

# RECONFIGURING THE COLLABORATIVE WORKSPACE: MAKING THE MOST OF TIME, SPACE & ATTITUDE

Report

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# Turn & face the strange ch-ch-changes

## The potential

We are at an inflection point: new technologies, especially more pervasive and reliable communication tools, are changing our working landscapes. Technology is enabling shifts in how we work, not only for senior executives but at all levels, for information workers and frontline workers<sup>1</sup> alike; and this includes *where* and *when* we work. The increasing ubiquity and reliability of these communication tools has opened the door for companies to expand their geographic footprints, to embrace remote working, and to grow more comfortable about offering policies for working flexibly and for shifted hours for employees. Just like in our private lives, video calls are now a workday staple. Real-time chat tools are becoming the norm at work, mirroring the social media tools we use in our private lives. Shared drives, dashboards and cloud storage make it easier than ever for information workers to work together on projects, documents and analysis from anywhere in the world. For information workers, all the tools they need to be in the office, wherever they actually are, can be carried in their pockets.

Where there is WiFi, there is work. (Mostly – there are still sticking points around systems access. And work is also not limited to WiFi, or to 4G and 5G connectivity; it includes analogue spaces like notebooks, art galleries and gardens.) In theory, we live in a golden age where *digital nomads* can roam the earth pursuing their dream careers by day and adventuring in exotic locales by night and at the weekends.

*"I think what has made a huge difference is being able to share live and work live on a document around the globe. What's improved now is cloud technology so that we can all work on the same document at the same time. That's made a huge difference to the world of work. But it isn't always about someone in Guangzhou and someone in Texas: it could be someone on this floor and someone two floors above. I think we forget that mobile working is as much about mobility and connection within the building as it is outside the building."*

**Mark Catchlove, Insight Director at office furniture company Herman Miller**

Companies are responding to workers' increasing fluency with digital tools by introducing new policies around working flexibly and remote working. Floorspace is expensive, so why not give employees the flexibility they want while reducing the (literal) overhead costs? There are some major advantages to embracing a more conceptual model of the *workspace*: rather than an office where we go to work, the workspace is any space in which we work. Furthermore, the increasing push to shared services and porous organizational boundaries from matrixed working<sup>2</sup>, outsourcing, insourcing and the move towards *platform organizations*<sup>3</sup> means that this flexibility extends to who is part of the organization and who isn't; but this demands ever-greater layers of complexity in granting access to the right information to the right people at the right time. As with all changes, new challenges are emerging, and new patterns for how to approach those challenges – or in some cases, old patterns making their way to the fore again.

## The pitfalls

With all the digital tools designed to transcend distance, why are companies still spending millions of dollars annually for people to get together in person? The global business travel market is expected to grow to almost \$1.7 billion by 2023<sup>4</sup>. Many of our interviewees reflected this trend, saying that even in distributed teams, concentrated face-to-face time is vital for establishing trust and setting the groundwork for good communication habits. When the going gets tough, our research indicates, the tough get together.

*"Some of it, I think, is a coordination problem in the very same way that religion used to be a way of solving coordination problems. You notice what nearly all religions invented was a Sabbath. And the reason they invented the Sabbath was it stopped everybody working themselves to death. But the second thing we realized is that ... leisure time is more valuable if everybody takes it simultaneously: there's not much point in having leisure time if all your friends are at work."*

**Rory Sutherland, Vice Chairman, Ogilvy UK**

Rory Sutherland is talking about the benefits of synchronizing leisure time across vast swathes of the population, but the value of coordinated time and space for creating highly effective collaborative working is equally high. This is in fact mathematically provable: in 1985 computer scientists researching the efficiencies of synchronous and asynchronous systems demonstrated that in an asynchronous system, no distributed coordination algorithm can guarantee that a consensus will ever be reached by all the computers connected in the system<sup>5</sup>. In other words, all distributed systems require some amount of synchronicity to work. So how do we get back to the kinds of harmonious synchronicities at work that, as Rory Sutherland says, used to coordinate not only our working lives but societies en masse?

Another risk of today's increasingly distributed communication patterns is that as communication technologies become more pervasive, we may leave the office but the office doesn't leave us. When we carry all our work tools on the same device we use for connecting to friends and family, how do we clear our minds to relax and refresh? How do we hold the line between personal and professional, private and public

spaces, if we are simultaneously WhatsApping about dinner, checking about a get-together with a friend and contributing in multiple project spaces through various technologies online, while listening in on headphones to a team briefing call in Microsoft Teams from the bus? Boundaries blur, identity slides, and **while we grip our phones, we may be losing our grip on exactly what's going on.**

*Presenteeism* – the desire to be seen to be working at all times – has seeped into our digital platforms. Presenteeism has long been rewarded. For example, **one study demonstrated that managers could not tell the difference between employees who actually worked 80-hour weeks and those who only pretended to<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, the same study showed no evidence that long hours were in fact more productive than the time spent by employees who worked less.** But those who were more transparent about working less were penalized by managers compared to their visibly over-working (or pretending to over-work) peers. However, the seeds of change are starting to sprout. Increasingly people are putting up boundaries, such as mentioning their usual office hours in email footers or mandating that intra-office communications tools are inaccessible out of hours. Like all paradigm shifts, some of these methods have unintended behavioural consequences, as we shall see.

## Turn ourselves to face ... us

As in all changes that humans go through, we bring our fundamental humanity with us.

This means that some of the same organizational challenges that we've been struggling with since the 1950s are still with us today: team communication, effective collaboration, open-plan offices, who should know what at what time, and where to find the right knowledge when we need it. In the 1957 Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy film comedy *Desk Set*, employees in a national TV broadcasting station reference library had to learn to cope with the introduction of a new 'electronic brain' that impacted everything about how they worked, including their physical space. Today's employees are equally uncertain about how advances in digital technologies will impact their future working environments. Yes, these challenges are nothing new.

4. <https://www.alliedmarketresearch.com/business-travel-market>

5. <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/was-e-mail-a-mistake>

6. <https://hbr.org/2015/08/the-research-is-clear-long-hours-backfire-for-people-and-for-companies>



Each organization, team, ad hoc group or network will have a different method for promoting and sustaining good working practices together. Here we offer some observations about current ways of working differently – and yet the same. **We propose a series of questions for organizations to ask themselves – not to adopt the One True Way of Working, but to identify the way that works best for them, for now.** The next 60 years, the same interval as between *Desk Set* and now, will continue to bring radical changes to where and how we work. But by continuing to be curious, to ask these questions and be open to stepping back from regular operations and adjusting course from time to time, we can make sure we're constantly evolving to meet the same organizational challenges that are showing up in new guises.

LEF has a long history of exploring developments in collaboration tools, such as our 2006 and 2010 guides *The Use & Misuse of Collaborative Technologies: a Distillation of Best Practices, Good Form & Correct Behaviour for Corporate Communications*. Those two handbooks seem to have anticipated WIRED contributor Victoria Turk's recent publications *Digital Etiquette: Everything You Wanted to Know About Modern Manners But Were Afraid to Ask*, and *Kill Reply All: a Modern Guide to Etiquette, from Social Media to Work to Love*, snarky consumer-focused guides to online manners at home and in work.

What this report offers is a prompt to consider these and other questions, about work and the configuration of three key elements of organizational culture – *time*, *space* and *attitude* – to encourage purposeful collaboration, effective communication and thoughtful cooperation.

## Methods: anthropology & ethnography

Applying an anthropological lens to this data gives us the freedom to explore the extraordinary hidden within the everyday; to see 'normal' things with new eyes. By asking deceptively simple questions<sup>7</sup>, anthropologists can unearth subtle but deeply rooted shared meanings, unquestioned norms and group myths. Raising these allows leaders and teams to make active decisions about how they want to work, rather than simply accepting the status quo.

Anthropology teaches us that all unique cultures have something to tell us about how our own culture operates. This is the fundamental reason cultural anthropologists seek field experiences in many different societies: to learn not only about the way *other* cultures do things, but also to learn how we are different – to stop taking for granted what we think of as *normal* or *natural* and instead to find the strangeness in our everyday objects and actions.

A core tenet of contemporary anthropology is that research participants are the experts on their own experiences. This profoundly influences how anthropological data is gathered and presented. For this project, we centred the research participants' experiences by asking them to gather data for us through a mobile ethnography platform, sending us over 2,000 data points of open-ended text, photos, videos and drawings of their working environments. All the photos in the deep-dive case studies, presented as addenda to this report, were taken by the employees themselves, showing us their working environments on their own terms. Each participant had access to the platform for approximately two weeks.

The ethnographic study ran across six different global organizations in industries ranging from pharmaceuticals to electricity generation to advertising & PR, including LEF. It enables us to identify moments where an unquestioned norm is persisting or a new practice or habit is starting to form.

Sample questions from this study include:

- How distracted are you right now? What's the most distracting thing around you (besides this app)? Describe it & share a photo if you'd like.
- What's one thing about your working environment you wish you had more control over? If possible, show us what this is. Why?
- Take a photo of an item which is emblematic of how clean your workspace is, if you can. (We won't judge, honest.) Tell us about it.
- Draw a sketch of your ideal working space. Take a photo and share it with us. Take a short video if you can, explaining what's important about each of the parts of your sketch.

We enriched the data set by also conducting approximately 50 hours of interviews with over 30 people working in a wide range of environments and at different organizational levels, including people who primarily work remotely; managers of remote teams of information workers; managers whose teams include information workers and frontline workers; people who work in offices; people who work with teams scattered around the globe; architects, software developers and furniture manufacturers supplying working spaces and tools; and sociologists who study the future of working environments. Their insights are included in support of the case study data throughout this report.

Before we dive into our five case studies and the clues they hold for us, we need to define core concepts around *collaboration*.

## Spaces for collaboration: a shared space for emerging relationships

As we sifted through our primary data and secondary sources, we began to confront questions that seemed deceptively simple at first:

- What is collaboration?
- What is the difference between *communication* and *collaboration*?
- Why are businesses so intent on encouraging collaboration in the first place?

Often, we found people excited about the potential for this research (or other research like it) to tell them how to optimize their company's exploitation of digital collaboration tools – but unable to define what words like *collaboration* and *communication* mean, or what it would look like when they succeeded.

Environmental psychologist Dr Nigel Oseland suggests this way of thinking about collaboration: **"Collaboration is not simply interaction between colleagues, it involves two or more individuals working towards a common goal and creating a new product (e.g. an idea, solution or insight) beyond what that they could have achieved individually.** Effective teams are characterized by trust and collaboration such that building trust through creating a community, interaction and socializing is important for nurturing collaboration. Therefore whilst collaboration is more complicated than interaction per se, interaction helps build trust and is therefore a prerequisite for true collaboration<sup>8</sup>."

This brings us to our first major principle of collaboration, something our Research Fellow Doug Neal recommended over ten years ago in the *Use & Misuse of Collaborative Technologies*: **if you want your people to collaborate, be clear about what you're expecting them to collaborate on.** This year's research might suggest a corollary: **value focus time.** In other words, don't focus on *more* collaboration, but *more effective* collaboration that also allows for private time in which to focus on deep work. The Leesman Index shows that employees judge their personal effectiveness by assessing their focus time to complete work<sup>9</sup> – not in meetings, communication tasks like checking email or chat tools, or other forms of multi-person collaborative work. Moreover, top collaborators – people who drive team performance to an exceptional level – are often rated poorly for

their own individual contributions. Eventually they become perceived as bottlenecks, a strong predictor of organizational turnover<sup>10</sup>. Organizations are talking the talk about working collaboratively, but primarily setting incentives based on individual contributions. This misalignment causes stress for individuals, friction in teams, and ultimately creates unplanned and unwanted results for businesses.

### Back to basics

For organizations considering how to make the most out of the physical spaces and digital resources available to create the most effective working spaces for teams, the *Use & Misuse* guide suggests these fundamental questions about collaboration which we believe are still relevant, with minor updates:



- What type of collaboration are you looking to engage in?
- What is the benefit you seek from the technology or space you choose?
- Can you, and everyone in your team (permanent or temporary), state the goal of collaboration?
- Do team members feel energized by working together?

For remote or flexible workers, digital tools are key to succeeding. But tools alone are not enough to get the job done: the *organizational culture* and approach to managing communication when some or all workers are remote is absolutely critical. Robert Stark, Senior Executive Director of property management firm MAPP, described a workplace he knew where the management team decided to mandate working from home two days a week in order to downsize floorspace. While they may have saved on rent, other costs quickly became apparent: this company implemented its policy without any training or indeed any consideration about how the culture would have to change to accommodate new ways of working. Consequently there was no agreement on which days people would be in the office or at home, there was no training on how to manage remote teams, and no consideration of what was required for workers to set up their own home working environments. People involved with the change described one aspect of the problem as "no visibility of managers to see what employees are doing," but this may be a surface-level expression of more fundamental challenges around trust. Barney Smith of Perform Green describes this need for in-person visibility as "presence management" rather than performance management.

8. Nigel Oseland on behalf of Herman Miller, *The Psychology of Collaboration Space*, 2012 [http://hermanmiller.homestead.com/The\\_Psychology\\_of\\_Collaboration\\_Space\\_Handout.pdf](http://hermanmiller.homestead.com/The_Psychology_of_Collaboration_Space_Handout.pdf)

9. *The Next 250K*, Leesman, December 2017 <https://www.leesmanindex.com/250k/>

10. Rob Cross et al, *Collaborative Overload*, Harvard Business Review, Jan-Feb 2016 <https://hbr.org/2016/01/collaborative-overload>

Some businesses (such as Xero, an accountancy software supplier headquartered in New Zealand with offices around the world, and Buffer, a social media management software provider with a globally distributed employee base) are experimenting with remote working and coming to the conclusion that while you can create a remote-first culture, there is still a need for physical touchpoints.

Digital tools are incredibly powerful, but they can't be the only way a team connects. What applies to communication tools (Google Hangouts, Skype, etc.) applies equally to project coordination tools like Jira, Trello, Confluence and so on. Great digital tools plus regular meetings create a powerful collaboration

capability in a team. Working solely through digital tools, says Gary Turner of Xero: "It's like mono-radio; you can hear it but it's not as rich."

While it may seem self-evident that collaboration is just one of many types of task people engage in, there is often a deep reluctance to carve out time for other forms of work, or there are no physical spaces that support different kinds of activity. As our work becomes ever-more digitally mediated, our electronic environments can exacerbate these challenges, though they also offer novel solutions.

## Digital futures: what we can learn from AR & VR



One emergent industry where the potential and pitfalls afforded by increasingly digitally mediated working environments are especially clear is in augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR).

Jacob Loewenstein, Head of Business Development at Spatial, spoke about VR's potential not only as a remote collaboration tool but as a fundamental revolution in how we organize our mental working environments: **"... the human brain thinks spatially, it does really interesting things, it makes unexpected lateral connections. And it doesn't necessarily behave in the way that the [current digital] systems that we create, that govern how we work and collaborate, encourage.** Even people in the same physical space will still choose to use these tools, because it enables them to collaborate differently. I do think that that really does come down to the question: **to what extent does physical interaction with information – the spatial organization of information – and to what extent does a meta-sized understanding of how people are behaving in the meeting, enable you to collaborate or to better curate information and people?** For us, 'digital collaboration' encapsulates all of those questions."

Becky Sage, CEO of Interactive Scientific, also spoke about the benefits of organizing information spatially, particularly in a shared virtual setting with multiple participants: "There's another aspect to communication in terms of what we do: taking information that would have been shown in data or numbers, or something that everyone might agree is very abstract, which people potentially see in a different way to one another, and giving them a shared model, a shared visual model. **You no longer have misconceptions or a slightly different viewpoint that leads to misunderstanding or miscommunication.**" Sage believes that by creating these shared models, the scientific community itself can become more accessible to people who traditionally may have shied away from more abstract concepts.

Kyle Wilson, Head of Product and Business Strategy for new ventures and innovation for Microsoft's Dynamics 365 mixed reality suite, says another powerful tool in the VR arsenal is the ability to create a data-enriched world powered by sensor data from the internet of things. **"Now, that data is becoming more ubiquitous as you bring in new sensors. It's coming into the physical world around you ... It's creating this merger which is forming new working environments and experiences: it's no longer just about the individual or the system being able to automate or augment, it's about the physical spaces being able to do that as well."**

In reality, whether we are interacting with others and with information and data, in a shared physical space or mediated through digital tools, all working environments are in our mind. We must develop the mental models and shared concepts to invite others into our mental working environments so that we can collaborate.

Nonaka and Konno's work on *ba*<sup>11</sup>, which they define as "a shared space for emerging relationships" that transcends physical, digital and mental spaces, is a useful way of conceptualizing the shared working environments we need to collaborate in. IT thinks it is solving vastly different challenges from the architectural firms and facilities management teams who design and maintain everyday management of spaces. None of them may be thinking of the primary questions that collaboration is intended to answer. Without communication by the 'owners' of these various domains about how they interact, there is a disconnect around how information flows through, across, in and around all the *ba* spaces.

Employees need better shared mental models of *how* they want to work together in order to successfully and seamlessly navigate between these overlapping realms of work. **Bridging the gap between digital space and physical space in order to make space to think requires IT and physical space managers to develop a shared language and understanding.**

In the five organizations where we did fieldwork, we observed five distinct collaborative and team cultures and sets of working practices. We've chosen to boil this down in each case to a key organizing term to help deepen understanding and offer a possible way of creating this shared language:

- *Agency*, power and independence to influence one's own environment
- *Standard*, a useful enabling constraint; also a banner or flag to rally around
- *Orchestration*, in both its musical and mechanical senses, many different parts coming together to form a complex yet organized whole
- *Selection*, the rich variety of choices that people have agency to act upon, being part of a special group
- *Condition*, the state or working order one finds oneself in; the work one undertakes in order to achieve one's optimal state

We've summarized our insights arranged around these terms in the case studies that follow. If you'd like to delve into any of these areas in more depth, as addenda to this report we are publishing more detailed case studies that provide longer guided tours of each theme, connecting ethnographic research, interviews and secondary research.


In each section of this report, under the heading 'Change provocations', we present a brief selection of what we think are the key tips, hints and provocative questions to take away. The appendix of this report includes an extensive directory of organizational prompts for the leadership, team and individual levels. 



Figure 1 – Our organizing principles and their key features

11. Ikujiro Nonaka and Noboru Konno, 'The Concept of "Ba": Building a Foundation for Knowledge Creation', *California Management Review*, Spring 1998



# Agency

## Agency

Control  
Ability  
Expression



## The team

Blandings<sup>12</sup> is a worldwide creative agency offering branding, marketing, advertising and public relations strategy to organizations around the globe. Relentlessly focused on people's perceptions and behaviours as clues to provoking radical change, Blandings moves easily between play and seriousness of purpose to achieve an interesting mixture of data-driven creativity.

This case study highlights how an organization can open the gates and develop better mechanisms for managing porous teams by encouraging outside-in thinking. It also illustrates the need to get ahead of change and consider the behavioural impacts of introducing new technologies, spaces and working policies rather than being caught unawares by allowing bad habits and allowing unintended consequences to develop.

## The organizing term: agency

In the social sciences, the term *agency* typically refers to an individual's ability to act as a free agent; to make choices and to influence one's environment. Agency is limited by *structure* – social norms, customs, beliefs and institutionalized power – that limits one's individual will. Every day at work there is a complex negotiation between our own individual preferences, choices and judgements and the roles, relationships and habits demanded of us by our organizations.

We observed three aspects of agency in our research at Blandings: *control*, the ability to have influence over one's environment; *ability*, the capability and resources to achieve one's goals; and *expression*, an aspect of control or influence that came out particularly strongly in this working environment.

## Time. Space. Attitude.

**Time:** At Blandings we found a wide range of views, from study participants who felt their schedules had minds of their own and they themselves had little control over their time, to those who said they felt empowered to set their own boundaries around working time and meeting schedules.



**Space:** People engaged in various tactics to make space to think and do their best work. This ranged from isolating themselves from interruptions, through seeking creative stimulus through music or different surroundings, to shifting work hours to separate focus time from collaboration time.



**Attitude:** A mixture of eccentricity and urgency ran through all the data we collected at this field site. One area where this stood out is in Blandings' openness to external collaborations. During our fieldwork with them, more than one team member was visiting on secondment from an external organization. This gives Blandings the opportunity not only to observe what other organizations are doing and thinking, but also for its internal operating machinery to be directly influenced by those external perspectives. This requires a great deal of trust, willingness to take risks and to experiment even when that experiment might not lead to any observable benefits (up to and including inviting a rogue anthropologist in to look things over.)



## Control

Every single person at Blandings said the very first thing they do in the morning is check their email (or make sure their WiFi is working so they can check email). Even when they primarily work co-located in the same office, Blandings employees reported feeling an almost performative urge to send flurries of early-morning emails to show others that they are awake, available and definitely on the ball.

### Digital presenteeism in action at Blandings

*"Check email on my phone as I wake up. We deal with China and the Philippines so often have to pick up overnight correspondence."*

*"The Outlook app on my phone! I'm always watching my work emails to see what's happening."*

This is not unique to Blandings: many interviewees from other organizations spoke about this kind of digital presenteeism.

Léonie Watson, director of the technology accessibility consultancy TetraLogical and member of the W3C advisory board, speaks of an earlier time when there was less pressure to live life so fully online: **"I remember when in the early days of the web somebody would send you an email, and it was perfectly OK not to reply to it, maybe not even the same day, if you had to go and look into something and get back to them. And we need to head a little bit back towards that more relaxed attitude. If someone sends you a text message or Slack message, you don't need to reply to it three seconds later. And you don't need to interpret the fact that someone hasn't replied to it immediately as being a brush-off of some kind. There are 101 reasons why someone might not respond immediately. And that's OK. I think it's partly just conditioning ourselves to a different reality of communication, without unconscious signals. And also just being a little bit more relaxed."**

Having the power to create the right thinking environment at the right time is critical for all workers. At Blandings, although there is a high degree of freedom around physically where to work (including multiple floors to choose from and the flexibility to work from home), the convention in the team participating in the study is to stick pretty close to their team desk area to facilitate impromptu meetings and conversations that flow into each other organically. Several people reported that their favourite place to work is the large communal table where their team is based in the main office: being surrounded by colleagues facilitates impromptu conversation. One person said they feel "horrendously guilty" when working from home, despite the whole team having explicit permission to do so.

While the team has access to some fancy kit for facilitating remote conversations, Blandings reported the lowest usage of different types of device during the working week. Conversely, Blandings employees interacted with the highest number of people. This implies a culture that relies on face-to-face communication to get the job done. No wonder study participants fret over the challenges of interruption, of coming across as standoffish, and of carving out focus time: **"If you have lots of work to get on with, you can feel a bit antisocial sitting at the desk and not talking to anyone if other people are being sociable and have a conversation. It would be nice to have more spaces where you can just sit by yourself and get on with work without feeling like you're blanking everyone else. Especially if you are the first one there, when the second person arrives you can feel socially obliged to have a conversation even though the reason you got there earlier was to get on with what you need to do!"**

## Ability

Agency requires the capability to put intentions into practice. In a working environment, this means having the technical and relational capabilities to bring ideas to life, individually or collectively. At Blandings, the team put into practice strategies to improve ways of working through sharing tips and tricks, making time to reflect on what to do better, and collectively experimenting with different practices like blocking out hours for focus time or having set work-from-home days. They seem not just technologically competent, but at ease with trust-building. (Trust is not a given in settings that are more frequently technologically mediated and it can become harder and harder to close the loop.)

### Bridging technologically mediated trust gaps

Kerri Miller, developer advocate at continuous integration platform Travis CI, says: "Empathy and that sense of understanding of what people do is really accelerated by short bursts of time together, and it's very, very difficult to establish that same level of rapport without having that actual physical colocation time ... **If you don't have the time and the space to develop those relationships where you can develop that professional trust [then] if I don't hear from you for six hours, do I trust that you're still working? Or does that mean maybe something's wrong? Did you have something happen in your life, or are you stuck?**"

Pilar Orti of Virtual Not Distant says: **"In a remote workspace you have to make work more deliberate and visible – visibility that might get taken for granted in a physical space needs to be made explicit in a virtual environment;** for example, holding one-on-ones in a group chat room; working on documents in the cloud where my teammates can see and access them instead of on my computer."

Even when everything is working fine, rapport can be harder to develop when not everyone is equally remote. At Blandings, most of the team participating in the study work in a closely-knit group based in one office, but a few people are further afield. Everyone agreed that their highly conversational style makes it harder to collaborate asynchronously or using remote tools.

This is particularly true for ideation and brainstorming sessions, which typically take place in a large group with ideas fired around rapidly and physical props like walls of sticky notes. Communication with remote employees, therefore, tends to be more transactional, taking what one participant called a "divide and conquer" approach, dividing up work rather than full collaboration. Without developing methods for remote and co-located employees to establish trust, unspoken assumptions can begin to take shape. "Sometimes I think people just see me as sitting here firing away these emails asking them to do things," said one primarily remote employee.

## Expression

***"I work best lying on my front with my laptop in front of me in bed, so I'm probably not the most representative."***

**– a Blandings study participant**

Naturally in a creative agency, connecting with one's expressive side is valued. Finding the space or environments that feed that creativity is a recognized part of the deal. Partly this comes as a matter of course in the Blandings building, with its beautiful vistas and funky furniture, openness to personalization of desks, and freedom to work flexibly.

