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thoughts for you who want to create
a successful workplace

Something is always happening

John Cage

Preface

A management team gathers to discuss how to take on the future. They experience some major changes in the world and yet they are committed to improve on customer value, development capabilities and efficiency. On top of this, they need a new workplace supporting the coming challenges.

“We have got the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create a place that is a powerful tool, supporting us in building well functioning teams, enabling smart ways of working and is attractive both for customers and employees. But how do we go about it? Somebody?”

There are no simple answers, but there is a fair amount of experience to draw upon. This booklet targets people who take this challenge seriously. We start by proposing some perspectives improving the chances for success and then by describing the steps and measures to be taken on the journey.

The booklet does not give the full and complete description of all possibilities and pitfalls, the ambition is rather to highlight what easily is forgotten and unforeseen. There is more to read on the homepage and more to discuss in a meeting.

Good luck!

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different perspectives

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Rely on the architecture

A precondition, when creating a successful workplace, is to wholeheartedly endorse the following:

“I know that the architecture of the place is essential for our success! The room, with its space, materials, colors, light and acoustics is the arena where our thoughts and behaviors are influenced and developed. Where we respond in different ways depending on if the surroundings are narrow and boring or free and beautiful.

The power of the room to provide visibility, security, exposure, shelter, richly flowing ideas and comfort is actually our best tool in creating effectiveness and well-being in our organization.

I also believe that our visitors experience the workplace as a mark of our soul, they feel that our culture, our level of quality and our abilities are mirrored in the environment where we choose to operate”.

This insight does of course not mean that we should overdo it or that extreme luxury is the only answer. Often, it is quite the opposite. The best can be to proudly show some humble economic responsibility. It is the conscious choice that makes the difference, that builds the story and the external image of the organization.

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Start with the story

The work towards a successful workplace begins and ends with an engaging story about the future.

Five suggested chapters: The future mission, How the ways of working should be developed, The right technology to support the digital workflow and How the workplace can promote and shape a good day at work. And we must not forget to pay attention to the employee as a human being and her biological and social needs of movement, variety and encouragement.

The main purpose of the story is to create a common thread for the work; it gives the broad picture and describes the relationship between workplace design and operational success. The story prevents careless compromises of important details further down the road and it facilitates well-reasoned priorities and choices.

Another purpose is to support the change process. When autonomous individuals have the habit of doing things as they like to and as they are used to, there is a need for a strong and sustainable vision to enforce customer focus and to create a joint spirit and direction for the work. The story gives trustworthy answers to what it all means to me in person and to why we do it in the way we do.

This will promote a respect for management clear-headedness and decisiveness, employee engagement and a good basis for each and everyone to contribute to a successful workplace.

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Develop the ways of working

The work in an office is ultimately about information handling. To gather, to systematize, to analyze, to process, to develop and to share information. Together with others or by yourself.

It is always fruitful to make it clear what is being done during a day at work and to take the opportunity to improve the ways of working. It is also generally appreciated since efficiency is not about running faster but to get more done with less effort, which is highly influenced by both culture and routines.

Culture is, at best, explicitly expressed values. However, it is more common that culture is represented by implicit approaches existing, for good or for bad, in all organizations. Is it OK to take an initiative when I see an opportunity, even if there is a risk that it will go wrong? Is all knowledge common knowledge? Do we help and support each other to succeed?

Routines are shared good habits aiming at successful operations. Good examples are commonly agreed meeting etiquettes or e-mail policies. It is less constructive when you hear instinctive arguments like "well, you know, we have always done it like this" when somebody is proposing to replace the old circulation envelopes by a well functioning intranet where all knowledge is shared. What habits are well proven experience and what habits are merely old habits where you are stuck in a rut? It can be quite a tricky consideration, however well worth exploring.

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To kill two birds with one stone

To create a workplace is to meet many interesting and useful choices within a given budget. Ideally we avoid compromises and instead find solutions freeing up both time and space.

Generally, it all comes down to truly questioning whether it is the ways of working or the workplace that is to be developed. When meetings are made more efficient, time is freed for individual work and less meeting rooms are needed. Less paper increases the mobility and decreases the need for storage. Employeeeeship and empowered employees increase the dynamics and entrepreneurship at the same time as it moderates the overcautious manager's need to superintend empty desks in neat rows.

Or, should we do it the other way around? Start by developing the workplace and trust that it will improve the way we work? We replace ten mediocre coffee machines by one well supplied bar, including barista, which brings pride, new meetings and a sense of fellowship. We could also create possibilities for walking meetings and get, beside the health effects, a kind of easy-going feeling, an understanding that it is not only those who sit at their desk that get things done around here.

