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By design – why our work ‘place’ is more important than ever

The ‘place’ in which we work in a post-COVID-19 world will be every bit as significant as the three elements – people, process and technology – that have long been seen as keys to business success, writes Mark Andrews.

Many readers will be familiar with the idea that ‘people’, ‘process’ and ‘technology’ are the trio of elements that are the cornerstones of successful organisational transformation.

In a work world that has forever changed because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including far greater adoption of technology, the framework now needs one more element – ‘place’.

With real estate, we often hear that ‘location, location, location’ is the main determinant of value. Location will also be crucial in our new work world, but perhaps the word ‘place’ better represents the area on which we need to focus. In thinking of ‘place’, we need to consider a few factors that have an impact on how work is performed:

- where – the office, home, a public space, a semi-private shared space etc;
- environment – the conditions at the place of work, including noise, light, air and congestion;
- aesthetic – the design qualities of the place and the extent to which they assist work; and
- equipment – the physical equipment available in that location.

I have commented in an earlier [column](#) that office space, although not as we might imagine it today, is still very much needed in this new work world where many people are working from home.

As we think about how work will be discharged in the future, the more that we consider people, process, technology and place, the better our decisions will be. Consideration of the place in which we work will certainly inform how we approach people, process and technology.

It is encouraging that more discussions are emerging about how we might design office space, the role office space will play and the need for a hybrid solution for work spaces. This, for me, offers the hope of a more humanistic perspective and one that recognises the importance of real connection, community and the role that places other than home play in our wellbeing.

Indeed, at my firm this is exactly the conversation that is happening. As an example, our Australian offices have started a project to consider the topic of the future of work with involvement from leading workplace design experts. So let's consider the idea of 'place' further through a few different lenses.

People lens – apprenticeship

The model of learning for new lawyers has many aspects, but apprenticeship remains a key element. Apprenticeship-based learning has an accidental component to it – that is, accidental in a positive way.

Experienced lawyers are unconsciously competent on a range of dimensions and skills. If one were to ask an experienced lawyer to document how they approach a particular issue or negotiation, much would be lost in the explanation that would be given. Through apprenticeship, however, newer lawyers can observe, reflect and question. They see things that experienced lawyers do and ask them to explain why and how they do them.

What is critical in this process is that an experienced lawyer rarely pauses to think about whether their next action will offer learning points. I am sure there are a few individuals, but probably not many, who have said: "Wait, maybe there is something to learn here, let me set up a Zoom meeting with a junior associate so they can see what I am doing."

This then brings us to the consideration of 'place' and the importance of having a place that is conducive to apprenticeship. To me, that place requires the apprentice and master to be

co-located – it does not matter where, but for convenience and efficiency office space will tend to offer the greatest benefit.

Process lens – performance reviews

While it can be argued that performance reviews are really looking at things through a people lens, let us instead think of some of the common process steps of performance reviews.

We may start the review process by soliciting feedback and completing a self-assessment. These activities have no particular ‘place’ requirements. As a reviewer, we may then consolidate feedback, consider the self-assessment of the individual we are reviewing and make some notes regarding possible points of discussion. Again, ‘place’ is not all that significant. We then want to conduct the review conversation and at this stage ‘place’ becomes very important as the most connected, people-centred reviews are those that can be done in person (that is, with individuals in the same physical location).

We can extend this across other people processes to identify where ‘place’ has a role to play. Where this gets interesting is in considering how we make ‘place’ more conducive to these activities. For example, what sort of physical space would you like to conduct performance reviews in? A standard meeting room, or one where you can combine visualisation of performance-related data with other inputs and have an immersive review experience. Think of the power of getting this ‘place’ right for an interview – what does the place in which an interview is conducted tell you about a firm? I am not advocating a massive investment in bespoke review and interview places, but I encourage you to consider how you can make workplaces more fit for purpose.

Technology lens – collaboration technology

The uptake of collaborative tools such as Zoom and MS Teams has been substantial and these tools are critical to productivity when we are working in multiple locations. ‘Place’, when it comes to collaboration technology, is significant as quite often we have rooms in offices that were designed to be connected to other rooms, but not necessarily to individuals or in a way that allows a presenter in a room to engage effectively with a remote audience.

Depending on the room design, the presenter may only see those in the room. Zoom and MS Teams make it far easier and more effective to collaborate across time zones and dispersed geographies. With these tools, too, we are not dependent on a place of work to be able to collaborate.

On the flipside, the fact that we now invariably have people both in the office and outside the office joining Zoom and MS Teams calls means we need to rethink the places we have in the office for use of collaborative technology. The fact that the uptake of Zoom and MS Teams has been so strong now necessitates an investment in technology within our offices so that the experience for those in the office is more on a par with the experience of those outside the office.

Place lens – investment

Real estate is a substantial cost for business and anything that can be done to reduce the cost has clear attractions. We certainly don't want to have large chunks of unused space for which we are paying rent. Having said that, substantial investment has been made by firms in making office space attractive and highly functional – albeit based on a premise of most people working in the physical office.

Now, more than ever, having the right sort of space designed for new ways of working is the key to realising real estate investment. In considering our real estate footprints, take the time to consider:

- what makes this place (the office) somewhere people want to be?;
- if the place is designed in a way that allows for hybrid working styles;
- if the place has advantages for particular types of work and, if not, what can you do to ensure that the place remains the best location for certain work types.

Evaluating 'place'

Let us now return to the different aspects of 'place' and how we might evaluate them. I recommend thinking about a wide range of work types and ways that people, process and technology are involved in these work types. For each work type, consider the impact that the place in which you work has on the experience, and use the following questions as a starting point.

Where:

- where is the optimal location for this work type?
- is the location the same for each person involved, or do different people need to be in different locations?
- what advantages do particular locations have over other locations?

Environment:

- for the work type, are there particular requirements in terms of noise, light, level of other activities in the immediate vicinity;
- are there external factors that cannot be controlled in some places but that can be controlled in others? (e.g. renovations in a residential area that make it impractical for someone to participate without battling background noise).

Aesthetic:

- what makes the place attractive for the work type?
- what are the aesthetic challenges in the place that could have an impact on the work type?
- how might aesthetics affect mood and output (as an aside, I remember some years ago touring some office space of a firm that had recently moved and the entire space was grey and devoid of aesthetic interest. I felt my mood go down and experienced physical relief when leaving the place)?
- for the places of which you have control, what can you do to make them more aesthetically appealing for the work type?

Equipment:

- what specific equipment is needed for the work type?
- where is the equipment and are there any substitutes for the equipment?
- is there a difference in equipment availability in different places that has a significant impact on the work type?

Conclusion

So let's bring all of this together. By taking a four-pronged approach to the future design of work – people, process, technology and place – we will avoid many of the potential pitfalls of forgetting the importance of 'place'. In the future world of work, it really is location, location, location that will be crucial.

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