It's not only about being surrounded by the right visual design: the right *soundscape* is also important. We heard: "My music app is extremely important to me, and makes anything I'm doing a bit more interesting and engaging. Also good for modulating my mood if I want to psych myself up for something or calm myself down. I don't use it at work though as often as I'd like." Several people mentioned using headphones *as a do not disturb* indicator (in fact one person had large headphone-like ear defenders with no speakers in them) but it's more than just the external signalling that headphones provide to others: one person said headphones let you "be somewhere else". Disappearing into the creative space within is an important aspect of the work at Blandings, while still being able to quickly jump out and work together. There could be a role here for using music to help spur *shared* psychological states: music could be a facilitating tactic for inviting others into our mental workspaces to facilitate a shared understanding of a project or goal.

## Change provocations

- **Open the gates.** At LEF, we believe organizations will become ever-more porous. As more and more organizations move to becoming *platforms* with shifting boundaries between consumers and producers<sup>13</sup>, teams will need increasingly to seek mechanisms for involving outside perspectives for co-creation and collaboration. The Blandings team is already embracing this way of working through opening the doors to secondments, site visits and other means of encouraging outside-in thinking. Managing this effectively requires developing mechanisms for frequent team onboarding and

disembarking so that visitors can get up to speed quickly and feel like one of the team. Fluidity and porousness also demand digital ability and etiquette if the successes of an open way of working face-to-face is to flow through to virtual settings.

- **Surround sound.** Soundscapes in the office came up over and over again in our fieldwork and interviews. While this is the special bugbear of those in open-plan offices and cubicles, building a sense of shared experience is also a concern for distributed teams. This could include a team soundscape.

## AGENCY

### Open the gates

At Leading Edge Forum we believe organizations will become ever more porous

How can you help your team bring in fresh perspectives? How can you ask powerful questions at the right time to help your team see things in a new way?

How do you make space for fresh perspectives? How do you deepen rapport inside & beyond the inner circle to allow 'outside-in' thinking?

What is your collaboration strategy? How do you invite outsiders & newcomers into porous & temporary teams?

### Surround sound

Building a sense of shared experience could include a team soundscape

Do you need different sounds for different types of work? Are headphones for creating a mood-scape, or just telling others to back off?

Are there shared team soundscapes? Is sound (or silence) a matter of individual preference? What about a team playlist to build rapport & shared psychological states?

What do your working spaces sound like? Is there a consistent soundscape throughout your offices/working environments? Is variety intentional?

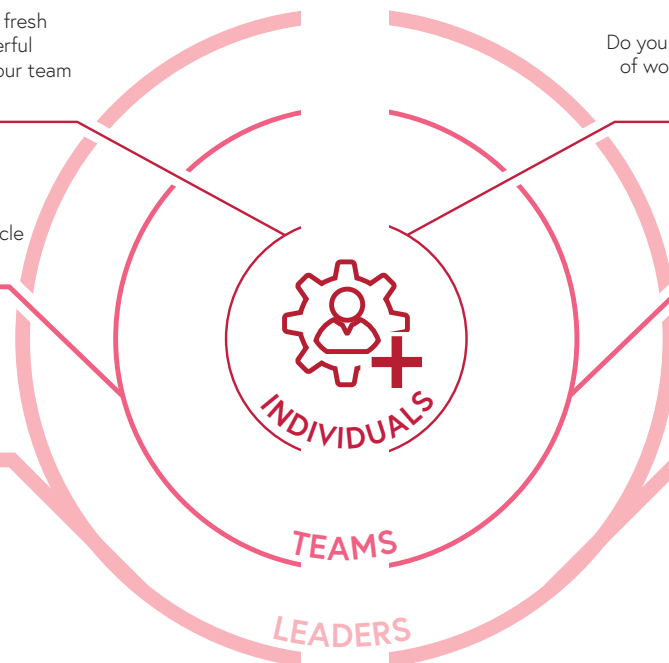


Figure 2 – Key change provocations from an agency culture

13. Bill Murray, *Liberating Platform Organizations*, LEF, September 2018.



# Standard

## Standard

Guidelines  
'Does the job'  
Responsibility



## The team

The Mundipharma global network of independent associated companies shares a common purpose: to identify and accelerate the development of meaningful medicines that add value for patients and healthcare providers around the globe. The network has a presence in over 120 countries. In Europe, the network employs more than 2,000 people from R&D to manufacturing/supply and commercial, with revenues in excess of €1 billion. Unsurprisingly in an industry as heavily regulated as pharmaceuticals, a commitment to shared codes and work aims came out particularly strongly as a factor in people's day-to-day working lives, maximizing productive time in both collaborative and solo working activities.

## The organizing term: standard

A *standard* can be a procedure or guideline – an agreed code that governs expected outcomes. It can also be a descriptor of something's function or condition, in the sense of basic, normal, satisfactory. While that might seem uninspiring, there's also nothing that stands out as uncomfortable or problematic when something is standard: there's a sense that everything is OK. Finally, a standard can be a rallying flag around which to converge or to coordinate an important venture (typically a military campaign).

Standards can be an *enabling constraint*. Enabling constraints show up in psychology and in information theory as a mechanism that gives form and structure to intention<sup>14</sup>. Enabling constraints, rather than hindering action, allow us to achieve more than we could otherwise. The rules of a haiku, for example, or that of a game, are enabling constraints.

All working environments are complex systems and as such require enabling constraints or else they will succumb to entropy and chaos. The balance between constraints and the freedoms they offer is a delicate one.

## Time. Space. Attitude.

**Time:** Compared to other groups in our study, Mundipharma participants spent far more time planning their working weeks and carving out time to review lessons learned from the past. This was reflected in a later-than-average start time for the first meeting of the day, implying an early morning focus on reviewing and setting the structure rather than diving straight into doing. This commitment to protecting time to think was hardwired into the company operating culture.



**Space:** For Mundipharma, the overarching sense of how people feel about their physical environment and digital tools at their disposal would best be described as 'satisfactory'. People were able to achieve what they need to achieve with little complaint or hindrance. Everything is OK. This is not a bad banality; it just is.



**Attitude:** As well as being at ease with sitting and thinking, mentioned above, we noticed that all the photos and videos people shared of their workstations were scrupulously clean and tidy compared to photos of other workplaces. There was barely any clutter on people's desks. We think this may be one indicator of an overarching culture of responsibility and adhering to the standards and higher aims in what is obviously a very heavily regulated industry and environment.



## Guidelines

At Mundipharma, employees were far less likely than other study participants to report diving into email and other communication tools first thing in the morning. Representative supporting evidence included:

- "The most important thing is the calendar on my phone. To make sure I am clear enough on the respective daily/weekly commitments."
- "This morning I decided to first read some lessons learned from a previous project."
- "Most time spent around consolidating tasks and paper notes from the past days."
- "Will now have 2 hours of driving, a couple of phone calls, listening to music and loose reflection."

The Leesman Index says "... to create a high performing workplace, all phases and activities that underpin knowledge work need to be deeply understood and well provided for – both individual/concentrative and interactive/collaborative. But concentrative work activities would appear to be the 'hygiene factor' for all employees. Get these wrong and perception of personal productivity falls. Get the balance right and the picture is more positive."<sup>15</sup> Our expert interviews also emphasized the importance of reflective thinking time for getting the job done.

In LEF's *Use & Misuse* guide, we advocated for employees making explicit choices about virtual presence in order to have the right balance between privacy (i.e. focused working time) and visibility (availability to collaborate). Too much of either means we cannot balance all the different types of work we need to achieve for optimum productivity.

The real hindrance to focus time is an expectation of constant availability: in a culture where people are expected to be always interruptible, where there is no permission to switch off or retreat to one's own space, it doesn't matter whether the interruptions are coming from pinging notifications on a phone or a person hovering at one's elbow in an open-plan office. Mundipharma has evidently found a solution for this interrupting culture in its shared standards around time and planning.

In an industry as scrupulously regulated as pharmaceuticals, it's no surprise that managing guidelines, rules, regulations and standards is a big part of the job. What is noteworthy is how much working in an atmosphere imbued with this need extends out into all the working habits and practices of the organization. It's almost as though this is a core aspect of the company's operating system.

## 'Does the job'

**"I can find what I need. I can do what I need without obstruction."**

**– a Mundipharma participant**

While nobody raved about the delights of the Mundipharma offices, in general respondents were satisfied that they could functionally do the work they need to do in what they described as a "pretty clean" space. A space that is *up to standard* and does the job. From our perspective, compared to most other working environments in our study, Mundipharma was scrupulously tidy with gleaming work surfaces everywhere. When presented with these findings, our primary contacts at Mundipharma credited "social nudges" for prevalent office tidiness: companies can create the behaviour they want to see by making it easy for employees to do the right thing. The office has plenty of waste receptacles and trolleys to return empty cups to rather than leaving them festering on the desk until the end of the day. The open-plan and glass-walled nature of the space means "everyone can see everything" leading to a high level of social pressure towards tidiness.

There is a risk for a functionally-focused office that adhering too closely to the current standard – the existing structured way of working – will not make room for future changes on the horizon and the kind of experimentation and unstructured thinking that's needed to take things to a new phase. Questions that could be asked here are how the environment can be pushed to not only meet the minimum level of what needs to be done but to actively encourage and inspire workers. This is one of the benefits often vaunted by *digital nomads*: the flexibility to work anywhere allows them to inhabit spaces rich in stimulus in all corners of the globe (the corners that have reliable high-speed WiFi, at least). Exploring some alternate working habits, such as creating more flexibility about when and where people can work, at the organizational level could also unlock some new possibilities.

15. *The Next 250K*, Leesman, December 2017 <https://www.leesmanindex.com/250k/>

## Building an inclusive culture through remote working and adherence to shared rituals

Remote working and working flexibly have the potential to unlock a deeper talent pool for organizations who without them miss out on the skills of people who are unable to work in more traditional environments which require presence in an office at set times of the day.

Barney Smith, speaking about his prior work with Natural England, spoke about the advantages of moving to this model: "At Natural England we very consciously made a shift to performance-based working so that people could work more flexibly and remotely. This helped us with three things: 1) **Retention – people who might otherwise have struggled to participate because of various factors were able to stay in their roles** 2) Savings on real estate, though we didn't do it primarily for that reason 3) We already had a very mobile/field-based work force and it was silly to ask those people to come into the office when they should have been out in the field to do their jobs. After we did this we saw that the usage on the IT systems peaked at three

times: around 9-9:30am when people were coming in, around 4:30pm, and again around 9:30pm. **What this seemed to show was people, particularly working parents, were shifting their working days by logging off a bit early then logging back on after bedtime. So people could do their core hours – times they needed to speak to others, between say 10 and 4 – then log on for their asynchronous [communication] whenever suits them outside those hours."**



To avoid endless channel proliferation and cross-messaging, and to maintain shared standards that mean contemplation space is not eroded, particularly for remote teams, Reimar Kosack, founder of Düsseldorf-based software consultancy Wash With Similar Colours (WWSC), says it's imperative to set some ground rules for how to collaborate. "[Collaboration] is really the backbone of how we work and how we organize work. We have very strict rules about what tool in what situation to use in which way and we see it's very hard for experienced clients to get when to switch to what level of communication: when they should drop an email, when they should send a Slack message, when we have a video call, or when it's the rare time to have an in-person workshop."

## Responsibility: raising the standard

While not demonstrably emotive about their working environment, there was a subtle yet profound sense of shared responsibility that came through in aspects of how the Mundipharma employees spoke about their work together. This came out at times in the way people characterized their work relative to others, or in their motivations for doing things a certain way or wanting to do them differently. For example (emphasis mine):

- "Instead of writing a document which has a deadline, I need to complete high-level business requirements for a PoC **so that that team can proceed. I can't hold them up** so will switch to that task."
- "I know there need to be checks and balances in place, however sometimes I feel that I would like to have more control to move into decisions to spend money, **for the good of the company**, more from intuition based on my depth of experience. This way we could get to a learning if something works or not quicker and that would save time in the long run."

This suggests there could be a quiet but important aspect of the Mundipharma culture that revolves around a sense of responsibility to colleagues and the company cause. The scrupulous cleanliness of the office may also be a manifestation of this. If a shared sense of responsibility is a core aspect of Mundipharma's *operating system*, then this could be used to open up new opportunities for bringing the company values to life. Rather than being an undercurrent within the company zeitgeist as it currently is, this sense of shared care could be a banner that Mundipharma uses to align employees on its core values, and to demonstrate externally how the company lives its values.

In most organizations, there are little clues about the real values: not the ones that are written on the wall or circulated in the company handbook, but the genuine (if unspoken) ways of thinking that govern people's behaviour. Uncovering these, moving them from the unspoken to the spoken, is the opportunity to create lasting change either through further developing things that are working or through reframing things that are not.

## Change provocations

- **Planning makes possible.** Unlike other workplaces, Mundipharma employees were far less likely to report feeling overwhelmed by communications technologies. While we all have to adjust our schedules to accommodate unanticipated needs at times, the reflective periods which seem to be endemic to the Mundipharma culture appear to be a form of enabling constraint: by building in this time, Mundipharma employees master their schedules, their schedules don't master them.

- **Understand your company's attitude and operating system.** What is the fundamental guiding principle at the heart of your business that reaches everything you do? Getting to grips with this central working principle is critical to embedding the right behaviours and mindsets for effective working – together. By peeling back the layers of the onion, looking deeper under what everyone is saying to understand their underlying mindsets and shared assumptions, it becomes possible to get to the heart of why your team works the way it does.

## STANDARD

### Planning makes possible

Unlike other workplaces, Mundipharma employees were far less likely to report feeling overwhelmed by communications technologies

What regular rhythm of thinking & collaborating time keeps you on top of things? What would it take for your thinking time to feel supported?

Is the team all in tune about what it means to 'be working'? How are you reducing anxious presenteeism & encouraging productive presence?

What signals & social nudges demonstrate that you value focus time as well as collaboration? Do people have 'room' to sit & think?

### Understand your company's OS

What is the fundamental guiding principle at the heart of your business which reaches everything you do?

How can you become aware of communication patterns? How can you use this information to strengthen what's working & challenge what isn't?

Does the team regularly reflect on & adjust communication & collaboration patterns in order to sustain shared principles, routines & practices?

What lies below your company's surface operating system? How do you know what's really going on underneath what people are saying out loud?

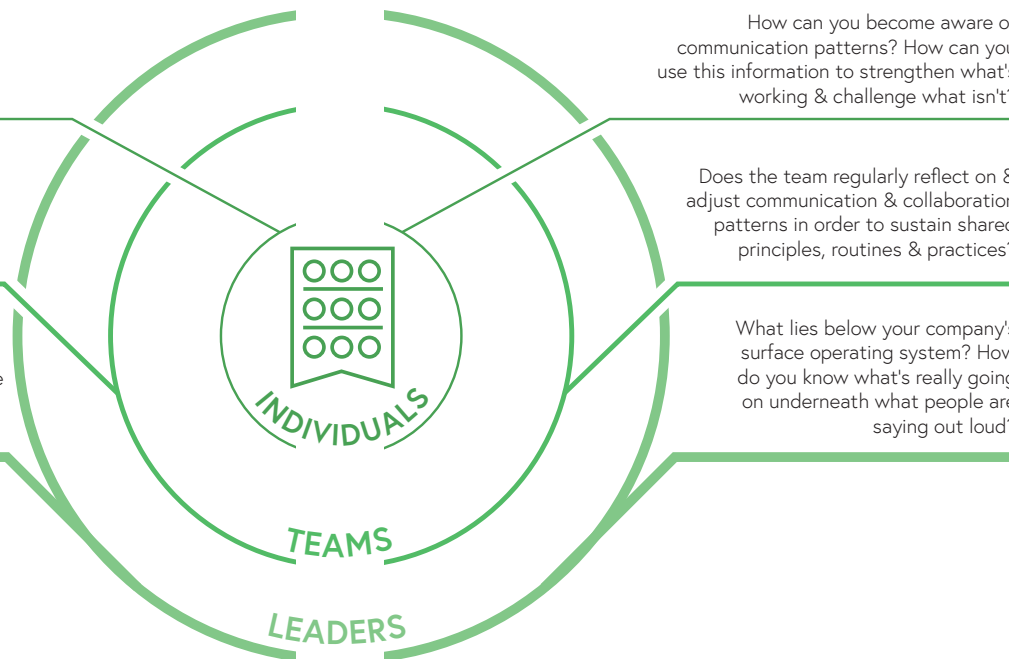


Figure 3 – Key change provocations from a standard culture



# Orchestration

## Orchestration

Making the set list  
Staying in tune  
Always on tour



## The team

Leonardo S.p.A. is an Italian multinational company specializing in aerospace, defence and security. Headquartered in Rome, the company has 180 sites worldwide. Our participants for this study were based in a digital technology and innovation unit with several sites spread around the UK.

In this case study, we examine what makes the difference between individual parts and a joint effort: this study encourages a renewed focus on working flexibly, not only for organizations that think of themselves as *remote* or *mobile* but as an increasingly ordinary part of working life. This case study also examines the physical and digital *beacons* or gathering points that enable distributed teams to collaborate effectively across distance and asynchronously.

## The organizing term: orchestration

What turns a collection of individual musicians who happen to be playing in the same room into an orchestra? Orchestras, in one light, are simply bands with many members. Everyone needs to be playing from the same set list to prevent cacophony. Staying in tune, making sure the instruments are all calibrated with each other, minimizes jarring notes. Bands are often on the road to give shows in many different locations, and travel requires particular adaptations that are different from the day-to-day environment. Orchestration also has another meaning: in computing, it refers to coordinating different systems and software into one smoothly operating whole.

## Time. Space. Attitude.

**Time:** There was a noticeable awareness of the need for balance in making time for different requirements – for different types of tasks and for being respectful of others' schedules as well as one's own convenience when setting up a meeting or project. Leonardo participants seem to feel relatively in control of their schedules rather than their schedules controlling them.



**Space:** In Leonardo's case, *space* came across particularly strongly as meaning *distance* and how that impacted scheduling. With multiple sites scattered around the UK, the team is constantly on the move to connect and collaborate with peers in different offices. Due to the sensitive nature of the work, it's been a challenge to identify tools that are secure enough to allow them to collaborate at a distance and cut back on the travel time. On more than one level, Leonardo seems to be a company of many disparate moving parts which all need to work together in an orchestrated way. Travel to meet face-to-face seems to be an important mechanism for achieving this.



**Attitude:** We saw this playing out in how people described their ideal spaces as well as their current environments. Multiple people described the office whiteboards not only as functional tools for noting down ideas but also as gathering places for teams to work in a collaborative way. The care and regard people show by scheduling meetings to suit everyone indicates a certain camaraderie. In their idealized space, people noticeably left plenty of room not only for nature (a typical workplace desire across most responses in our study and beyond), but also for cool new collaborative tools like VR headsets, which suggests a willingness to experiment and adopt new ideas. It's noteworthy that there is such an emphasis on in-person meetings in a group that seems to value novelty and experimentation with technical tools.



## Making the set list

Participants at Leonardo were alert to the need for balancing reflective time with collaborative time in meetings and on multi-person projects. On balance, people seemed attuned not only to their own needs but also to those of others in getting the job done together.

This speaks to not only individual levels of care and consideration with one another, but an all-company recognition that employees are best placed to know when they will be most productive and how to meet that need effectively. In line with our findings about working flexibly and remote working, establishing a level of team trust is not only a nice thing to do or a morale boost, it's also a critical aspect of an inclusive working culture and empowers employees who might otherwise struggle to contribute. This is good for employees and great for employers, who benefit from added skills they would otherwise not be able to leverage.

## Staying in tune

Perhaps because this is a particularly digitally focused team, Leonardo participants placed a high emphasis

on the importance of having physical or digital tools to facilitate working together (or, when necessary, finding a separate space for solo or small group work). A lot of the travel mentioned in the study seemed to be geared towards staying in the know or establishing rapport, in order to *stay in tune* with others. When asked what a future ideal workspace would look like, one Leonardo respondent said: "Having people around is very important to me so I'd want lots of my team with me as well as ways to connect with people as face-to-face as possible." Whiteboards were also mentioned as important vectors for team collaboration and idea exchange:

- "My favourite place would have to be our Southampton office space [where] there is a good mix of whiteboards and technology."
- "The whiteboard gathers the team around it to facilitate collaboration and allows addition or changing of ideas as you go."

The evident enjoyment of gathering around whiteboards seems to more than offset the gruelling demands of being constantly on tour, creating what Dr Kerstin Sailer of UCL refers to as "the solidarity of shared experience."

## Solidarity through shared experience

Dr Kerstin Sailer, a researcher in the sociology of architecture at University College London, uses a technique called *spatial network analysis* to analyze the usage potential of different working environments. The main influence that space has on team cohesion, says Sailer, is its power to introduce solidarity through shared experience. If I pass by your desk every day at the same time to get a coffee, for example, we might become coffee buddies.



Replicating this incidental yet essential contact in a digital setting is a challenge. Despina Katsikakis, Head of Occupier Business Performance at real estate services company Cushman & Wakefield, says: "If you look at virtual interactions, they are planned and structured, and highly controlled, right? I know when my Skype calls are, and I go from one to the next to the next, I know who's on the call, what we're going to talk about, and so on. **Physical encounters are unplanned, intimate and random.**" The challenge isn't entirely unique to online communications, though: workers without assigned desks have very different communication patterns from workers with them.

Sailer echoed the importance of pathways and beacons for creating opportunities for interaction. Employees

who are adjacent to something like a coffee point, a whiteboard or a cupboard where essential and frequently used equipment is kept will clearly have more opportunities for spontaneous interaction than those tucked away in less frequented places. Workers who are on the go all the time, moving from meeting to meeting perhaps, might be harder to pinpoint at any given moment, but the likelihood of encountering them along their path at some point during the day is quite high<sup>16</sup>. These patterns create opportunities for information sharing and building trust through camaraderie in a natural way. Thinking carefully about which teams need to share information, and how to create those opportunities for potential communication, can increase productivity. You need to do this in the digital environment, too.

While the face-to-face aspect is very important to Leonardo employees, there may be ways to enhance concentrated periods of face-to-face time supported by more regular touchpoints through digital tools. When we presented the research findings to our primary contact there, he mentioned instituting regular "working together" days where everyone gathers at one of their worksites to facilitate community-building and trust between periods working at a distance – similar to the regular face-to-face touchpoints that Xero and Buffer described. This echoes the ideas about synchronization from Rory Sutherland (page 3).

16. Sailer's student Rosica Pachilova will shortly be publishing her doctoral study on interaction pathways.

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For all its willingness to experiment with digital disruption, including being the only group to submit a digitized imagined future workspace rather than a hand-drawn one, it is striking that the Leonardo team was so very committed to face-to-face working. Physical whiteboards as the gathering place for impromptu collaborations were an important highlight of their case study. Likewise, they emphasized to us when we shared the research results that they really do travel an unusual amount – it wasn't a skew in our data. While sensitive data and security concerns are a partial rationale for the team's face-to-face culture, we also believe that they currently find it too difficult to replicate the camaraderie of spontaneous encounters and spatial effectiveness of scribbling on a whiteboard that comes from geographic proximity. There are more and more enhanced digital tools that are trying to replicate this sense of proximity, but even a team as willing to experiment as the Leonardo group might need some encouragement to give these new ways of working a chance.

## Always on tour

One person, when asked what was the most important app on their phone, said: "I'd have to cheat a bit and pick two things! As I travel every week, my CWT travel app is a must for me for booking hotels and having all of my travel details to hand. The other is WhatsApp as it

lets me keep in touch with my team, family and friends whenever I want and wherever I am." While some people responded that they primarily use virtual meetings to stay in touch, digital communication tools didn't crop up nearly as often in our responses as simply travelling from place to place.

People reported this aspect of their work as very tiring; for example, one respondent said: "Gruelling today... six hours of travel as well as a full day is challenging." Another said: "The challenge comes when I have to travel a long way to meetings, which can make for very early starts and/or late finishes without the catch-up time." Despite these two examples, in general attitudes about work seemed to be very positive and people did mention valuing the flexibility of their working hours.

Despite the energy drain, people also described their face-to-face time with others in different locations as useful and productive. This does reflect findings from other participating companies and interviews, that face-to-face time can accelerate trust and give projects a boost. However, there may be an opportunity here to discover new ways of working that still incorporate face-to-face time, but perhaps less frequently. Other case studies hold suggestions about what makes for satisfying and productive remote working.

## Change provocations

- **Jazz it up.** Repeating routines creates the confidence and sense of familiarity to move from place to place, jump into the mix, connect and improvise. A high level of trust, in other words, increases a team's ability to be flexible. This flexibility can be a powerful tool for workforce inclusivity, giving you access to different perspectives from people who might not otherwise have been able to contribute. What are the strategies that help a deep-rooted face-to-face collaboration practice move to more abstract-feeling virtual settings? What additional transparency mechanisms do you need to build to keep everyone in harmony, or in comfortable chaos?

