

After 50 years, it's time to go mainstream

In the first of a two-part feature, **Paul Carder** argues that today's "new" office concepts are not nearly as new as facilities managers think.

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Ideas are rarely new, but even if they are, they often take time to come to fruition. Sometimes the world, or an industry, is not ready for them when they first appear.

"Office productivity" may be one of those concepts, in our industry at least. The concept arrived in the 1990s but most people were not yet competent to put it into practice and had other priorities. It just was not "top of the list". But now we should be ready. People have been talking about office productivity for years: it is time for it to become mainstream and to be part of every facilities manager's plan.

What does it really mean, though? Let's break it down, so we all have the same understanding of the background.

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

Office productivity: two words. First, "office"; straightforward? Maybe not, actually. My old friend and tutor, Dr Frank Duffy CBE, was one of the first to talk about the changing nature of work and therefore how offices needed to change. His 1974 PhD on "Office interiors and organizations"¹ was one of the first studies of its kind in relating organisational structure to the use of interior space. Duffy was already known by this stage, having written papers on this subject since the mid-1960s, when he was at the Architectural Association (AA) in London. He went on to become president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, founder of workplace consultants DEGW and is now an independent consultant.

"New" concepts of open-plan space, actively designed to consider the organisation and interactions between users of an office, date to the early 1960s and the emergence of the *bürolandschaft*, a concept which fed into Duffy's earliest work, *Office landscaping: A new approach to office planning*². As he explains³:

"I had become interested in office design in the fourth year at the AA because I had come across the emergence in Germany in the early Sixties of the phenomenon of *bürolandschaft* (which translates roughly as 'office landscaping'), ie open-plan, non-orthogonal, generously planted, flowing office layouts claimed to be derived from an analysis of internal interactions and communications so that the

architectural forms of office buildings themselves were shaped directly by clients' operational briefs."

This last is the critical observation here – 50 years ago, the design of office buildings was starting to be shaped by clients' operational briefs; in other words, how to get their organisations to work better in the office spaces that they occupied.

Does anyone still think we should use the term "new office concepts"? If so, just stop to think which parts of it are actually "new" in concept. For a full account of the history of and changes in offices and the office economy, see Dr Rob Harris's thorough work, *Property and the office economy*⁴. Offices have changed very slowly over the past 50 years, despite significant changes in the way we work.

WHAT IS "PRODUCTIVITY"?

So what about the word "productivity"? To me, it conjures up pictures of factories. Or the modern call centre, as described in an article by Tom Lamont⁵, which again demonstrates that this is not a new concept: "Call centres ... first appeared in Britain in 1985, when the businessman Peter Wood founded the telephone-based insurance company Direct Line. His 63-man centre in Croydon was followed, in 1988, by a First Direct centre in Leeds." Lamont goes on to describe the psychology, and measurement by various means, of worker productivity.

Another article, by Alex Hudson at the BBC – "Are call centres the factories of the 21st century?"⁶ – has the sort of comments left by readers that I would expect, having observed several such environments. One such comment reads as follows: "It can be the most soul-destroying environment that you'll ever have the misfortune to work in. The article is right in asserting that call centres are the modern era's equivalent to Blake's 'dark satanic mills' ... Nobody wants to have their every move monitored, measured and translated into efficiency ratings, pie charts, graphs and other such nonsense."

It is this ability to measure, though, which makes the call centre attractive to the managers of customer-service-focused businesses. They get lots of data, both on customers (via feedback surveys) and on the efficiency and effectiveness of the call-centre operation itself. This makes it much like any production facility, where statistical process control is constantly monitored.

As information technology gets constantly more powerful, and mass data can be manipulated and analysed more quickly and cost-effectively, we can expect to see more measurement, for better or for

worse. Shoshana Zuboff, in her book *In the age of the smart machine – the future of work and power*⁷, issued a warning about this way back in 1988 at the beginning of the “information revolution”. Zuboff said there are two potential faces of technology:

- “automate”, leading to dull jobs with a lack of meaning; or
- “informate”, leading to higher participation, more stimulating, challenging jobs and greater satisfaction.

