic system which governs the property world, still mired in antiquated rules, regulations and systems which desperately need transformational reform.

CHASMS IN TECHNOLOGY AND ITS IMPACT ON WORK

Understanding technology and the application of ethics

We do not quite understand how systems like artificial intelligence (AI) fit into our lives and, by extension, our work and work-places. Grappling with incorporating AI into organisations will be a major challenge for individuals, business leaders and manage-ment, since no one quite realises its full potential.

As a problem-solving tool, AI offers an exciting prospect of improving the human condition by helping us advance in many beneficial ways. There is, however, a poten-tial dark side which cannot be ignored and can be used against our interests — this includes cyberattacks, social and political manipulation, dissemination of false infor-mation and promotion of vested financial interests.[2]

People are also apprehensive about the accumulation of data and how it will be used in terms of privacy rights. To try and partly address these concerns, the EU introduced the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the US is looking into how it will introduce a federal-wide legal framework.

Overall, however, there is a really wide gap regarding the ethical and legal gov-ernance surrounding intelligent systems, which is years behind the advances made in technology.

It is now incumbent on those involved with the advancement of AI and other tech systems to bring an ethical lens into what they design and build. For organisations, this has opened another aspect of business ethics which has enormous societal ramifications.

The danger to the traditional workforce

As technology grows exponentially and becomes increasingly prevalent in every aspect of our lives, what is regarded as the middle ground of skills will be done by intelligent devices.

This will be a challenge to many office workers whose jobs will be hit with AI and automation, because much of what they do is more predictable, repetitive and less innovative and creative; however, the jobs requiring empathy, emotional intelligence, soft skills and value-based judgments will survive in the long term. These are the qualities which are our USP as human beings and have tended to be disparaged in the world of work.

So, the middle will be affected, which will be a real shock to society because so far these have been 'the untouchables', as that middle strand has always pretty much sailed through, reinventing itself and enjoying con-tinuous employment prospects.

Human co-existence with the digital world

Tech innovation may scare us, but we have had AI in our pockets in the form of our smartphones for the last 10 years, and it is gathering data about us all the time, learning our routines and behaviour patterns.

So the time has come to embrace the fact that as far as work is concerned, we can have the best of both worlds – a blend of soft human skills, alongside negotiation and col-laboration, together with efficient software and AI's analytics and systems.

This powerful combination of soft skills plus smart technology enables people to work together across the world and will be the way forward to provide effective and conducive working environments for all.

CHASMS IN ORGANISATIONS AND BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

The status phenomenon

During the past 50 years corporatism's mantra was 'big is beautiful', with one

function of the office being part of the 'big is also powerful' phenomenon, which was perceived as being attractive and aspirational.

Working in those big shiny status pieces used to be a driver to attract talent, but this will now shift to places which provide better human-centric working environments. People will still need to go somewhere for face-to face-collaboration, to meet and engage with people, so the 'big is better' rule is breaking up and there will be a much greater role than ever before for smaller, dynamic, more networked businesses that can better adapt to people's needs.

The hierarchy silos

Fortunately, things have moved from the bad old days of the executive washroom that was kept under lock and key, so underlings would be impeded from sharing facilities with their 'superiors'.

Organisational hierarchies still exist, however, and people are not going to abandon them, especially after having spent many years climbing up the greasy pole to reach the upper echelons. A large number are not going to shift their mindset because of vested interests, easily accepting the system and the way things have always been done.

The workplace division silos

For the enterprise, their central support areas – CRE/facilities management (FM), human resources (HR) and tech – have differing agendas and views of their role within the organisation. This divergence has existed for many years, but will this still be sustainable now in the post-pandemic organisation? The problem has also been exacerbated by the fact that many non-core activities have been outsourced to third parties, thus inhibiting innovation and investment.

