

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 30: Preparing for a change of mindset as well as a change of office space

Speakers: Hannah Collis and Matthew Davis

Hannah: Hello. Welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast, my name is Hannah Collis, I'm a researcher in occupational and organisational psychology at Leeds University Business School.

Matthew: Hello. And I'm Dr Matthew Davis an Associate Professor in organisational psychology here at Leeds University Business School.

Hannah: So, we are currently working on a research project which is exploring the return to the workplace after the pandemic. In previous podcasts and in our webinars and blog posts that we've produced as part of this project, we've discussed a lot about what people have done in order to work in the office due to COVID-19 as well the plans and reflections from individuals designing offices for employers coming back once the lockdown has been lifted, but what we haven't really commented on so far is how to make it a success and what could also be done to make the most of it. So, I think the first question, Matt, is, drawing on your own research and experience in working with organisations, what can these organisations be doing to ensure that the changes they are making and their return to the workplace is a success moving forwards?

Matthew: That's a great question Hannah, and I think before we get into thinking about how to approach the change, I think we just need to recognise and appreciate quite how different everybody's experience will have been over this past year. And, in particular, when we're talking about the return to the workplace, we absolutely have to recognise that, for some people, they never left the workplace, they've been working onsite during the pandemic for the whole time. So, whether that's in care homes or hospitals or supermarkets, or actually even in more traditional office-based jobs, but in roles that couldn't be performed away from the physical office. So, we have people in these roles, we also have people who have been predominantly at home, and their experiences will have differed a lot as well depending on their personal circumstances. Working from home is very different if you have children present versus on your own. So, all of these things will be influencing how people feel that this last year has been, and also how they feel about coming back,

maybe, into the workplace, some for the first time since, maybe, March 2020. For others, they might be feeling anxious or unsettled by the thought of having more people come back into the office that they've been used to working in, maybe under very, kind of, low numbers in the office, socially distanced, and that will feel quite different for them now, as well, having more people coming back over the coming months. So, we just need to be mindful of that.

I think a lot of the discussion around the return to offices in particular has focussed around safety measures, things like improving ventilation and hygiene practices, looking at transport and commuting, which are all really, really important, and particularly when we're thinking about the context of COVID-19 and how we try to reduce the spread of the virus and make these places as safe as they possibly can be, but we also need to think about this, actually, as a change that people are undergoing, and particularly if the office is going to be different to what they left. How do we approach this? How do we start thinking about the future and how we can, maybe, adapt or change the office and our ways of working to make the most of what's happened as people have embraced home working, digital tools more over this past year?

And I think there are six key things that we should be thinking about when we approach this change, then. And this is based on a great number of years of research, looking at the design of offices in particular, and workplaces, and thinking about this is a change process. So, we know these things are important and they are especially important now given the turmoil and the disruption to people's lives. So, I think the first key thing is just to engage with staff and to be open around this, and really to listen to the experience they've had, the lesson they've learned around their own working preferences and what helps them to be productive and to manage their time. But also, to understand the differences between people's roles, and what they need to do their work effectively. So, the type of environments which are important to somebody who is working very much individually, versus somebody who is very much dependent on others and their team to get their work done are likely to be quite different, and we need to think about that. But engage with staff, get their feedback, help them to actually, kind of, design and come up with the solutions that we're looking at here, and to give us... be that critical friend. So, if they can see that something is not going

to work, let's address that before we put it into place. And as I say, let's not rush the process, either.

So, we've been in an emergency situation and things have had to happen at pace for a very good reason, but if we are looking at decisions around the design or the changes to our offices, these will be with us for a number of years, and they are big changes, big choices, and unless there is a pressing need to have something different on day one, let's just take our time over this, let's take our time to get the design right, to listen to employees, to get feedback, to really, maybe, test out different ideas, maybe different concepts with different groups within the office, and make it an iteration as well, let's learn, do things gradually and incrementally. As I said, recognise that everybody has had a different experience, so actually the levels of enthusiasm for change, enthusiasm for coming back to the office, maybe in terms of actually willingness to embrace things like hybrid working or, you know, new digital tools, that will be different depending on how this last year has been for people. And I think we've got a real opportunity here.

