

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 37: What do workers want, and need, from an office space?

Speakers: Matthew Davis and Hannah Collis

Matthew: Welcome to the latest episode of Leeds University Business School's Research and Innovation Podcast. I'm Dr Matthew Davis.

Hannah: And I'm Hannah Collis.

Matthew: In this episode we're going to be talking about how where people work is changing and what this might mean for office space and, in particular, we're going to talk about the results of a cross-sector industry-wide survey of office workers who we conducted recently. And we were looking to understand from this piece of research, how well-prepared employees and organisations felt for the wider return to the office and their thoughts around how they might be using these spaces as we come out of the... or hopefully come out of the pandemic. And in particular thinking about preferences for flexible working practices, how people are intending to split their time between the office and home and what the office is looking like in response to this. So, Hannah, I think we set out to really try and take the pulse, didn't we, of how office workers are feeling about work as we're moving towards, I guess, the new normal, people are starting to be back into office working routines again. Can you talk us through, maybe, how the survey was set up and we wanted to see what this meant for people's, kind of, preferences and routines and who we surveyed?

Hannah: Yes, of course. So, we carried out a survey towards the end of summer this year, so 2021, and we received answers from around 1000 people from across the UK from a variety of sectors. This is a representative sample of office-based workers, and they were asked questions such as their preferences and what they were looking for and what they also had available to them. So, we looked at people who were across different organisations, different sectors, different forms of job roles, and it should give a fairly good picture of how the UK workforce is feeling, not just from the big organisations, which is maybe normally picked up in other research.

Matthew: Wonderful. So, we got a really nice snapshot across all sorts of different industries, all the ONS categories, as representative as you can try and do in these kind of things, sample of office workers. And what was that showing, Hannah, in terms of what people's preferences are now? So, after we've had 18 months for a lot of people of experiencing home working, maybe experiencing life back in the office as well. What are we seeing in terms of preferences?

Hannah: I think the main preference that we saw, which we were kind of surprised about, really, was the fact that around, sort of, a third of people wanted to work back in the office full time, which is maybe somewhat surprising. We thought maybe we'd see a bit more people wanting hybrid. But actually, in that case we only saw a third as well, our sample was pretty well split between a third wanting to stay, to be in the office full time, a third preferring to work from home full time and a third wanting that hybrid pattern, which differed a bit from what we've seen in some of the other industry surveys that are being conducted. And that's kind of one of the key findings, I think, that came out of this.

Matthew: It's interesting, isn't it? Because I think if you read the newspapers, a lot of the business press, all you see quite often is this... I guess we've got this narrative, don't we? So, we've got the government who have been very much pushing for people to go back to the office and really pushing strongly for that. You've got most business groups which have been talking about the emergence of hybrid working and that this is here to stay. And our data, I guess, is showing it's all a bit more nuanced, isn't it, in terms of individual preferences that we're seeing across these working groups. Is there anything else we're seeing within the data, Hannah, maybe around the types of workspace that people have access to at home, is that different across the sample?

Hannah: Yes, it is. So, when we... as part of the survey we asked, sort of, if you were working from home what sort of workspace you were working from. So, what we found is that just under 15% had a dedicated office room, and that is where you can completely separate your work from your home life and close the door at the end of the day. However, that's a tricky one to kind of capture, in a way, because, as you can probably imagine, some of the younger people in our sample, they maybe don't have access to those spaces, maybe they live in shared housing or with their parents or in smaller places of accommodation, maybe flats where there is only a single bedroom and a lounge or a studio.

And so, when you expand that we found that just over 20% had a dedicated working space in another room, so this is a proper desk setup in a separate room. So, whether this is the corner of their dining room or the corner of their lounge, maybe even in the corner of their bedroom, but it's a specific desk where they can work from. But the rest of the samples, so that is still around... well, only 30%, 35% who have a dedicated working space in their home. The rest of the sample either work from their kitchen tables, their dining tables, from the lounge, from the sofa, even from their bed, and I think if you can really think that we've been in this pandemic for 18 months or so and people still have not been able to adapt their workspace. It's obviously not working for them from home because it's not good for a number of reasons but working from a bed is maybe not the best for a) productivity, but also your physical health and you're much more likely to get things like back pain and neck pain from that. So, I think that was a really interesting find that came from that.

