

Designing with the headspace in mind

Workspaces can play a vital role in internal communications, creating accidental but productive encounters. They can act as a ‘town centre’ where people can meet and collaborate, provide a forum for to update the entire team and even help staff socialise and form friendships, *Paul Bray* is told.

» We’ve all worked in offices that were uncomfortably akin to zoos. But ironically, designing an ideal office environment has more in common than you might think with creating the perfect enclosure for zoological specimens.

“A working environment is first and foremost a place where people live at work,” says Jayne Cox, director of workplace design consultancy, Fusion Spaces. “Its design should reflect this, allowing human animals to display their natural behaviours and their wellbeing to be fully supported.”

Just as a Bengal tiger or pot-bellied pig likes a place to exercise, a place to wallow and somewhere for a private snooze, so *homo sapiens bureaucrat* (the office-dwelling ape) needs more than just a desk and computer to do its best work.

“Users’ needs change throughout the day - seeking quiet for deep thinking, getting together informally in a huddle, socialisation, and formal meetings, perhaps with colleagues at different locations,” says Christopher Jaynes, CTO and founder of Mersive. “The workplace needs to support smooth transitions between these, so boundaries are starting to disappear in favour of free movement throughout the day - discussions that start in the corridor while waiting for a booked space or continue in a café after the meeting is over. Technology is becoming cheaper and more flexible, allowing, for example, screens in the corridor to support informal collaboration.”

“The modern workplace should be thought of as a collection of spaces, each adapted to different kinds of work,” agrees Mary Ann De Lares Norris, EMEA vice-president of Oblong. “It’s called activity-based design, combining open-plan space with a series of high-functioning, high-utility spaces, from private phone booths and immersive ideation spaces to conferencing and briefing spaces. Complement this with café spaces and casual meeting points for easy access, and provide robust IT and AV underpinnings for a mobile, connected, collaborative workforce, and you have a winning formula.”

Just as modern zoos are designed to mimic their animals’ natural environment, so offices can look distinctly un-office like, with fitted kitchen areas to facilitate relaxed discussions and comfy sofas and potted plants for quiet, individual working.

“We’ve seen many larger organisations, both



Allied Irish Bank, Dublin

corporate and public sector, introduce co-working spaces,” says Martin Evetts, UK general manager of contract furnishing company, Haworth. “For example, the days of a staff canteen that’s only occupied at lunchtime are diminishing, with these spaces often open round-the-clock, allowing more choice of informal meeting places while helping to sweat the real estate asset.”

“These spaces can play a vital role in internal communications, creating serendipitous encounters as well as additional meeting space. They can act as a ‘town centre’ where people can meet and collaborate, provide a forum for management to update the entire team on key milestones, and help staff socialise and form friendships outside their immediate teams.”

