
Modernising government workplaces: towards evidence, as well as experience

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Abstract

Based on a presentation entitled “Modernising government workplaces”, looks at how modernisation can help in increasing productivity in the workplace. Examines public buildings as economic and social assets and factors of productivity while taking into account the work of the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE). Concludes that CABE should set up an independent research body that produces evidence-based knowledge, applied in educational programmes at universities, commercial training bodies and professional institutes, and which provides evidence-based knowledge, not just experience-based learning.

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Introduction

This article is based on a presentation entitled “Modernising government workplaces” as the subject of a masterclass hosted on 14 October 2003 by AMA Alexi Marmot Associates, in London. Participants came from real estate management, research and consultancy in various parts of the public sector workplace estate. The speaker was Wim Pullen from the Center for People and Buildings based at Delft in The Netherlands, and moderator of round-table discussion was Stephen Bradley, a director of AMA and a past director of the Workplace Forum.

Meaningful modernising

The word “modernising” is applied liberally in the UK to a huge range of government initiatives. Just search the Web site of 10 Downing Street or the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and you will be surprised at the extent of what needs to be “modernised”: from fire services to post office network, from elections to local government. There is very little that is not going to be modernised. The high-frequency use of the word brings into doubt the meaningfulness of all these programs. For the purposes of this paper we concentrate on the part of the modernising agenda that aims for increased productivity - achieving more with less.

Questioning the meaningfulness of slogans about initiatives or programs, both in the public as well in the private sector, is very useful. Too often slogans become “mantras” that obscure rather than clarify understanding of real issues. How we wrap up or cloak issues in words is a culturally-charged phenomenon. Opening up to inspect is like a lucky dip - our expectations are often high but we get surprised by what is inside.

Workplace programs are often labelled with aspirational phrases like “increasing productivity”, “efficiency improvement”, “delivering added value”, “enhancing sustainability” and now and then we read about “sustaining employee vitality”. Workplace productivity is a particular buzz-phrase that is much abused and little understood. Everybody



repeats the “mantra” but hardly anyone seeks to clarify meaning. Fewer still offer means of gathering evidence to show whether the aspiration is met. This comes down to what really is expected of investment, and who is asking (Bradley, 2002). For example, do we mean more quantity, or more quality?

Productivity is an economic word. In the workplace profession we normally refer to the “physical” workplace, whilst HR people consider the workplace a complex system of social interactions that supports people in their employment. The economic discipline usually follows the latter definition and talks about performance in the workplace, not meaning performance of the workplace. The workplace as a social construct is the primary meaning in general use.

The Work Foundation (Westwood and Jones, 2002) says the UK has a productivity problem: “The UK skills base is a key problem for our productivity”. Trying to understand what we mean by productivity shows us an issue with different faces: skills are involved in it as well. The battle for productivity is fought on different fields.

In order to develop an investment strategy to increase productivity we are engaged in allocating where the money will go: into the labour force by improving skills, into physical assets like workspace, into the information technology that enables new processes or any other means of increasing the total factor productivity. We can make the investment only once. The challenging question is what the relative contribution is of increased skills or a modernised workplace to overall economic productivity. Who knows how to make these judgements, where are the research studies? What are the motivations? We lack the evidence to take informed investment decisions.

So here is our first point about “meaningful modernising”. When it comes to the physical workplace we are pretty careless about the definitions we use when talking about productivity growth. Second, we lack the data to analyse the relative contribution of the investment spent on people and on buildings. Third, we cannot call upon well-informed decision making that brings together understanding of the fields of physical workspaces and social workplaces.

Public buildings – what do we mean by “better”?

What is going on in public buildings? Knowing that this category consists of more than the government buildings it is easy to talk about them because there is plenty of recent writing about “better public buildings”.

In the brochure of the same name, *Better Public Buildings* (Finch, 2000) published by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) in 2002, we read a foreword by Tony Blair. The Prime Minister makes some interesting statements. “It is widely believed good design is a costly luxury”. This is a wise political statement. The public perception is that famous architects make expensive buildings. The PM continues to quote the proposition of Sir John Egan’s 1998 report *Rethinking Construction* (Egan, 1998) that “best practice in integrating design and construction delivers better value for money and better building”. Again, nothing wrong with that, but there is an assumption that lessons (even the mistakes) of best practice projects are being systematically learned and applied. The most promising statement by Tony Blair, however, is this: “Government organisations have started addressing their performance as clients by setting measurable targets and objectives with strong focus on life time costs, quality and design”.

Our observation is this: who is reporting on progress, who is capturing the lessons of all these efforts, since what is stated here is a unique opportunity to derive innovations for the facility management and corporate real estate professions, actually for the whole support sector as an industry. The Department of Trade and Industry has merged its Construction Best Practice Programme with the Rethinking Construction organisation under the banner of “Constructing excellence”, but this endeavour focuses on the performance of delivery of buildings and not on the performance of buildings as economic and social assets and factors of productivity.

Towards evidence-based reasoning

In this context we cannot leave the work of CABE out of the discussion. In

The Netherlands, architecture is always very much in debate. The CABE publications are impressive from a Dutch perspective, both positively and negatively. First a positive remark, followed by a negative and ending with a positive challenge.

