RECONFIGURING THE COLLABORATIVE WORKSPACE: MAKING THE MOST OF TIME, SPACE & ATTITUDE

Executive Summary
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November 2019
What's this all about?

• Time and space are precious finite resources governing the productivity of organizations, teams and individuals. Attitude is the secret sauce: this is a frequently neglected resource that can transform wasted or inefficient uses of time and space into behaviours that power the organization towards its goals. Attitude is more than mindset: it's not a set way of being but an evolving way of thinking about how to navigate time and space effectively in order to make the most of their potential.

• It's time to lean in to the change. Work is changing: the accelerating flow of new technologies, new communication tools and evermore ubiquitous and reliable connectivity makes it possible for organizations to re-think how and where their employees need to be. There is a fracturing of time and space as organizations become increasingly porous. As more and more organizations work outside-in rather than inside-out, they are losing coherence: virtual spaces, mobile and nomadic working in distributed teams, redrawing of organizational boundaries and more all contribute. None of this will go away. In fact, adopting these new ways of working is accelerating, with unknowable consequences as different trends interact with each other.

• There is no 'one workspace to rule them all'. Every organization should optimize for its own needs in order to get the most out of its teams. What this report offers is a view into many different contemporary ways of working, describing practices, habits and spaces that readers can draw on for inspiration to create change. This report also suggests a series of investigative questions, posed at leadership, team and individual levels, to determine the optimal working environment together. These inspirational environments and change provocations together produce a powerful invitation and methodology to create a workplace that works for you.

In summary ...

Where there is WiFi, there is work. Where there is a notepad and pen and a park bench with the warmth of the sun on your back, there is work too. And in what is often known as the ‘hallway track’ at conferences – those serendipitous, unscheduled connections between people and ideas that spark new projects – there also is work.

Organizations have an increasing array of analogue and digital tools and places at their disposal to enable work to happen wherever and whenever it needs to. But to make the most of this potential in a more distributed and mobile workforce, teams and individuals need to adapt, developing new etiquette and survival strategies for the new technoscapes that they inhabit. In this report we investigate today’s hybrid digital/physical working environments, how issues of trust, presenteeism, communication and culture are manifesting in this time of change; and what organizations can do to create a workplace that works.

Key findings

Modernization and growth are on the agenda in virtually every one of LEF’s clients, and beyond. Achieving this involves multiple transformations. Some we plan intentionally and others we react to as new patterns and unexpected consequences emerge.

As we know from LEF’s digital transformation report published earlier this year, transformation programmes are complex and require the orchestration of many interlocking parts: operating models, physical space, working practices and HR strategy, technology and platforms, partnering across organizational boundaries, and more. Even in a well-constructed programme that...
has genuine backing from leadership sponsors, changes are never entirely predictable.

**Time and space are becoming ever-more fractured and boundaries blur between teams and across organizations, and personal and professional space.** It becomes harder and harder for individuals and teams to know how to find effective collaboration and ‘together time’, while protecting the focus time vital to creating value for the organization and preserving private time and space for renewal.

**Fragmentation presents daily dilemmas for leaders, teams and individuals.** In a matrixed, fluid world of temporary cross-functional teams that are increasingly working on the move, how do individuals show peers and bosses the value they bring? Are your team members overenthusiastic digital presentee-ists, sending messages at all hours and responding to every new message in the team chat; or do they go off the radar, becoming unreachable in an effort to hide from information overload, competing demands and too many notifications? **Both extremes point to the same underlying anxiety:** employees are pressed to manage increasingly cluttered environments, both digital and physical – a working pattern that becomes a time drain. Neither of the extremes really works, but they are survival tactics we’ve seen emerging through this research. Employees may not be able to put a finger on what’s bothering them, so being able to read the clues and look for the underlying information about what’s really going on is an increasingly important skill for leaders tasked with bringing about organizational change and making it stick.

**Don’t focus on more collaboration, but more effective collaboration.** As teams become increasingly distributed and porous, organizations are emphasizing collaboration as a key skill for success. It absolutely is. But performance measures – the real incentives to behaviour change – are typically geared towards individual contribution over collaborative effort. The people who drive team performance to an exceptional level often become perceived as bottlenecks, rated poorly for their individual contributions. This misalignment causes tension for individuals and between team members, ultimately draining organizational productivity.

**Leaders may be frustrated by leaking productivity.** So many internal meetings and ping-ponging emails, and yet nothing ever seems to get done. Where is the thinking and focus time? Why are so many conversations getting repeated? How do leaders give people permission to stop and think, and the confidence to take that up? One organization told us that despite encouraging a team to block out two hours a week for experimenting, noodling and thinking time away from their day-to-day tasks, the team members were reluctant to take up this gift. After we presented our findings from this case study, managers could see two huge problems with their approach. First, this distributed team was co-located with other units who weren’t offered the same opportunity for thinking time, so the team felt embarrassed that those around them might think they weren’t working. Second, two hours of focus time is too easily elided or interrupted. Eventually, the team mandated one day a month of experimentation away from their day-to-day work, either together in one of their offices, or remotely at home, in a coffee shop or library, so they could be free from the performative impulse to look like they’re working – rather than actually working.

**The trial and error of today’s workspace demands more of us than ever.** This is where digital anthropology comes in. This study, powered by an anthropological viewpoint, used a mixed-methods approach of digital ethnographies encompassing over 2,000 lived experience data points from field studies in five different corporations across several geographies and industries, as well as expert interviews with leaders designing innovative organizations. It gives a rich and often unexpected view of the current inflection point where technology is enabling shifts in how we work together. As we mentioned in our report Who Shares Wins², by looking at the everyday challenges in many different organizations – from dodgy headphones to long commutes – we can dive below the surface and elicit deeper understanding of company cultures, shared world views and unspoken assumptions.

**Space is more than place.** Creating and curating the working environment – virtual and physical – for high-performing teams demands a state of constant alertness and curiosity, watching ourselves at work, probing assumptions, spotting anomalies, shifting habits day-to-day, learning and adapting as we go. We all need to learn to think like anthropologists, spotting the deeper patterns that show up as surface symptoms, in order to actively choose and build workspaces that work for us.

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² https://leadingedgeforum.com/research/who-shares-wins/
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