As stated earlier, architecture affects behaviors. It does something to us human beings.

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Share the resources

Many open offices are, regrettably, quite an apathetically shaped compromise between meetings and seclusion with one desk for each person - and that is about it. It is a workplace that neither is bad nor does it work perfectly for anybody or anything. Hence, there are reasons to pose some questions.

How do we actually use this workplace? Is it like in the majority of cases, where people are on the move and the desks stand empty most of the day? Could we instead share places and make room for a greater variety, for different needs? Suitable for the role, the work task and the current mood.

When we take responsibility for the usage of resources can we then, at long last, fit in that little extra something? Such as project areas with whiteboards, quiet zones, a study library, reading corners with comfortable armchairs, studios for innovative workshops? The answer is "Of course, the sharing brings new opportunities!"

Some challenges will follow as a consequence. A precondition for true mobility is a minimum of papers and suitable devices. A clear desk at the end of the day is another prerequisite, very challenging to some. And then, there is a need for little bit of courage, a belief that we can sort out most things together and trust in that we do not need to constantly keep track on everybody's whereabouts, now that we are on the move.

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Lighten up

For a long time, it was natural that the office should be designed along the industrial society's rigid expectations on the employee as a cog in the machine, that it should be formed like effective assembly lines in a rectangular and controllable structure. However, all of that has eventually become slightly ridiculous in a time when the challenge rather is to recruit, with all available means, committed and competent people. People who energetically collaborate to invent the world and to maximize customer benefits.

Thus, we seek a new shape and search for new possibilities. For a moment, we should refrain from thinking in terms of nice and ugly and put the questions differently. How can an office bring new energy? How can the physical environment contribute to encouragement and recreation? What is needed, what can we borrow from other environments?

We could borrow the idea of a bar - for a quick coordination. The lounge - for a more quiet and confidential conversation. The atelier - for innovative ideas. The library - for our common knowledge and the secluded concentration and reflection. The forest glade - for rest. The amusement park -when you are out of creativity.

Which experiences are needed? What senses - sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste – should be stimulated? This is very interesting to explore, for the open minded and courageous!

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See the whole human being

No matter how sharp the analysis of the mission and the ways of working, the organization stands or falls on the people operating it, not only as contributing employees but also as complex biological creatures with individual and common needs.

A healthy workplace does not only minimize risks, it also considers the latest research regarding our brain and body, something that can be summarized in one word – variation. In order to function properly over time, the human being needs to change position mentally and physically, if not she runs the risk of becoming seriously ill.

The brain needs variety in order to function properly for experience storage and creative thinking. The day should, in addition to focused work, contain elements of dialogue, reflection, play, rest and sleep. The location plays an important role in actively providing the best possible conditions. Equally important is the physical movement; to sit still for more than half an hour is not efficient and it is detrimental to your health.

The challenge is to have variation and movement built in as a natural part of the workday. Let's move! The best conversations take place during a walk.

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Challenge the habits

“The most common form of stupidity is to do as you are used to and yet hope for the result to be different.” This is also valid for the process all the way up to a completed new workplace. Of course, it is wise to use the proven and good experience but beware of the force of habit.

Leaders and co-workers tend to talk about how they are used to do things or possibly how they like to do things at work. Even architects, consultants and constructors often want to copy the way things were done in the previous project: “It was so successful!” However, to build a monument of the past and at the same time expect a place for inventing the future does not rhyme. The question should be: “How do we go about it this time in order to be incredibly successful, also five years from now?”

Forward thinking is to let go of the idea of doing the same thing a little smarter and faster and in that way solve the problem. That kind of thinking mainly leads to breathlessness and shortcomings.

Moving on is more about breaking out of the prison of thought. To lose control for a while, to be courageous and to think out of the box, to propose the impossible and to trust the joy of joint exploration. And perhaps the trickiest part; to listen carefully to others, to a whole new way of reasoning and thereby take the opportunity to change fundamentally.

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Provide a context

A new workplace can imply a distressing breakup when leaving accustomed approaches and behaviors. It could be a situation where the office room is replaced by a more open community, to change from a smaller territory to a bigger shared environment, not doing things the way you like but instead having to take responsibility for a new common order.

Early in the change process, many often see themselves as victims of miserable circumstances, but each and everyone should of course be encouraged to participate and to take initiatives; the pure essential of a successful work culture.