Spaces can use different technologies

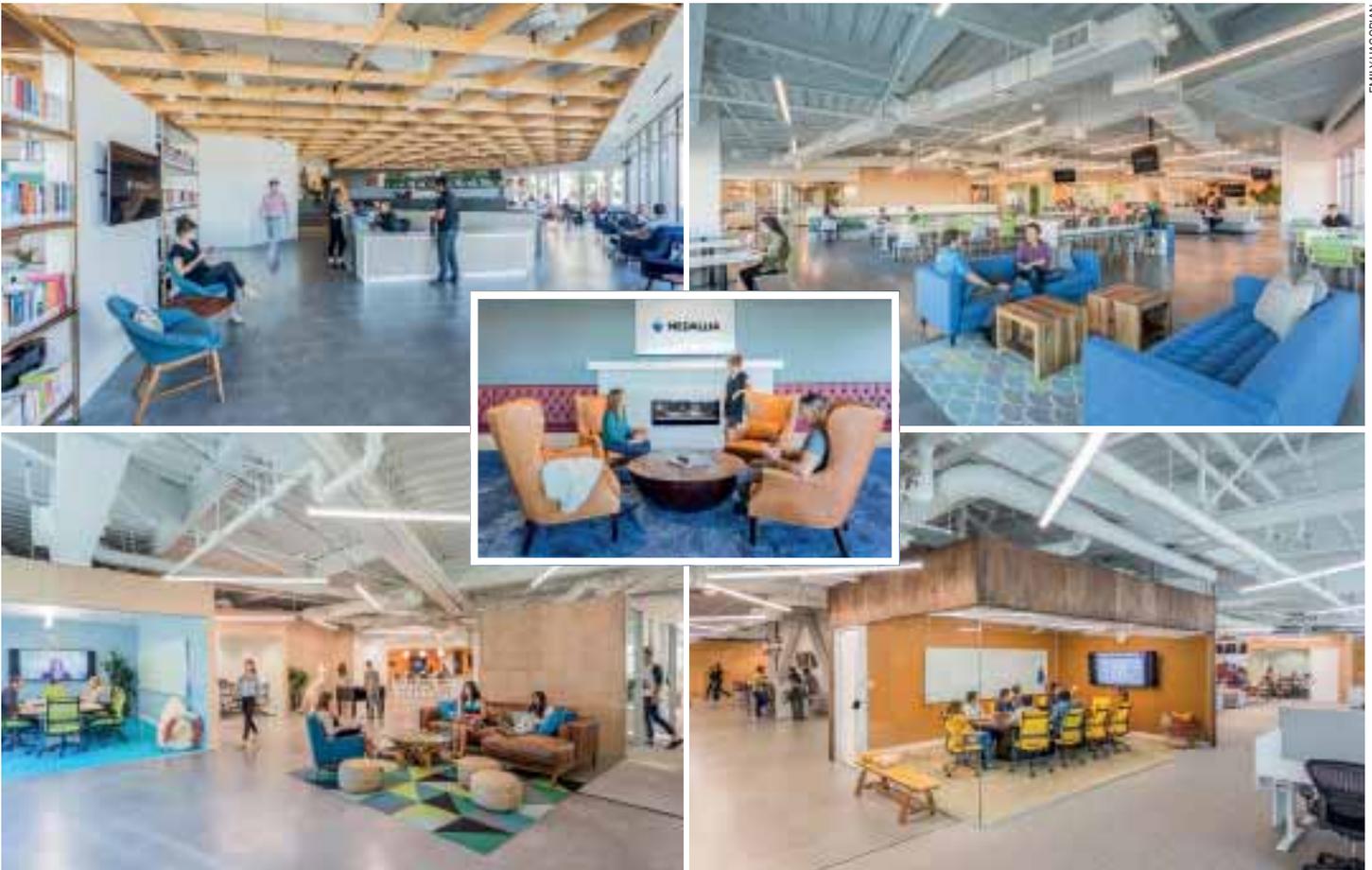
Different workspaces may be provided with different technologies, says Lucy Meredith, product marketing specialist at Panasonic. “At Allied Irish Bank’s new workspace in Dublin, small breakout spaces for two or three employees use 43in touch screen panels, providing a high level of connectivity

to allow the group to annotate and share documents. Scrum meetings for four to six people take place on standing tables around a similar panel, encouraging creative, informal collaboration. Larger, more formal meeting rooms often use several large touch screen panels so larger groups can engage with content with the same level of connectivity.”

Not everyone has the budget of a bank, of course, but there are affordable alternatives. “For small businesses, shared office space can be a great way to benefit from the latest technology with lower monthly costs,” says John Whittle, director of Loxit. “Many of these boast high-end conferencing equipment and well-equipped communal spaces.”

The precise approach to kitting out workspaces may vary by sector. “Public sector organisations must keep in mind good stewardship of public monies, so their workplaces won’t look as ‘flashy’ as corporate workplaces and AV needs to fit in with the desire to convey good use of funding,” says Ben Shemuel, vice-president of Teecom.

“By contrast, AV in commercial workplaces often reflects the organisation’s embrace of technology. »



EMILY HOGOPAN

Medallia's worldwide HQ in San Mateo, California: Teecom designed the audio visual system for the campus and for its corporate standards worldwide

Young, scrappy, tech-forward firms often have bare bones, we-can-do-this-ourselves AV systems in collaboration spaces. Financial firms tend to prefer more sophisticated systems that simultaneously provide greater capabilities – controlling environmental elements such as lighting and window coverings – while masking this sophistication through made-for-purpose touch screen controls.”

When it comes to creating an ideal environment for their charges, in at least one respect office designers have the advantage over zoo keepers: they can ask the animals what they want.

“The first step is to gather the thoughts, feedback and requirements of the workforce,” says Dan Watson, senior consultant in AV and multimedia at PTS Consulting. “This helps identify needs and wants, and early engagement encourages the uptake of new spaces and technologies, as does engaging end users in tech trials, demos and early training workshops.”

A clear understanding of how each space will be used is vital, especially if making a big investment in conferencing and collaboration tools, adds Whittle. “Do people need these tools, how do they fit into current working practices, and do they meet the needs of different departments, as HR, marketing, engineering, and so on will all have different requirements?”

When California-based software company Medallia consulted its staff before designing a new headquarters, the most important priority identified

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was people’s desire to remain connected as the company grew rapidly and globally.