As a way to move forward and make progress, barriers put up by organisational silos and siloed thinking between internal support systems should be broken down. These groups should be encouraged to take a joined-up approach to provide much greater strategic support for the enterprise, as it navigates post-COVID uncertainty.

Managerial styles stuck in a pre-COVID rut

The speed with which organisations had to shift to mass enforced remote working because of the pandemic lockdowns was phenomenal and many were totally unprepared. This meant that management did not have time to adjust to the change in quite the same way as if there had been an organic development of flexible systems and remote working in their organisation as a result of internal cultural changes. Therefore, presenteeism in the office did not die – it just moved online. It was replicated virtually in terms of managers monitoring and constantly checking in and checking up on their workforce at home.

This is in part due to high cultures of hierarchy and control, especially within certain industries such as finance and in the legal profession, where employees are judged based on being observed in working a certain way.

The changing eco-system of companies

Despite those who want to cling on to the old managerial styles and the 'big is beautiful' corporation, the economy is changing rapidly from this corporatist model. The days of longstanding and stable multinational corporations may well be drawing to a close. Many forecasters say that the average life expectancy of corporations on the S&P index will be 14 years by 2026, down from 33 years in the 1960s.

The traditional office versus adaptive, human-centric spaces

The same old traditional office will still exist, simply because some organisations and their leaders are not early adopters. Many will be slow to act differently until it becomes the norm and that only happens when there

is some kind of legal/taxation change or a universal demand for change.

Other far-sighted business leaders have seen that by reducing the amount of space they take up, they can make it more interactive and more resourceful. They are re-envisaging the potential of their workplaces by looking at their space resources, IT and collaboration requirements. They will then set out to provide their people with adaptive spaces as and when they need it. There is also a minority mindset which has more radical views about the alternatives to space by putting people, well-being and sustainability at the centre of the proposition.

CHASMS IN THE PEOPLE FACTOR

The dilemma of people's working needs

The traditional way of working was designed to make things seem manageable. If one considers that there could be 3,000 people working for an organisation, there are advantages in having elements of convenience and efficiency in place to standardise everything and treat everyone the same.

Now the standardised corporate employment model is shrinking in several industries and a small and medium enterprise (SME) individualised style is growing in parallel. This has been because of technology freeing knowledge workers from the shackles of the office desk, enabling more collaborative ways of working. Furthermore, the COVID factor has now totally upended the traditional workplace.

Problems for business leaders and managers

One can understand that the predictability of the '9 to 5, Monday to Friday' routine was quite helpful in managing vast groups of people to move in a certain direction to meet organisational goals. COVID sounded the death-knell to those standardised norms, however, and while it is generally accepted

that we will not be reverting back to exactly where we were pre-pandemic, we will not be going into an entirely different world either. More realistically, the COVID accelerant will bring about more flexibility and choice in the ways we work.

From the typical manager's perspective, managing half their teams at home, the other at the office and some in a suburban hub frightens them. They are thinking 'How can I make sure work happens efficiently and goals are met when everyone's in different places?'

Right now we are dealing with remote/home/anywhere working, but without the philosophies that go along with it, because there has to be a new paradigm of management and a new paradigm of working, which we have not come across before on such a mass scale – especially since in many cases the managerial style in most companies has not been adapted to implement it.

Challenges for employees

People's response to enforced remote working during the pandemic was not without its issues, complexities and disparities, and evident in the way different individuals responded to it.

- In many cases people's homes/apartments are not conducive to permanent and continuous working;
- Some find it very difficult to divide work and home/family life;
- Some appreciate not having to do the daily commute; conversely others miss it because it is their down-time;
- Those who are disciplined organise themselves quite well — they require a manager who understands that independence by letting them just get on with things without micro-managing;
- Others who work better in structured environment are out of their depth without the rest of their team for support

and want managerial supervision and guidance;

- Middle-aged and older people who have done all their networking and business relationship building are more content with remote working;
- Younger people cannot wait to get back into the office — they miss their mentoring, training, networking and socialising with their colleagues.