- **Build beacons.** Whether you're always on the go with no fixed desks or working in the same place every day, gathering points such as whiteboards give people focal points to rally round. For teams that aren't typically co-located but who regularly pass through a particular space, a whiteboard or other physical messaging point can be an important way of keeping in touch asynchronously. Digital tools can also be a means for creating these focal points, but moving things online requires more clarity and structure to ensure everyone is on the same page about customs, norms and habits.

# ORCHESTRATION

### Jazz it up

The confidence to jump into the mix, connect & improvise flexibly is a powerful tool for workforce inclusivity

### Build beacons

Whether you're always on the go with no fixed desks or working in the same place every day, gathering points like whiteboards give people focal points to rally round

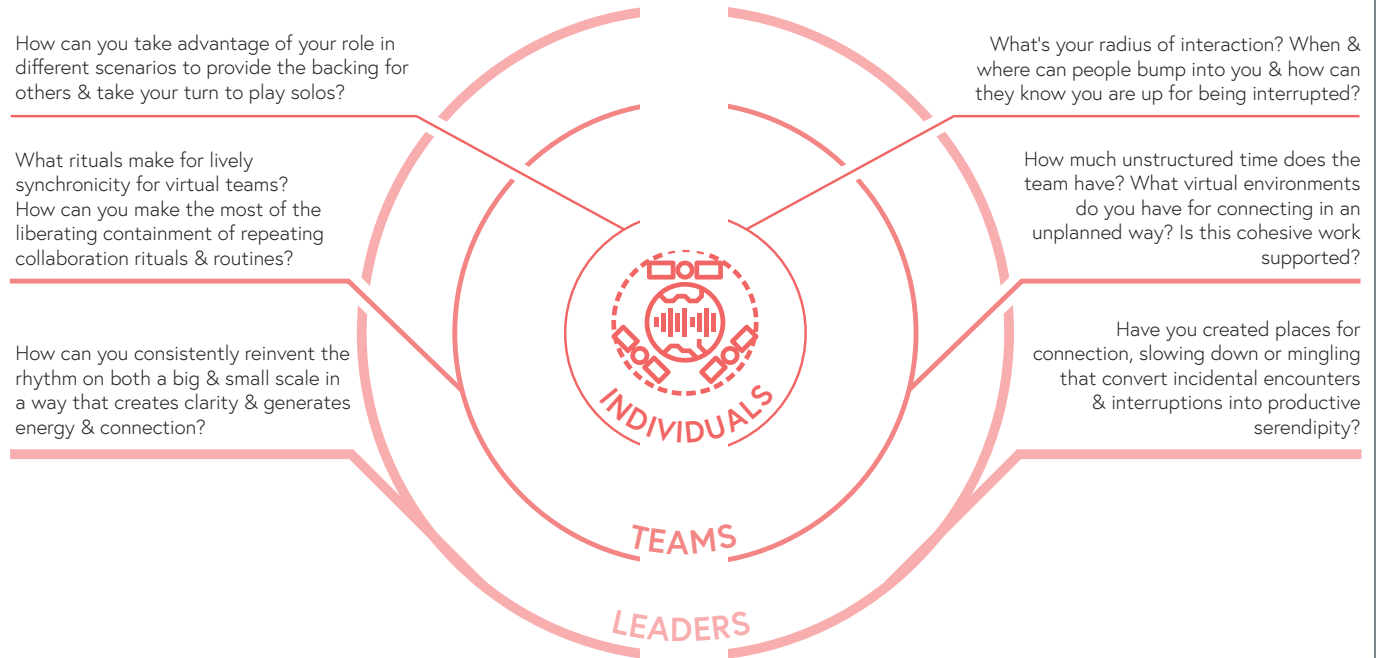


Figure 4 – Key change provocations from an orchestration culture

# Selection

## Selection

Switch contexts  
'The right tool for  
the right job'  
Worthy of notice



## The team

Uniper SE is an energy company based in Dusseldorf, Germany. With about 12,000 employees in 40 countries, Uniper has a balanced portfolio of technologically advanced large-scale assets. Our participants included team members based in the UK and in Germany.

This case study provokes reflection on the importance of finding the right tool for the right job, and in particular the right equipment for communication across increasingly distributed teams. And it explores the role of communal spaces in creating a sense of belonging and connection.

## The organizing term: selection

To *select* can mean to switch, as in context-switching between modes of intensive focus time and high-energy collaboration. It can also mean to choose between a selection of things, like finding the right tool for the right job. And a select item is something that is especially noteworthy.

Elsewhere this report talked about *agency*, the sense of one's own ability to choose. In order to exercise one's agency, one must have a robust field of options to select from.

## Time. Space. Attitude.

**Time:** In Uniper's case, we noticed a duality around how people perceived time: people felt relatively empowered to set their own schedules and switch contexts as they needed to, because of the policy of working flexibly; yet at times people could not fully embrace this because of external pressures – for example, the boss requesting a late meeting or a perceived pressure to meet in person in the office rather than remotely. The pressures of *seeing* and *being seen* may also play into this latter case.



**Space:** Uniper's respondents had a particular focus on technology and how it helped (or in many cases hindered) their ability to work effectively within a distributed team. A theme in common with other case studies was insufficient spaces or tools to have calls and conversations in ways that don't disturb others, offer sufficient privacy for conversations that need it, and don't bring surrounding distractions into the conversation. Space as a place of belonging and connection was also important in the canteen at the heart of the workplace.



**Attitude:** In an interesting contrast with the data showing Uniper employees interact with fewer people during the course of the day than other study respondents, Uniper participants also mentioned the importance of *seeing* and *being seen* to facilitate collaboration and team trust. The canteen seemed to be a particularly important location for off-the-cuff conversations and meeting with a variety of different people, as well as being a space with personal resonance as a base. This might explain some of the reluctance we saw in some respondents to work from home.





## Switching between contexts

As mentioned above, there seem to be some interesting contrasts in the data: people generally reported being satisfied with Uniper's support of working flexibly, yet they also refer to pressures to conform to schedule expectations set by others. Working flexibly is perceived as the *natural order*, supported by the company culture, with an occasional switch into working outside that norm when necessary. Perhaps because the need to stay late or work in a particular place is only occasional rather than an expected default, people seemed to take these blips in their stride.

Another contrast: Uniper employees reported they interacted with fewer people during the day compared to other companies in this study, yet informal meetings in an open space like the canteen, or having varied encounters with others in different types of working environments through the day rather than one fixed office, seem relatively important to people. At Uniper, the canteen is a place where these meaningful encounters flourish. One person mentioned "pretending to be completely offline" to find some focus time, suggesting a need for fairly firm boundaries for focus time, in contrast to the open and informal collaboration that occurs in a space like the canteen.

## The right tool for the right job

Choosing both the right space and the right tool to facilitate collaborative work seemed to be a common challenge. This was mentioned both at the team and individual levels: "The meeting room has no Jabra speaker that works well with Skype. Colleagues in Germany, listening in their non-native language, find it difficult to follow conversations." With the Uniper team being distributed and frequently communicating through phone calls, struggling to find space that wasn't too noisy and distracting, particularly with headphones that are not up to the task, seemed to be a common problem.

Bringing one's own device, or communicating through unofficial channels, was a fraught issue that emerged in several interviews. **There is a complicated balancing act between keeping up with the risks of information security and enabling people to meet company goals around collaboration and efficiency.** Social media consultant Euan Semple described one consulting engagement: "In a financial services group in Hong Kong, the board confessed to me that they were using WhatsApp to communicate because they were so frustrated waiting for IT to give them a secure option." At another company, Semple described an information security officer discovering a very productive and focused collaborative working environment among team members sharing a private Facebook group. As this contravened

## Architecting collaboration flow



Mark Catchlove of Herman Miller told us an emerging architectural paradigm is to put hubs or plazas at the centre of group spaces: **"We're moving away from a breakout area over in a corner – no one ever goes to them when they're in a corner. You can see our experience: our coffee is at the heart of what we do.** I call this the 'village pub' ... Going back to that personality aspect, some people can be very much on their own in a busy space. [Our coffee area] is not just a collaborative space. For some people it's like going to work in a café because 'I'm not going to be interrupted there.'"

Despina Katsikakis of Cushman & Wakefield said: "I think the office is not going away anytime soon; there will continue to be a significant need for face-to-face interaction alongside immersive virtual interaction. But it will become a different type of environment. **I do not want to travel for an hour and sit at a desk and look at my computer; I can do that in a much better environment [at home] and have gained the commute time. So when I come into the office, what is it that I come in to do? It is really about meaningful and unexpected encounters, collaboration, brainstorming and unique experiences.**"

company policies around social media usage, the management team shut the group down, leaving employees wondering why they should bother trying to be more collaborative (and, quite possibly, whether their leaders were operating to the same rules that they were expected to follow).

Several people also mentioned not being comfortable taking video calls from the desk:

- "I never video call from my desk ... too much going on in the background that is distracting."
- "Currently in a project meeting on Skype, I have had to mute myself as it is noisy in the open office."
- "No videos from the desk."

On a deeper level, the Uniper participants' recognition of meeting the needs of others (for example, being aware that the German team is having trouble hearing due to insufficiently powerful speakers, or self-consciousness about background distraction in the office when on video calls) reveals a level of team-wide consideration and care: people aren't simply grumbling about their own experience, but about making sure the environment is conducive to collaboration for everyone. This suggests a level of willingness to experiment and try different solutions which could facilitate greater effectiveness across the whole team.

## Worthy of notice

At Uniper, the canteen is much more than just a place to eat. The team uses the canteen both as a way of staying in touch and building social camaraderie, and to find out about important projects in different parts of the

business. "I love this space. It is our canteen. I see many people here and have unplanned conversations. Today I heard about a great AI project that I would otherwise have missed" was a typical comment. Others including meeting at the start of the day for a coffee, benefitting from working publicly and hoping to run in to people there, all point to a sense of belonging, a home base. For some it's also a place to model leadership: "What I achieve, I achieve through others. Therefore **I like to be seen and make myself available**. Before my meetings started today, I sat in our canteen and read my mails. Various people talked to me. **I cannot lead from behind a closed door**. If I really need quiet time I can work at home."

There is also something about the expression of *being seen* that is a subtle signal about the Uniper culture: the team seems to highly value transparency and visibility. "I would hate to be stuck at one desk," said one person. Another focused on the value they could add if they had more flexibility in their working environment: "I have a varied role but a fixed working space that is allocated to me. This limits the impact I can have." Kerri Miller, Developer Advocate at Travis CI, also touched on the importance of transparency for getting work done in a collaborative way: "As a tech worker, I'm very addicted to the idea of showing my work ... I need to do all of my work publicly, which includes all of my mistakes, all the bugs, all the errors, all the bad assumptions I've made about the project. **You have to develop a culture of failure where it's OK to make mistakes, where mistakes are recast as learning opportunities, where you can laugh at your ridiculous bugs or silliness that you've done on the way.**"

## The virtual canteen: opportunities to connect

Supporting increasingly distributed teams requires the behaviours of the entire team to change, not just remote workers. Organizations sometimes start thinking about this when they begin hiring workers who will be primarily remote (i.e. based in their homes most of the time) but there are many situations in which teams find themselves at a distance: teams based across multiple offices, particularly in different time zones, need these skills. Workers who have an office base but travel frequently grapple with these problems, too. Teams whose members have flexible hours may overlap in the office infrequently, needing to depend on digital means for regular connection. There are very few teams that are solely and completely co-located in modern organizations. Strategies for giving all workers equal opportunity regardless of distance include:



- Introduce *virtual coffees*, either as one-on-ones for individual employees to get to know one another or

as optional open invites for the team to spend time together chatting

- Simply set aside time during a regular meeting for the team to check in and chat socially as a 'warm up' or 'cool down' from the main agenda
- For co-located teams, employee games rooms or corners, fitness classes or informal brown-bag learning lunches, or even just places to congregate with healthy(ish) snacks can provide opportunities for micro-socialization
- Playful rituals like *reverse brainstorming*, sharing the worst possible version of an idea, can bring people together to normalize sharing failures and missteps
- Elia Mörling of remote collaboration software tool maker Idea Hunt describes a method his team uses to replicate those offline *tea break* moments in what can otherwise be very formal meetings: "Every now and then [on our all-hands call] we actually do a little game, or some little exercise that we put in there consciously. Because to do the team building [remotely] you really have to articulate and be more mindful about it."

## Change provocations

- **Quality kit creates trust.** The right tool for the right job is important in any workplace, but there's a special emphasis in distributed, multilingual teams on audiovisual equipment that supports communication. If you're struggling to hear the other side of the conversation because of background noise, low microphone volume or dropped and garbled calls, it's impossible to have an effective communication experience. If your team makes a lot of calls, make sure you have the equipment and the environment to support their productivity.

- **Camaraderie counts for a lot.** Having physical spaces that feel inviting, like home, to draw people in, both for focus time and to connect with each other intentionally or by chance, is important. And that needs to be mirrored in online canteen camaraderie. These don't need to be big times and spaces; they can also provide 'micro-socialization'. Knowing how to talk to someone in an informal way about something that isn't important to work is a core skill that becomes even more important when there is something critically important to discuss. It's better to build in plenty of practice time and allow informal trust to ripen through regular encounters than to depend on everyone knowing how to pull together automatically when an urgent situation arises.

## SELECTION

### Quality kit creates trust

The right tool for the right job is important in any workplace, but there's a special emphasis on audiovisual equipment that supports communication in distributed, multilingual teams

Can you anticipate when you need quiet surroundings or privacy for calls? How do you avoid having to hang around in corridors making calls?

Have you formed a collective agreement for when to focus on the most efficient way of getting the job done given current skills? Have you allowed time to innovate with new tools?

Is the company kit reliable & easy? Are there everyday obstructions to productive work? Are people encouraged to play with new technologies & approaches?

### Camaraderie counts for a lot

Having physical spaces that feel inviting, like home, both for focus time & to connect with each other intentionally or by chance is important

How can you balance solo working time with showing up, seeing & being seen, creating lines of sight, connections & deepened mutual awareness, rapport & respect?

What spaces, physical or virtual, temporary or permanent, does your team call 'home'? Where do you belong, kick back & be at ease with each other & with guests to the team?

How are you showing up in communal spaces? How are you demonstrating the behaviours that you want to see? How are you contributing to the atmosphere of the spaces?

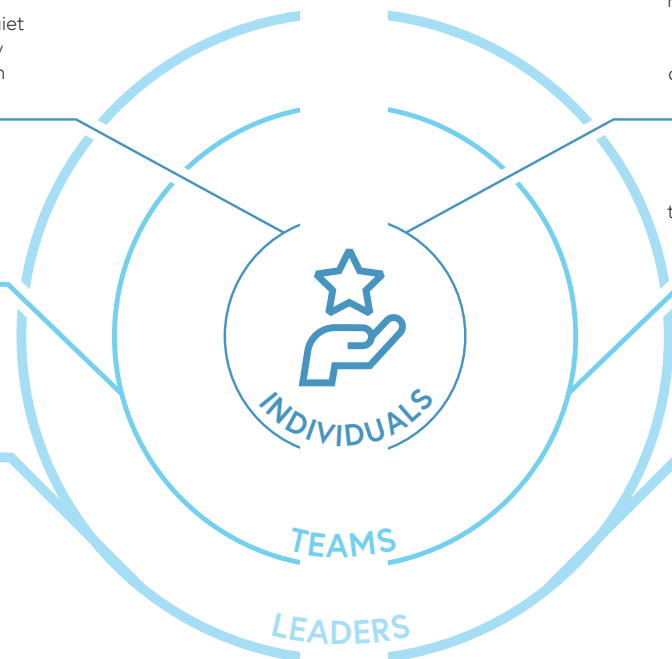


Figure 6 – Key change provocations from a selection culture

# Condition

## Condition

Work smarter  
Taking ownership  
Making space to  
succeed



## The team

Younger Insurance<sup>17</sup> is a large health insurer in the US employing more than 22,000 people. It serves nearly 15 million members. Younger Insurance offers group life, disability and dental solutions, as well as a range of other individual policies. It also provides various care management and wellness resources. The teams participating in this study primarily came from two groups spread across multiple geographic offices located around the US, some working in new, open-plan collaborative floors with very few barriers between desks, others in more traditional cubicles.

This case study raises the possibility that learning to *read* an organization, and the implicit conditions and conditioning that are at play through its physical layout and culture, is a skill that we all need to develop. In particular, as organizations become increasingly digitized, learning the unique dialects of their digital spaces becomes ever-more important. This case study also demonstrates the power of choice; its key point is how we need to create an environment that makes those choices viable. It also explores the inevitable bumpiness of the change journey as it plays out not just in the physical and virtual collaboration spaces but right through the fabric of the cultural operating system.

## The organizing term: condition

*Conditions* are the circumstances or surroundings in which we operate. They can also be the state or order in which we find things (or ourselves). We condition things to make them ready or keep them in shape – like an athlete undergoing conditioning to prepare for a big match.

How do we condition ourselves into new, healthier and more productive working habits by taking ownership? How do we make a workplace that works for us not against us, and understand condition (and conditioning) as co-created between individuals, teams and leaders?

## New spaces, new norms: the turbulent change journey

Of all the organizations we studied, the Younger group had the most fraught relationship with its digital and physical working environment. This is perhaps because it is in the middle of a cultural shift that is playing out in physical spaces and the operating model. Younger told us that it is currently on a journey to a flatter structure with fewer layers of leadership. While most people would say they feel more comfortable working in the latter than the former, negotiating that change is a bumpy ride. We heard some natural reservations from team members who are unsure how to negotiate their needs in an uncharted future. In other case studies we've discussed *enabling constraints* as essential features that create the *shape* of the way groups work together. We're certainly not advocating a return to the old ways simply because it's a more comfortable type of discomfort, but we think this is a great example of how even beneficial changes may involve a period of challenging – and painful – growth and acclimatization before new habits, attitudes and a shared understanding of enabling constraints feel as natural as the old ways.

Adopting new ways of working is a common challenge in businesses that are negotiating a change in working environment and seeking to support the corresponding changes in working practice. In particular, introducing a more open-plan style appears to shake up people's perceptions of how to manage organizational hierarchy until they develop an understanding of new organizational signals.

Despina Katsikakis described a rebalancing in how organizational space is used: "Many years ago, we used our office as a lab by implementing new ways of working on ourselves. So we had mobile telephony within the office and no assigned seating, except for the PAs, who were the anchors for everyone. One of the things I

used to do is invite the boards of directors of companies that we worked with to have their meetings in our office. I would walk them around and show them the environment and get them to understand what this meant in real terms. I was walking around the board of the BBC, and the then Director General suddenly stopped in the middle of a tour. And he said: **'I totally get this! It's reverse hierarchy. The more senior you are, the more toys you get to be liberated from the office. And the more junior you are, the more locked you are to space,'** which I thought was an exceptionally astute observation." The proliferation of inexpensive collaboration and communication tools means that being liberated from the office is at least notionally within the reach of all information workers. What kinds of signals do we now need to look for to understand organizational power?



Mark Catchlove spoke about the operational importance of supporting employees with the right tools, equipment and spaces no matter where they sit in the organizational hierarchy: "The world of work is becoming more democratic. **For a company, particularly in the world of tech, your next big idea can come from anywhere in that business. So you'd better make sure that you're not giving the best just 'up here' [in management], and not supporting 'down here.'**"

Dr Kerstin Sailer of UCL says: **"If you have power [that] manifests itself in the corner office, with the biggest square footage, and the nicest furniture and the best views ... everyone knows their place in the organization. The way to rise up the ranks is to get a nice office. When you replace all of that and tear down the walls and say, 'we're now all open plan', the power relations don't go away, they're just invisible. Then it just becomes much more difficult to manoeuvre; you need extra levels of information."**



## Examining extremes

It's also worth mentioning a methodological risk that sponsors of collaborative workspaces and working practices need to be alert to. Extremes of dissatisfaction and satisfaction tend to show up in surveys more strongly than middle-of-the-road responses: it's hard to get excited about "feeling meh about something", as one of our sponsors within Younger pointed out. It's possible that, as well as coinciding with major cultural change, in this case we hit on the passionate few who were using this research as an opportunity to vent about changes they fear, or which they feel they've hitherto had little input into. There are valuable insights to be gleaned from this field site:

- First, when respondents do represent a vocal minority, their voices are still likely to be influencing the rest of the group and their concerns should be addressed. That's not to say their opinions should be the only factors driving action, but they must not be discounted completely either. Giving them a way in which to express their feelings is vital.
- Second, it's important to find alternative methods for engaging with the remainder of the workforce to seek alternative perspectives so those aren't drowned out.
- Finally, we can still learn about organizational values and invisible governing principles even where they are being expressed in challenging ways. In Younger's case, for example, the challenges around extreme presenteeism seem to reflect the *hero culture* of wanting to be recognized for overcoming big challenges – a common tension for organizations moving to more collaborative working practices. In order to do this, Younger is unconsciously creating an environment where there's always an urgency to be solved. This desire to be heroic could be harnessed to encourage healthier and more productive organizational behaviours by reframing what it means to be a hero in the organization.

## Time. Space. Attitude.

**Time:** Of all the participating groups in our study, the Younger Insurance participants demonstrated the least sense of control over their own schedules. While they reported higher-than-average levels of focus, this appeared to be a hard-won quality. We wonder whether the challenges expressed as problems with long hours or inconsiderate scheduling are fundamentally reflective of wanting to find more focus time by being involved in fewer meetings. At the surface level this is showing up as long hours; a deeper enquiry might show people are afraid of declining meetings or asking whether their presence is truly necessary. Learning to let go and delegate some decisions to others, as well as having permission to decline some meetings, would give people more solo focus time.



**Space:** At Younger, employees are seeking both physical and digital environments that support their need for focus time or one-on-one conversations. This was often couched as a need for *privacy*, which includes being able to hold private calls and do work without fear of being overlooked. Open and spontaneous collaboration may be facilitated through workspaces with fewer physical barriers, but for the most part at Younger, people seemed disinclined to focus on these capabilities and much more vocal about the aspects of their roles that they currently do not feel the available tools and spaces support them in achieving.



**Attitude:** The noise and inability to *hide* from others in both open-plan offices and cubicles seems to make things challenging for people at Younger while the transition to new spaces and working policies is coming into effect. This isn't to say that people there are not in fact productive, nor that they are doing things they shouldn't be doing, but rather that there is a fundamental organizational value here (perhaps articulated as "I must be seen to be working") that people are striving to uphold, and fearing that they are not doing so sufficiently. Being willing and able to advocate for and claim space to do the best job is an attitude which could, if fostered, transform a painful change into a personally satisfying one.



## Work smarter, not harder

'Getting out of the cube' is a major challenge. One striking finding was the number of respondents dining *al desko* (our term, not theirs). The majority of participants either didn't take lunch breaks at all or only stepped away briefly to fetch sustenance before returning to the desk to eat.

## At desko

"I tend to work and eat my lunch to stay productive."

"I take 3 breaks per day. Most are for 15 minutes to fetch coffee or lunch – which I bring back to my desk so I can continue to work."

"I rarely get up ... if I do it's for the restroom. I did walk downstairs to microwave my lunch. I need to move around more during the day. However, I have too many meetings ..."

At least among our respondents, the early starts and few breaks seem to reflect an *always on* culture with little time for reflection or refreshment (in the mental as well as physical sense). When we shared the study findings with the primary sponsor within Younger, they spoke about the "hero culture" in the company. Like so many unwanted habits and behaviours, this one comes from a positive intention: wanting to be recognized for *saving the day*, and demonstrating one's commitment to the work. But there are ways to do this that don't involve over-taxing oneself or others by long hours and demanding lots of meetings.

Throughout this report we have discussed the importance of diving below the surface of things to get at what's really going on – for example, a fixation with being physically present rather than working from home can reflect deeper anxieties around how to connect, build rapport and create trust with people when the digital channels and practices for this aren't very strong. **It's an old adage, but in this case the evidence is clear: taking breaks and having downtime are essential for boosting productivity. Work smarter, not harder.** The incremental gains of staying on a task decline sharply after 90 minutes.<sup>18</sup> There is a wealth of research<sup>19</sup> demonstrating that the mind needs a break from intensive tasks in order to keep in peak operating order<sup>20</sup>, both in terms of short breaks between tasks and longer durations of rest for sleep and on vacation. Staying at one task too long produces diminishing returns and eventual exhaustion.

If this working environment resonates with your own culture, an action step could be encouraging the team to introduce mental conditioning breaks to improve productivity. **People may feel that they are demonstrating valour or commitment through staying late and never leaving their desks, but to actually achieve more, they need to get out of the cube.**

## Taking ownership

To create the conditions for success, we need to take ownership of our own best working practices. We noticed a lot of angst about a perceived lack of control over one's own schedule or physical environment: too many meetings, a broken phone in a conference room, thoughtless scheduling, pinging notifications, loud talking, lack of respect for the *do not disturb sign* – all clues to a deeper failure of care and self-care in the working environment.

When asked what their ideal working environments would be, most respondents focused on higher walls and doors that close. But this seems to be a surface reflection of some deeper underlying needs, particularly around finding the physical and digital tools to support solo reflection time or better informational control (such as not being overheard on confidential calls). There is a real opportunity here for people to be their own advocates and to make clear to colleagues their own best ways of working in order for the whole team to be more successful.