Guiding the organization on this journey is a matter of time, open dialogue and most importantly, a clear and honest purpose. A notion to hold in mind is 'sense of coherence', which will come to us when circumstances are understandable, manageable and meaningful. The project challenge is to create comprehension through clarifying what the change will mean to the group and to the individual and why it happens. Manageability is conquered when employees are set free to explore what a good day at work should look like, given the new workplace conditions.

Meaningfulness will come through the open and courageous conversation and the feeling that we, with a little effort, will manage the challenge together.

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Make the journey a mutual experience

Since the workplace is an important strategic tool, the responsibility starts and ends by top management having the responsibility for the brand, productivity, renewal, motivation and well being. And yet, the development activities should be an important matter to everyone in the organization.

After all, it all boils down to that sense of cohesion, to achieve true participation and commitment in change. The shortsighted person sees a mutual dialogue around the workplace as an unnecessary time thief. For others, the dialogue is a means to increase employee initiative: "You are the ones meeting the customers on a daily basis and who know the fruitful solutions." Here, the process of creating a new workplace is used as a unique opportunity to leverage engagement for a common future. It is also a possibility to strengthen the long term trust and renewal abilities that follow as a result of a well performed project.

A certain degree of maturity among the concerned is a prerequisite to engage the employees in the conversation. Development is not the same thing as negotiations, voting or that everyone will get its own way. Influence requires mutual confidence and trust in that commonly taken decisions also are favorable for the customer, for the organization and for me. In that sequence.

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Recruit the coordinator

Leading complex processes require knowledge, time and confidence. This is especially valid when it comes to internal projects. Therefore, one of the most crucial success factors is to recruit the most adequate internal project leader and to support this person in his or her delicate and exposed mission.

The project leader does not have to be an expert in workplaces; he or she is primarily a person responsible for ordering and distributing tasks. During the process, a diversity of skills are needed; skills of organizational, economic, legal, technical, administrative and artistic natures. For those not creating new workplaces on an everyday basis, most of that competence is bought from experts supporting the project in its different stages. This is the most economic solution in the long run. With this diversity of angles and approaches there is a risk. A risk that each and everyone does their task and passes the result over to the next in line, where the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing and important needs are lost along the line.

Competent project leaders gather, literally, all the participants in one room. By telling the visionary story of the future and by challenging everyone to consider the risks and opportunities, a fruitful discussion will usually take place. In this way, a joint energy and decisiveness to create true customer value is mobilized.

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Invest in the future

“The cost for a construction project is distributed as 1 dollar for design, 10 dollars for construction and 100 dollars for management.”

The proportions are actually correct and two conclusions can be drawn right away. The first is that the proportionate cost for thinking through the project thoroughly in its early stages is very low and therefore it is wise to leave some room for the architects to exceed expectations. The second conclusion is that an investment in a timeless and easily managed workplace with long term usability is profitable both for the tenant and property owner.

“If you buy cheaply, you pay dearly” can be pretty obvious, taken the entire organizational budget into consideration. The cost for a workplace is seldom more than 20% of the budget, whereas salaries and other associated costs represent the remaining 80%. If we lower the rental costs at the same time as work efficiency is reduced by a few minutes per hour, the gain is completely lost.

The obvious ambition must be to use the workplace wisely in order to boost efficiency and well being in order to increase productivity. It is not very difficult, given that you have a lot of joyful energy and a pinch of careful planning.

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steps towards success

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Exploration with the management team

It is wise to start the process by a management meeting including study visits, lectures and workshops, in order to secure that top management acts wisely and consistently. Here, a vision for the new workplace is shaped, based on the business environment and corporate strategies.

The conversation can take its start by reflecting upon the current situation; "What do we do well and what can we do better?" The next step is the vision: "Where do we want to be five years from now when it comes to customer benefits, abilities, ways of working and workplace?" By stating some measurable goals regarding the performance of the new workplace, the focus is further sharpened.

The road ahead is also a management matter. Do we have on-going development work that should be incorporated in the project from the start? Which opportunities and risks do we foresee in the development dialogue and what are our responsibilities as leaders?

This conversation is not a waste of time for a busy manager! He or she is also a human being, having thoughts and feelings of his/her own to handle. A common story gives strength and direction in the upcoming work and builds trust in the dialogue with worried or hopeful employees.

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Structure

The establishment of a stable base for the project is truly worthwhile. It starts by an activity plan presented as a clear overview. It will facilitate the understanding of when different aspects will arise, both for project members and employees. The activity plan should also be discussed.

The project organization should be formed in such a way that it secures the different interests of the organization and that it is competent to act when quick decisions are needed. A steering group can take the overall decisions regarding investments, a reference group represents the operations and contributes by sharing experiences, a project group is the operating engine supported by subprojects on different matters. That is the way it usually looks like. The project leader is the central hub, always present and having direct access to management.