This real-life shared experience proved once again that 'one size does not fit all' in the working-from-home (WFH) versus office debate, although it has created an appetite for employees wanting to explore new options in how they can work, with 72 per cent declaring an interest in hybrid remote and office working options, according to a global survey of 9,000 knowledge workers carried out by Slack.[3] The focus, however, has to be on making sure the workplace is safe.

Individual choice versus management

We are also entering the age of individualism, where it is accepted that we all have our different ways of working, thinking, learning and understanding. As the neurodiversity narrative crosses over into the workplace, this will be another set of challenges for organisations and management.

As blended and hybrid working will become more widespread, individual choices will become drivers in how we work. So, employers will have to factor these additional elements into the managerial remit to attract new talent.

For example, people will come to accept that working life will not be linear like the traditional career path. It will end up being a zigzag pattern, as individuals step in and out of work for the different demands of their lives, whether it is having and raising children, being a carer or taking time out to volunteer or travel. Also, as AI and robotics become more prevalent, the work lifecycle

will also have to include more retraining/upskilling as technology progresses and roles change.

So, this is where effective leadership is so important because they have to manage that shift to cater for different people and for different parts of the process.

The freelance versus full-time employee dynamic

What the pandemic has also demonstrated is that the whole concept of the employer/employee relationship is starting to erode slowly. With people increasingly working as individual consultants for themselves or on a freelance basis they no longer have that same kind of social contract with an employer.

The emergence of the gig economy and ascendance of freelancers has been catapulted to greater heights by COVID-19, at least in the USA, with 90 per cent of companies depending on freelancers to augment their full-time staff.[4] Moreover, there has been a 40 per cent increase in contingent workers who are not on the payroll and this figure is increasing.

Conversely, the UK had seen a massive growth in self-employment, but it stalled with the onset of the pandemic. COVID showed how isolated and difficult it can be for self-employed workers in the light of a lack of social security and government support.[5] With so much uncertainty in the offing, however, UK businesses are deferring permanent hiring decisions and have started to recruit more freelance workers.

Most company leaders see hiring freelancers as an ideal cost-saving solution to attract good-quality talent on a project, part-time or consultancy basis to supplement their existing workforce or access skills and expertise they lack in their organisation.

So, the dynamics of the way that people work, who they work for and why they work is changing like quicksand and the working environment has to respond to that shift.

Heading towards a more human-centric working environment

Collaboration and adaptability will be key to ensuring that things come together effectively. This is a quality which applies to all of us, whether we are management, employer or employee; it is about being able to listen and be adaptable. We all have to change and be agile enough to adapt to see somebody else's perspective and accept that whatever we learn today, we might have to relearn tomorrow.

In the context of work, it means moving away from that patriarchal set of assumptions that has basically run out of steam. It is becoming increasingly apparent that it has the potential to be replaced by a more equitable system where all things are connected. We all have a responsibility in becoming more aware of the issues and possibly even effect a change in the system.

BRIDGING THE CHASMS

So far, we have examined the chasms of mindsets, behaviours and systems in operation which inhibit progress in real estate, organisations and the way we work. COVID has certainly proved to be the wake-up call for all these areas to rethink the paradigm and find ways to converge to enable headway to be made in what will be turbulent times ahead for all concerned.

As far as the property world is concerned, there has to be a systemic change in the way real estate is funded, allied to how it develops, builds and supplies buildings. It has to take account of the needs of its clients, in other words the end-occupier or user of its spaces.

The support functions — CRE/FM, HR, tech — have to work together more closely and become more strategic in order to add value to the enterprise and facilitate alternative ways of working. Business leaders, management and employees will have to find common ground in accommodating different working styles and how increasingly smart technology fits into their organisations.

In other words — we are all in this together, and there has to be a convergence of people, place and process in order for us to face the challenges ahead and survive.

