



Added value: companies should aim for their workspaces to be enjoyable and reflect the positive values of the firm in an 'honest' way

IMAGE: LUTHER/UTTERBACH

Variety is spice of life in workspace fit-outs

Good office fit-outs should be exciting, flexible enough to change and, above all, tailored to the needs of employees. **Samuel Horti reports**

"Workspaces are like sex," says Atul Bansal, co-founder of office interior design consultancy the Sheila Bird Group. "If you don't experiment, it gets repetitive. It gets boring." And just as bad sex can sour a relationship, bland workspaces can turn off potential employees and deter the most talented staff from staying.

In June's What Workers Want survey from Savills and Oxford Economics, respondents named interior design and fit-out as the one thing they would change about their workspace above all else.

Employees are also increasingly footloose: half of all workers, and two thirds of 18- to 24-year-olds, expect to move job within five years, the survey found.

Put those things together and it is clear that office design is one of the key weapons in the war for talent.

But what exactly do employees want from their workspace? And how should landlords and occupiers work together to create the best spaces?

Experts agree that having a unique, original fit-out is more important than ever. But employees do not want a space that is different for the sake of it. They want a design that shows what a company stands for. In other words, they want something "honest", says Bansal.

"Businesses' biggest problem is recruitment," he says. "You've got to have a 'cool' space to work, but the definition of 'cool' is now 'honest'. I want an honest place to work, a

place that stands for what you're saying it stands for. I don't want you just pretending to be green, pretending to care about me. I want you to actually care about me."

Katrina Kostic-Samen, head of workplace strategy design at consultancy KKS Savills, says it takes roughly two years to train and get full value from an employee, and Savills research shows that staff stay in a job for an average of just two and a half years.

The longer they can be persuaded to stay, the more productive they'll be, she explains. "Law firms, for example, are terrified of tech companies, because all their lawyers are going off to the fun and savvy spaces."

'Experience-driven space'

Increasingly, employees want what Bansal calls "experience-driven space" – places they enjoy visiting. Kostic-Samen agrees, saying that for some 18- to 24-year-olds, being able to "go into a space and be happy and enjoy it" is more important than company reputation and brand when deciding where to work.

Naturally, the type of experience Bansal has in mind depends on the occupier and the building. He points to a tech company client that was struggling to recruit. He put them in touch with a local start-up coding school and encouraged the firm to incorporate a shared coding space into their office, which would appeal to the type of people the company was trying to attract.

"It's not just about the physical environment. It's about what you've created in it, what creates that character and mood. If I then put you in touch with a developer, all of a sudden you connect the dots, create linkages. It [sounds as though it] has nothing to do with design, but it has. It creates that palette."

From an interior design perspective, Kostic-Samen says the three things occupiers want most from their fit-outs are natural light, outdoor space and eating areas. They also want a flexible design that they can change as and when they please, she adds.

Jackie Cocking, building consultant at consultancy Matthews & Goodman, says tenants increasingly want a "campus-based feel, which is >>



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Armchair philosophy: a breakout area

attractive to millennials". They want more breakout areas, work pods, hot desks and coffee lounges within an office layout. They also want to show staff they care by providing facilities linked to their journey to work, such as showers, changing rooms and bike storage.

Pressure on costs

Landlords should also think about the pressure occupiers are under to minimise their operational costs when designing a fit-out, says Richard Clarke, partner at Matthews & Goodman. Desks, for example, are now smaller than before, and planners are designing at a ratio of one staff member per 8 sq m, rather than the previous 1:10 ratio. Furthermore, landlords and developers should be aware that tenants are also taking a greater interest in the environmental footprint of buildings, especially the impact of lighting, heating, air conditioning and ventilation, he says.

Edward Pittar, partner and head of workspace consultancy at Hollis, stresses that fit-outs must reflect changing patterns of work, such as the rise of remote working. Young people are accustomed to flexible working from their time at university and moving into a "fixed office with rigid structures" can damage their mental wellbeing, he says. Most businesses have cloud-

based infrastructure and storage, but their offices are rarely designed with changing technology in mind, Pittar argues. For example, video conference calls with remote workers often happen at a desk, where there is a lot of background noise.

"Well-thought-through design can mean the provision of a few private booths that can act as a space for conference calls, focus zones for uninterrupted working, private downtime, thinking space or somewhere to finish an argument with a spouse to stop it festering at the back of your mind," he says.

Occupiers are also increasingly focusing on "inclusivity and diversity - not just about gender, generational and ethnic diversity, but also about neurodiversity", he says. Around 10% of the workforce have a neurodivergent condition such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or Tourette syndrome and larger companies are starting to cater for

the needs of these people in their office fit-outs.

During the fit-out itself, Bansal advises businesses not to get bogged down in details such as the colour of walls early on. People have "blinkered" views based on their own preferences, he says, and it's more important to answer the big-picture questions early, such as how many rooms a company requires or how much private space is needed.

"If you take someone through a journey about the possibilities of a space and they start to see it being constructed, they are more open-minded at a later stage," he says.

Rather than obsess over tiny details, occupiers and landlords should think more about the message they are trying to get across with their fit-outs, he adds. "If somebody says to us 'I think we need a pool table', I'll say 'I'm not interested. If they're asking why they think they need a pool table, then we'll help them.'"

Ignoring trends

He also advises against following trends, believing the word should be banned. It's a thought echoed by Tyler Goodwin, chief executive and founder of Seaforth Land, who cautions against adhering to a market-driven formula for fit-outs.

"Co-working companies are certainly influencing the current interior design of office space - most

certainly in terms of densification of desk space and generosity of breakout and collaboration spaces - but a formula is a shortcut to short-term success," he says. His direction to his designers has simply been: "Please come up with something that is special."

Many landlords have been slow to respond to these changing demands, KKS Savillis' Kostic-Samen argues. This is despite the fact that landlords who work closest with occupiers on the fit-out of their buildings and are most in tune with their tenants' needs will attract the best rents.

The Sheila Bird Group's Bansal adds: "The people who are getting it right are getting buildings that are full before they've even been finished. The people who don't get it right, I don't think they'll be here in five or six years." Ultimately, there's no "one-size-fits-all" solution for fit-outs, Bansal says. The key is to make sure they are exciting and take employees on a journey.

He recalls an exhibition he saw in Portugal in which 200 women lined up facing 200 men in a narrow tunnel and guests had to walk through the middle. "Why's that interesting? Well, none of them had any clothes on," he says.

"I think about how we travel through space and use our space. If it's boring, that process, that journey, is irrelevant." ■



Edward Pittar
Hollis

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