

Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 48 - Utilising technology to support hybrid working

Speakers: Emma Gritt and Babak Tizkar

[00:00:00] **Emma:** Hi and welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast from Leeds University Business School. I'm Dr Emma Gritt, a lecturer in information management. And today I'm delighted to be joined by Babak Tizkar who is head of Building Information Modelling for building designer Atkins. Welcome Babak.

[00:00:24] **Babak:** Hi

[00:00:25] **Emma:** It's great to have you here with us today.

And so what we're going to talk about is hybrid working and specifically the role of technology in supporting this. Maybe some of the challenges that have been faced and how hybrid might progress going forward. But before we do start to get into those discussions, Babak it'd be great if you could briefly just tell us a bit about Atkins, and then maybe a bit about your role within the businesses as well.

[00:00:51] **Babak:** Absolutely. Thank you for having me. So Atkins is a UK based global engineering design and project management consultants firm. And we work across all major sectors between energy, transportation and infrastructure. In 2017, we got acquired by SNC Lavalin, which is a Canadian engineering, procurement and construction firm.

And we employ together globally about 40,000 people across 50 offices in every single continent. So I work Head of BIM for building design, and building design is a smaller practice that effectively focuses on building buildings and designing and engineering buildings. We are primarily UK based, although we have staff and teams and offices that sit globally. And we cover building services, building structures and architecture and their sub-disciplines all within those. And we work across all sectors within the AEC industry, other than healthcare.

[00:02:00] **Emma:** Fantastic. So I mean, it's great to have you here and to talk about the ways that you've been working during the pandemic and, specifically, as we've kind of moved, as we're starting to move out of the pandemic, and we're starting to see more organizations adopt this, what we might call sort of hybrid way of working.

Could you maybe say a bit about the approach that you've taken at Atkins during the pandemic and then where you are now?

[00:02:29] **Babak:** Yeah, absolutely. So our approach actually started long before the pandemic because we championed agile working as part of the way we work. By that we mean we all have laptops that we use. We have hot desk environments, we have connected networks and we have support staff in the form of IT and other people that are on phone, on speedphone that we can connect to.

So physical presence has been a part of what we do, but it's not been the primary way of working. And that's a lot about promoting agility, promoting different ways of working because we have to be adaptable in the project environments we work with, accessing site offices and other offices as we collaborate. Moving and transitioning to working from home, particularly during the COVID period was very difficult and challenging, as with everyone.

And one of the primary challenges we found there was the speed and the rapidness of us deploying our staff to work from home and being able to enable all of that to happen. Luckily from a hardware perspective, we had that enabled, but there were a lot of other challenges around engagement, around connecting people's home networks or connecting to softwares or connecting to secure environments that caused challenges.

[00:03:52] **Emma:** And in terms of where you are now, have you still got quite a lot of people working from home?

[00:04:00] **Babak:** Absolutely. And we've since then learned quite a lot, particularly moving into 2021 and one of the things Atkins learnt was that working from home and having a hybrid way of working is the future. So Atkins introduced a mandate and guidelines around expecting 50% of our week to be physically present in the offices and 50% working from home.

Various teams and various disciplines have approached that slightly differently and adapted it to get it, to work for them. From a building design perspective. we've said we're spending two days a week working in the office, two dedicated days - Mondays and Thursdays. That's to as much enable engagement and sort of camaraderie amongst our staff, as well as ensuring that we can pre-book meetings and have more social gatherings as part of our day.

And then any other day that we don't spend in the office, we can then choose whether it's on a project basis or as individuals where we then sit and work.

[00:05:05] **Emma:** And obviously technology has been kind of key to this in enabling this, well, both fully remote and also hybrid ways of working. Could you tell us a little bit about your experience with technology, how that's maybe evolved over the last couple of years or how it's supporting your work?

[00:05:25] **Babak:** So the AEC industry we work in is very tech-heavy. We use a lot of technology, a lot of technology that requires hardware, that can operate them because we are running simulations of very complex design models that we need to maintain. As well as being very dependent on cloud-based solutions, and a lot of services, a lot of solutions, that sit in the AEC industry are primary predominantly cloud-based now as well.

So the transition to working from home and looking ahead, the technology that we're finding is we haven't necessarily introduced new technology to support that transition of hybrid. We still communicate using Skype and Teams, but we have accelerated the use of them and we've probably chosen one over the other based on performance.

And that performance aspect is probably one of my key criteria at the moment, being able to have project teams, have people connect into systems and have the performance there, not to hinder productivity or not to hinder the outputs.

[00:06:31] **Emma:** So I guess it's really essential then in every aspect of your work to ensure that that that technology is working.