## Making space to succeed

A widely cited recent study showed that open-plan offices, far from increasing in-person collaboration, actually tend to decrease face-to-face interactions and drive up digital communication patterns<sup>22</sup>. The authors believe that physical boundaries in workspaces create the necessary enabling constraints that give employees clues about who has what kind of information at what time – powerful clues to navigating an organizational structure. Take these physical cues away and employees are likely to replicate those signals in a digital space (e.g. through patterns of who cc's whom in what email, and who has access to what channel in the company chat).

One way the Younger Insurance teams seem to be negotiating the meaning of spatial clues is in their stated desire for more privacy and personal space. Digging deeper, we think this shows a wish for a more fundamental sense of autonomy and control over one's working environment. Comments like "Some of my co-workers have standing desks which let them view my screen at all times" seem to reflect a disinclination for being observed. This clue about wanting more privacy, plus the *always on* culture mentioned earlier, might indicate a level of anxiety about *getting caught* not being productive.

18. Tony Schwartz, 'For Real Productivity, Less is Truly More', *Harvard Business Review*, 17 May 2010 <https://hbr.org/2010/05/for-real-productivity-less-is>

19. Kenneth T. Strongman and Christopher D.B. Burt, 'Taking Breaks from Work: An Exploratory Inquiry', *Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*, June 2000

20. Robert A. Henning et al, 'Frequent Short Rest Breaks from Computer Work: Effects on Productivity and Well-Being at Two Field Sites', *Ergonomics*, January 1997

21. K. Anders Ericsson et al, 'The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance', *Psychological Review*, 1993

22. Ethan S. Bernstein and Stephen Turban, 'The Impact of the "Open" Workspace on Human Collaboration', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 2 July 2018

At the group level in Younger Insurance there are clearly some common environmental needs, like small meeting rooms or calling spaces, which (at least for these participants) aren't currently being met in the most effective way. There's a constant strain of having to lurk in odd places, like the hallway next to the maintenance elevator, to hold confidential meetings.

The majority of respondents for this study seemed to spend large amounts of their time on phone calls. As we've identified in other workspaces, taking phone calls in noisy group environments is counterproductive. Where

the conversations deal with sensitive information, there's an added need for spaces in which to have confidential conversations. In other working environments we've seen small pods or sound-muffling wingback chairs that allow people to get away from the main working floor to conduct calls. While Younger demonstrably has some of these breakout spaces, they don't seem sufficiently *private* or plentiful to meet employees' needs.

Distractions and interruptions also figure large: "There is really no way [to concentrate] in a cube situation. People come up all the time even when you have headphones on." Echoing this: "[I am distracted by] loud talkers in cubes nearby."

## Navigating new norms



In other case studies we explore the characteristics of successful distributed and remote working at length; here we emphasize the *change* aspects. What does it take to bring about a change in working environment?

One option might be to experiment with more remote working, giving people a greater sense of autonomy over their working environments. This does require attention to workers' home-working setups, both physically and by ensuring people have the right communication habits and channels to keep one another in the know. There is a question of shared ownership here: collectively identifying the group's working activity needs and advocating for physical and digital spaces that support those needs.

A change in working environment, whether that means more remote working or not, requires attention to the accompanying cultural shifts. Adrian Cockcroft, formerly a Distinguished Engineer at Sun, describes an instance of this going badly: "One of the contributing factors to Sun Microsystems' decline was when they introduced this 'hotel system' where you booked a random place to sit, that changed often, and which broke up team communication patterns. Nobody could find each other; there was no personalized space, you had lockers for some of your stuff and that was it. **People started to disappear – they'd be working from home all the time, phoning it in, or they'd even resigned and nobody would know. And other people would be working away like mad and there was no way to tell.**"

Quintessence Anx says this need for visibility can be managed effectively in remote and flexible teams through better informational signposting, though it's particularly challenging with teams in transition or partially remote teams: "When you have a team that's already set up with an expectation of remote and people are already remote, I would say the tools work really well because your mental model of your daily work is built around weaving in communication, collaboration, etc. that is remote [-friendly].

**The downside is when you have a team that's either hybrid or transitioning. Some people are in office[s] together, and you'll find that the 'office people' are just talking to the open air, because that's what you do. And the remote people have to play catch-up for whatever live communication has occurred.** I see that as a disadvantage because even with all the tooling in the world, unless your perception changes, you're not going to bridge that gap."

PJ Hagerty of DevRelate echoes this: **"A lot of times, the remote people get treated like second-class citizens."** Hagerty also points out a simple way to mitigate this challenge is to enforce working-from-home days among people who are typically co-located in an office: "If you start that policy, and then you hire your first remote employee, they don't feel like they're the first remote employees. People in the office get a sense of what it's like to not be in the office."

The Younger team also has the opportunity to learn to use the spaces at hand more effectively: walking meetings could impact space utilization, and with so many people eating at their desks presumably the cafeteria has space (especially outside peak food times) to provide a refreshing change of scene and possibly even a perceived more *private* working environment to take calls and the like.

## Change provocations

- **Read the room.** Successfully navigating organizational culture requires an ability to understand unspoken expectations and norms. As organizations' physical spaces change, many of the traditional physical symbols we've depended on for *reading* the organization have disappeared. The underlying power structures are still there, but are more challenging to read since the new symbols and signs aren't yet settled.
- **Create a workplace that works for you.** With any proposed working environment change it's critical to empower teams to take an active role in considering how they want to work together in the new space: What's currently working that they want to keep? What new goals do they want to achieve in the new

space? What habits and practices do they need to develop to make that feasible? Again, this requires digging underneath the surface to find out not only *what* is important but also *why*. What meaning do teams attach to their current spaces, or imagined future spaces? What alternatives might allow them to achieve the same ends? For example, rather than focusing on the stated desire for what is basically more enclosed cubes, and instead looking at the deeper need for more focus time and confidentiality in calls, could Younger develop environments that support more activity-based working, with quiet spaces for reflection time and ample phone booths or other small meeting room spaces to take calls from? Or remove the cubes entirely and encourage more remote working?

## CONDITION

### Read the room

Successfully navigating organizational culture requires an ability to understand unspoken expectations & norms

### A workplace that works for us

With any proposed working environment change, it's critical to empower teams to take an active role in considering how they want to work together in the new space: what's currently working that they want to keep?

What spatial clues do you use to tell you how this workspace works? How do you test your assumptions & fill information gaps?

What support is in place to prepare you for new ways of working? How can you be your own best advocate for ways of working that work for you?

Where is your team's 'home' digitally & physically? What features of this space give you a shared sense of belonging? How do you invite others in?

How does your team adopt or adapt working guidelines? What experiments could you design to discover more productive patterns?

Whether you want them to or not, people will 'read the space.' What signals are you sending through the way spaces are organized & inhabited?

How could a change in working practice create unexpected impacts? Are you ready for quick repairs if needed? How do you convey what 'good' is?

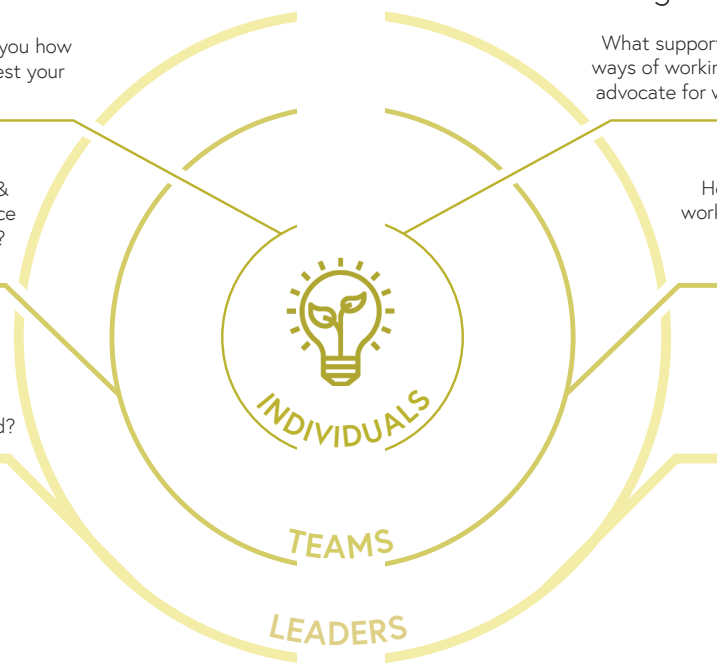


Figure 7 – Key change provocations from a condition culture

# In conclusion: closing the space

In 60 years' time, will working environments look more different from our offices today than today's offices look from those in the 1957 film *Desk Set*? That we can't tell you. But we can say that the challenges of complex distributed systems will continue to describe the way people work together – and apart. As John McArthur writes: "As digital technology becomes increasingly ubiquitous, the ways we operate in the physical world become more reliant on the digital. It seems almost silly to pose the two worlds as separate – a digital world and a physical world. For most of our experience, we interact with both, unless we make a conscious effort to unplug<sup>23</sup>."

Organizations seeking to maximize the productivity of ever-more asynchronous and distributed teams would do well to learn what computer scientists and software engineers are using to orchestrate the vast architectures of distributed databases that do everything from processing our credit cards to sending cat gifs in emails. In order to work together effectively, we need organizing principles that act as enabling constraints. This frees us from constantly renegotiating *how we work together* so we can *focus together on the work that really matters*.

One lesson stands out for each of the three core organizing principles we've used throughout this report:

## Time. Space. Attitude.

**Time:** Find a rhythm and tempo that encourages some synchronicity across the entire team, whether that's regular in-person meetings, periodic virtual hangouts, or something else. This rhythm needs to encompass both enjoyable and productive collaboration arrangements, and to protect focus time that is so easily stripped out in today's working environments.



**Space:** A degree of autonomy over one's working environment goes a long way. Everyone likes a lot of light and a view of green plants; on that, we found no surprises. But having the right kind of space for the right job, and the ability to choose aspects of one's environment even if that choice is limited, gives employees a sense of self-directedness at work. Everyone is responsible for co-creating this space together, and for going on observing and adapting it. Space is also an internal matter, working to create the mental landscapes and conditions that make it possible for you to do your best work.



**Attitude:** The way people speak about and behave regarding the first two principles gives profound clues to the third. This is how leaders can find out what is really driving organizational performance: dig under the surface to discover not only what people say but the fundamental shared world view that resonates throughout the organization. By getting to grips with this, teams have the opportunity to enact profound change in how they work together. Identifying symbols, rituals, practices and shared disciplines is the external manifestation of this.





Framing the exploration of collaborative workspace early in the report, we spoke of the new mental models made possible by dynamic interactions between people and data in collaborative spaces. We return, here at the close, to *ba*, that "shared space for emerging relationships" in which people's work happens. To create the most effective *ba*, organizations must make the most of *attitude* – the secret sauce. People have to get involved rather than stay on the sidelines, to take ownership of the working conditions that work for them in both collaborative and focus-time work, to surface assumptions and continually revisit and renegotiate the working relationship, in order for the team to create a cohesive yet dynamic working environment.

This does not mean that *ba* is a cookie-cutter stamp that will end up looking the same everywhere: as we've seen, each organizational culture has its own particular way of making *ba*. Our five case studies each have an essence that we've captured in a single term – agency, standard, orchestration, selection and condition. These terms, and the ethnographic texture that brings them to life, may resonate with part or all of your own culture. But you may find by diving below the surface and exploring the deep norms and unquestioned assumptions that lie beneath 'how we do things around here', that your team, group or organization has its own distinctive default operating system. By deepening a shared understanding of what this is, you can set intentions around the best parts of that culture, and work together to minimize the worst and most difficult bits.

It's very tempting to get drawn into emerging digital trends and tools: it's often easier to make the case on paper for a new piece of kit to hold up as the superhero that will fix everything or the scapegoat to blame when it all goes wrong, than to just talk to people about what's going on in their team. But without the solid foundation of a shared understanding of cultural and behavioural intent, progress in nurturing the collaborative workplace, and making the most of time, space and attitude, will be patchy, and harder to secure.

There is no one communication tool, nor one way of organizing the office, to rule them all: your organizational needs will dictate the kind of physical and digital spaces you require to get the job done. Using methodological tools designed and tested in the social sciences to dig deeply into how work is done in a variety of different organizations opens up many possible different models of what work could look like. Anthropology is not only about going into the field, but coming to realize that the field is all around us, all the time, wherever we are. As Professor Charles King puts it: "The payoff [is] a liberating and original way of seeing your own society, denuded of its specialness, as just one of a number of available worlds. The journey back home could be as thrilling as the voyage into the unfamiliar<sup>24</sup>."

Finding these emergent headlines from *out there* also allows us to re-examine what might be unique about our own working culture. By bringing this into the light, we are able to take action to proactively shape who we collectively want to be at work. This gives us the freedom to question what we assume is *just the way it is* and decide how we really want it to be. By asking the questions we've proposed in this report, teams can gain deeper insight into what really makes them tick and develop new experiments to try in their ongoing quest for productive working environments.

24. Charles King, 'Gin, Sex, Malaria, and the Hunt for Academic Prestige: How the misadventures of Margaret Mead, Reo Fortune, and Gregory Bateson shaped anthropology,' *The Chronicle Review*, 28 July 2018 <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190724-king-mead>



# Appendix

Here we've collected the core provocations from throughout this report. Use these as a guide for your teams to experiment in your search for more effective collaboration.

## AGENCY

### Open the gates

At Leading Edge Forum we believe organizations will become ever more porous

How can you help your team bring in fresh perspectives? How can you ask powerful questions at the right time to help your team see things in a new way?

How do you make space for fresh perspectives? How do you deepen rapport inside & beyond the inner circle to allow 'outside-in' thinking?

What is your collaboration strategy? How do you invite outsiders & newcomers into porous & temporary teams?

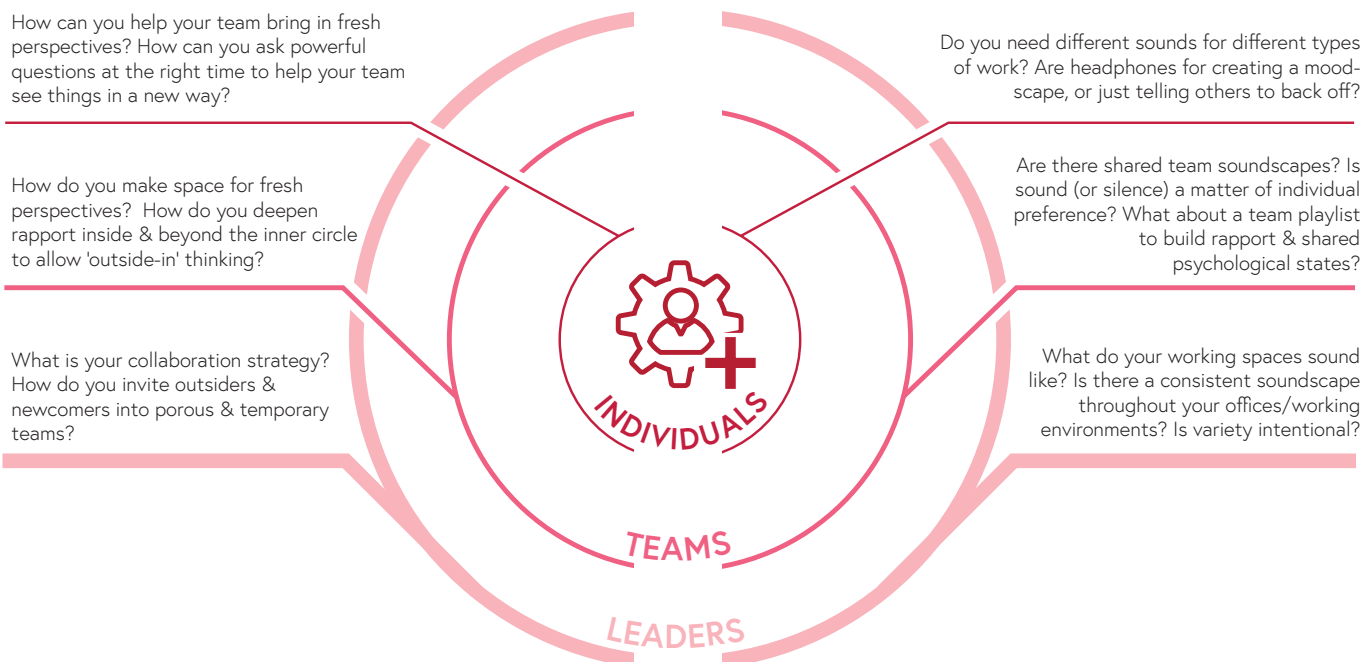
### Surround sound

Building a sense of shared experience could include a team soundscape

Do you need different sounds for different types of work? Are headphones for creating a mood-scape, or just telling others to back off?

Are there shared team soundscapes? Is sound (or silence) a matter of individual preference? What about a team playlist to build rapport & shared psychological states?

What do your working spaces sound like? Is there a consistent soundscape throughout your offices/working environments? Is variety intentional?



# STANDARD

## Planning makes possible

Unlike other workplaces, Mundipharma employees were far less likely to report feeling overwhelmed by communications technologies

What regular rhythm of thinking & collaborating time keeps you on top of things? What would it take for your thinking time to feel supported?

Is the team all in tune about what it means to 'be working'? How are you reducing anxious presenteeism & encouraging productive presence?

What signals & social nudges demonstrate that you value focus time as well as collaboration? Do people have 'room' to sit & think?

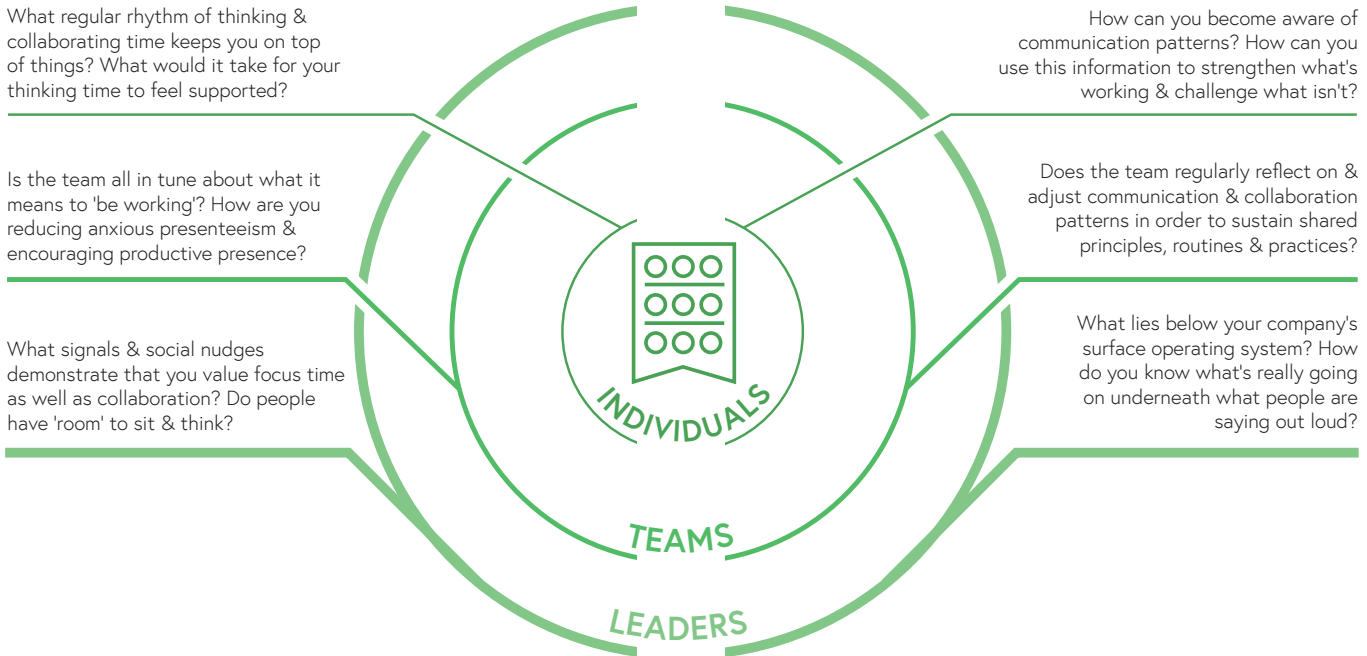
## Understand your company's OS

What is the fundamental guiding principle at the heart of your business which reaches everything you do?

How can you become aware of communication patterns? How can you use this information to strengthen what's working & challenge what isn't?

Does the team regularly reflect on & adjust communication & collaboration patterns in order to sustain shared principles, routines & practices?

What lies below your company's surface operating system? How do you know what's really going on underneath what people are saying out loud?



# ORCHESTRATION

## Jazz it up

The confidence to jump into the mix, connect & improvise flexibly is a powerful tool for workforce inclusivity

How can you take advantage of your role in different scenarios to provide the backing for others & take your turn to play solos?

What rituals make for lively synchronicity for virtual teams? How can you make the most of the liberating containment of repeating collaboration rituals & routines?

How can you consistently reinvent the rhythm on both a big & small scale in a way that creates clarity & generates energy & connection?

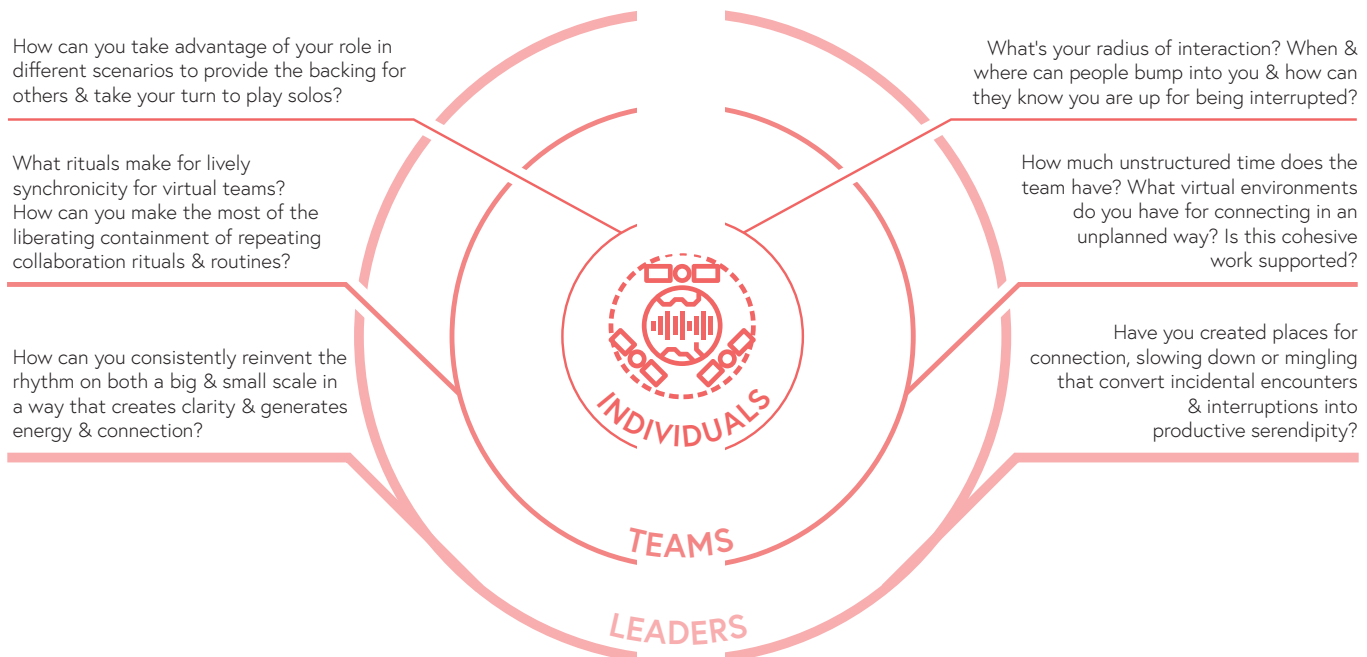
## Build beacons

Whether you're always on the go with no fixed desks or working in the same place every day, gathering points like whiteboards give people focal points to rally round

What's your radius of interaction? When & where can people bump into you & how can they know you are up for being interrupted?

How much unstructured time does the team have? What virtual environments do you have for connecting in an unplanned way? Is this cohesive work supported?

Have you created places for connection, slowing down or mingling that convert incidental encounters & interruptions into productive serendipity?



## SELECTION

### Quality kit creates trust

The right tool for the right job is important in any workplace, but there's a special emphasis on audiovisual equipment that supports communication in distributed, multilingual teams

Can you anticipate when you need quiet surroundings or privacy for calls? How do you avoid having to hang around in corridors making calls?

Have you formed a collective agreement for when to focus on the most efficient way of getting the job done given current skills? Have you allowed time to innovate with new tools?

Is the company kit reliable & easy? Are there everyday obstructions to productive work? Are people encouraged to play with new technologies & approaches?