FRESH PERSPECTIVES: A REFRAMING

Putting people first

Until recently because of the overriding 'build it and they will come' mentality in real estate, little thought was given to how individuals actually worked and how culture forms in the built environment. That is because the industry never really had to consider people's requirements as users, tenants, workers, community members, etc. Real estate will now have to put the people factor at the centre of the proposition to accommodate the best ways for them to work and collaborate in their buildings.

In parallel, large and small organisations all over the world are also thinking about their place and purpose, as well as their survival, which should now go beyond just being about the search for efficiency, productivity gains and profits. Nevertheless, organisations (including real-estate) cannot ignore the following pressing factors:

- People's health;
- The well-being of the community;
- The environment;
- The consumer and the products they sell.

These pillars make up a 'culture of health' strategic approach that links purpose, business productivity and profitability with talent attraction, sustainability for the wider benefit of the community and society.

The health and well-being agenda

This does not just mean sanitising and ensuring social distance in the workplace,

but encompasses the entire physical health and mental well–being element. Without a doubt the pandemic has spurred people to redefine their priorities and attitudes to a different way of living and working. Never before have workers had to worry simultaneously about their own health, that of their loved ones, their work colleagues, as well as the health of their friends and communities.

As people have become more fearful and stressed due to the pandemic, companies who listen and provide a better value proposition to their employees will become more attractive.

One way to gauge how 'healthy' an organisation is to measure its workplace well–being quotient.[6]

An example of one such framework is 'The Harvard School of Public Health Flourishing Index',[7] which goes beyond the typical sort of cultural workplace survey and shifts from a material framework to a much more holistic sense of what people find important.

There are six domains in the survey: happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, together with financial and material stability, plus the idea that if we could create places and spaces alongside working environments and network connections that progress those six domains, people at work should flourish more than just being 'happy at work' because they like their job or their boss.

It has rigour because it brings in aspects of meaning and purpose, as well as the happiness and financial security elements. This is key, since health and well-being issues are also wrapped around having financial security.

RETHINKING BUSINESS

The fundamental problem is that we operate in a model centred around the search for the economic 'holy grail' and we are now beginning to realise that in our aims to pursue productivity and profits, we have caused damage on so many levels — environmentally, socially and culturally — and we are in the process of losing our human values and our focus in life.

Frameworks such as Harvard's Shared Value Creation[8] have been designed as dimensions of corporate strategy to treat global societal challenges as business propositions. This shift from purpose and profit to giving back to society creates a more prosperous environment in which to operate, while also strengthening economies, the marketplace and communities.

The central premise is that the competitiveness of a company and the health of the communities around it are mutually dependent. Additionally, companies that turn to shared value will be 'winners' not only by helping society, but also finding business opportunities that their competitors miss out on, while also attracting people to work for them.

Another factor to consider is reimagining the relationship between the organisation and the people who work there. There is an emerging school of thought called 'humanocracy', led by business thinkers Hamel and Zanini,[9] who advocate for making it more symbiotic and people-orientated.

Humanocracy versus bureaucracy

In traditional bureaucratic organisations, people are seen as resources hired to create products and services through compliance to maximise profits. Humanocracy assumes that in addition to earning a living, people wish to have an impact on the organisations they join. In these people–led environments employees are encouraged to think like problem solvers — they are not sitting around waiting for somebody to tell them what to do.

Employees are also given autonomy over important business decisions, and have the freedom to set their own strategy, to

organise themselves as they see fit and to distribute rewards — plus increasing their salary when good business decisions end up being profitable.

Leaders in these organisations have to think more about becoming 'system archi-tects' and try to build the values, systems and collaborative platforms that bring all of their organisational talent to the fore to develop successfully and reap the financial rewards.

Changing to a new organisational paradigm post-COVID

The effects generated by the pandemic across the world are being faced collectively to varying extents in one place or another. Additionally, we have the COVID fear factor to contend with and that will dictate many of the choices and behaviours that we will see in the way organisations respond and manage it.