A communication plan is a valuable support to systematically handle information and dialogue. There can, and should, be several channels. Information meetings, exhibitions, the daily dialogue of the reference persons with their colleagues, weekly newsletters from the project leader and, not least, the intranet sharing the latest news as well as questions and answers on topics related to the project.

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Mapping

A systematic analysis of the current situation and the improvement areas builds a solid base for the continued project work. The analysis can study the current ways of working and work tools as well as expectations and concerns for the future. The focus should lie on the crucial project goals pointed out by the management team, such as cooperation, knowledge sharing or increased attractiveness for customers and employees.

The mapping serves several purposes. It is a support in creating a common agenda for the development work, in strengthening the “we-feeling” and it is helpful when initiating the employee dialogue. In addition, it gives a point of reference for an evaluation after the renewal of the workplace and thereby serves as a basis for decisions on additional measures or corrective actions. The evaluation is reassuring for those who are hesitant but yet prepared to try and see, and who expect to have a say in the continued workplace management.

The methods should be adapted to the needs. Web tools can enable broad and time efficient enquiries. Completing interviews give a more thorough and personal understanding of the employee concerns and expectations.

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Kick start

Never underestimate the power of denial. Most change processes start by a phase where many think that what is claimed probably not will happen or, at least, will not be of my concern. In those circumstances, there is a need for a clear start up of the project, as a kick start for the change process.

The best way is to gather all employees and managers at one occasion in order to share the management's engaging vision and clear project conditions. Everything cannot be negotiable, so clarity around what the project is all about - and the reasons therefore - is necessary for the continued process. The next step is to describe how the work shall be carried out through a well-considered and credible project plan. The communication plan makes it clear how each and everyone can contribute to a successful result.

A complement of great value is to learn from the experience of others. External speakers can highlight business environment changes and success stories from other organizations. This will widen the perspective from a personal concern to a common development.

Like in all successful meetings, it is important to allow enough time for a systematic collection of questions and comments.

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Design program

How do we want the new workplace to be perceived? It is wise not to respond to this question by personal views on nice and ugly but to develop a qualified idea on what the workplace shall convey in order to strengthen the brand and the attractiveness to the visitors, current employees and future job-seekers.

From descriptions of the future operations, customers and stakeholders - as well as from the brand profile and content - the workplace design program concretely presents what shall be conveyed and how that shall be done. Often, a descriptive text is combined with pictures as well as material and color palettes. Sometimes the design is supported by a metaphor such as the city, the nature or the seasons.

The program shall govern the direction and quality through the whole process of planning and is certainly, like all other brand related work, a matter for the management team.

This work is important but also great fun. When the first inspirational pictures are shown, a new energy usually emerges among the employees; reserved attitudes are replaced by high expectations on the new workplace. "We cannot wait to move in!"

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Strategic program

The strategic program summarizes the story on how the renewal of the ways of working shall meet future challenges and which qualities shall shape the workplace. The material can function as a basis for facility search or for renovation. It should be a steering document all the way up to the finished solution. The content is developed by the project group, based on the management vision and goals as well as on the employee dialogue from the reference group.

All in all, the strategic program describes the main factors, such as customer and external relations, brand profile and the major aspects for the workplace location. The ways of working are described in terms of customer meetings, project and concentration work, information sharing and document handling. More general qualities will complete the picture; such as efficiency, flexibility, flows, correlations, security and - not least – sustainability.

A detailed description of the workplace function and design will tie the story together. It is also wise to bring clarity to the often burning issues of personal rooms, open workspaces or shared seating.

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Searching for office space

When the project includes a completely new workplace, the search for office space is the strategically most important step and now you will need some assistance. Call on architects and technical consultants in order to investigate the qualities of the proposed premises. Examine how the surface can be used for your purposes – try some different workstation outplacements based on shared seating, open office plan or office rooms. Thereafter, a thorough and systematic discussion - based on the strategic program - can be conducted around different alternatives. In this way, the investment decision will be taken on very good grounds.

When it comes to contracting, it is important to state things clearly. Loose ends regarding function, quality and responsibilities will always result in lengthy and non-constructive discussions between tenant and property owner, and can easily end up in ill-considered panic cutbacks when unforeseen costs arise.

At that point, it is good to remember that the workplace actually is an investment in operational success and to consider the cost relations: 10 dollars construction, 100 dollars management. Rent 20%, salaries 80%. It is important to keep these proportions in mind and to avoid the short term inclination to 'save money', which in the longer perspective most probably will translate in increased costs.