She explained that “managing in an informed environment is a delicate human process. The ability to use information for real business benefit is as much a function of the quality of commitment and relationships as it is a function of the quality of [intellectual] skills.”

Nearly 25 years later, with all the knowledge we now have about managing in an ever more “informed” environment (Zuboff could not have imagined just how much information we now have in comparison), perhaps we have missed the point with call centres. Few of us will mourn their eventual demise – maybe fewer even than reminisce over our manufacturing past in those “dark satanic mills”.

But has Zuboff’s “quality of commitment and relationships” happened elsewhere? Putting call centres aside, what happens in the contemporary office of the 21st century?

THE CONTEMPORARY KNOWLEDGE WORKER

Away from the call centres, the modern office is a place for knowledge workers to congregate, collaborate and do what they do. And whatever that is, it is far less measurable than production-type work.

What is knowledge work anyway? It is increasingly what we do and what offices are generally for – but rarely seems to be well defined. The Work Foundation has gone further than most in two reports, *Knowledge workers and knowledge work* (2009)⁸ and *Is knowledge work better for us? Knowledge workers, good work and wellbeing* (2010)⁹.

In the 2010 report, it explained the scope of knowledge work: “We were able to classify workers by the degree to which their jobs are knowledge-intensive, based on the actual tasks they perform as part of their jobs. We estimated that 30% of the workforce form the ‘core’ knowledge worker group, with a further 30% requiring some knowledge and 40% requiring little knowledge.”

This makes the analysis look easier than it was, however. In reality, it was complex, with the Work Foundation taking a sample of more than 2,000 UK workers employed in at least one job for 20 hours or more per week to assess how frequently they engaged in 186 different tasks or activities that fell into 10 categories. To gauge the degree of knowledge work, it used three criteria:

- the frequency of information technology use as part of the workers’ jobs and the degree of specialist use;

- the type and variability of methods of sharing and capturing knowledge and ideas when performing new tasks; and
- the surveyed workers’ own perceptions of the complexity of the tasks they have to perform.

Interestingly, when you think about the Work Foundation’s descriptions of knowledge work, it becomes clear that not all knowledge workers are office workers. Modern factories (in part) and laboratories are

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for knowledge work also. The important consideration is to deliver workplaces, in whatever form, that are as supportive as possible to the knowledge worker.

The 2010 report also talks about wellbeing, in its widest context, and explains how important it is from both a moral and economic standpoint to improve wellbeing: “The definition of wellbeing adopted by the World Health Organization outlines wellbeing as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity’. Work can cause both physical injury and mental distress; it can also exacerbate the impact of conditions with different origins.”

If we add to this emphasis on wellbeing the “quality of commitment and relationships” that Zuboff called for, we can appreciate why so many contemporary organisations spend time and money on improving their workplaces. Improving the wellbeing and operational effectiveness of knowledge workers is critical to the success of many, if not most, organisations today.

TIME TO ACT

If you manage an office portfolio, you are responsible for the workplaces of many hundreds (or thousands) of knowledge workers, and at least partly also for their wellbeing. But how do you actually improve office productivity and wellbeing? And almost as importantly, how do you measure this and demonstrate your own effectiveness to your organisation’s leadership?

Good places to start looking for answers to these questions are Dr Nigel Oseland’s website¹⁰ and a classic but still useful guidebook by Oseland and Paul Bartlett, *Improving office productivity – a practical guide for business & facilities managers*¹¹. A more recent book is available, by Professor Derek Clements-Croome, *Creating the productive workplace*¹², while Clements-Croome’s website also has useful links¹³.

In a future issue I will explore this information and guidance in more detail. In the meantime, it is clear that with so much information available stretching back many years, it is time for facilities managers to make office productivity a central plank of their FM strategy.

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