Matthew:

I completely agree, Hannah, and I think it's really interesting, 18 months in and I think we would assume that by now if you were able to make changes at home to create those types of dedicated workspace that would have happened, and it's worth saying, I guess, again that this is a sample specifically of office workers, so people who you would expect to have an incentive to create these types of workspace for home or hybrid working. So, maybe there is a constraint here. I guess also raises a question around whether there's an opportunity for third space, so coworking spaces, spaces outside of the home where you might go and work if you don't have a quiet space at home also. But I think within our survey we were only finding maybe around 5% or so of people saying they had used those types of third spaces. So, it doesn't seem to be there yet, but it's a question maybe what happens there.

And, as you said, kind of, lots of reasons why maybe working from your bed or pinching spaces within the home isn't preferable long term. I know you did a great podcast talking about ergonomics, Hannah, which I think links in here. But I guess also we know from the psychology literature and research that has been done that it's harder to switch off and separate work and home where you don't have dedicated spaces and boundaries. So, really, really important. Last thing maybe just around these preferences, could you talk us through what people want to do or say they want to do task-wise back in the office, what do they want to use the office for?

Hannah:

Yes, this was a really interesting aspect that we wanted to look at because obviously it's coming out in the news and in the government comments that the offices will be used just for collaboration and just for these face-to-face, maybe some of the creative tasks as well. And so we really wanted to ask the sample this and say, "Well, if you had the choice, what would you want to do and where?" And okay, whilst we did find that for individual tasks, so these are ones that the government and other news outlets suggested that you would do from home, we found a trend, so we found that 66% of people wanted to do that individual, high concentration tasks, maybe that's more like knowledge base work, sometimes pretty core job roles in some industries, and also individual low concentration tasks which are things maybe like responding to some emails or doing bits of admin, things like that. That was still wanted to be done predominantly at home, but around 30% of people still wanted to do those job tasks from the office, which suggests that actually it isn't quite as clear split as people had previously suggested.

Moreover, we go things like 80% of people wanted to do the collaboration tasks and meetings, sort of, in the office, but there are still a proportion who either want to do it from home or from other spaces, so maybe that's meeting in a neutral third ground, like you said, these third workspaces that can come up, whether that's coffee shops or desks in other locations. So, I think it's a really interesting split. And then the final one that we've got is that with virtual meetings and hybrid meetings, people still want to do it. We had... the hybrid meetings, we had around 45% who wanted to do it from home but 26, 27% who wanted to do that from the office. So, there remains that question, the office I don't think can just be used for creativity or for collaboration, we really need to make sure that you are providing these different areas, so individual desks are still going to remain and maybe quiet spaces or these pods, which I think are popping up everywhere at the moment, with some soundproofing, they are going to probably become much more prevalent to help support hybrid meetings in the workplace as well as those virtual meetings too. But just to allow for that kind of difference in activity.

Matthew:

But that's interesting, Hannah, because from what you just said then... so, if we're seeing this real variation in terms of what people want to do in the office and the fact that that might not be the same for people in very similar roles in terms of where they feel most comfortable or most able to, let's say, join an online meeting or a hybrid meeting, or in terms of where they want to

do these different types of the tasks, that makes the task of planning these offices and getting the mix of spaces right much more difficult, doesn't it? And I'm just struck from our data, because we asked our participants, people answering the survey, explicitly, you know, has your office been redesigned to support hybrid working or flexible working, and only 22% of our sample said that their offices had been changed at all to support this. And I think really interestingly as well, only 7% had received any training in how to participate in things like hybrid meetings as well, which is core to being able to actually use these spaces and to interact effectively in this new way of working. And from what you said, Hannah, around maybe looking at meeting pods or different spaces, I think highlights that there's a real opportunity here to look at the spaces we're providing, so what does the office look like?

Hannah: Matt, I completely agree. But I think we also need to show that it's not as far away from... it's not as big a shift that people are expecting. We're not saying that offices need to dramatically change to support this kind of hybrid working and things like that. We found that actually currently almost half of the sample had unassigned desks, so hotdesking, which is kind of key to some of these coworking or collaborating spaces or activity-based workspaces that we're maybe looking for in the future. It's already halfway there, people are already... have the opportunity to move around, maybe they don't take that opportunity and they might have their preferred desk, but they aren't formally assigned a desk. And I think that is a trend that's across many organisations and it's just about reinforcing that. We also asked if people actually had some task-specific spaces in their workspace and almost 60% of the sample did say yes, so I think it is increasing, but maybe just the awareness and accessibility of these spaces need to be improved, and maybe the... just the ratios, shall we say, of the different [Crosstalk 00:12:00].