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Meetings, meetings, meetings

Employee meetings, management group meetings, steering group meetings, reference group meetings, collaboration meetings, subproject meetings, planning meetings, construction meetings, IT-meetings, coordination meetings, move planning meetings, follow up meetings.

There are great amounts of information to be shared and retrieved which implies that everybody's communication and collaboration skills will be put to the test. But the work could be made more efficient. Short and well prepared meetings with the right participants, systematic and driving project leadership, clearly distributed responsibilities and authorities, trust in everybody's capabilities to exceed expectations in order to serve the customer will make the work a lot easier.

A powerful tool for a coordinated project organization is actually yet another meeting; a start up meeting for project participants, consultants and constructors. To meet, to discuss vision and goals, to study the possibilities and risks from different angles and to get to know one another is a good support in stressful times when everything shall be produced quickly and simultaneously.

If everyone pulls together towards the same final goal, the meetings will run smoothly.

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A good day at the office

Do not forget to develop the ways of working! The pressure is usually high to deliver results to the construction and interior design entrepreneurs, but when the time to move in to the new office is approaching it is nevertheless what the workday will look like that will occupy the minds of the employees.

For organizations moving towards increased efficiency there are often other processes to align with, such as the development of value-based work culture, implementation of Lean or operational and technical support systems. The project can clarify how the overall development ambitions will have an impact on the everyday work of the employees. The goal should be to assure - in cooperation with communications department, HR and IT - that everyone has the right prerequisites for a good day at work in the new workplace.

It is a challenge to handle the work flow with less amounts of paper and to increase the degree of digitalization, which is somewhat of a precondition when planning shared seating. To abandon one's - perhaps perfectly well arranged - piles of paper is often perceived as a huge obstacle and should be met with a mix of education and encouragement.

Office etiquette for the workplace cooperation is developed in dialogue with the employees since the responsibility for successful behaviors and straight communication belongs to you and me – and not to anybody else.

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Clean up party

The name 'clean up party' implies in this case more cleaning than party. With a common effort and under nice circumstances you do the most boring of all; namely to clear out, to throw away stuff and to clean up.

The challenge is obviously to have the courage to throw away documents that have been neatly saved during the years. It is helpful if archivists and legal expertise can assist and give advice on what needs to be kept. When doing this together with colleagues, it is easier to agree on keeping only one common reference and to be rather merciless on binders that have been meticulously taken care of for ages.

As an extra incentive, prizes can be awarded for the oldest or the most peculiar relics that have been found during the clean out session – and the day ends with a nice party. The joy of travelling light is noticeable. Together with the dialogue on office etiquette, these preparatory exercises have another virtue; the organization mentally moves in before the actual move takes place. This means that those who, by chance, still hope that the move is nothing but a bad dream will be awakened. Change management does not need to be more complicated than that.

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Finally moving in

The move is neither a doomsday nor a rebirth; it is just an exciting take-off for continued everyday work towards a successful creation of the world. Take a look at the changes done in recent years. If the number of changes will not decrease in the future, most organizations can expect that in six months time there has been organizational changes, a number of people have changed place, some new managers have been hired and others have left. Business as usual.

Moving is of course tremendous hard work when it is taking place. With everything that shall be thrown away, sorted, packed, marked, transported, placed in the right spot and unpacked. Luckily, there are experts in this; magicians having the power to make the computer work from day one, at least in most cases.

The first day in the new workplace is the starting point for the rest of the organization's successful life. Not only the project leader and move consultants but also managers are in place to put everything into order. All cardboard boxes are unpacked at once! A welcome gift is a pleasant surprise. Perhaps a water decanter in the summer while waiting for the air conditioning to function properly or a tea light holder in the winter to use during the final mounting of the lamps.

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Continuous development

When everybody is prepared to face the change and to try something new, it is also required to secure a watchful follow-up of what did not turn out perfectly from the start. It is a matter of creating a structure, to form a house council, to establish internal routines for following up, to maintain the project organization six month after moving in and, not least, to have a financial reserve for additions and changes.

After a few months it is time for a follow-up survey. What was improved and what has turned out worse than expected? What about the concentration possibilities? Is there enough space for meetings? Publish the results; also a poor outcome is a gift, a good basis for improvements.

That was it! What a journey! So many details to handle, so many decisions to be taken, so many priorities and yet a fantastic result. However, the challenges are still there, the questions are the same: how shall we work in order to face new external changes and how can the workplace support us even better? But now it is easy, since change competence is high and the workplace is flexible. The office is almost paperless since we got rid of so much paper in the clean up party.

Good luck!

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