So, the disruption of the pandemic has, you know, changed our habits, it's kind of disrupted our habits we had and our expectations about what the office looked like, about what work routines and what work itself looked like. And this is a great time for us, and I think to be a manager or a leader at the moment means you'll never have the same opportunity to really help people to think differently about how they work, to really start to embed good, healthy working practices. So, what is the culture and the ways of working that we want to see in the office going forwards? You know, we've had this disruption, let's actually get people thinking about new ways of working which are better than what was there before.

As we go through this process, let's build in more resilience and adaptability, so ways of working, ways of organising and designing our office space that means there is flexibility. If teams change, if the nature of how we get our work done changes, if we have to go back to social distancing, let's not tie our hands in terms of how this actually is designing. So, let's not over-optimise things, let's have a bit more resilience in how we work. Let's also consider new starters and more junior members of staff, they are likely to be the people most keen to get back into the office, into the workplace, to meet others and learn from others. If they are coming in on their own, or their teams aren't coming in at the same time, let's think about how we support

them, how we help them engage, create social situations to support them

Hannah:

I think they are some absolutely great points that you have touched on there, Matt, and I think you're right in that these are all things that haven't really been spoken about much in the broader context of this pandemic, even through our own channels and in the news and things like that as well. I think this is all things that people haven't really considered, but really should be, moving forward. And I think that, sort of, leads us onto a second topic which I think we wanted to touch on today, which is a lot more about how organisations can make the most of this experience and this time, moving forward. So, rather than using this process as a reactive and maybe a struggle to get back to how things might... used to be, what the normal was, if there ever is going to be a new normal, but maybe instead have organisations use this as an opportunity to invest and to change and use it for the better. What more could they be doing, whether this is potentially investing in wellbeing, in health developments in the workplace, or if it's investing in other staff training or cross-skilling, for example? Is there anything else there that you think organisations could be doing to make the most of this, then, Matt?

Matthew:

Absolutely. I think you've really touched on some of the positives that could come from this, and let's be honest, the last 15 months, for a lot of people, have been pretty miserable in very many ways, with the government restrictions, potentially, kind of, damages to their own health, concern for loved ones and others. It's been a tough time, so what can we do to make really the most of this disruption, are there positives we can take from this? And I think that's a really nice thing to have been hearing from the partners that we work with, so in the public and the private sector, and the way they are thinking about trying to improve and to build back better, to steal that phrase. And I think some of this, then, is looking again at how do we support wellbeing within the workplace? And you touched on this in terms of how we might link the design of the workplace to supporting wellbeing. And I think what we're hearing much more is people thinking about things like biophilia as a way of bringing in, maybe, more positive environmental design as well.

So, bringing planting and natural finishes into the workplace. We know from the research that that is... you know, it helps to support many people's mental health, can stimulate creativity as well, there are indoor air benefits from having natural plants in

the environment, lots of positives from that. And this sense of restoration and calm that it can induce as well.

The other thing, I think, is also looking just at the type of space and the nature of the spaces that we provide within offices, and one of the reasons I said I think we should not rush into changes is because I think we really need to take a bit of time to understand people's needs and experience at the moment, and I think there's a danger that we're just going to reach for assumptions, and that's not a healthy thing. So, for example, we're having lots of discussion in the business press around hybrid working and how people will want to visit the office to have lots of interaction, stimulation that they can't get at home, so to see other people, to be in really exciting spaces, to be, kind of, having lots of chance encounters all the time. Now, absolutely, for some people, that's likely to be what they're missing and what they really crave and want to get back to, that social contact. But for others, and we need to remember different situations people are in, there are a lot of people who have been making do in really poor workspace at home, maybe where they have lots of other people living in the same house and not being able to get quiet time and so on, or just the other circumstances they have in their life, they are craving, and really looking forward to going back to the office to get quiet space, to think, to work individually, a fixed desk to work at and lay out their work again if they've been working from a kitchen counter or their bed.

So, we need to be mindful of that, that not everybody is going to want the same thing from the office environment. And actually, for some people, stepping back into a hyper-connected, really stimulating, very busy office environment is going to be harmful, and actually is not going to be providing what they need to work effectively. So, we need to be a bit more nuanced in this. But given your background, Hannah, I'm sure you've got other ideas about how you might tie this in around mental health, wellbeing and positivity as well?