Matthew: Well that's interesting, so we asked people if they had task-based and I guess our other findings and what we're seeing in our wider research project that we're working on is showing that the... I think the range of spaces that we might be needing within offices, so thinking about the types of collaboration spaces, social spaces, but also as you were saying before, Hannah, those maybe individual quiet spaces or very tech-enabled spaces, that's maybe the thing which is challenging the traditional offices spaces that our participants are in, and companies are providing at the moment. So, it's going to be

interesting to see that mix of spaces and how do we understand that effectively? And I think the hotdesking, such an interesting one, really interesting, almost half of our sample, pretty much half of our sample, hotdesked already as you said, but 80% of people who responded said that their preference was for an assigned desk, their own dedicated desk.

And we know from the psychology and the management literature that time and time again, if people are given a choice, they want their own individual office and they want their own personal desk. I think that highlights a challenge for organisations of how do we bring people along with us, if we're saying that we want to provide high quality office space? It might be much more varied in terms of the types of interesting spaces, really functional spaces for people to work from that reflects this variety and maybe this different pattern that people have in terms of how much they're in the office. What do we do if that comes alongside having to have hotdesking to make that work to free up space for these other areas? And, for me, I think it comes back to this need for, kind of, engagement and really kind of participation of workers.

So, I think often we see, when you look at studies and look at research that's really examined this in depth in the past, people can feel a real sense of loss if they don't understand why they're giving something up. So, why should I give up my own individual desk that I love, I can have my pictures on this, it's mine, that I can go into each day and I know where I'm working, I don't have to unpack things from a locker? And I think we neglect that at our peril. So, people need to understand what they're getting back in return, why is this better? Why should I go through the hassle of giving up this desk, having to search each day? And I think that engagement often is that missing link. So, we can create beautiful spaces, really functional spaces, but they don't work in practice if people don't want to use them, don't understand why they're gaining and how they might gain from these. And, for me, that reflects our project, Hannah, so in terms of having this kind of engineering and behavioural and IT, kind of, insight together, because one without the other just won't work.

Hannah:

You're right. It needs to be done in relation to other things as well, especially... we're seeing with some of the organisations that we're working with, not just from this survey but from other things that we've been looking at, you have this rise of the use of technology, and whether that's increasing, like booking apps or availability to book these desks, it just reduces some of that

maybe anxiety about where you're going to sit when you were saying you don't want to come in in the morning and say, "Oh, where am I going to go now? Am I going to be with my team?" I think if you are going to do this you need to do it with this technological support and use those tools to make this transition a success for you. And I think you also need to have things, you mentioned lockers, but I don't think many organisations truly have really implemented those.

So, if you truly are taking away someone's desk, maybe you need to give them their own space where they can store some of their equipment, so they're not lugging it back and forward between their home and the office, because you're just going to alienate people who maybe can't do that, who take public transport. And also people who maybe have some form of disability and that can really, really alienate them. So, I think there is, as I said, many areas that need to be linked together, so things like engineering and technology and looking at the people and the psychology of what they want.

Matthew:

Definitely. Essentially what we're both saying is taking a whole system approach. I think that's the way of summing this up and no looking at the type of space we provide in isolation without thinking about the tasks, the individual preferences, personality, I know, Hannah, that's a real interest of yours, as well as the technology that needs to support that as well. And I think the interesting thing... I get excited about this, and I know you do too Hannah, we could talk about all the different things that come from this all day long, but I just think this is so illustrative of what we're seeing with our partners we're working with around this kind of testing and learning that we're in, in terms of how do we start to move towards, I guess, a future office, and an office that is flexible and adaptable to different ways of working?

And I think it comes back to something we've said before in a previous podcast, that we need to be honest about the fact that we're feeling our way and I think, again, our research in this survey shows there's a real gap between what we're hearing in the press and actually the reality here of formal policies, of people locking in how they'll be working, how the office looks long term. We're still very much in transition, which I think is incredibly exciting and a chance to rethink and really get this right as well, creating better, more inspiring, more, kind of, supportive working environments. But I think that's all we've got time for in this episode but thank you very much for listening.

Hannah:

Yes, thank you very much. And if you're interested in finding out more about this research you can visit our project webpage or get in touch, all the details can be found in the show notes.