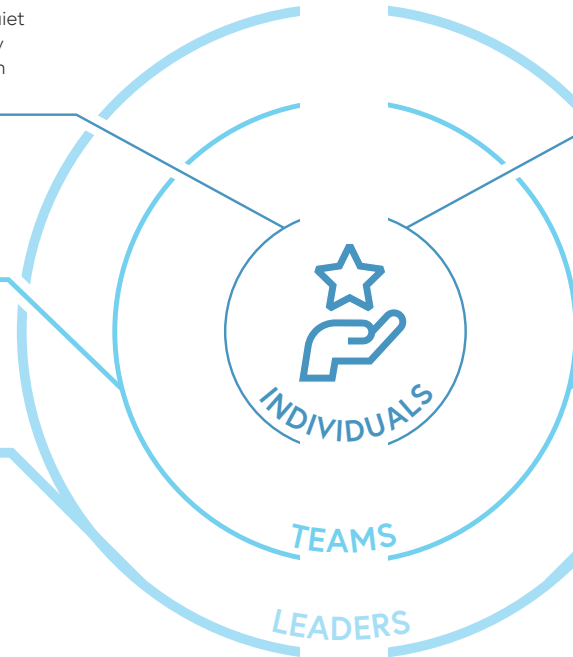
### Camaraderie counts for a lot

Having physical spaces that feel inviting, like home, both for focus time & to connect with each other intentionally or by chance, is important

How can you balance solo working time with showing up, seeing & being seen, creating lines of sight, connections & deepened mutual awareness, rapport & respect?

What spaces, physical or virtual, temporary or permanent, does your team call 'home'? Where do you belong, kick back & be at ease with each other & with guests to the team?

How are you showing up in communal spaces? How are you demonstrating the behaviours that you want to see? How are you contributing to the atmosphere of the spaces?



## CONDITION

### Read the room

Successfully navigating organizational culture requires an ability to understand unspoken expectations & norms

What spatial clues do you use to tell you how this workspace works? How do you test your assumptions & fill information gaps?

Where is your team's 'home' digitally & physically? What features of this space give you a shared sense of belonging? How do you invite others in?

Whether you want them to or not, people will 'read the space'. What signals are you sending through the way spaces are organized & inhabited?

### A workplace that works for us

With any proposed working environment change, it's critical to empower teams to take an active role in considering how they want to work together in the new space: what's currently working that they want to keep?

What support is in place to prepare you for new ways of working? How can you be your own best advocate for ways of working that work for you?

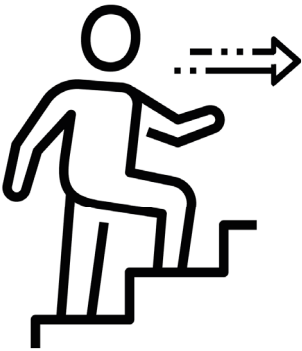
How does your team adopt or adapt working guidelines? What experiments could you design to discover more productive patterns?

How could a change in working practice create unexpected impacts? Are you ready for quick repairs if needed? How do you convey what 'good' is?

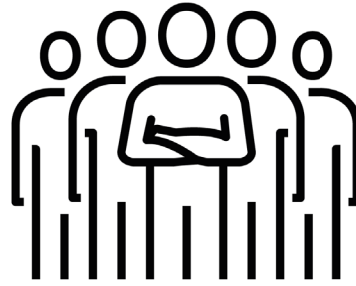




# Leaders



# Teams



# Individuals





# Leaders

What is your collaboration strategy? How do you invite outsiders & newcomers into porous & temporary teams?

What do your working spaces sound like? Is there a consistent soundscape throughout your offices/working environments? Is variety intentional?

What signals & social nudges demonstrate that you value focus time as well as collaboration? Do people have 'room' to sit & think?

What lies below your company's surface operating system? How do you know what's really going on underneath what people are saying out loud?

How can you consistently reinvent the rhythm on both a big & small scale in a way that creates clarity & generates energy & connection?

Have you created places for connection, slowing down or mingling that convert incidental encounters & interruptions into productive serendipity?

Is the company kit reliable & easy? Are there everyday obstructions to productive work? Are people encouraged to play with new technologies & approaches?

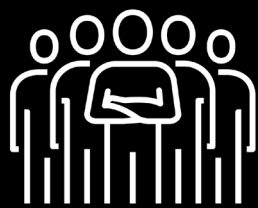
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How could a change in working practice create unexpected impacts? Are you ready for quick repairs if needed? How do you convey what 'good' is?

**AGENCY**

**STAND**



# Teams

How do you make space for fresh perspectives? How do you deepen rapport inside & beyond the inner circle to allow 'outside-in' thinking?

Are there shared team soundscapes? Is sound (or silence) a matter of individual preference? What about a team playlist to build rapport & shared psychological states?

Is the team all in tune about what it means to 'be working'? How are you reducing anxious presenteeism & encouraging productive presence?

Does the team regularly reflect on & adjust communication & collaboration patterns in order to sustain shared principles, routines & practices?

What rituals make for lively synchronicity for virtual teams? How can you make the most of the liberating containment of collaboration rituals & routines?

How much unstructured time does the team have? What virtual environments do you have for connecting in an unplanned way? Is this cohesive work supported?

How are you showing up in communal spaces? How are you demonstrating the behaviours that you want to see? How are you contributing to the atmosphere of the spaces?

What spaces, physical or virtual, does your team call 'home'? Where do you belong, kick back & be at ease with each other & with guests to the team?

Where is your team's 'home' digitally & physically? What features of this space give you a shared sense of belonging? How do you invite others in?

How does your team adopt or adapt working guidelines? What experiments could you design to discover more productive patterns?





# Individuals

How can you help your team bring in fresh perspectives? How can you ask powerful questions at the right time to help your team see things in a new way?

Do you need different sounds for different types of work? Are headphones for creating a mood-scape, or just telling others to back off?

What regular rhythm of thinking & collaborating time keeps you on top of things? What would it take for your thinking time to feel supported?

How can you become aware of communication patterns? How can you use this information to strengthen what's working & challenge what isn't?

How can you take advantage of your role in different scenarios to provide the backing for others, & take your turn to play solos?

What's your radius of interaction? When & where can people bump into you & how can they know you are up for being interrupted?

Can you anticipate when you need quiet surroundings or privacy for calls? How do you avoid having to hang around in corridors making calls?

How can you balance solo working time with showing up, seeing & being seen, creating connections & mutual awareness, rapport & respect?

What spatial clues do you use to tell you how this workspace works? How do you test your assumptions & fill information gaps?

What support is in place to prepare you for new ways of working? How can you be your own best advocate for ways of working that work for you?

# Supercharge your space: key questions



**Time**



**Space**



**Attitude**

	<b>Time</b>	<b>Space</b>	<b>Attitude</b>
<b>AGENCY</b>	Do you master your schedule or does your schedule master you?	What are your personal hacks to make space to think & do your best work?	How could your team embed outside-in thinking that allows you to get fresh perspectives on your working practices?
<b>STANDARD</b>	Does your team value reflective & planning time or is it all about doing? What impact does that have on your work?	If your organization is getting the basics right, how can you push for a workplace that inspires?	What could you introduce to your space that would make it easy for people to develop & act on a shared sense of responsibility?
<b>ORCHESTRATION</b>	What habits & shared signals can your team devise to let each other know when you need focus time & when you're available to collaborate?	How can you develop effective synchronicities & coordinating habits among distributed teams?	What tools or spaces does your team currently associate with collaborating? What kinds of experiments can you try for working in new ways?
<b>SELECTION</b>	When you need to switch between modes like high-intensity collaborative time & more reflective time, how can you make the transition smooth?	What kind of kit does your team need to get the job done? Do you have the right spaces for different kinds of work?	What are the vectors your team uses to establish camaraderie? How can you develop effective team cohesion across digital as well as physical channels?
<b>CONDITION</b>	How can you encourage refreshment breaks & changing perspectives to stimulate greater productivity?	What habits & behaviours do you want to encourage in a space you are changing? How will your new space support those habits?	What are the deeper motivations hidden under the surface descriptions? What's really going on for your team? How can you dive under the surface?

# Case Studies



## CASE STUDY

supplementing the LEF Report

# RECONFIGURING THE COLLABORATIVE WORKSPACE: MAKING THE MOST OF TIME, SPACE & ATTITUDE

## AGENCY

This is the first of five extended case studies supporting our report *Reconfiguring the collaborative workspace: making the most of time, space & attitude*. All the case studies contain rich detail expanding on the primary conclusions and change provocations described in the report, exploring the nuances of our learning in a deeper way. Details of our research methodology are given in the report.

The headline concepts that emerged from our fieldwork were:

- **Agency**, as in the power and independence to influence one's own environment

- *Standard*, in the sense of useful enabling constraints but also banners or flags to rally around
- *Orchestration*, in both its musical and mechanical senses of many different parts coming together to form a complex yet organized whole
- *Selection*, the rich variety of choices that people have agency to act upon
- *Condition*, the state or working order one finds oneself in; the work one undertakes in order to achieve one's optimal state

This case study focuses on the ethnographic detail demonstrating the organizing principle of *agency*, as we found it in the organization described.

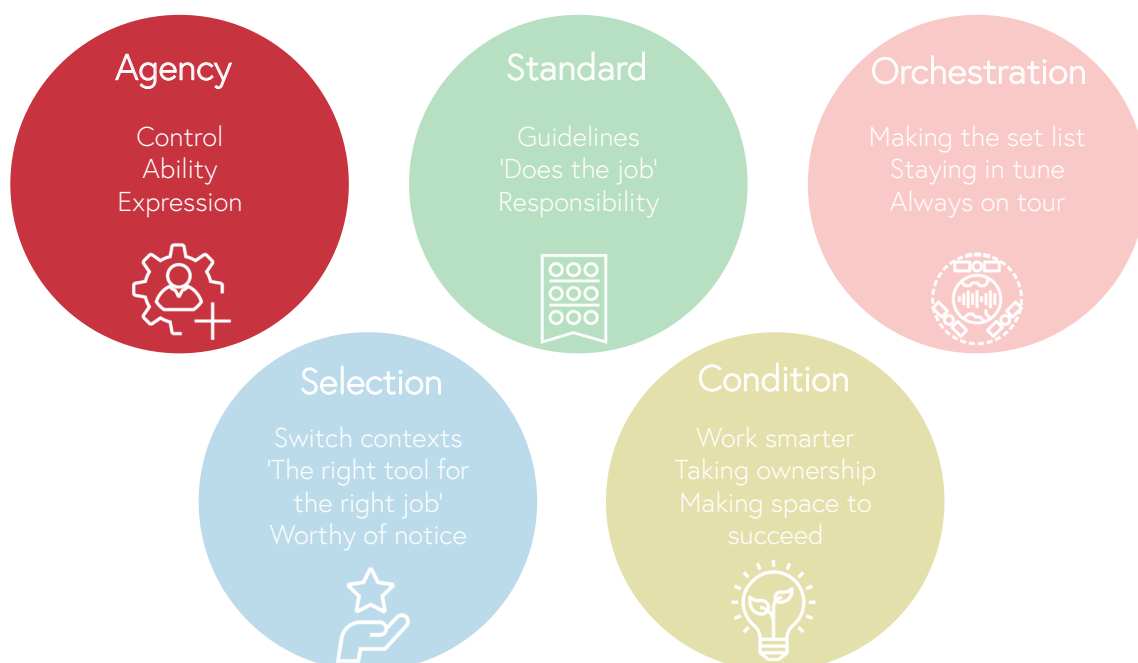


Figure 1 – The five organizing principles and their key features





## The team

Blandings<sup>1</sup> is a worldwide creative agency offering branding, marketing, advertising and public relations strategy to organizations around the globe. Relentlessly focused on people's perceptions and behaviours as clues to provoking radical change, Blandings moves easily between play and seriousness of purpose to achieve an interesting mixture of data-driven creativity. This negotiation between agency and structure is present everywhere, but it is perhaps fitting that the field site where the dichotomy came out particularly strongly was an advertising agency.

This case study highlights how an organization can open the gates and develop better mechanisms for managing porous teams by encouraging outside-in thinking. It also illustrates the need to get ahead of change and consider the behavioural impacts of introducing new technologies, spaces and working policies rather than being caught unawares by allowing bad habits and unintended consequences to develop.

## The organizing term: agency

In the social sciences, the term *agency* typically refers to an individual's ability to act as a free agent; to make choices and to influence one's environment. Agency is limited by *structure* – social norms, customs, beliefs and institutionalized power – that limits one's individual will. Unless we live on a remote island or mountaintop with no interaction with other human beings, none of us have complete agency; we all to some extent agree to cooperate with the structures around us in our everyday lives. This is especially true in formalized environments such as the workplace, where even if our individual work is solitary we are almost never working independently towards a goal that we set for ourselves. Every day there is a complex negotiation between our own individual preferences, choices and judgements and the roles, relationships and habits demanded of us by our organizations.

Several studies have shown that higher levels of autonomy contribute to work satisfaction and overall wellbeing<sup>2</sup>. But it's not just about feeling good: autonomy also increases overall productivity. One study of British civil servants found that a lack of job control contributed more to incidence of coronary heart disease than standard risks such as smoking<sup>3</sup>. That's a high cost in human terms as well as lost productive time.

## Time. Space. Attitude.

**Time:** At Blandings we found a wide range of views, from study participants who felt their schedules had minds of their own and they themselves had little control over their time, to those who said they felt empowered to set their own boundaries around working time and meeting schedules.



**Space:** People engaged in various tactics to make space to think and do their best work. This ranged from isolating themselves from interruptions, through seeking creative stimulus through music or different surroundings, to shifting work hours to separate focus time from collaboration time.



**Attitude:** A mixture of eccentricity and urgency ran through all the data we collected at this field site. One area where this stood out is in Blandings' openness to external collaborations. During our fieldwork with them, more than one team member was visiting on secondment from an external organization. This gives Blandings the opportunity not only to observe what other organizations are doing and thinking, but also for its internal operating machinery to be directly influenced by those external perspectives. This requires a great deal of trust, willingness to take risks and to experiment even when that experiment might not lead to any observable benefits (up to and including inviting a rogue anthropologist in to look things over).



Three key aspects of agency we observed in our research at Blandings are *control*, the ability to have influence over one's environment; *ability*, the capability and resources to achieve one's goals; and *expression*, an aspect of control or influence that came out particularly strongly in this working environment.

1. Not its real name. I've chosen the surname of the eponymous hero from the 1948 Carey Grant film *Mr Blandings Builds His Dream House*, about an advertising executive struggling to support his dream of a countryside idyll.  
 2. Daniel Wheatley, 'Autonomy in Paid Work and Employee Subjective Well-Being', *Work and Occupations*, August 2017  
 3. M. G. Marmot et al, 'Contribution of job control and other risk factors to social variations in coronary heart disease incidence', *The Lancet*, 26 July 1997

## Control

Study participants' anxieties over their environment came out particularly strongly when they were talking about their working time or schedules. Every single person in Blandings said the very first thing they do in the morning is check their email (or make sure their WiFi is working so they can check email). Even when they primarily work co-located in the same office, Blandings employees reported feeling an almost performative urge to send flurries of early-morning emails to show others that they are awake, available and definitely on the ball.

### Digital presenteeism in action at Blandings

*"Check email on my phone as I wake up. We deal with China and the Philippines so often have to pick up overnight correspondence."*

*"The Outlook app on my phone! I'm always watching my work emails to see what's happening."*

This is not unique to Blandings: many interviewees from other organizations spoke about this kind of *digital presenteeism*. Pilar Orti, founder of remote working consultancy Virtual Not Distant, says of the creeping pressure to be available: "Even basic things like notifications can lead to a perceived lack of balance and to work-home interference or a sense of burden. Or conversely, things can get missed and someone is seen as a poor collaborator or difficult to work with." Léonie Watson, director of the technology accessibility consultancy TetraLogical and member of the W3C advisory board, speaks of an earlier time when there was less pressure to live life so fully online: ***"I remember when in the early days of the web somebody would send you an email, and it was perfectly OK not to reply to it, maybe not even the same day, if you had to go and look into something and get back to them. And we need to head a little bit back towards that more relaxed attitude. If someone sends you a text message or Slack message, you don't need to reply to it three seconds later. And you don't need to interpret the fact that someone hasn't replied to it immediately as being a brush-off of some kind. There are 101 reasons why someone might not respond immediately. And that's OK. I think it's partly just conditioning ourselves to a different reality of communication, without unconscious signals. And also just being a little bit more relaxed. I think the platforms can also do more to help: [being blind] I don't get plagued, obviously, by the little visual things flickering on and off telling me 'this will be a message', but I've got very good at turning off the audio bleeps."***

Digital presenteeism is partly about responding to messages or showing up as available in the company chat or video call tool at all hours, but it also includes sending messages with redundant or unnecessary content simply to show that you've seen or read something, particularly to make sure the boss or another influential party believes you're online and engaged – a digital "I was here". For these messages, the subtext is more important than the text.

Having the power to create the right thinking environment at the right time is critical for all workers, but as we'll see, some workplaces are better set up for this than others. At Blandings, although there is a high degree of freedom around physically where to work (including multiple floors to choose from and the flexibility to work from home), the convention in the team participating in the study is to stick pretty close to their team desk area to facilitate impromptu meetings and conversations that flow into each other organically. Several people reported that their favourite place to work is the large communal table where their team is based in the main office: being surrounded by colleagues facilitates impromptu conversation. One person said they feel "horrendously guilty" when working from home, despite the whole team having explicit permission to do so.

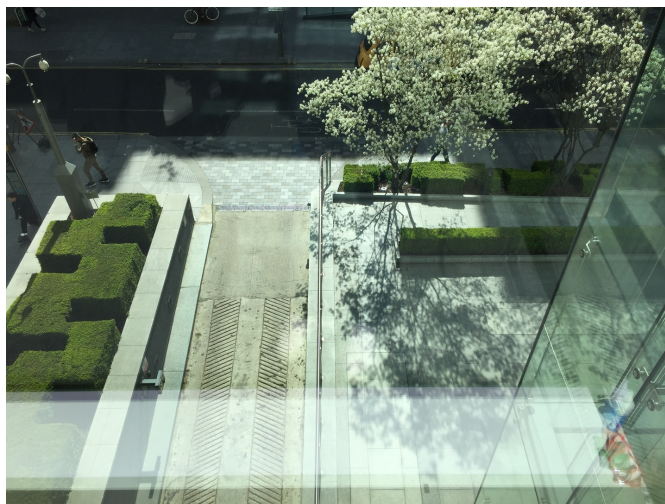


Figure 2 – "Working from home today so only the occasional child or dog stops by"<sup>4</sup>

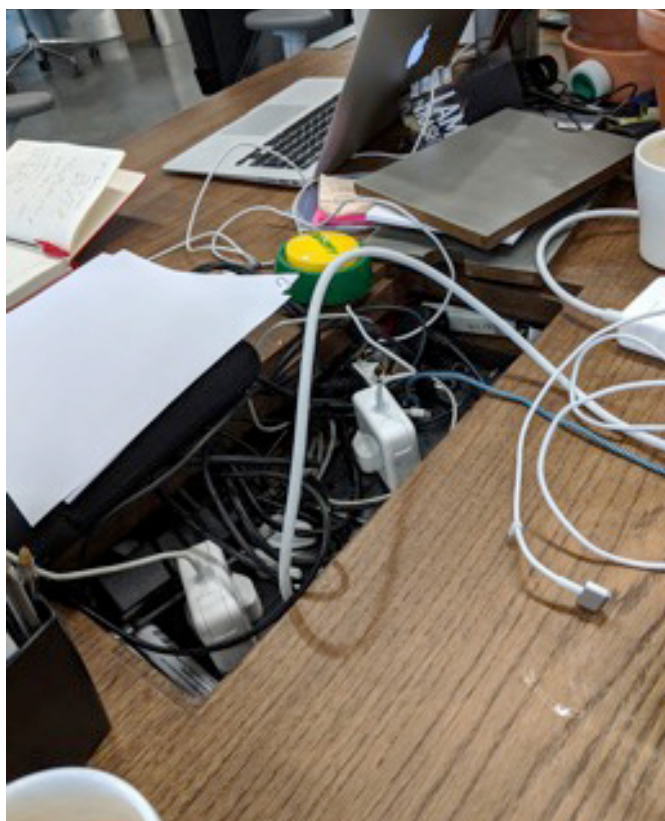
While the team has access to some fancy kit for facilitating remote conversations, above and beyond the standard webcam and microphones that are common to all laptops these days, Blandings reported the lowest usage of different types of device during the working week. Conversely, Blandings employees interacted with the highest number of people – around 20 per day compared to the study average of five. This implies a uniquely sociable culture that relies on face-to-face communication to get the job done. No wonder study participants fret over the social niceties of carving out focus time: "If you have lots of work to get on with,



you can feel a bit antisocial sitting at the desk and not talking to anyone if other people are being sociable and have a conversation. It would be nice to have more spaces where you can just sit by yourself and get on with work without feeling like you're blanking everyone else. Especially if you are the first one there, when the second person arrives you can feel socially obliged to have a conversation even though the reason you got there earlier was to get on with what you need to do!"



**Figure 3 – One Blandings employee's favourite working space for focus time: high up, lots of light, away from the communal desk area**



**Figure 4 – A typical problem at Blandings was laptop cables catching on water glasses and shorting out the electrical plugs**

## Ability

Agency requires the capability to put intentions into practice. In a working environment, this means having the technical and relational capabilities to bring ideas to life, individually or collectively. At Blandings, the team put into practice strategies to improve ways of working through sharing tips and tricks, making time to reflect on what to do better, and collectively experimenting with different practices like blocking out hours for focus time or having set work-from-home days.

When everything is running smoothly, the experience can be like this report from Blandings demonstrating how a combination of tools and channels can create a seamless experience: "It was a virtual phone call today using Zoom. Video was off, but we shared our screen to talk them through a presentation. I had the presentation up on my screen, and my colleague also dialled in in the same room, so he was sitting next to me and could see on his screen what the client would also see as I was sharing my screen. It was useful being able to only share the PowerPoint presentation with them, so that I could then open up a draft email and be writing notes, and they wouldn't be able to see that, they would still only see the presentation."

## Bridging technologically mediated trust gaps

Kerri Miller, developer advocate at continuous integration platform Travis CI, says: "Empathy and that sense of understanding of what people do is really accelerated by short bursts of time together, and it's very, very difficult to establish that same level of rapport without having that actual physical colocation time ... **If you don't have the time and the space to develop those relationships where you can develop that professional trust [then] if I don't hear from you for six hours, do I trust that you're still working? Or does that mean maybe something's wrong? Did you have something happen in your life, or are you stuck?"**

PJ Hagerty, founder of developer relations service DevRelate, tells us that attempts to create some focus time by disconnecting from communication tools can backfire: "[When] you snooze out alerts from Slack, or use do not disturb on Skype, **people forget they put those things up and well, they're completely available [but] it doesn't look like they are.**"

Barney Smith, Founder and CEO of Perform Green, a sustainable change management consultancy, says: "All the discipline we learned around in-person meetings – **having an agenda, knowing whose turn it is to speak, being clear about expected speed of response** (sometimes remotely people put something out there and they're waiting for a response and it's not clear when that response is coming), **being fully present and paying attention** – this is getting lost with remote working."

Pilar Orti of Virtual Not Distant says: "**In a remote workspace you have to make work more deliberate and visible – visibility that might get taken for granted in a physical space needs to be made explicit in a virtual environment;** for example, holding one-on-ones in a group chat room; working on documents in the cloud where my teammates can see and access them instead of on my computer."

Adrian Roselli, an accessibility consultant, says: "When you have a distributed team ... there's a combination of not knowing who can contribute, and that extra friction of 'Oh, I'll go ask on Skype, I'll go ask in the Slack channel, I'll put something on the board.' **Sometimes that friction is no more than it would be for somebody to walk across the floor to the other bank of cubes, and if they won't do it in real life, they're certainly not going to do it if there's just as much effort required in whatever tool they're using.**"

But there were still obstacles to taking action, sometimes not of one's own making. Reliability in technology, lack of trust that it's going to do what it says on the tin, definitely causes some hindrances. One study participant spent a full day trying to recover a rogue SharePoint account that had developed authentication problems. People also mentioned the frustration that comes from communication tools that aren't working: when someone isn't responding on the company chat tool, are they ignoring me or have they not seen the message because there's a problem? Is that pause because of a delay in the audio on this call or because the other side disagrees with me and is thinking about what to say next? These types of problems create not merely functional frustrations about a tool not working, but trust gaps between the people operating them. If there are no alternative means for managing these technologically mediated trust gaps, it can become harder and harder to close the loop.

Even when everything is working fine, rapport can be harder to develop when not everyone is equally remote. At Blandings, most of the team participating in the study work in a closely-knit group based in one office, but a few people are further afield. Everyone agreed that their highly conversational style makes it harder to collaborate asynchronously or using remote tools. This is particularly true for ideation and brainstorming sessions, which typically take place in a large group with ideas fired around rapidly and physical props like walls of sticky notes. Communication with remote employees, therefore, tends to be more transactional, taking what one participant called a "divide and conquer" approach, dividing up work rather than full collaboration. Without developing methods for remote and co-located employees to establish trust, unspoken assumptions can begin to take shape. "Sometimes I think people just see me as sitting here firing away these emails asking them to do things," said one primarily remote employee. Fortunately, as we'll see in the case study on *Standard*, there are companies that are developing effective means for remote collaborations.