[00:06:40] **Babak:** Absolutely. One of the things Atkins was testing before COVID was running VDI and just briefly explaining VDI - Virtual Desktop Infrastructure is a technology that allows essentially stored hardware servers to effectively run virtual desktops for users to access. And they can access it either through browsers or through softwares that they installed on their laptops or tablets.

What that allows is people to access desktop environments that are predefined in terms of softwares, in terms of security protocols, in terms of work flows. And it enables users to access a much greater range of solutions, have much closer IT support. It enables them to operate within the virtual environment in a much more rapid sense because they have backend access.

It also allows laptops to be used for a longer period because bearing in mind, we're going through a very tough silicon shortage at the moment and supplies are in demand. So we've had to think long and hard about extending the longevity of the hardware we have. And VDI has enabled us as we've transitioned through COVID and into the hybrid working has enabled us to extend the lifespan of our laptops because the hardware support sits on the video environment. And what COVID did was to accelerate the uptake of VDI across the business.

[00:08:13] **Emma:** Yeah, that's great to hear that you've been able to find those solutions and particularly because I know you mentioned, it being more secure, and I imagine that's quite an important part of your work as well with, with the kind of work that you do is having systems that are, that are secure enough and robust enough that you can essentially work from anywhere.

[00:08:34] **Babak:** Absolutely. And we still have, and there's various degrees of security clearance and security environments that we have. At its furthest extreme, we do have to commit to being physically present in a secure environment, that has its own infrastructure and its own setup. But for most of our secure projects, we are able to work remotely. Minus a few things that we need to do from the backend and from the user's perspective to ensure that the work they do is as secure as possible.

[00:09:08] **Emma:** Yeah. And, given that you're kind of quite reliant on things like cloud-based services, have you found any challenges around that?

[00:09:18] **Babak:** There's been a number of challenges. I think, predominantly when we started moving through the working from home transition, we got a lot of requests for adopting technology that in one shape, form or the other, replicated what people were doing physically, whether that was whiteboarding, whether that was just taking notes or chatting, and talking to someone physically. How do you write down minutes in the session?

We've then transitioned from that, and what we've seen is various technologies we've introduced, to fundamentally support different activities, but also different generations of people that are using technology in different ways. So we've, we have always had a range of basket for the different solutions just to diversify portfolio and not rely on a singular provider.

But we've had to accelerate that basket and had to then adapt different tasks and different sort of outputs and outcomes. And match them against technology. So one that we, one that we've

accelerated the use of is Mural as ways of collaborating, as ways of taking notes, as ways of brainstorming and having a very sort of blank piece of canvas for people to engage in. That can be used formally as part of client conversations and client meetings, but also informally to collaborate between teams. And that has very much replaced that necessity of whiteboarding physically.

[00:10:52] **Emma:** Yeah. And I think that's really interesting that you say that, you know, you started off with, with using some of these tools that, that maybe people were more familiar with. So in a way I'm guessing that maybe helps that transition to, to move forward and then you can pick out other solutions to help manage that as well.

[00:11:11] **Babak:** Absolutely. And one of the culprits in terms of the key challenges we've had is the overuse of technology and people struggling to be able to switch off, people struggling with work-life balance, working long hours and so on. And one of the things, you know, all the great things technology does, it doesn't communicate on your behalf so that over necessity to be able to articulate communication, putting a lot of effort in being mindful of communicating is really critical.

And we've had to, you know, and everyone in Atkins have had to take a step up in being more reliant in, in the use of communication and taking greater responsibility to ensure what they're doing is communicated. People are on the same page. There's a consensus around what needs to be done and that, you know, there's no piece of technology that can do that for you. You just have to take that step up.

[00:12:04] **Emma:** Absolutely. Yeah. Sometimes it's much more about creating that culture and that environment, isn't it for, for using the technology and communicating through that. And in terms of moving forwards then, how do you think hybrid might develop going forward. Are there kind of any sort of technology, any further technology solutions that you think might work?

[00:12:28] **Babak:** We have several pieces of technology or ways of looking at hybrid working. And we are very much championing at looking inwards towards ourselves as much as looking at presenting design solutions to our clients, or at least approaching problem-solving in a different way.

The fundamental critical thing is to approach it from a fit-for-purpose perspective, being conscious of what type of engagement is suitable for what type of outcome and what type of scenario and being very conscious in, in the way we work, where we ask questions related to, "if we're looking to solve this problem, are we able to accelerate the solution if we are to meet up in two weeks' time, versus us spending X amount of hours between now and then talking about it virtually?" So making sure that the complacency and routine or habit doesn't creep in, that we are very conscious of the broad range of solutions we've got, is really critical. And we always pass that on to clients as well.