The professional experience that was brought together in the CABE publications is really thrilling. The objectives are clear: to educate the end users of buildings. Showing the impact of high quality commissioning of architecture tells the story of the underlying vision.

When we take a closer look at the possible consequence of educating the customer, however, we discover a very demanding challenge in the making. We believe that an educated customer will demand a knowledgeable architect and other consultants. Experience-based reasoning will not continue to be sufficient to satisfy the educated customer, who will also demand evidence.

The CABE brochure *Better Public Buildings* (Finch, 2000), in the chapter on design for business, still sticks to the plausible, overt aspects of design interventions. Norman Foster refers to 20 years of experience. These days we generally do not allow our architects such a learning period. They have to be productive (read “knowledgeable”) very early, or they do not survive and thrive. Lord Foster cites an example of a 20 per cent increase in output. The suggestion is inferred that this is due to physical workplace interventions. But no facts are mentioned about the economic market situation. Architect Frank Duffy is quoted, referring to the achievement of a 30 per cent reduction of workspace at Andersen Worldwide. Yet any balancing negative side effects in the social workplace are not mentioned.

We suggest that the educated customer will not take this experienced-based reasoning or semi-scientific “proof” for granted. He will no longer quickly bow down to the consultant that asks for his trust. In the era of the educated end user (which is the era of CABE influence) experience is not sufficient. The end user requires evidence. In The Netherlands the Center for People and Buildings was founded for this reason: to help educate the end user with practical but scientifically justifiable information and knowledge. It has recently

published a number of books, notably *Innovative Workplace Design* (van der Voordt, 2003).

Finally, here is the challenge: evidence is hard to get. It will take years. Assume the education of the end user will take five to ten years. Building the knowledge base based on a thorough understanding of meaningful workplace productivity will take 10-20 years.

Examples of knowledge needed

Here are some ideas on research work that needs to be done to generate knowledge that educated customers will demand.

What do we know about behaviour in the physical workplace, or human-building interaction? There is an awful lot of scientific work on human-computer interaction, in which some of the knowledge is obtained by observing people at work. Research methods on space use often use surveys in which respondents self-report about different aspects of work and workplace related issues. The problem is that a simple questionnaire-based survey invites participants to give a socially conditioned response, based on their limited personal experience. Real behaviour is not always the same as self-reported behaviour. Since Tversky and Kahnemann (1974, 1981) have shown that people are inherently risk averse, the question is how people deal with the new or unfamiliar workplace? It is not only the computer that can cause risks in the work, the work-setting itself can present risks, cause delays or just create barriers to essential interaction. Is it possible to map behaviour and to use the knowledge gained systematically for workplace planning and design?

What is our knowledge about workplaces for the ageing workforce? In many European countries the debate is going on about retirement ages. We have to work longer years in order to afford ourselves a reasonable pension. From psychology we know a lot about the consequences of ageing, e.g. performance of cognitive tasks requiring concentration, which is what we often lack when we get older. Open office environments are characterised by regular background noise with occasional intrusion of unwanted sounds and sights (noise).

Concentration suffers from unwanted auditive and visual stimuli. On the other hand, those stimuli keep us awake. The question is what are the demands of older workers in order to perform adequately, and how can they be reconciled with other workplace design themes?

What are the health consequences of innovative and flexible workplaces? Increasingly, we see that employers are seeking to reduce property costs. Employees are asked to share workplaces, to work on the move, on client sites and in neutral territory, to work from home.

There is not much evidence on the health consequences (psycho-social and psycho-physiological) of these increased stress factors. In a relevant research project done by the Amsterdam Medical Center, 1,000 scientific articles were found on workplace stress factors by searching databases on medicine, sociology, psychology, biology, architecture, FM and corporate real estate. Filtering out the articles that report a valid research method, only 49 articles were left. In those articles, convincing evidence was found merely that open offices reduce the level of concentration. Not much more was found out of 30 health features and 15 workplace characteristics. If pressure on the workforce to increase economic productivity will continue to grow, we need more knowledge to prevent people from suffering the health consequences and to protect employers from the potential cost consequences of health problems.

Additional challenge for CABE

CABE is doing great work, supporting end-users in a growing awareness of the importance of good design. Delivering good design requires a well-developed understanding of demands (the brief) combined with an effective decision-making process. CABE is providing experience-based knowledge that can be tested in daily workplace practice. Use of the instruments in an increasing number of projects allows a lot of learning.

But who is going to close the feedback loop? Where does all the new experience lead to? To more experience or to real knowledge, to practical workplace theories and principles. Is CABE providing a structured research program of learning and evaluation? It seems the right time to take steps to create a knowledge base. Perhaps this needs re-allocation of part of their budgets, from education to research. Can strategic alliances be set up with universities, without slowing down CABE's admirable fleetness of foot?

If this chance is not taken, a lot of money will have been invested in educating customers (and professionals) without a proper return. In our opinion CABE should use part of its funding to set up an independent research body that produces evidence-based knowledge, applied in educational programs at universities, commercial training bodies and professional institutes. Providing evidence-based knowledge, not just experience-based learning. We look forward to an answer on this challenge!

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