

Strategy Versus Policy: A Big Picture Look at How We Engage Our Workplaces

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Stores and restaurants are opening to include more guests. Movie theaters are starting to welcome patrons again. And even Broadway has partially reopened. As vaccinations rise, more people are starting to make plans that include other people.

And that is fantastic.

Amidst it all, one question seems to remain unanswered: how are we really, if at all, returning to the office?

One reason this question seems so elusive is that many consider return-to-office a one-time situation solved with the right policy. We are treating the office like a theater or a restaurant — not the dynamic, ever-evolving experience and space that it is. In doing so, we are missing a golden opportunity to amplify workplace strategies already starting to grow in popularity and practice over the past decade — far before the pandemic forced many of us into makeshift home offices.

So, what is a workplace strategy and how does it differ from a workplace policy?

First, a strategy is nimble and tied to business goals, with the flexibility to evolve over time. A policy is static and more difficult to update or change.

The workplace is not static.

Workplace strategy provides services and solutions that take into account the changing needs of the workplace aligned with ever-evolving elements of the office beyond the pandemic. This includes things like corporate culture shifts and business practice or service changes. Workplace strategy is a flexible but thoughtful approach toward environments that accommodate the needs of any organization, and incorporate teaming, collaboration, and innovation to support successful business performance.

As the dynamics of business shift, so too must our use of space. This is nothing new. We are simply seeing it in a new light.

Second, a strategy takes advantage of the workplace as an experience. A policy can sometimes stifle that experience.

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The workplace is an evolving ecosystem, not just a building.

The workplace is an ever-evolving ecosystem that takes on many roles and shapes depending on the people engaging with it.

The options, infrastructure, location, tools, and technology all need to work together to provide success. How people — employees, partners, vendors, guests, prospective hires, customers, and shareholders — experience the workplace matters. If we think of experience as a story, and people as characters in that story, the varied ways people engage with the space and each other has tremendous impact on the outcome of the business. Workplace strategy must be responsive to those needs and adapt the “climate” to changing ecosystem needs.

Strategy is about experiences. Policies are about processes.

A workplace strategy is a dynamic experience, not a simple roadmap.

Just as a business strategy must evolve without losing focus on its goals, a workplace strategy similarly needs to be responsive to challenges and opportunities.

On the real estate-portfolio level, a strong workplace strategy proactively focuses on location and business strategy to accelerate growth across all functions. It identifies cross-business synergies and geographic value opportunities. By coordinating across these areas, a workplace strategy enables functions necessary for business growth while focusing on long-term planning beyond the annual budget cycle or the next pandemic.

Further, a strategic approach to a commercial real estate portfolio can improve client focus with proximity and a robust infrastructure that responds to on-demand scalability and connectivity needs — not to mention driving greater commercial value in terms of both labor and real estate.

Lastly, the environment itself has tremendous impact. Workplace strategy considers environments that reflect distinctive client practices and brand consistently across the globe, encourage greater collaboration and productivity, improve wellness, comfort, and safety, are sustainable, and foster a sense of caring and belonging.

That environment creates an experience that is dynamic and infused with humanity.

Strategy is about unlocking the potential of people. Policy is about defining it.

Perhaps the most critical component of a successful workplace strategy is the people. Some of us are introverts who have largely thrived in an at-home work environment. Some of us are extroverts who derive energy and value from engaging with others in the office. Most of us are a combination of both. Our workplace needs to reflect that dynamic appropriately to empower people to perform at their best.

This is where culture becomes critical.

Specifically, a culture of trust allows for the flexibility needed for people to define their own best workstyle and equips individuals for success. Companies that stifle individualism and pay only lip service to trust will suffer. This is now

becoming evident with businesses whose office-hour policies have driven employees to competitors that allow for more autonomy and embrace a culture of trust.

Not all policies are created equal.

Having some kind of a system in place that allows people to understand expectations and adapt to company culture is important. We should think of policies more as guidelines than rules, just as we think of the workplace as a fluid environment made useful only by the people who engage in it. As you look to set policies, do so with an eye toward nimbleness, adaptability, and an approach rooted in the needs of your people and a culture of trust. Setting expectations is good but dictating how your people meet those expectations by demanding their physical presence at specific times unconnected to the goals that drive your business will stifle innovation, productivity, and morale.

Transform the unknown into opportunity.

We are facing a great deal of uncertainty — and have been for some time. But when it comes to business, uncertainty is just unrealized opportunity.

While many unknowns exist about the future of the workplace, we cannot allow those unknowns to get in the way of an opportunity to think beyond return-to-work policies that focus on how many days a week people will be required to work in the office. We must instead unleash the potential of a real workplace strategy.

This is not a one-and-done policy change. Many health experts have said that the recent pandemic is not the last one nor even the worst one. To pretend that we can just devise a policy that resets our expectations so that we can comfortably exist in the “new normal” is not seeing the full picture. Business leaders must think bigger and implement workplace strategies that reflect the complexities of our modern world. We may want to look back nostalgically on the nine-to-five office, but to be honest, it was not working even when it was working. Many businesses already knew that in 2019, but the pandemic certainly has given the rest of us an opportunity to revisit it. And in doing so, realize that uncertainty does not have to be scary if we embrace it as opportunity.



About Siobhan

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