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# INDESIGN



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The 'Workplace 20/20 Foresight' Issue.

# A matter of intelligence



Words *Graham Lauren*  
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“The focus of the modern workplace lies in data about knowledge and accommodation, not fixed square metres of property,” writes Graham Lauren. And, with the future of work in the ever-scrolling hands of the digitally-empowered, the designer’s role diversifies.

As more of the people who gave the world of work its current shape retire, new notions of work, the tools it uses and where it will be done will transform the workplace to create a new economy of smarter businesses. This will make an entirely new breed of workplace entrepreneurs richer. But, with the future of work increasingly in the hands of those who have never known a life without the internet, it will likely also deepen and enrich the role of the designer.

In this economy, organisations are no longer ‘space users’ but ‘learning machines’, constantly transformed by the acquisition and development of new knowledge, driven by networked technology. And one important lesson for workplace architects and designers may be that clients don’t buy interiors or architecture. Instead they seek out leaner, more compact, agile and faster-learning versions of the businesses they already run.

Designing for such businesses necessitates consideration of new briefing inputs. This will include the fit of the workplace to the personal, articulated experiences and insights of those it must house. Its thinking must focus not only on the space it occupies, but the constant redesign of the evolving organisation itself.

Increasingly, these learning machines will adapt in rhythm with what is changing outside, and the knowledge they must contain and develop. In this and its planning lies the true birth of the discipline of workplace strategy.

#### **The opportunity**

Those commercial property owners able to reconceive their future business as being not just in leasing space, but in helping their customers do better business, will profit handsomely. They will also shift forever the business model terrain on which the commercial workplace will be fought.

The resource to accelerate human workplace creativity and productivity to help them do this is already right in front of, and within, us. It is in the mastery of the internet’s collaborative workplace technologies that the workplace’s entire foreseeable future lies.

And, location aside, like all others connected by the internet, workplace is being driven to become an information business. Once, from its technologies, we can derive a knowledge profile of every workplace and work community, its productivity can be read. And when its human inputs can be understood, they can also be altered to produce new results.

#### **The human resource driving the shift**

Across every business now exists pervasive ‘internet social literacy’, the most powerful and most unanticipated naturally emerging management tool ever discovered. Previously it was hard, if not impossible, to capture and transform into usable information the





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knowledge and insights of those across an organisation. Yet, as our use of and familiarity with using the social internet grows, we have reached an age of unprecedented opportunity in making the best use of intelligence across the web-age business.

In the wake of Facebook, everybody now knows how to use social media to write online, upload and share material, and make comments about those items uploaded by others. And when such communications are in writing, they can be captured easily by the mirroring, private, Facebook-like technologies now available within every business.

Workplace knowledge, insight and learning that was once out of reach is no longer beyond our grasp.

Through it, management can now tap into diverse perspectives and intelligence that was previously both unknown and unreachable. Through the precise data it can drill down on, it also has access to a bottomless, renewable resource, whose creativity may be limited only by its imagination in what it asks for.

#### **The necessary response: Knowledge factories will make their occupants smarter**

Every business can cultivate deliberate, collaborative data about how it must be accommodated to perform optimally. As such, the greatest foreseeable workplace opportunity presents itself to landlords able to understand this. They will learn how to help those who occupy their spaces become smarter, more adaptable, more productive and more competitive.

In this world, it will be up to designers and architects to guide clients in configuring the many emergent dimensions of the modern workplace around the intelligence it comprises. For the landlord capable of branding, owning and operating knowledge factories that deliver this outcome, the queues will be long.

#### **The likely response: Myopia**

As long as they remain fixated on workplace property as property, not data, those qualified only to think and act as old-style landlords will be looking where the light doesn't shine. Because the focus of the modern workplace lies in data about knowledge and accommodation, not fixed square metres of property.

Yet, in a recent interview I conducted with the managing director of one of Australia's biggest commercial real estate agencies, he clearly articulated the breaking state of its established business model. He

confirmed that the smarter businesses got about taking space, the less they took. He also suggested this was okay, because there are more new businesses around to take up that newly vacated space.

Another ASX-listed owner confessed to knowing almost nothing about the businesses that occupied its offices. Yet, in the digital age, it is not from 'not knowing' its customers that the likes of Dell Computer became a USD12 billion company within 13 years of operation; or that Amazon's Jeff Bezos became the world's richest man – simply from running an online bookstore. Each rethought his business to bring it closer to customers.

As landlords are physically closer to their customers, this places the onus on every property owner to learn more – and faster – about its own customers, if it is to sustain a relevant, information-driven business.

If CBD office owners thought of themselves as providing services to accommodate work, rather than in leasing space, this mental shift alone could transform their businesses and make them fitter for the future.

The likelihood of any property owner being able to do this in isolation – without learning from its customers, or drawing on its tenants' collective internet social literacy – is slender indeed.

And the opportunity for designers is to learn how to guide them in doing so.

#### **Winners**

Location might be valuable: if you want to attract the right workers, it's still location, location, location, right?

Perhaps. But, as work is no longer location-dependent, the rules are changing.

Future successful commercial property owners may become those both better at getting closer to customers and installing their collaborative, comfortable, connected networks of, most likely, co-working, knowledge factories closer to home.

But the design skills of those able to get inside the consciousness of learning organisations – those individuals who can guide creation of facilities that stimulate new ideas and new revenues through productive collaboration – they will earn a premium.

The reason Amazon succeeds is because it understands its customers. In the emerging learning economy, it will be the cancer of ignorance that kills others.

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