We can drill down even further into how different companies and industries are responding to the pandemic. Some, such as Twitter, GitLab, Automatic, have shifted to full remote work. Facebook, Microsoft, Google, Salesforce among many others, including Fujitsu, will be operating remotely for the foreseeable future and probably adopt hybrid or blended models once the COVID danger subsides.[10] Yet there are outliers such as Netflix who view WFH negatively and want their workforce to return to the office six months after a vaccine.

Owing to so much uncertainty right now regarding which direction to go next, it is evident that company cultures are trying to catch up and that one size or solution does not fit all.

Going from fixed to fluid

For some organisations, the processes of changing to more agile, flexible ways of working was already underway before COVID hit. Companies which were already being led to work cross-functionally with flatter structures reaped the benefits of being able to move swiftly and adapted faster to the crisis.

This was all about business continuity and how it could be achieved by having people working in their own way or in different ways. It goes back to the simple concept of not having all your eggs in one basket; paradoxically, the greater diversity of people, activities and locations in an organisation, the more resilience can be built into the system.

These are also going to be the compa-nies with more flexible orientations towards adopting hybrid or blended forms of work to enable them to make the transition into the post–COVID era.

OMNIWORKING™: THE FAR-REACHING POTENTIAL OF BLENDING FIXED AND FLUID WORKING

Omniworking presents the opportunities created by the shift from the traditional analogue way of providing and using work-spaces to one based on the 'new reality' of digitally enabled working, which gives busi-ness leaders and an organisation's employees a wider range of choice in the way they work in a seamless, integrated and holistic manner.

The system is inspired by the retail world's concept of omnichannel marketing, whereby the customer experience is unified and con-sistent across both traditional and online shopping platforms.

Applying it to the world of work, the omniworking model combines fixed traditional office space with local hubs, flexi-working options, the fluidity of home and remote working and the 'borderless office', encompassing the increased prevalence of tech innovation, AI and robotics in the busi-ness environment.

This gives people choice and under-standing in how they work, while equipping them with the tools they need to build a shared working community. This will happen increasingly with progressively more

sophisticated and connected technology, as we move towards the era of the 'borderless office'.

Environmental, health and societal benefits

With a focus on greater choice in working environments, omniworking could also accelerate the decentralisation of work away from city centres, enabling people to work locally or nearer their home. This has the obvious advantage of cutting down on commuting, which is now a big concern universally with the return to the office post-COVID and would also have a positive impact on the environment by reducing emissions.

Conversely, omniworking could also mitigate the 'fear factor' which workers are facing as they return to their workplaces. Through effective management and by deploying multi-channel working policies, businesses could find a viable and resilient set of systems in how they navigate the complexities of the post-pandemic working environment.

The other plus is its wider implication for society — an improvement in people's work/life balance and their health, giving them more time to spend with family/ friends and on their leisure activities, engendering a greater sense of well-being and community.

Lessons from the tech sector to manage omniworking

Making people part of the process and involving them in building the omniworking system to make it suitable for them and their organisations would naturally lead towards a more user-centred working environment, taking a leaf from the tech world in the 1990s, which would design products along the 'build it and they will come' model. The game changed (and profits soared) when they incorporated user experience (UX) researchers into the development and design

process, who were tasked with finding out what users really needed. UX or design research utilises methods from social science, psychology and data science to understand the needs, desires or pain points, in order to design products and services around people's requirements.

Additionally, developing tech involves building and iterating a product over time, instead of focusing on the whole process at once. Since multiple possibilities exist within omniworking, that iterative approach is something that could be utilised when it comes to designing an omniworking model for each user.

In this way organisations learn from management, employees, workers and contractors what will make omniworking conducive to their needs. This is the sort of model that forward-thinking companies should consider, which could actually help them manage people, spaces and working options that are useful for their specific demands.