## Expression

***"I work best lying on my front with my laptop in front of me in bed, so I'm probably not the most representative."***

– a Blandings study participant

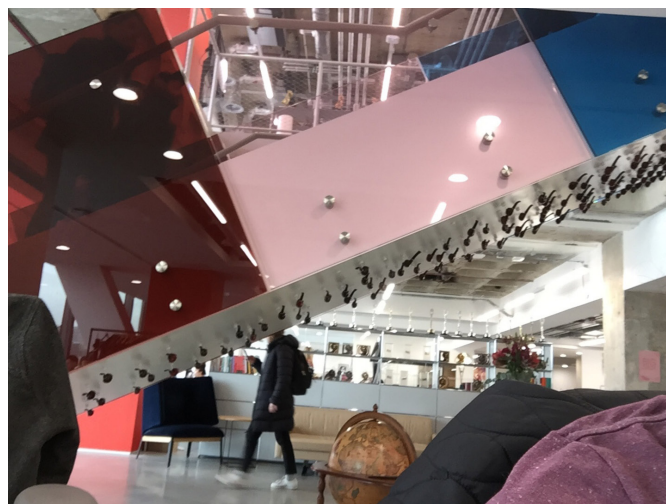
Naturally in a creative agency, connecting with one's expressive side is valued. Finding the space or environments that feed that creativity are a recognized part of the deal. Partly this comes as a matter of course in the Blandings building, with its beautiful vistas and funky furniture. One participant said their favourite place to work was on the ninth floor where they can sit



overlooking St Paul's cathedral and the wide panorama of London for some reflective time. The team also frequently chose to meet in the café on the top floor of the building, not only because of the shortage of available meeting spaces elsewhere but also to enjoy the change of scenery. In a different office, one person mentioned their personalized desk including photos of their family, plants and their own snacks as important to their working environment.



**Figure 5 – Impromptu meeting areas in creative spaces**



**Figure 6 – Blandings' whimsical design features**

It's not only about being surrounded by the right visual design: the right *soundscape* is also important. We heard: "My music app is extremely important to me, and makes anything I'm doing a bit more interesting and engaging. Also good for modulating my mood if I want to psych myself up for something or calm myself down. I don't use it at work though as often as I'd like." Several people mentioned using headphones as a *do not disturb* indicator (in fact one person had large headphone-like ear defenders with no speakers in them) but it's more than just the external signalling that headphones provide to others: one person said headphones let you "be somewhere else". Disappearing into the creative space within is an important aspect of the work at Blandings, while still being able to quickly jump out and work together.

On a functional level, music helps block out background noise and create a barrier to the outside world. On a more ephemeral level, music can help boost our ability to access particular emotional or physiological states: helping spur our alertness, for example, or adding to a reflective atmosphere. There could be a role here for using music to help spur *shared* psychological states: music could be a facilitating tactic for inviting others into our mental workspaces to facilitate a shared understanding of a project or goal.

The primacy of creative thought at Blandings extends to how the working environment is allocated: creatives who work on client-facing content and interventions get to work in a creative-looking space while their (supposedly) more functional internal services colleagues have a much more perfunctory, cramped and less well-lit space elsewhere in the building. There is a solidarity of sorts that emerges when drawing the short straw in any allocation of limited resources, and at Blandings the non-creative teams have given their side of the office

a robustly lived-in look. It may be scruffy, it seems to shout, but it's ours. I suspect this pattern is replicated in many organizations: there is a group of rock stars who get the best of everything (first dibs on new kit, the office closest to the canteen, etc.) and the others who must make do – much like the beleaguered main characters in the British office comedy *The IT Crowd*, a small IT support team relegated to the unsavoury basement of a large and flashy corporation.

Organizations would do well to notice these patterns and to find ways to more fairly allocate limited resources, whether they be seats by the window, the latest digital tools or control over one's attention. Creating the right structures – physical and organizational – empowers people to use agency in the most effective way.

## Change provocations

*In each case study we present a brief selection of what we think are the key tips, hints and provocative questions to take away. The appendix of the report includes an extensive directory of organizational prompts for the leadership, team and individual levels.*

- **Open the gates.** At LEF, we believe organizations will become ever-more porous. As more and more organizations move to becoming *platforms* with shifting boundaries between consumers and producers<sup>5</sup>, teams will need to increasingly seek mechanisms for involving outside perspectives for co-creation and collaboration.

The Blandings team is already embracing this way of working through opening the doors to secondments, site visits and other means of encouraging outside-in thinking. Managing this effectively requires developing mechanisms for frequent team onboarding and disembarking so that visitors can get up to speed quickly and feel like one of the team.

- **Surround sound.** Soundscapes in the office came up over and over again in our fieldwork and interviews. While this is the special bugbear of those in open-plan offices and cubicles, building a sense of shared experience is also a concern for distributed teams. This could include a team soundscape.

## AGENCY

### Open the gates

At Leading Edge Forum we believe organizations will become ever more porous

How can you help your team bring in fresh perspectives? How can you ask powerful questions at the right time to help your team see things in a new way?

How do you make space for fresh perspectives? How do you deepen rapport inside & beyond the inner circle to allow 'outside-in' thinking?

What is your collaboration strategy? How do you invite outsiders & newcomers into porous & temporary teams?

### Surround sound

Building a sense of shared experience could include a team soundscape

Do you need different sounds for different types of work? Are headphones for creating a mood-scape, or just telling others to back off?

Are there shared team soundscapes? Is sound (or silence) a matter of individual preference? What about a team playlist to build rapport & shared psychological states?

What do your working spaces sound like? Is there a consistent soundscape throughout your offices/working environments? Is variety intentional?

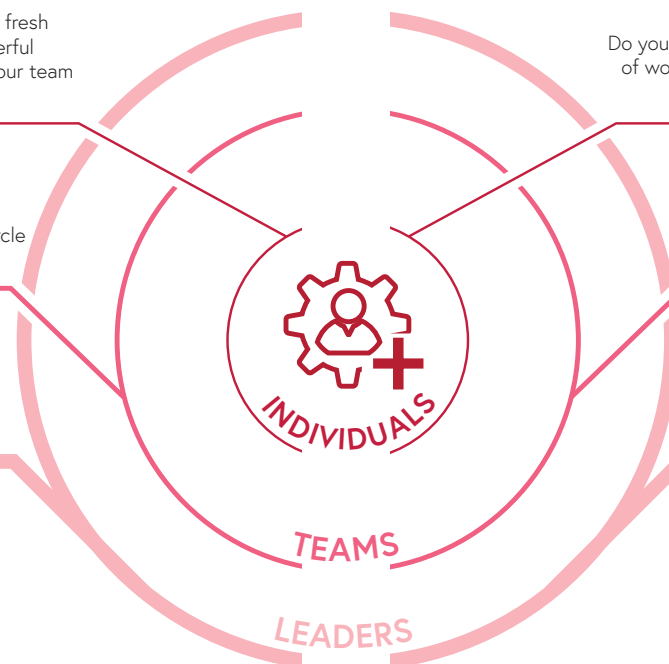


Figure 7 – Key change provocations

## CASE STUDY

supplementing the LEF Report

# RECONFIGURING THE COLLABORATIVE WORKSPACE: MAKING THE MOST OF TIME, SPACE & ATTITUDE

## STANDARD

This is the second of five extended case studies supporting our report *Reconfiguring the collaborative workspace: making the most of time, space & attitude*. All the case studies contain rich detail expanding on the primary conclusions and change provocations described in the report, exploring the nuances of our learning in a deeper way. Details of our research methodology are given in the report.

The headline concepts that emerged from our fieldwork were:

- **Agency**, as in the power and independence to influence one's own environment

- **Standards**, in the sense of useful enabling constraints but also banners or flags to rally around
- **Orchestration**, in both its musical and mechanical senses of many different parts coming together to form a complex yet organized whole
- **Selection**, the rich variety of choices that people have agency to act upon
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This case study focuses on the ethnographic detail demonstrating the organizing principle of *standard*, as we found it in the organization described.

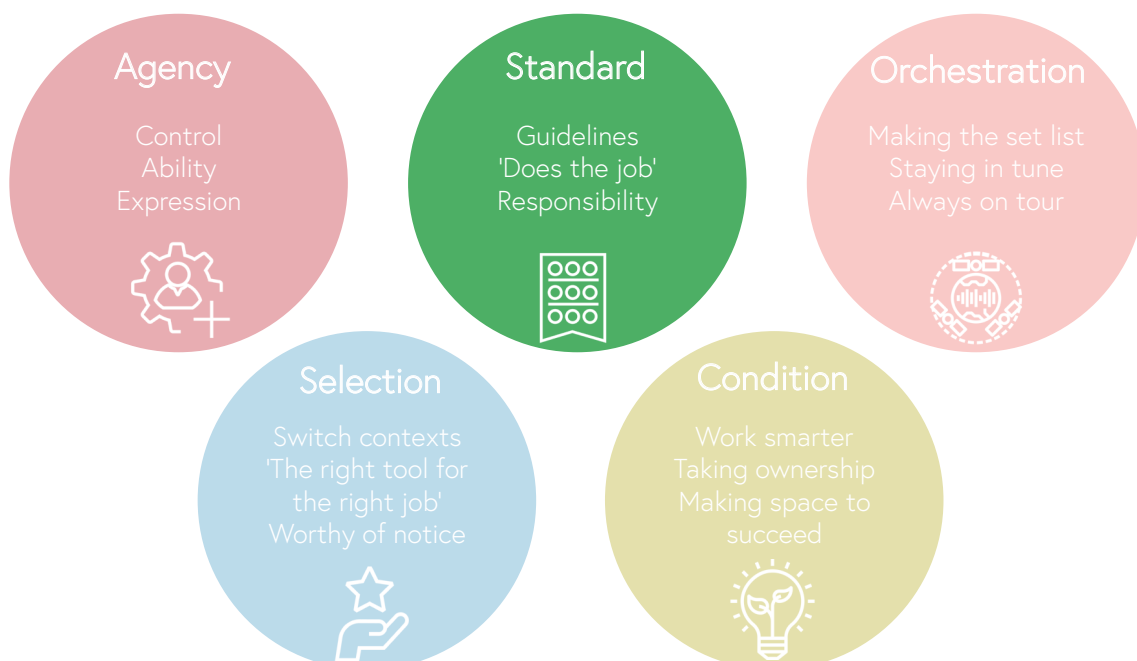


Figure 1 – The five organizing principles and their key features



## The team

The Mundipharma global network of independent associated companies shares a common purpose: to identify and accelerate the development of meaningful medicines that add value for patients and healthcare providers around the globe. The network has a presence in over 120 countries. In Europe, the network employs more than 2,000 people from R&D to manufacturing/supply and commercial, with revenues in excess of €1 billion. Unsurprisingly in an industry as heavily regulated as pharmaceuticals, a commitment to shared codes and work aims came out particularly strongly as a factor in people's day-to-day working lives, maximizing productive time in both collaborative and solo working activities.

## The organizing term: standard

A *standard* can be a procedure or guideline – an agreed code that governs expected outcomes. It can also be a descriptor of something's function or condition, in the sense of basic, normal, satisfactory. While that might seem uninspiring, there's also nothing that stands out as uncomfortable or problematic when something is standard: there's a sense that everything is OK. Finally, a standard can be a rallying flag around which to converge or to coordinate an important venture (typically a military campaign).

Standards can be viewed as a type of structure, as defined in the report under *Agency*. They can also be an enabling constraint. Enabling constraints show up in psychology and in information theory as a mechanism that gives form and structure to intention<sup>1</sup>. Enabling constraints, rather than hindering action, allow us to achieve more than we could otherwise. The rules of a haiku, for example, or that of a game, are enabling constraints.

All working environments are complex systems and as such require enabling constraints or else they will succumb to entropy and chaos. This case study encourages us to consider how building reflective periods into the day, stepping back and taking a holistic view of one's work, is an enabling constraint that maximizes productive time in both collaborative and solo working activities.

A second lesson from this case is to uncover the fundamental working principles – the company's operating system – in order to understand the mindsets and shared assumptions that define at the systemic level the way things work. In this case study, much like the case study on *Agency*, it became clear that the unspoken operating principles of the organization reflected the organization's industry and purpose as well as its character.

## Time. Space. Attitude.

**Time:** Compared to other groups in our study, Mundipharma participants spent far more time planning their working weeks and carving out reflective time to review lessons learned from the past.



This was seen in a later-than-average start time for the first meeting of the day, implying an early morning focus on reviewing and setting the structure rather than diving straight into *doing*. Despite all this planning, people still had to be able to adjust and rearrange to accommodate others' needs on the fly.

**Space:** For Mundipharma, the overarching sense of how people feel about their physical environment and digital tools at their disposal would best be described as 'satisfactory'. People were able to achieve what they need to achieve with little complaint or hindrance. Everything is accepted; it's OK.



**Attitude:** As well as the reflective mindset mentioned above, being at ease with sitting and thinking, we noticed that all the photos and videos people shared of their workstations were scrupulously clean and tidy compared to photos of other workplaces. There was barely any clutter on people's desks. We think this may be one indicator of an overarching culture of responsibility and adhering to the standards in what is obviously a very heavily regulated industry and environment.





## Guidelines

At Mundipharma, employees were far less likely than other study participants to report diving into email and other communication tools first thing in the morning. This may speak to a more reflective and structured mindset than in most of the companies who participated. Representative supporting evidence included:

- "The most important thing is the calendar on my phone. To make sure I am clear enough on the respective daily/weekly commitments."
- "This morning I decided to first read some lessons learned from a previous project."
- "Most time spent around consolidating tasks and paper notes from the past days."
- "Will now have two hours of driving, a couple of phone calls, listening to music and loose reflection."

The Leesman Index says " ... to create a high performing workplace, all phases and activities that underpin knowledge work need to be deeply understood and well provided for – both individual/concentrative and interactive/collaborative. But concentrative work activities would appear to be the 'hygiene factor' for all employees. Get these wrong and perception of personal productivity falls. Get the balance right and the picture is more positive."<sup>2</sup> Our expert interviews also demonstrated the importance of reflective thinking time for getting the job done.

Digital tools can be a help and a hindrance to making the space to think: many people complained about the endless proliferation of channels they're now expected to keep up with. Digital channels can always be paused or switched off, unlike physical interruptions which require a different space to retreat to. The real hindrance to focus time is an expectation of constant availability: in a culture where people are expected to be always interruptible, where there is no permission to switch off or retreat to one's own space, it doesn't matter whether the interruptions are coming from pinging notifications on a phone or a person hovering at one's elbow in an open-plan office.

## Presence management: making space to think

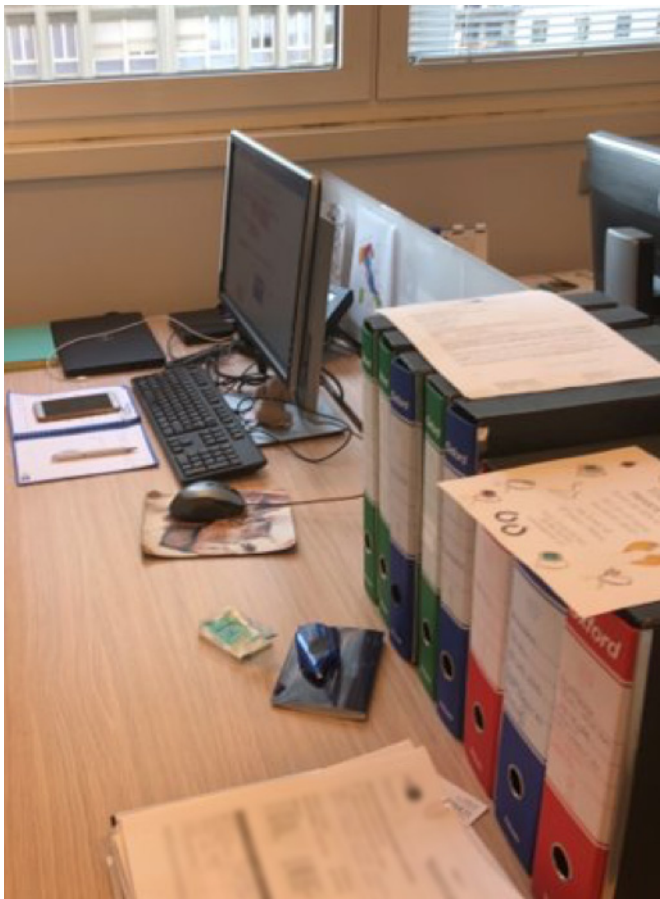
In LEF's *Use & Misuse* guide<sup>3</sup>, we advocated for employees making explicit choices about virtual presence in order to have the right balance between privacy (i.e. focused working time) and visibility (availability to collaborate). Too much of either means we cannot balance all the different types of work we need to achieve for optimum productivity.

Gary Turner, the UK & EMEA Managing Director of accounting platform Xero, says it's critical for organizations to understand boundaries, particularly around time: "Be respectful: if you're asking somebody to join a call at 9pm it needs to be high value. Recognize people have their own priorities. People have lives outside the eight hours a day they're expected to [work]. Sometimes it's the right thing to do for people to be on the call at 6:30 in the morning or at 10:30 at night, but not every morning or every night. Have clear rules of engagement about what it means to be respectful or people's time. **What I've found is it's not like the company expects you to do it, but people are so engaged they want to do it. They'll [willingly] make those sacrifices because they're so engaged and they want to be involved and sometimes you have to put your foot down and say no, don't do that.**"

Barney Smith of Perform Green says: "**One person's convenience, 'I can work at all hours', is another person's interruptions.**"

2. *The Next 250K*, Leesman, December 2017 <https://www.leesmanindex.com/250k/>

3. *The Use & Misuse of Collaborative Technologies: a Distillation of Best Practices, Good Form & Correct Behaviour for Corporate Communications*, LEF, 2006 & 2010



**Figure 2 – Set up for planning<sup>4</sup>**

In an industry as scrupulously regulated as pharmaceuticals, it's no surprise that managing guidelines, rules, regulations and standards is a big part of the job. What is noteworthy is how much working in an atmosphere imbued with this need extends out into all the working habits and practices of the organization. It's almost as though this is a core aspect of the company's operating system, as fundamentally differentiating as the Mac, Linux or Microsoft kernels. For Mundipharma, one aspect of this is operating within a heavily structured environment, which leads to a more reflective way of working. Your organization will have different driving factors, and by uncovering what those are you will have a deeper understanding of why people work in the way they do.

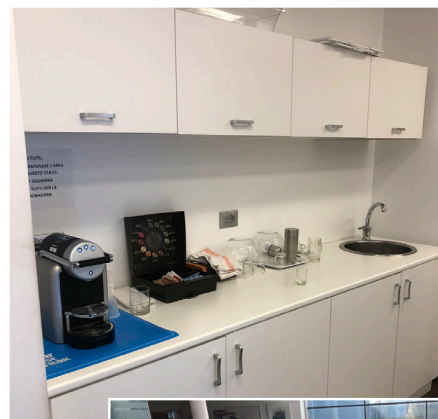
## 'Does the job'

***"I can find what I need. I can do what I need without obstruction."***

***– a Mundipharma research participant***

While nobody raved about the delights of the Mundipharma offices, in general respondents were satisfied that they could functionally do the work they need to do in what they described as a "pretty clean"

space. From our perspective, compared to most other working environments in our study, Mundipharma was scrupulously tidy with gleaming work surfaces everywhere. When presented with these findings, our primary contacts at Mundipharma credited "social nudges" for prevalent office tidiness: companies can create the behaviour they want to see by making it easy for employees to do the right thing. The office has plenty of waste receptacles and trolleys to return empty cups to rather than leaving them festering on the desk until the end of the day. The open-plan and glass-walled nature of the space means "everyone can see everything" leading to a high level of social pressure towards tidiness.



**Figure 3 – Clutter-free zones at Mundipharma**

Respondents' focus on the functional aspects of the environment suggested a tendency towards assessing space according to whether it meets requirements; is *up to standard* and can enable employees to deliver what they need to. Questions that could be asked here are how the environment can be pushed to not only meet the minimum level of what needs to be done but to actively encourage and inspire workers. As we saw in the Blandings case study (*Agency*), for creatives at least, there is often a recognition that inspiring surroundings will produce more inspired work. This is one of the benefits often vaunted by *digital nomads*: the flexibility to work anywhere allows them to pursue rich new experiences in all corners of the globe (the corners that have reliable high-speed WiFi, at least). There is also a risk for a functionally-focused office that adhering too closely to the current standard – the existing structured way of working – will not make room for future changes on the horizon and the kind of experimentation and unstructured thinking that's needed to take things to a new phase. Exploring some alternative working habits (such as creating more flexibility about when and where people can work) at the organizational level could unlock new possibilities for challenging the status quo.



**Figure 4 – Enthusiasm in the office**

Functionality and the ability to get work done without obstruction isn't only an issue for office-based workers. A core reason that many organizations are now adopting flexible and remote working policies is to gain access to a talented pool of workers who, for one reason or another, would find it difficult to be in a role that requires them to be physically present in an office at set times for five days a week.

## Building an inclusive culture through remote working and shared rituals

Remote working and working flexibly have the potential to unlock a deeper talent pool for organizations who without them miss out on the skills of people who are unable to work in more traditional environments which require presence in an office at set times of day. It can also provide inspiration for challenging the status quo and introducing a more experimental attitude.

Kyle Wilson, Head of Product and Business Strategy for new ventures and innovation for Microsoft's Dynamics 365 Mixed Reality, says of collaborative technologies: "You can be in different locations, and that flexibility [of using remote collaboration tools like shared documents] not only creates a healthy work environment, but also a very inclusive environment [even though] not everyone has to be in the same place at the same time."

At social media management software firm Buffer, remote working is core to operations. The ethos is that no Buffer employee should have any geographic advantage. Buffer's VP of Customer advocacy Åsa Nyström talks about how central this is: **"We're not doing remote work because we want to save money. We're doing remote work because we believe everyone can be more productive, everyone's happier. They can be in their happiest place [and] we can hire the best talent out there."**

Barney Smith, speaking about his prior work with Natural England, spoke about the advantages of moving to working flexibly: "At Natural England we very consciously made a shift to performance-based working so that people could work more flexibly and remotely. This helped us with three things: 1) **Retention – people who might otherwise have struggled to participate because of various factors were able to stay in their roles** 2) Savings on real estate, though we didn't do it primarily for that reason 3) We already had a very mobile/field-based work force and it was silly to ask those people to come into the office when they should have been out in the field to do their jobs. After we did this we saw that the usage on the IT systems peaked at three times: around 9-9:30am when people were coming in, around 4:30pm, and again around 9:30pm. **What this seemed to show was people, particularly working parents, were shifting their working days by logging off a bit early then logging back on after bedtime. So people could do their core hours – times they needed to speak to others, between say 10 and 4 – then log on for their asynchronous [communication] whenever suits them outside those hours."**



The UK Civil Service is in some ways ahead of the times when it comes to remote working and working flexibly: accessibility and inclusion for the workforce are issues it cannot afford to ignore and so there have been long-held policies around flexible hours, part-time jobs and role-sharing. However, technological support for enacting those policies effectively has been variable across departments. Michelle Patel, Head of Social Science at the Food Standards Agency, gave an example of one worker seeing a change in how collaboration tools supported better inclusivity: "One of the women at work has two children. The first time she came back from maternity leave part-time, she felt like she was completely excluded from the organization because she had to work slightly strange hours and wasn't present all the time. The second time she came back, she felt like ... **the culture and mindset of the organization towards working flexibly and working part time had changed entirely over the course of maybe five years.** I think the way that we have really grabbed on to digital ways of doing things is the art of necessity, frankly. But the knock-on effect, that positive impact, has been that people have felt able to contribute [who] perhaps wouldn't otherwise have done or it would have put too much pressure on them in their private lives."

Some organizations are putting forward effective practices to make sure all workers have equal opportunities for success, regardless of distance. At Buffer, for example, says Åsa Nyström: "**What we say is there shouldn't be an advantage to being anywhere specifically in the world ... whether you're at home, or you might be in an area where there are co-working spaces, you should have the same opportunities in terms of finding the best setup for you.** It is really important that you have a good setup, and everyone's different." Buffer supports this by providing budget for home work equipment or office supplies, or an allowance for a co-working space membership, or even a coffee shop allowance if that's the employee's preferred place of working.

To avoid endless channel proliferation and cross-messaging, particularly for remote teams, Reimar Kosack, founder of Dusseldorf-based software consultancy Wash With Similar Colours (WWSC), says it's imperative to set some ground rules for how to collaborate: "[Collaboration] is really the backbone of how we work and how we organize work. **We have very strict rules about what tool in what situation to use in which way** and we see it's very hard for experienced clients to get when to switch to what level of communication: when they should drop an email, when they should send a Slack message, when we have a video call, or when it's the rare time to have an in-person workshop."

## Digital collaboration tools: changing the workscape for better & for worse

Digital tools have the advantage of seamlessly capturing data: chats or recorded meetings create a searchable record of what was decided and how; virtual whiteboards with virtual sticky notes mean that nobody has to spend time digitizing photos of hand-made scribbles at the end of an ideation session; introverts can contribute without the pressure of trying to interject or keep up with more extroverted colleagues.