Hannah:

Yes, of course, and I think, obviously, the introduction of things like biophilia, like you said, can also really help with wellbeing and just general interpretations of the workplace, and it has been shown in research that just having more plants around you can really make you feel better and more comfortable in your work environment. And I think, in terms of other areas of, sort of, wellbeing and mental health, I think, like you said, it's this continuous engagement with staff which needs to take place, this ongoing conversation, whether that is specifically around

health and wellbeing or if it's just about what people might want out of their working practices. And obviously this whole more than a year now has been completely different, so even if people are now starting to feel comfortable working from home and they don't want to go back, that's absolutely fine, but their experiences of working from home during the pandemic are very, very different to the experience of working from home when everything is back to normal. Are they then going to feel isolated and left out of office conversations when they previously wanted to work from home? So, I don't think this... this shouldn't be, not necessarily even a one size fits all, but a one time is representative of that individual. I think there is only so much research, and my own research, which shows how much people can change over time, based on their experiences.

And so, when you are deciding how to come back or what to include, what people want, you need to continuously review this and learn from what people are saying. But also understand that these employees are changing as well. So, don't be offended or get frustrated when employees' attitudes and thoughts about how they want to work is going to change in 12 weeks, six months' time, because working from home now is not going to be the same as working from home.

Matthew:

Absolutely, Hannah. I couldn't agree more. It kind of makes me really happy to hear this idea about continual review and thinking about how we iterate design, and keep improving this, and learn from doing. And I think that's one of the things we need to be making sure we build into our office designs and the way that we work and the technologies that we use, to have a bit more resilience and flexibility built in, because the environment changes, how we work will change over time as well. So, let's not lock ourselves into one way of doing things. But I think we need to be very honest, I think, as leaders, as managers, as designers, honest and humble with our staff and colleagues about the fact that we probably aren't going to get this right first time round. So, there is probably going to be some trial and error, learning what works for particular teams, for groups and individuals, depending on their preferences. So, I think we need to have that humility and also invite feedback and honest feedback to help us improve, help us to fine tune designs and ways of working. One other thing that just struck me as you were talking was this idea that people have had different experiences, we keep coming back to this. I think we also need to just recognise that some of the data that businesses are making

decisions on at the moment around workplace design and ways of working going forward is not perfect.

So, a lot of the employee data that had been used are surveys that were taken during the pandemic, when people had been working from home for quite a long time and making assumptions about how they might want to use the office going forwards. Now, I think there are difficulties with this for two reasons, one is that they are thinking about the office they left in March 2020 in many cases, that may well be very different to the office that they are returning to, depending upon choices being made by the organisation, technological tools and things they are using now, but also because we are making decisions based on what our home working experience has been like during a pandemic. I probably don't have to say this, but this is not a normal time to be working, and certainly not a normal time to be working from home. And then finally, as well, what we need, how we work, and what we do in the office is going to be dependent on what other people as well.

So, we may decide that a particular pattern would work best for us, but that may not survive first contact with reality when we find our key team members, or other people that we want to work alongside or to see are having a different pattern to ourselves. So, we might find, actually, there's a bit of changing and evolution as people settle into new routines, work out how others are working as well, and we're not working on our own, we won't be when we're back in office environments. So, it's much more interactive than that. So, I would say again, we need to be cautious about rushing into changes, we need to let things settle down when we get more of our colleagues, our staff, back into the workplace, back into offices. And just to allow things to evolve and to learn how people are going to settle into new routines and ways of working before we make any long-term decisions.

Hannah:

Also, just to add one final thing onto that is that it's not necessarily the employees' responsibility to tell you how they're feeling. I think, as an employer, you also need to really actively seek feedback from your employees, don't leave it to them to tell you when they're not okay. I think so much throughout this pandemic, everyone, sort of, said, "Oh yes, I'm fine," or, "It's okay, it'll do." I think we really, especially as we're moving back into changing workplaces as well, I think we really need to have those deeper conversations about, actually, how is it? Like, how exactly are you finding this? How could this be better for you? I

think we should really be encouraging an optimal workplace, not just an “it’ll do” workplace, whether that is how it is at the moment, or you might need to make some changes in the future, I think that’s what we should be looking for, not just be getting by. So, we’ve, sort of, come to the end of our discussion now. I think if you’ve got... if you’re interested in the project at all, and if you want to find out more about the research we’re conducting on this return to the workplace, please check out our website which is in the podcast show notes. So, thank you very much, I’m Hannah Collis, you can find my details online as well, and I’ve been speaking to Matt Davis.

Matthew: Thank you very much for listening.