CONCLUSION

A call to action — fresh thinking required

This piece was created by collating the views of a wide-ranging group based in the UK, Australia, Europe and the US with expertise and experience in CRE, HR, technology, anthropology, sustainability, equality and diversity. It proved to be a great learning experience in which we overcame our unfamiliarity with one another and came together virtually to frame insights which are challenging, diverse and thought-provoking. We were surprised to see how quickly we identified a number of key areas of commonality.

We hold the view that the traditional mindset approach of 'one size fits all' does not work anymore, especially if it is applied as a response to dealing with business challenges

post-lockdown and particularly since enterprises now have a choice with regard to accommodating office work. Similarly, providers and landlords of commercial real estate need to recognise that this also applies to the provision and operation of office buildings. So, for the first time ever, two disparate, unconnected players find themselves in the same boat. Put simply and through necessity, both parties who have never had to directly interact before now need to innovate and find a sensible way forward. In our view, the first step in such a process is to seek fresh perspectives and fresh thinking. This is premised on accepting that a huge shift has taken place in how we consume and use office spaces, which can be summed up by a shift from fixed to fluid.

In debating our approach to the future shape of enterprises and how offices are used, we concluded that the benefits of distributed and networked working outweigh the long-held mantras of centralisation and consolidation. To capture the competitive advantage benefits of moving in this direction, however, one needs to recognise a variety of obstacles. Many of these are a by-product of a fragmented and antiquated real estate system, allied with the bureaucratic and centralised mindsets of most enterprises. Looking at these in the round, we identified a chasm of misunderstanding across real estate, technology, organisational and people factors. By bridging this gap, we believe it would generate a significant source of competitive advantage. This could be applied to all stakeholders, enterprise leaders or real estate players. As a first step on this journey, we suggest that everyone stands back and sees the wood for the trees.

We propose that these three areas are key to all stakeholders:

- *Looking beyond the building/asset*: We need to think about how people work and what they require from real estate as occupiers/tenants or users, as well as rethinking the relationship between the organisation and how it uses offices. We need to consider that office work/knowledge work can be done anywhere, anytime and anyplace. This affects the enterprise in how it organises its space to accommodate work and this now has multiple dimensions. It needs to be delivered and consumed in a seamless, cost-effective manner which respects our common bond of operating in a more sustainable manner;
- *Adopt to the emerging new reality of ubiquitous choice*: The omniworking label was selected as it represents multiple dimensions. It considers the complexity and interdependence of modular and knowledge working including interactions, patterns and the outcomes expected. It also recognises that things are continuously changing in the nature of work and the people doing it;
- *Reimagining the office*: We also need to reimagine how offices how are funded, designed and built by asking ourselves the question — are they being designed and built to fit the requirements of those using them? — as well as understanding that they have to operate in a smarter, more sustainable and distributed manner.

As we are now all enduring a period of profound change, it seems to us that we have a responsibility to come up with a set of fresh perspectives collectively to counter the challenges of today in order for all of us to have a better future.

Here is what each sector has to address:

- *For developers/investors*:
  - Consider innovative approaches to uses;
  - Engage with the demand for flexibility and commodity products;
  - Ensure that real state addresses wider social concerns.
- *For CRE/FM*:
  - Recognise and articulate the CRE/

FM value contribution towards enabling the purpose of the business;
- Adapt to the change and emphasis on the physical place, based on the shift from fixed to fluid;
- Develop deeper collaboration with other corporate support areas;
- Devote time to understanding the strategic perspective and avoid getting stuck in a rut.

- *For workplace professionals*:
  - Improve or step up the message about the strategic contribution/advantage in using your services;
  - Develop a better way to describe workplace strategy options, to replace hot-desking, ratio working, remote working etc., by developing a language which is more human-centric;
  - Consider the wider range of knowledge work permutations, beyond just office versus working from home.

AUTHORS' NOTE

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