

Experience Days

Shopping is now seen as 'leisure experience,' hotels are a hospitality experience, restaurants a dining experience: the whole world suddenly appears to be about experience. This trend, already bubbling under in the world of workplace for a year or two, will explode in 2020 as occupiers, landlords and developers concentrate on building an experiential element into new working spaces. Translating the idea into physical facts will mean moving on from the pool tables and chill zones of the last few years. The gimmicks that produce Instagrammable content may help recruitment, but do they help with retention? The latest wisdom is that a sense of community and common purposes might work better – but how do you design that into a space?



THE DISCUSSION

We've gathered another crack panel of industry experts together – at Amtico's fantastic new space in South London's Metal Box Factory – to discuss the hot topic of the workplace experience.

We begin by asking the team whether their clients are now talking about 'the experience'.

James: Definitely. I think that developers, organisations, clients now realise that a space has to be more than just somewhere you go to work – it has to be part of your everyday life. You now need to give people flexibility, convenience, comfort...it's about being able to do what you

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really want and need in your own life, so building in things such as great F&B, onsite GPs, gyms, crèches etc. This works for the client as well because it means that people don't need to take as much time off.

Dan: Experience is now one of the first topics our clients talk about. At present, clients are really focused on creating environments that not only respond to an 'internal/inward focus experience' but also an 'external/outward focused experience'.

Elaine: Experience in the workplace is definitely key to talent retention and staying competitive





in a really vibrant market. The focus on the experience in the workplace is so much more evident these days. A couple of years ago, creating an experience in the workplace was considered as simply adding a good coffee station into the office. These days it focuses on everything – from the entrance into the office, the different worksettings, the branding, all the way through to the technology that you use every day. All the different elements that make up the workplace contribute to the overall work experience that we have daily.

Dan: More and more, during brief taking and workshops, staff want to feel a connection to the company, and usually this is portrayed via the experience from the first moment you walk across the doormat. It is much more than just providing a coffee cart in the reception – it's about the culture of staff and how open and inclusive the space makes you feel. After all, first impressions are so important and can really set the tone for how the individual uses and moves through the experience.

Gema: It is normal now for us as a manufacturer to have these kinds of conversations with designers right at the beginning of concept planning. Often we are told and understand that the design of a space allows designers to create an emotional response in the user, which can be anything from the sense of excitement, through to making them feel relaxed and comfortable. The flooring layout and design is often integral to this, as it can signify to the user how a space should be used with the use of different colour palettes, defining a specific area or creating a sense of wayfinding, taking the user on a journey.

So which particular sectors are clients referencing in order to move away from the look and feel of a traditional office?

Rachel: I definitely think a strong influence is the hospitality sector. From the moment people

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walk through the front door, there is now a much more welcoming, hospitable, inclusive approach – and this follows throughout the workspace. People do want comfort and they do want service. The education sector is also a very strong influencer – and this comes through tech. We do everything at work now. So we are taking the best we can find from retail, hospitality, education, and blending these together to allow people to do this. Ongoing learning is also crucial. We keep learning at work.

Natasha: I think workplace is borrowing from a number of sectors, including retail, hospitality and some aspects of education as well. So, in terms of hospitality, we're borrowing the types of spaces, dressing of spaces and lighting levels, and then creating a true experience through the work environment. In terms of retail, it's about the speed and the pieces and kit of parts. Then, through education, it is about creating a programme for development and for nurturing staff.

Nic: I think the domestic/living sector has had a great deal of influence – and a big driver has been that 'home from home' style of workplace. I actually think we're now moving away from that – we're growing up a little bit. A workplace should deliver all the stuff that allows you to be brilliant at work – and I don't think that creating a space that is like a home is necessarily conducive to that. When I'm at home I don't want to feel as though I'm at work – they're two different spaces and do two different functions. Another influence is undoubtedly hospitality – the whole business of service and looking after the people who work for you and your clients.

Paul: First, I think the phrase should be 'influencing' rather than 'borrowing' – and that definitely refers to more than one sector. For me, the living sector, as well as the higher education sector, is influencing what we are now doing in



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the workplace. When it comes to the living sector, I think the environment is starting to become more comfortable and more relaxed. When it comes to influence from higher education, the younger generations are more about freedom of how and where they work – and technology aids them to work in this way. They don't want to be chained to a desk – that just won't work for them.