The other side of this is one of the things we've learned and one of the things we've now championed is we've introduced the Atkins Workplace Index. And one of the things we've learned in engaging with clients over the past two, three years has been that the question around technology creeps up more and more in the definition of spaces.

So when clients are introducing their design briefs, when they walk through and explain what they're trying to do with spaces, technology is becoming a critical component in that conversation. So, what Atkins has done is it's introduced a Workplace Index. That Workplace Index looks at three groups of sort of key things that need to happen.

Then we walk through those processes with the clients. So the first grouping is looking at people and activity. And we look at what type of demographic we are dealing with, what type of personality, what type of neuro diversity of range of people we're dealing with, whether that's looking inwards or with clients, and match that against activities - what are they trying to do? How best are they trying to use the space? Are there better ways of doing it with hindsight? Obviously lessons learned.

We then move that more towards the physical environment. And we look at the place of work, the spatial quality of the work, the environment, the setting, all the way down to physical desks and workplace directly related to the individuals. But tied to that and something that's now starting to become a much bigger part of the brief is technology. Where does technology sit physically in that environment? And where does technology sit virtually in that environment? How are people engaging with other people? Do we need office desks that are sitting alongside each other or opposite each other? Do we need other spaces to be created to sort of enable more engagement?

Because people are so used to virtual meetings now and all of that then adds onto the question around travel. Question about commute, question about people spending time getting to and from the offices, and the added value of what they can get from that travel as well.

[00:15:51] **Emma:** That sounds really interesting. And I think, you know, some of the things that you've touched upon there in that technology is now becoming that kind of key aspect of, of design and space. And it's almost becoming where it was maybe, maybe not in all cases, but pre pandemic it was kind of like a supporting role, a nice to have, but now it's kind of becoming that essential infrastructure that probably every office is going to need going forward.

[00:16:18] **Babak:** Absolutely. Absolutely. And with the hybrid working, obviously you've got the greater flow space, the staff that you have employed. So what do you do with that space? And one of the critical things we've introduced both as ways of encouraging hybrid working, but also as ways of tackling the added value to office space, we've introduced something we call Lava Lab, which is a term we use to describe a broader space that we've defined within our office space.

So we've created this sort of dedicated Lava Lab space within three offices currently in Montreal, London and Bangalore. And if I speak specifically around London because the shape and the use of these spaces slightly differ based on geometric and sort of spatial arrangements. The London one focuses primarily around a series of breakout spaces, formulated around an immersion room that we've created. These breakout spaces take different shapes. So it could be a one-to-one collaboration space, it could be hybrid meeting spaces where we have, you know, cameras and monitors up on the wall and you've got a team of people sitting and engaging with another team of people and dialling in. There's touch screens so you can, you know, do all of that sort of engagement.

The immersion room itself tries to solve several things. And it's trying to sort of look at how can we bring engagement, both virtually and physically, in a virtual environment. It's trying to reverse the conversation. And a lot of that sits around the use of technology.

One of the things we've done with the hybrid space, or the immersion room, is we created this six by six meter cube, which has four projections on four sides of the walls. So the screen real estate is massive and we, in the centre have desks and chairs that people sit around. And the technology that runs behind it is effectively trying to create an environment where any piece of technology can be

introduced within, within the room and be instantaneously connected up with any other piece of technology that we introduce.

So when we have clients that have their own set of tech tax or softwares that they use, we're very quickly able to introduce that into that space. And at the same time, have another set of softwares and another set of tools that we use internally and being, being able to have that interoperability between everything is really, really critical because as with a lot of these things, first impressions and the ease of use is a major, major piece of stepping stone towards getting engagement.

We are also able to project spreadsheets or other types of formats to look at a more extensive set of data that perhaps you can't with the smaller real estate you've got with monitors.

As well as having people projected up on the walls in terms of their cameras, and having a much more physical presence in the room just because of size and then because of that, so the multiple cameras that we got set up in the group.

And all of that is done is for us to have a space, a safe haven for clients effectively and stakeholders to break down that fear factor and that barrier that some might have in the use of technology.

Giving them the opportunity to play around and fading sometimes with some of the tools, whether that's walking through or designing something in their own right. Or promoting change effectively. And that's one of the biggest things we're, we're hoping to be able to achieve with that.

[00:20:09] **Emma:** Thank you. And it's been really interesting to hear your thoughts on that. And I'm sure, some of these challenges and things that you've talked about will resonate with a lot of other people as well as we see that technology is becoming this, this kind of essential part of hybrid.

So, thank you so much for sharing your experiences with us today Babak. It's been great to chat to you. If you're interested in finding out more about the Adapting Offices research project, the information it should be in the show notes and a link to click through. Thank you so much for listening.