“Inspired by this desire for community, the architect, M Moser Associates, proposed the idea of the office as a small city,” says Shemuel. “They used the principles of city planning to map out the office landscape and neighbourhood relationships, anchored and activated by AV technology. Lounges, conference rooms, training rooms and the all-hands area all offer standardised design so employees can move from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and maintain a consistent experience.”

As well as consulting the workers, Norris advises asking their managers. “Ask questions such as, what kind of work do their teams engage in, what percentage of time are teams in meetings, are

meetings large or small, how much solo time does each employee need, must this solo work happen at the workplace or can it happen at home or in a local café?”

It might also be a good idea to turn David Attenborough and discreetly monitor homo sapiens bureaucrats in its current habitat. “Do ask users what they want,” says Jaynes. “But their responses will be limited by their experience and they won’t necessarily tell you about their underlying needs. That’s why the iterative process of monitoring what users do and responding to discoveries is essential.

“For example, one of our Kepler customers noted that first floor meeting rooms were used much more than basement huddle spaces. When they enabled our signage feature in the underused rooms much of this distinction disappeared. It turned out that employees liked looking out of the windows to check the weather or see if it was dark yet – easy on the first floor, impossible underground. Signage provided them with this information in realtime.”

The physical properties of a workspace can have a significant impact on those who use it. “The quality of lighting is an essential consideration, with people encouraged to have autonomy,” says Cox. “Access to natural daylight is best, but good quality LED lighting and lighting that can be colour tuned to work with the human body clock is an acceptable alternative. Desk lights also allow for personal preference. In one of our projects the introduction of natural light tunnels resulted in reports of increased

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Haworth workspaces (left to right): Bluescape screen; Adidas, Moscow; Mindspark office, New York; Shell, Krakow – diverse layout and usage



An Evoko Liso meeting room manager at Scandinavian design agency No Picnic



Mersive Solstice enables team problem-solving within a modern meeting space

happiness, energy and work satisfaction.

“Another best practice is how a space sounds. Poor acoustics are an obvious stressor, and if you just stop and listen you’ll hear how a space makes you feel. Frequently staff are wearing headphones. Design can do far better with the inclusion of a specialist acoustician.

“A problem we see is design for trend and not for human wellbeing. It might look awesome but how do people really feel? We might consider using the art of feng shui as a guide – everything in a space placed with a purpose, much as we do in our homes.”

Similar principles apply to technology. “It shouldn’t require laminated sheets of instructions and should be reliable and suit the tasks in hand,” says Cox. “When we simplify technology, meeting rooms that were disused are used again and the IT department is no longer fielding calls from employees in the grip of panic as their presentation comes to a grinding halt.”

Blanket standardisation can help ensure a seamless user experience, but it can also be a constraint. “It means users are compelled to use Zoom rather than Skype, for example, because that’s what’s available,” warns Jaynes. “The real challenge is to maintain choice within an environment that’s intuitive to users with any level of technical competence and confidence.”

As office spaces become more diverse, it will be increasingly important to provide technology that is purpose-designed for each type of space, argues

“Video solutions with adequate audio capabilities will be key in busy breakout areas. They’ll need to be compact yet powerful, providing clear audio for the participants and having sophisticated noise cancelling microphones to counteract ambient office noise. Similarly, video conferencing equipment designed for small spaces will be better suited to huddle rooms compared to using equipment designed for boardrooms.”

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And while it may look neat to incorporate AV kit into the architectural design of a space, this can be a constraint when it needs to be replaced. “We tend to

think twice when recessing things like displays into walls because it might complicate switching to a different product,” says Shemuel. “The solution is either to dimension the recess generously to offer flexibility for future replacements, or not to recess the item at all.”

Once office environments have been redesigned it is advisable to measure their effectiveness. In addition to the obvious approaches of asking workers for their feedback and measuring changes in productivity, AV technology itself can help to provide the answers.

“The majority of pro AV manufacturers are releasing or opening up APIs for their products, basically turning them into sensors and data capture devices,” says Watson.

“The key trends are around smart buildings with systems that can monitor and track activities, such as desk booking systems, or sensors that monitor people’s movements,” says Jon Knight, commercial director of Ascentae. “These can link to phone systems and unified communications platforms such as Skype for Business, and so combine what people are physically doing with the tools they’re using.

“Willis Towers Watson, a global company with 55,000 employees, has implemented a sensor system to track where staff are, which facilities and desks they use, for example. This feeds into the company redesigning workspaces around the whole concept of agile, with decisions driven by the data from the sensor platform.” ■