Elaine: Designers are looking at a variety of different sectors for inspiration. Not just residential and hospitality, but even daily experiences like navigating through a city, travelling around the world, advances in technology. All of these elements can feed into the experience that becomes the modern workplace. Since technology has enabled us to work from anywhere, the modern office really has to offer you something special to make you come into the workplace. It has to offer you that seamless connection to colleagues and technology, as well as a great experience, to make it worthwhile.

James: I agree. It's about borrowing from not one particular sector – it's about borrowing



from everyday life. It's difficult to pinpoint any one sector. Workplace is now learning from every other sector – that is key to that holistic experience. If these things are built into the workplace then that only adds and benefits. The lines are now so blurred.

Dan: Any and every sector is being referenced in today's workplace. Everyone has access to a variety of sectors and we will cross between various sectors each and everyday – where we subconsciously take in pros and cons of spaces. This means we are able to pull these experiences back into our creative thinking and tailor them to



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the individual client. Not one client will have the same experience – it is all driven by the business culture and also the culture of a workforce or business leader.

How much of 'the experience' is about the physical environment and how much is about the culture?

James: I think they are dependent on one another. One doesn't necessarily work without the other. You can build the most fantastic workplace, with all the facilities people want and need, but that won't be successful if you don't have the culture that goes with that.

Dan: The physical experience is becoming more and more important with clients, but that's not to say all experiences need to be loud, busy and vibrant. They really need to be created around people to enable the individuals to feel comfortable in the environment around them and be the best they can possibly be. A business that has a workforce of mainly introverts will have a much different experience than a business of extroverts.

Elaine: Culture plays such an important part in the overall experience. Designers can provide all of the parts required for a great workplace, but without the right company culture to enable employees to use the space to its fullest, the potential of the design will be lost. Managers need to lead from the top down, showing employees how to work in the modern office, how to engage with the different areas, and showing their employees that they trust them to do their job no matter where they are. Therefore managers should be taken on the design journey



to fully understand the space. The early engagement, workplace strategy and change management portion of the process is so important, allowing the leaders to understand and buy into the design. It is not enough to just design a project blindly. If you want a successful project, you need to be willing to spend the time, to allow the designer to fully understand the client and the culture that they are after, and to fully engage the employees in the design process. I would argue that the culture is the most important part of ensuring a successful and great office experience.

What would you say are the key elements required to create this experience?

Natasha: In terms of the experience, I think there are two key elements – you have both the staff experience and the visitor experience, and being able to tailor those to represent the brand throughout the journey and ‘experience’ within the space is really important. In creating

the experience, I think leadership has to lead by example. There has to be an element of trust.

Nic: Creating a new experience is about people. However sexy your reception space is, if somebody gets an amazing welcome, it’s going to be more powerful than the design itself – and I’m a designer so maybe shouldn’t be saying that. When you talk about people, you’re talking about emotions – about engagement, community, help, welcome, comfort...these should be the drivers when creating a workplace.

Rachel: People need the functionality to be seamless. They don’t want to be cluttered when getting their work done. They need the technology to work – they expect it to work and to be seamless. We want our spaces to be multifunctional and everything to be at our fingertips. We have a very high expectation of our workspaces now. We’ve moved past the ownership of things. Younger generations don’t need to own anything – but they expect everything they need to be at their fingertips, in a bespoke and unique way. People expect spaces to work hard – day and night. So, as designers, we’ve really got to sweat the space in order to offer as many opportunities as possible.

Paul: Usually, when we’re talking with our clients about what they want from their workplace, they talk about retention rather than talking about attraction. Now they are starting to talk about both attraction and retention. I think one of the key elements is to create flexibility – to create different zones for people to work in. In creating the experience, I do agree that trust in the leadership team is crucial.



CONCLUSION

We conclude by asking our sponsor whether this shift in workplace culture has led to different trends/products being specified. If so, what are those hot trends?

Gema: People want a story; they want different experiences as they move through a space. Amtico’s Designers Choice laying patterns are an excellent example of story-led designs and the huge creative potential of combining colour, wood and stone in harmony. Finishes can change and evolve to suit the surrounding space, giving the designer anything from a traditional, authentic wood finish to a contemporary, colourful geometric pattern. We find more and more that there are blurred lines between residential and commercial interiors and, in recognition of this, our entire portfolio is now available for both applications, assisting the home from home workplace trend and providing flooring that both achieves the homely familiarity but also performs for a long time in a high traffic environment. ♦