Navigating towards the Future of Work

Like many organisations, we've been dedicating a significant amount of effort and energy into navigating the disruption of the COVID-19 crisis and understanding its likely impact on the future of work – both internally within our own team and in partnership with our clients.

Overwhelmingly, the public debate throughout lockdown has focussed on how the office will need to change in the near-term as organisations implement social distancing guidelines; the degree to which people are working from home; and at what point will people return to the office.

But does that reflect the true scale of the challenge?

In reality, what we're seeing and hearing from our clients is that the issue is not as simple as reconfiguring their corporate office to make it COVID-secure or letting their people work from home. It's a much more complex set of issues which are unprecedented in the modern working world. The future of work challenge is not just a real estates and facilities issue, its scope spans an entire ecosystem that encompasses leadership behaviours, organisational culture, ways of working and the employee value proposition.

It's also a challenge where both the current and the future-state are difficult to define, ever-changing and often ambiguous. There's no such thing as a route map to the future of work, nor is there time to create one. Organisations need to provide a clear vision of the destination they want to get to and be confident in navigating their own path.

The future is history

The 'future of work' has been a hot topic for at least the last decade, yet for most organisations its practical relevance has always been somewhere in the not-too-distant future and something which they may or may not have to consider at some point. But the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis has rapidly accelerated change to such a significant degree that the envisaged 'future of work' is no longer in the future, it's here now. It's the new reality.

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For now, the future of work is no longer a cool and quirky fad where humans and robots work alongside each other in some form of augmented reality. The future of work is now the practical reality that organisations must quickly respond and adapt to in order to remain relevant in their customer market as well as the global talent market.

The strength and resilience of people and organisations is not in their ability to predict their future, but in how quickly and effectively they respond and adapt their ways of working in periods of change and disruption.

Work is an activity not a place

The use of the term 'workplace' implies that there is a specific location where someone goes to perform their work. For a proportion of the working population, this remains true. But in an ever-increasing service and knowledge-led economy, with the right infrastructure and technology around them, people don't need to be based in a specific location to fulfil the scope of their work and achieve their objectives.

"For organisations going forwards, success should be measured on creating the right workspace for their people, rather than automatically defaulting back to their traditional workplace. Why return employees to an outdated and unproductive working environment for the sake of it when people, teams and entire organisations have been working effectively in a remote and virtual environment? "

Employees are increasingly being told to get back to work as it's now safe to do so. However, much of the workforce has been working right through lockdown, albeit it remotely and virtually. The notion that people haven't been 'at work' because they haven't been physically working from their outdated office environment feels largely unhelpful. Underlying attitudes and the accompanying narrative needs to shift within organisations and across society from the concept of work being somewhere that we go to (a location) to a more progressive view that work is something that we do (an activity).

Navigating a way forward

As lockdown restrictions ease and organisations emerge into their post-pandemic environment, there is the opportunity to rethink and reimagine 'how' people work. Rather than narrowly focusing on 'where' their people work, organisation should focus on creating a compelling working environment and an employee experience that attracts, motivates and enables their people to perform at their best.

Organisations should look beyond the design and configuration of the physical workplace, and develop a new era of leadership capability; define and embed an organisational culture reflective of their new ways of working; and put in place both the tangible and intangible infrastructure needed to enable their people to continue to be effective and productive.

When thinking through the future of work for your organisation, think beyond the physical workplace and your commonly accepted norms, and consider:

- **Organisational Culture:** How do you maintain and embed your desired organisational culture through periods of disruption and uncertainty?

- **Leadership Development:** How do you develop leadership capability and behaviours to enable your leaders to effectively lead blended, remote and less visible teams?

- **Talent and Capability:** How do you ensure that your leaders, people managers and employees have the right technical and behavioural capability fit for new ways of working?

- **Employee Experience:** How do you design your future working environment so that it's a key touchpoint within the employee experience that enables you to attract, motivate and retain top talent?

- **Customer:** How do you align your new ways of working with how you interact with your customers and markets?

- **Business Continuity:** How do you mitigate increased security threats within the virtual working environment and adhere to your operational and regulatory compliance obligations?

Creating a people-centred working environment is not limited to the design and configuration of the physical workplace. Organisations should instead consider each of the five key dimensions. The PHYSICAL working environment should suit INDIVIDUAL preferences and working styles; provide a MEANINGFUL experience and facilitate SOCIAL connections; and enable people to be effective and PRODUCTIVE in their work.

INDIVIDUAL
A working environment that considers individual preferences and working styles to enable people to be effective, productive and perform at their best.

PRODUCTIVE
A working environment that is a practical partnership between people and technology, operating at the appropriate cadence and enabling people to work smartly and efficiently.

MEANINGFUL
A working environment that engages and inspires people, creates a sense of purpose and belonging, and drives people to be the best they can be.

PHYSICAL
A working environment that is usable and useful having been created through a people-centred design approach that focusses on different users and their diverse needs.

SOCIAL
A working environment that encourages collaboration, facilitates social interaction, and enables people to build meaningful connections and lasting relationships.

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