Figure 5 – Webcam for collaborating remotely

For remote or flexible workers, digital tools are key to succeeding. But tools alone are not enough to get the job done: the *organizational culture and approach to managing communication* when some or all workers are remote is absolutely critical. Robert Stark, Senior Executive Director of property management firm MAPP, described a workplace he knew where the management team decided to mandate working from home two days a week in order to downsize floorspace. While they may have saved on rent, other costs quickly became apparent: this company implemented its policy without any training or indeed any consideration about how the culture would have to change to accommodate new ways of working. Consequently there was no agreement on which days people would be in the office or at home,

no training on how to manage remote teams, and no consideration of what was required for workers to set up their own home working environments. People involved with the change described one aspect of the problem as "no visibility of managers to see what employees are doing". but this may be a surface-level expression of more fundamental challenges around trust. Barney Smith of Perform Green describes this need for in-person visibility as "presence management" rather than performance management. Quintessence Anx, Developer Advocate at Logz.io, perceives this as an essential component in remote working: **"If you hire people that you can trust to get their stuff done, you don't need to look over their shoulder if you need them."**

Gary Turner of Xero spoke about the power of creating digital spaces for incidental chat to build rapport: "When we were only about 50 people in the UK, we set up a persistent chatroom on Skype, like a CB radio style. It was a chatroom that was permanently on and whether you were remote on mobile on sales calls or whatever you were all in the chatroom; it was always there. It was miscellaneous random chatter; not formal. **It was incredibly powerful. It enabled us to feel like we had a connection, real-time and live back to the office. You were part of that no matter where you were.**"

Some businesses (like Xero and Buffer) which are experimenting with remote working are coming to the conclusion that while you can create a remote-first culture, there is still a need for physical touchpoints. Gary Turner says: "It's easy to think of collaborative tools like Google Hangouts as an incredible boon to productivity, but they're not universal; they're not the only thing you need to do. **We're collaborating with colleagues all over the world and what I always hear is that when someone comes to the UK for three days 'it's like they're seeing things in three dimensions'. There's an incredible depth of understanding you get when you're in the same room with someone.**" The mistake we sometimes make, Turner says, is that because these tools are so useful, we rely on them too much and we forget that face-to-face time remains a primary way to build mutual understanding. **"The conversations and relationships that were already really good were ten times better. We should Hangout less and hang out more."**

Digital tools are amazingly powerful but they can't be the only way a team connects. While Turner is referring primarily to communication tools (Google Hangouts, Skype, etc.), the same principles apply to project coordination tools like Jira, Trello, Confluence and so on. Great digital tools plus regular meetings create a powerful collaboration capability in a team. Working solely through digital tools, Turner says: "It's like mono-radio; you can hear it but it's not as rich."

Similarly, Åsa Nyström says: "We do have in-person retreats [at Buffer] about once a year where the entire company comes together ... Then we also started doing 'on sites', we call them, with smaller teams. **That's what lets you take relationships to a new level. We have found it to be quite important even though we are a remote company. We see the importance of getting together and we're not against that.** Also for certain groups like the leadership team, we might see the importance of getting together a little bit more because of certain discussions that are just hard to have over Zoom calls. It gives us the ability to sit together for longer as well, being in different time zones."

Both Turner and Nyström described regular team get-togethers as expensive, but absolutely worth the cost because they supercharge collaborative powers in globally reaching teams.

## Responsibility: raising the standard

While not demonstrably emotive about their working environment, there was a subtle yet profound sense of shared responsibility that came through in aspects of how the Mundipharma employees spoke about their work together. This came out at times in the way people characterized their work relative to others, or in their motivations for doing things a certain way or wanting to do them differently. For example (emphasis mine):

- "Instead of writing a document which has a deadline, I need to complete high-level business requirements for a PoC **so that that team can proceed. I can't hold them up** so will switch to that task."
- "I know there need to be checks and balances in place, however sometimes I feel that I would like to have more control to move into decisions to spend money, **for the good of the company**, more from intuition based on my depth of experience. This way we could get to a learning if something works or not quicker and that would save time in the long run."

This suggests there could be a quiet but important aspect of the Mundipharma culture that revolves around a sense of responsibility or duty. The scrupulous cleanliness of the office may also be a manifestation of this. If a shared sense of responsibility is a core aspect of Mundipharma's *operating system*, then this could be used to open up new opportunities for bringing the company values to life. Rather than being an undercurrent within the company zeitgeist as it currently is, this sense of shared care could be a banner that Mundipharma uses to align employees on its core values, and to demonstrate externally how the company lives its values.

In most organizations, there are little clues about the real values: not the ones that are written on the wall or circulated in the company handbook, but the genuine (if unspoken) ways of thinking that govern people's behaviour. Uncovering these, moving them from the unspoken to the spoken, is the opportunity to create lasting change either through further developing things that are working or through reframing things that are not.

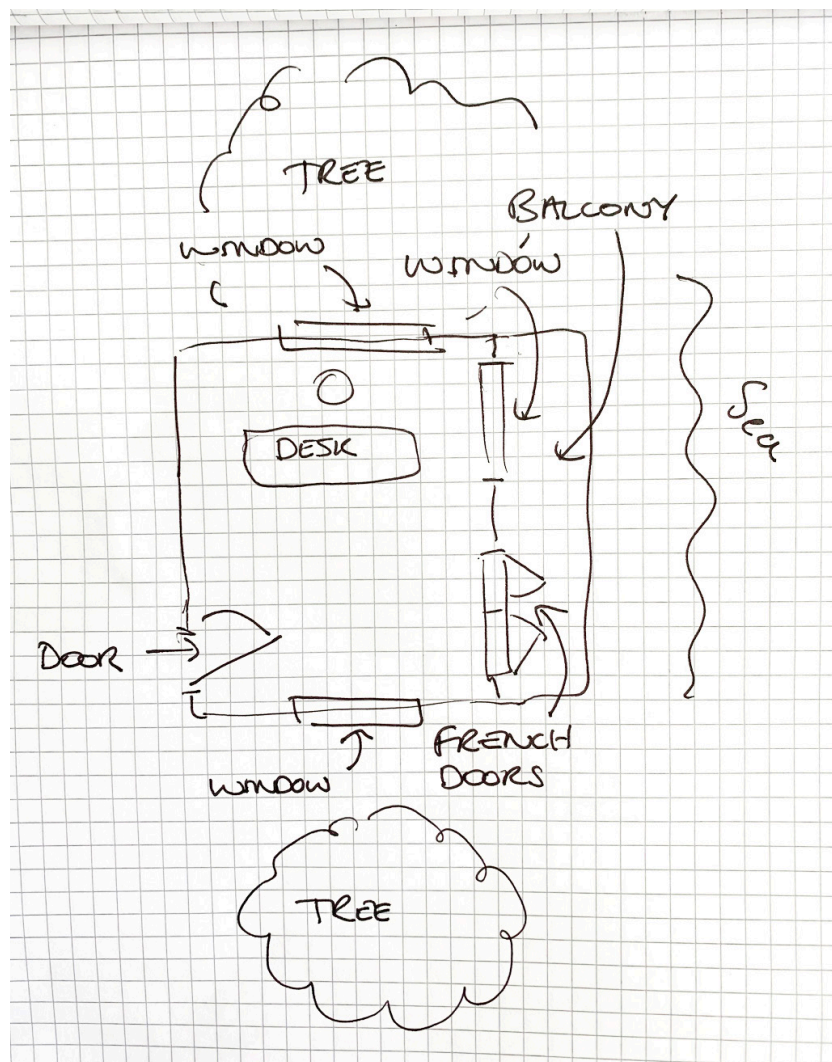


Figure 6 – Imagining the ideal workspace



## Change provocations

In each case study we present a brief selection of what we think are the key tips, hints and provocative questions to take away. The appendix of the report includes an extensive directory of organizational prompts for the leadership, team and individual levels.

- **Planning makes possible.** Unlike other workplaces, Mundipharma employees were far less likely to report feeling overwhelmed by communications technologies. While we all have to adjust our schedules to accommodate unanticipated needs at times, the reflective periods which seem to be endemic to the Mundipharma culture appear to be a form of enabling

constraint: by building in this time, Mundipharma employees master their schedules, their schedules don't master them.

- **Understand your company's OS.** What is the fundamental guiding principle at the heart of your business that reaches everything you do? Getting to grips with this central working principle is critical to embedding the right behaviours and mindsets for effective working – together. By peeling back the layers of the onion, looking deeper under what everyone is saying to understand their underlying mindsets and shared assumptions, it becomes possible to get to the heart of why your team works the way it does.

## STANDARD

### Planning makes possible

Unlike other workplaces, Mundipharma employees were far less likely to report feeling overwhelmed by communications technologies

What regular rhythm of thinking & collaborating time keeps you on top of things? What would it take for your thinking time to feel supported?

Is the team all in tune about what it means to 'be working'? How are you reducing anxious presenteeism & encouraging productive presence?

What signals & social nudges demonstrate that you value focus time as well as collaboration? Do people have 'room' to sit & think?

### Understand your company's OS

What is the fundamental guiding principle at the heart of your business which reaches everything you do?

How can you become aware of communication patterns? How can you use this information to strengthen what's working & challenge what isn't?

Does the team regularly reflect on & adjust communication & collaboration patterns in order to sustain shared principles, routines & practices?

What lies below your company's surface operating system? How do you know what's really going on underneath what people are saying out loud?

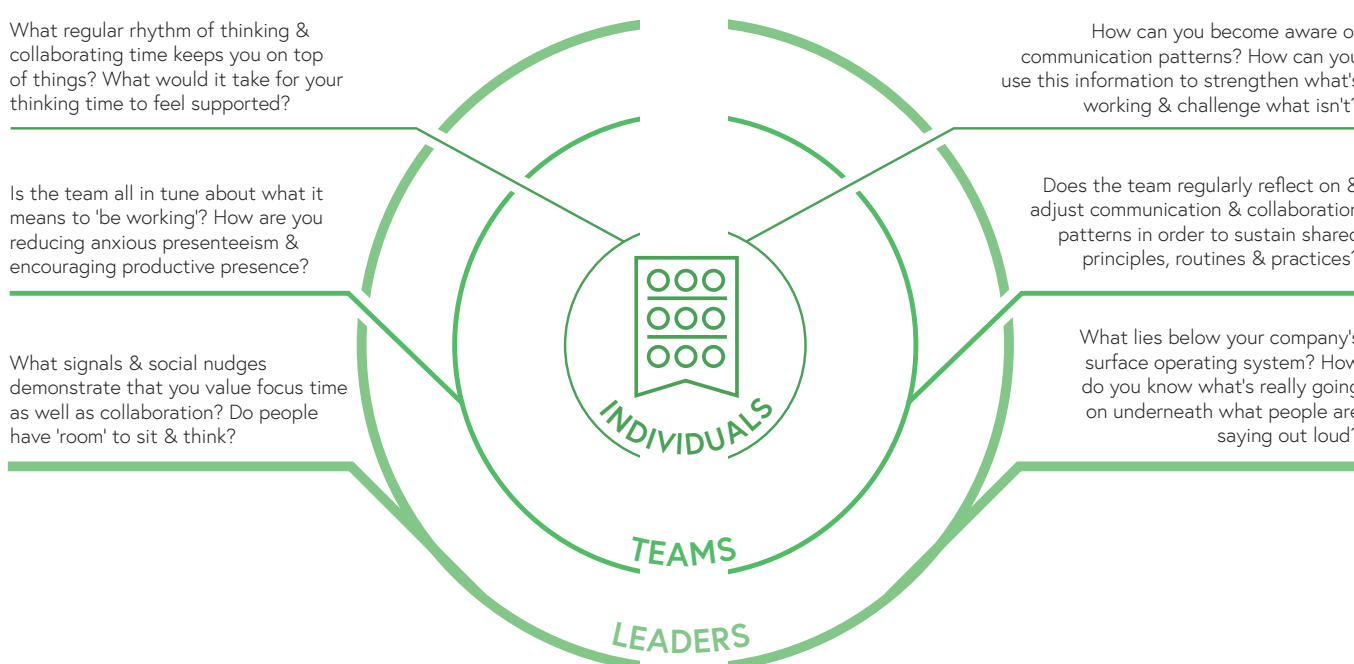


Figure 7 – Key change provocations

## CASE STUDY

supplementing the LEF Report

# RECONFIGURING THE COLLABORATIVE WORKSPACE: MAKING THE MOST OF TIME, SPACE & ATTITUDE

## ORCHESTRATION

This is the third extended case study supporting our report *Reconfiguring the collaborative workspace: making the most of time, space & attitude*. All the case studies contain rich detail expanding on the primary conclusions and change provocations described in the report, exploring the nuances of our learning in a deeper way. Details of our research methodology are given in the report.

The headline concepts that emerged from our fieldwork were:

- *Agency*, as in the power and independence to influence one's own environment

- *Standards*, in the sense of useful enabling constraints but also banners or flags to rally around
- **Orchestration**, in both its musical and mechanical senses of many different parts coming together to form a complex yet organized whole
- *Selection*, the rich variety of choices that people have agency to act upon
- *Condition*, the state or working order one finds oneself in; the work one undertakes in order to achieve one's optimal state

This case study focuses on the ethnographic detail demonstrating the organizing principle of *orchestration*, as we found it in the organization described.

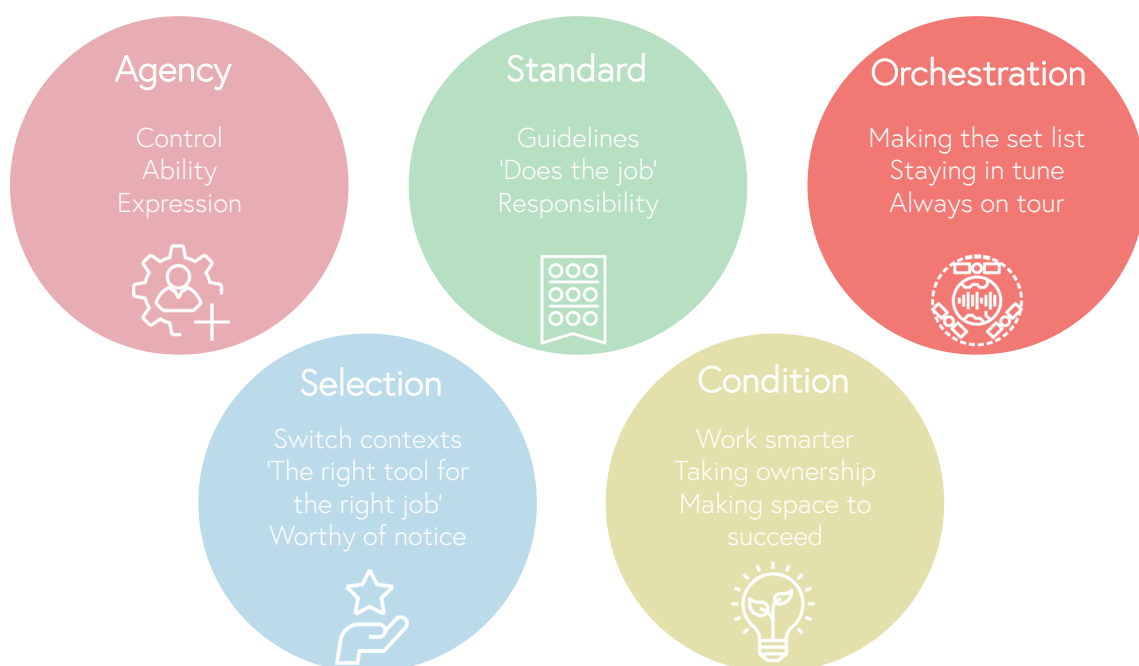


Figure 1 – The five organizing principles and their key features

## Orchestration

Making the set list  
Staying in tune  
Always on tour



## The team

Leonardo S.p.A. is an Italian multinational company specializing in aerospace, defence and security. Headquartered in Rome, the company has 180 sites worldwide. Our participants for this study were based in a digital technology and innovation unit with several sites spread around the UK.

In this case study, we examine what makes the difference between individual parts and a joint effort: this study encourages a renewed focus on working flexibly, not only for organizations that think of themselves as *remote* or *mobile* but as an increasingly ordinary part of working life. This case study also examines the physical and digital beacons or gathering points that enable distributed teams to collaborate effectively across distance and asynchronously.

## The organizing term: orchestration

Orchestras, in one light, are simply bands with many members. Everyone needs to be playing from the same set list to prevent cacophony. Staying in tune, making sure the instruments are all calibrated with each other, minimizes jarring notes. Bands are often on the road to give shows in many different locations, and travel requires particular adaptations that are different from the day-to-day environment. Orchestration also has another meaning: in computing, it refers to coordinating different systems and software into one smoothly operating whole.

## Time. Space. Attitude.

**Time:** There was a noticeable awareness of the need for balance in making time for different requirements – for different types of tasks and for being respectful of others' schedules as well as one's own convenience when setting up a meeting or project. At Leonardo, people used techniques like blocking out hours in the calendar for focus time (or simply noticing when they have enough time available for this) or setting their status to 'do not disturb' in order to prevent interruptions. Leonardo participants seem to feel relatively in control of their schedules rather than their schedules controlling them.



**Space:** In Leonardo's case, space came across particularly strongly as meaning *distance* and how that impacted scheduling. With multiple sites scattered around the UK, the team is constantly on the move to connect and collaborate with peers in different offices. Due to the sensitive nature of the work, it's been a challenge to identify tools that are secure enough to allow them to collaborate at a distance and cut back on the travel time. Nevertheless, it's noteworthy that there is such an emphasis on in-person meetings for a group that seems to value novelty and experimentation with technical tools. On more than one level, Leonardo seems to be a company of many disparate moving parts which all need to work together in a precise, orchestrated way. Travel to meet face-to-face seems to be an important mechanism for achieving this.



**Attitude:** We saw this playing out in how people described their ideal spaces as well as their current environments. Multiple people described the office whiteboards not only as functional tools for noting down ideas but also as gathering places for teams to work in a collaborative way. The care and regard people show by scheduling meetings to suit everyone indicates a certain camaraderie. One person simply said that having people around is very important to them. Much like in Blandings (the *Agency* case study), headphones are not just a functional signal or a means to drown out the office background noise, but a tool for accessing "my favourite motivational playlist". In their idealized space, people noticeably left plenty of room not only for nature (a typical workplace desire across most responses in our study and beyond), but also for cool new collaborative tools like VR headsets, which suggests a willingness to experiment and adopt new ideas.



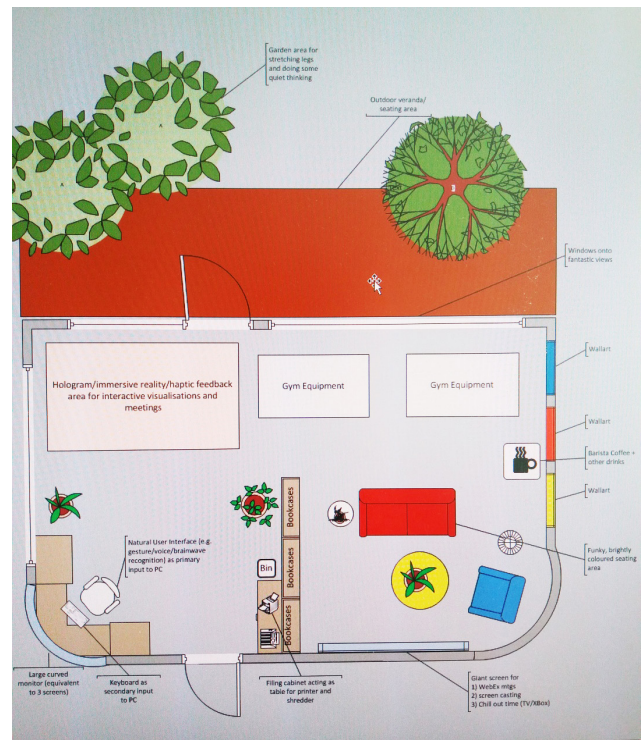
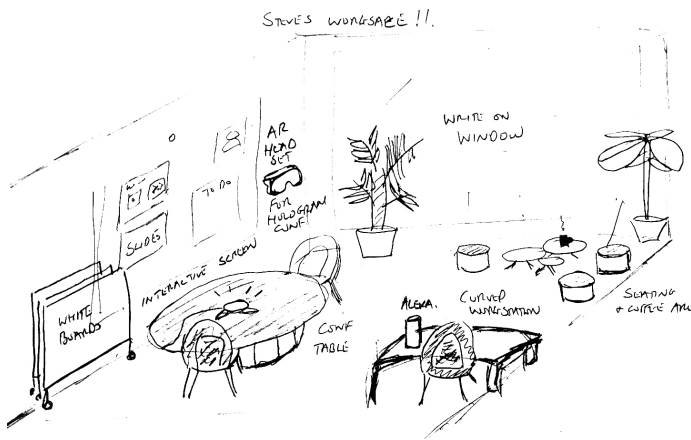


Figure 2 – Imagined future workspaces at Leonardo<sup>1</sup>

## VR: spatial reasoning, digitized

VR and AR are already starting to play a more prominent role in the working environments of frontline workers, those whose work requires them to be in particular physical locations, and information workers. In 2018 Walmart was using 17,000 headsets to train employees in 4,700 US locations on scenarios that would be difficult or dangerous to simulate, such as the Black Friday shopping rush<sup>2</sup>. Other simulation scenarios include training for security and service personnel at mass events like the Olympic Games, large concerts and the Hajj pilgrimage<sup>3</sup>. Stanford VR lab and the burgeoning industry of VR training providers also tout the benefits of VR for building better social skills, including greater empathy. We interviewed several AR and VR manufacturers who spoke about the potential of VR now and in the future:

- Jacob Loewenstein, Head of Business Development at Spatial, spoke about VR's potential not only as a remote collaboration tool but as a fundamental revolution in how we organize our mental working environments: **"I think that the higher level goal for Spatial is really to surpass the status quo of real life collaboration. The human brain thinks spatially, it does really interesting things, it makes unexpected lateral connections. And it doesn't necessarily behave in**

**the way that the [current digital] systems that we create, that govern how we work and collaborate, encourage.** Even people in the same physical space will still choose to use these tools, because it enables them to collaborate differently. I do think that that really does come down to the question: **to what extent does physical interaction with information, the spatial organization of information, and to what extent does a meta-sized understanding of how people are behaving in the meeting, enable you to collaborate or to better curate information and people?** For us, 'digital collaboration' encapsulates all of those questions."

- Becky Sage, CEO of Interactive Scientific, also spoke about the benefits of organizing information spatially, particularly in a shared virtual setting with multiple participants: "There's another aspect to communication in terms of what we do: taking information that would have been shown in data or numbers, or something that everyone might agree is very abstract, which people potentially see in a different way to one another, and giving them a shared model, a shared visual model. **You no longer have misconceptions or a slightly different viewpoint that leads to misunderstanding or miscommunication.**" Sage believes that by creating these shared models, the scientific community itself can become more accessible to people who traditionally may have shied away from more abstract concepts.

1 All photos in the case studies were taken by the employees themselves. To protect the anonymity of our participants and the organizations they work for, no individual faces are shown  
 2 <https://theverge.com/2018/9/20/17882504/walmart-strivr-vr-oculus-go-headset-training-shipments>  
 3 Almoaid Owaidah et al, 'Review of Modelling and Simulating Crowds at Mass Gathering Events: Hajj as a Case Study', *Journal of Artificial Societies and Social Simulation*, 2018 <http://jasss.soc.surrey.ac.uk/22/2/9.html>

- Michael Casale, Chief Science Officer at STRIVR, spoke about the contextual importance of learning in an environment as close to the real world as possible. When you learn in a classroom or through an on-screen programme: "You may actually learn something, but it's really [related] to that environment [in which] you learn. So you'll be really good at taking a test on a desktop or be really good at answering questions in a classroom, [or] a paper and pencil test. But being in that environment, those connections that are being made during learning are only really useful for that specific environment. And that's **why obviously, the best thing you can do is just get real-world experience. But that's really hard to get. And that takes years.** And what we're doing, hypothetically, is getting you much closer to that real-world environment than any other medium or technology right now. So you're learning the things that you're there to learn. It's the decision making, it's the recognition that's happening in conjunction with the right inputs, so to speak. **Once you see those inputs in the real world, you're much more likely to make the right decisions versus 'Hey, I did learn some concepts in these abstract environments, but I've no idea when to use them. Because I have no pairing with those real-world inputs.'** That's what you get with the virtual environments – the ability to create real-world learning."
- Kyle Wilson, Head of Product and Business Strategy for new ventures and innovation for Microsoft's Dynamics 365 Mixed Reality, says another powerful tool in the VR arsenal is the ability to create a data-enriched world powered by sensor data from the internet of things. "As you think of these new technologies coming together, previously, they were isolated. Business data was stored in a device, or a system, or behind a firewall. **Now, that data is becoming more ubiquitous as you bring in new sensors. It's coming into the physical world around you ... It's creating this merger which is forming new working environments and experiences: it's no longer just about the individual or the system being able to automate or augment, it's about the physical spaces being able to do that as well.**" This parallels how cloud technologies and software-as-a-service have impacted consumer technologies like digital music. Rather than having singular isolated experiences on different devices, consumers can sync and stream music across a range of different tools. Wilson anticipates that a similar path will emerge for services that can sense, automate and augment the physical world around us, impacting our lived experiences in public and consumer spaces as well as business environments.

For all its willingness to experiment with digital disruption, including being the only group to submit a digitized imagined future workspace (see Figure 2), it is striking that the Leonardo team was so very committed to face-to-face working. Physical whiteboards as the locus and gathering place for impromptu collaborations were an important highlight of their case study. Likewise, they emphasized to us when we shared the research results that they really do travel an unusual amount – it wasn't a skew in our data. While sensitive data and security concerns are a partial rationale for the team's face-to-face culture, we also believe that they currently find it too difficult to replicate the camaraderie of spontaneous encounters and spatial effectiveness of scribbling on a whiteboard that comes from geographic proximity. There are more and more enhanced digital tools that are trying to replicate this sense of proximity, but even a team as willing to experiment as the Leonardo group might need some encouragement to give these new ways of working a chance.

## Making the set list

Participants at Leonardo were alert to the need for balancing reflective time with more collaborative time in meetings and on multi-person projects. One participant described their schedule as "It's fine today, some gaps in diary to allow focus," demonstrating this awareness of a need for individual time balanced with the requirements of others. That's not to say this need was always met: one participant described their day as "Very busy, could do with blocking out some time". But on balance people seemed attuned not only to their own needs but also to those of others in getting the job done together: "On the whole everyone is pretty good at scheduling meetings to suit everyone. It's expected at times to come in early or stay late if you're off-site or have a deadline looming. Due to the company's flexi-time policy I feel massively in control of my work schedule and can change my start and end times most of the time to suit me."





**Figure 3 – Working flexibly allows employees to take breaks to attend to personal matters like laundry and errands**

This speaks to not only individual levels of care and consideration with one another, but an all-company recognition that employees are best placed to know when they will be most productive and how to meet that need effectively. In line with our findings about flexible and remote working, establishing a level of team trust is not only a nice thing to do or a morale boost, it's also a critical aspect of an inclusive working culture and empowers employees who might otherwise struggle to contribute. This is good for employees and great for employers, who benefit from added skills they would otherwise not be able to leverage.

## Staying in tune

Perhaps because this is a particularly digitally focused team, Leonardo participants placed a high emphasis on the importance of having physical or digital tools to

facilitate working together (or, when necessary, finding a separate space for solo or small group work). A lot of the travel mentioned in the study seemed to be geared towards staying in the know or establishing rapport, in order to *stay in tune* with others. When asked what a future ideal workspace would look like, one Leonardo respondent said: "Having people around is very important to me so I'd want lots of my team with me as well as ways to connect with people as face-to-face as possible." Whiteboards were also mentioned as important vectors for team collaboration and idea exchange:

- "My favourite place would have to be our Southampton office space [where] there is a good mix of whiteboards and technology."
- "The whiteboard gathers the team around it to facilitate collaboration and allows addition or changing of ideas as you go."



**Figure 4 – Whiteboards act as gathering points**



## The solidarity of shared experience

Dr Kerstin Sailer, a researcher in the sociology of architecture at University College London, uses a technique called *spatial network analysis* to analyze the usage potential of different working environments. For example, on visiting the LEF's office in Kings Cross, she observed: "What you are using the most central space for is a long corridor where people pass through, that leads to meeting rooms. [Having] that in the centre of the workspace creates different potentials for social life in an organization, different cultures. **So if, for example, this most central corridor ... goes through an open plan work area, you've got both the problem of noise and disruption. But you've also got great opportunities for people walking past to interact with their colleagues as they pass.** If all of the main centrally connected corridor goes past a range of meeting rooms with closed doors, there's a different potential that arises out of that." The main influence that space has on team cohesion, says Sailer, is its power to introduce solidarity through shared experience. If I pass by your desk every day at the same time to get a coffee, for example, we might become coffee buddies.

Mark Catchlove, Director of the Insight Group at Herman Miller, echoes the importance of moving through space: **"Your journey to your desk is as important as being at your desk."** Spaces can be designed to optimize or discourage chance encounters and that will have a profound impact on team communication, cohesion and collaboration.

Replicating this incidental yet essential contact in a digital setting is a challenge. Despina Katsikakis, Head of Occupier Business Performance at real estate services company Cushman & Wakefield, says: "If you look at virtual interactions, they are planned and structured, and highly controlled, right? I know when my Skype calls are, and I go from one to the next to the next, I know who's on the call, what we're going to talk about, and so on. **Physical encounters are unplanned, intimate and random.**" The challenge isn't entirely unique to online communications, though: workers without assigned desks also have very different communication patterns than workers with them. Sailer says: "We know from occupancy [studies] that people roughly spend between 45 and 50 percent of the time at their desk, but then they'll probably circle around their desk. If you think about probabilities, if they're using a meeting room, it's likely on the same floor, if they're using a coffee point, it's likely on the same floor. So they're within that vicinity of that desk. You can make some assumptions about proximity."

Sailer echoed the importance of pathways and beacons for creating opportunities for interaction. Employees who are adjacent to something like a coffee point, a whiteboard or a cupboard where essential and frequently used equipment is kept will clearly have more opportunities for spontaneous interaction than those tucked away in less frequented places. When I was a data analyst at a medium-sized company, my team encouraged visitors by setting out an enticing (unauthorized) snack table, which meant we always had the latest informal and soft-power company information as well as the formal facts and figures that were our official job. Similarly, workers who are on the go all the time, moving from meeting to meeting perhaps, might be harder to pinpoint at any given moment, but the likelihood of encountering them along their path at some point during the day is quite high<sup>4</sup>. These patterns create opportunities for information sharing and building trust through camaraderie in a natural way. Thinking carefully about which teams need to share information, and how to create those opportunities for potential communication, can increase productivity. You need to do this in the digital environment, too.

While the face-to-face aspect is very important to Leonardo employees, there may be ways to build enhanced, concentrated periods of face-to-face time supported by more regular touchpoints through digital tools. When we presented the research findings to our primary contact there, he mentioned instituting regular "working together" days where everyone gathers at one of their worksites to facilitate community-building and trust between periods working at a distance – similar to the regular face-to-face touchpoints that Xero and Buffer described. Managing staying in tune for multi-site offices, particularly across multiple time zones, requires being vigilant about setting expectations around availability. "If I'm working eight-to-five East Coast for a company that is in Denmark, I have to let them know that 'at seven o'clock your time, I'm going for lunch. So get me anything you need before that, and I will deal with it. But you know, once I go to lunch, when I come back, y'all should not be working,'" says DevRelate founder PJ Hagerty. This super-transparency about availability is critical to setting expectations about when and how to communicate with people. He continues: "If you've ever worked in food service, this is like what's on the board. When you walk in the door, you punch the clock. 'Oh, Emily is going to be here today. Oh, Caitlin's going to work later. Oh, I'm on dishes today. Cool.' **You know, if you've worked at a Denny's, you understand how that works. Yet businesses don't get that that's exactly how remote works. You don't need to see the people, you just need to see the information about the people to know their boundaries.**"

4. Sailer's student Rosica Pachilova will shortly be publishing her doctoral study on interaction pathways.

Another oft-cited reason for defaulting to co-location rather than remote collaborations is that people at all levels of experience are generally rather poor at managing remote meetings, especially with multiple participants. Remote facilitation consultant Judy Rees says: **"The people in leadership, the top people, don't understand what needs to happen to make a good remote meeting work, therefore they lead meetings**

**badly, therefore everyone thinks that's how it should be done."** But expecting digital natives to have natural fluency in this sort of thing is also doomed to failure: "It's not core curriculum for digital natives: how to lead a meeting remotely. They know how to have a conversation with their friends online but they wouldn't dream of doing in meetings the same things they do with their friends<sup>5</sup>."

## Always on tour

One person, when asked what was the most important app on their phone, said: "I'd have to cheat a bit and pick two things! As I travel every week, my CWT travel app is a must for me for booking hotels and having all of my travel details to hand. The other is WhatsApp as it lets me keep in touch with my team, family and friends whenever I want and wherever I am." While some people responded that they primarily use virtual meetings to stay in touch, digital communication tools didn't crop up nearly as often in our responses as simply travelling from place to place.

People reported this aspect of their work as very tiring, though in general attitudes about work seemed to

be very positive and people did mention valuing their flexible working hours. One respondent said: "Gruelling today ... six hours of travel as well as a full day is challenging." Another said: "The challenge comes when I have to travel a long way to meetings, which can make for very early starts and/or late finishes without the catch-up time."

Despite the energy drain, people also described their face-to-face time with others in different locations as useful and productive. This does reflect findings from other participating companies and interviews, that face-to-face time can accelerate trust and give projects a boost. However, there may be an opportunity here to discover new ways of working that still incorporates face-to-face time, but perhaps less frequently.



Figure 5 – Working en route

## Bridging the space between

Supporting remote working and working flexibly requires the behaviours of the entire team to change, not just the person who is working remotely. Several of our interviewees have experience with more mobile ways of working and suggested helpful tips as well as cautions and warning notes. Kerri Miller, developer advocate at Travis CI, was in the middle of a seven-month motorcycle trip around the United States when interviewed for this report. **"I had to put a lot of effort into security, a lot of thought in terms of life while I'm on this McDonald's or Starbucks WiFi. How secure is it?"** Taking a few extra steps to secure my data communications as well as physical security of my laptop if I need to run to the restroom ... I had it set up so that my notifications for things were very hair-trigger and very loud so that I would get a notice if somebody mentioned my name in Slack. Then I could pop in and be present so that I wasn't a ghost who would only show up in people's overnights."

PJ Hagerty talked about the importance of calendar discipline and transparency: "When I worked at [a globally leading tech corporation], just making it very clear in the public calendar: 'I'm going to be at Web Summit, I'm leaving on Monday, I will not be back until Friday, do not expect me to show up in meetings, do not try to give me a call ... Don't expect me to be around; I'm going to be on stage.'"

Just as important is leading by example: "Now, there's a company I know where one of the founders and CEOs, he does not give you that information. And he does travel quite a bit, which makes life extremely difficult when the shit hits the fan. You try to get hold of this person and their phone is shut off because they're flying somewhere. They even have a program where you can check in and say, 'I'm working from home this week. I'm flying around the country this week.' **But while that's an expectation for everyone on the lower levels, because he's a C-level person, he doesn't feel the expectation. And that's a real negative behaviour reinforcer.**" People look to leadership for behaviours and habits to emulate. When unwanted behaviour surfaces at the top levels of management, it sets expectations for the rest of the team.

WWSC founder Reimar Kosack says: "We [have] an open handbook that everybody can change in the company. And it has a peer review process. So somebody needs to write a change to the code of the company, and two other people need to approve it. But it can be anybody, and I like that. I think that's very shaking to some management." Kosack also suggests introducing *open Fridays* in which at a regular cadence everyone can optionally join a channel or chat and anyone can raise

any issue at all and open it up to all-company dialogue: "I think that's the most clever way to change a company."

For building a sense of camaraderie and breaking down the formality of electronic communications, some companies introduce virtual coffees, either one-on-one or as groups, where people can get together just to have some social time. This works well for remote employees, but freelancers we interviewed also tout the benefits of doing this to keep up with a network of like-minded peers and avoid the loneliness and isolation that sometimes comes with not having a regular team.

Barney Smith of Perform Green suggests mimicking the *chat time* that happens in real life right before meetings. This echoes furniture manufacturer Herman Miller's research team findings that there are *warm ups* and *cool downs* before and after official meetings, which require what it calls *landing spaces* in offices. How do you create a *digital landing* for people to informally chat before or after the big meeting?

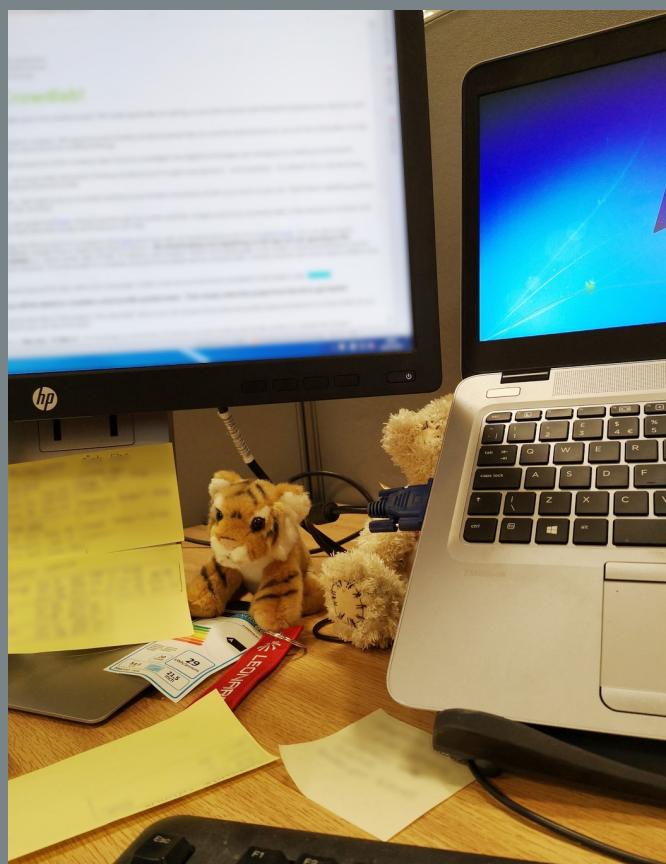


Figure 6 – Fuzzy friends help break down formalities



## Change provocations

In each case study we present a brief selection of what we think are the key tips, hints and provocative questions to take away. The appendix of the report includes an extensive directory of organizational prompts for the leadership, team and individual levels.

- **Jazz it up.** Repeating routines creates the confidence and sense of familiarity to move from place to place, jump into the mix, connect and improvise. A high level of trust, in other words, increases a team's ability to be flexible. This flexibility can be a powerful tool for workforce inclusivity, giving you access to different perspectives from people who might not otherwise have been able to contribute. What are the strategies that help a deep-rooted face-to-face collaboration

practice move to more abstract-feeling virtual settings? What additional transparency mechanisms do you need to build to keep everyone in harmony, or in comfortable chaos?

- **Build beacons.** Whether you're always on the go with no fixed desks, or working in the same place every day, gathering points such as whiteboards give people focal points to rally around. For teams that aren't typically co-located but who regularly pass through a particular space, a whiteboard or other physical messaging point can be an important way of keeping in touch asynchronously. Digital tools can also be a means for creating these focal points, but moving things online requires more clarity and structure to ensure everyone's on the same page about customs, norms and habits.

## ORCHESTRATION

### Jazz it up

The confidence to jump into the mix, connect & improvise flexibly is a powerful tool for workforce inclusivity

### Build beacons

Whether you're always on the go with no fixed desks or working in the same place every day, gathering points like whiteboards give people focal points to rally round

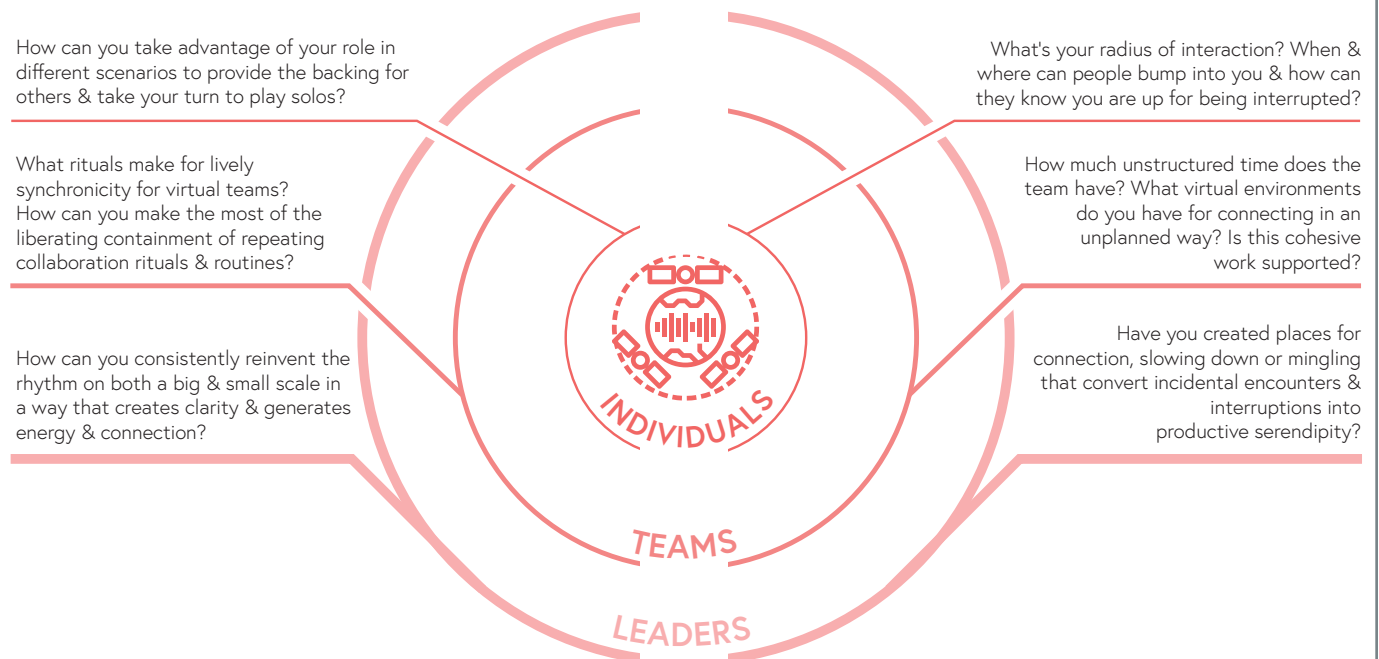


Figure 7 – Key change provocations

## CASE STUDY

supplementing the LEF Report

# RECONFIGURING THE COLLABORATIVE WORKSPACE: MAKING THE MOST OF TIME, SPACE & ATTITUDE

## SELECTION

This is the fourth extended case study supporting our report *Reconfiguring the collaborative workspace: making the most of time, space & attitude*. All the case studies contain rich detail expanding on the primary conclusions and change provocations described in the report, exploring the nuances of our learning in a deeper way. Details of our research methodology are given in the report.

The headline concepts that emerged from our fieldwork were:

- *Agency*, as in the power and independence to influence one's own environment

- *Standards*, in the sense of useful enabling constraints but also banners or flags to rally around
- *Orchestration*, in both its musical and mechanical senses of many different parts coming together to form a complex yet organized whole
- **Selection**, the rich variety of choices that people have agency to act upon
- *Condition*, the state or working order one finds oneself in; the work one undertakes in order to achieve one's optimal state

This case study focuses on the ethnographic detail demonstrating the organizing principle of *selection*, as we found it in the organization described.

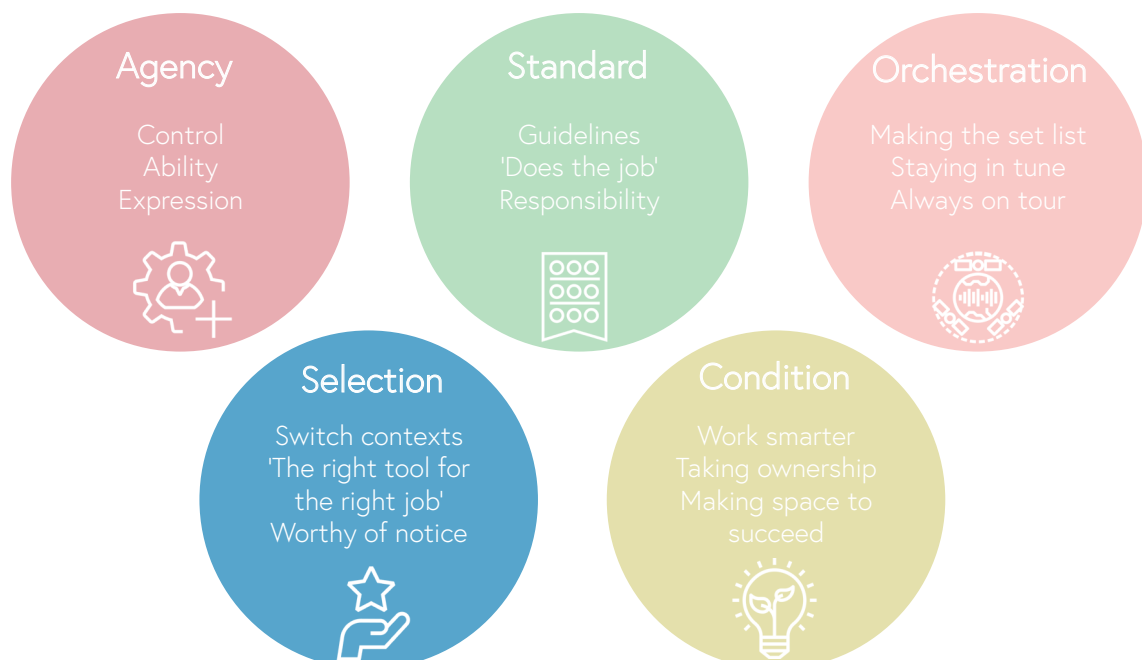


Figure 1 – The five organizing principles and their key features





## The team

Uniper SE is an energy company based in Dusseldorf, Germany. With about 12,000 employees in 40 countries, Uniper has a balanced portfolio of technologically advanced large-scale assets. Our participants included team members based in the UK and in Germany. This case study provokes reflection on the importance of finding the right tool for the right job, in particular the right equipment for communication across increasingly distributed teams. And it explores the role of communal spaces in creating a sense of belonging and connection.

## The organizing term: selection

To *select* can mean to switch, as in context-switching between modes of intensive focus time and high-energy collaboration. It can also mean to choose between a selection of things, like finding the right tool for the right job. And a select item is something that is especially noteworthy.

The main report talks about *agency*, the sense of one's own ability to choose. In order to exercise one's agency, one must have a robust field of options to select from.

## Time. Space. Attitude.

**Time:** In Uniper's case, we noticed a duality around how people perceived time: people felt relatively empowered to set their own schedules and switch contexts as they needed to, because of policies that allow them to work flexibly; yet at times people could not fully embrace this because of external pressures – for example, the boss requesting a late meeting or a perceived pressure to meet in person in the office rather than remotely. The pressures of *seeing* and *being seen* may also play into this latter case.



**Space:** Uniper's respondents had a particular focus on technology and how it helped (or in many cases hindered) their ability to work effectively within a distributed team. While for the most part people seemed satisfied with their physical surroundings, several people mentioned the challenges of accessing the right supporting audiovisual equipment (such as headphones) to facilitate remote collaboration, both in groups and one-on-one. A theme in common with other case studies was insufficient spaces or tools to have calls and conversations in ways that don't disturb others, offer sufficient privacy for conversations that need it, and don't bring surrounding distractions into the conversation.



**Attitude:** In an interesting contrast with the data showing Uniper employees interact with fewer people during the course of the day than other study respondents, Uniper participants also mentioned the importance of *seeing* and *being seen* to facilitate collaboration and team trust. The canteen seemed to be a particularly important location for off-the-cuff conversations and meeting with a variety of different people, as well as being a space with personal resonance as a base. This might explain some of the reluctance we saw in some respondents to work from home, as it's more difficult to establish this sense of informal communication and camaraderie through digital tools – though not impossible.



## Switching between contexts

As mentioned above, there seem to be some interesting contrasts in the data: people generally reported being satisfied with Uniper's support of working flexibly, yet they also refer to pressures to conform to schedule expectations set by others. Respondent sentiment overall pointed to a genuine belief that the company really does support its employees in achieving the goal of working flexibly as the expected norm. Working flexibly is perceived as the *natural order* with an occasional switch into working outside that norm when necessary. Perhaps because the need to stay late or work in a particular place is only occasional rather than an expected default, people seemed to take these blips in their stride.

### Working flexibly works ... with occasional glitches

*"I am really happy with my work schedule. Uniper really does embrace flexible working."*

*"Sometimes I plan to work from home and someone asks me to come in for a physical meeting ... so usually I ask if they can swap this to a virtual meeting. Though depending on who they are I sometimes feel a prang [sic] of guilt."*

*"In my team, we have committed to the work/life balance of ourselves and our teams. No meetings out of hours or over lunch."*

*"Normally don't have meetings so late ... but it is with my boss ..."*

Another contrast: Uniper employees interacted with fewer people during the day compared to other companies in this study, yet informal meetings in an open space like the canteen, or having varied encounters with others in different types of working environments through the day rather than one fixed office, seem relatively important to people. Mark Catchlove of Herman Miller says an emerging architectural paradigm is to put hubs or plazas at the centres of group spaces: **"We're moving away from a breakout area over in a corner – no one ever goes to them when they're in a corner. You can see our experience; our coffee is at the heart of what we do.** I call this the 'village pub' ... Going back to that personality aspect, some people can be very much on their own in a busy space. [Our coffee area] is not just a collaborative space. For some people it's like going to work in a café because 'I'm not going to be interrupted there.'"

At Uniper, the canteen is a place where these meaningful encounters flourish.

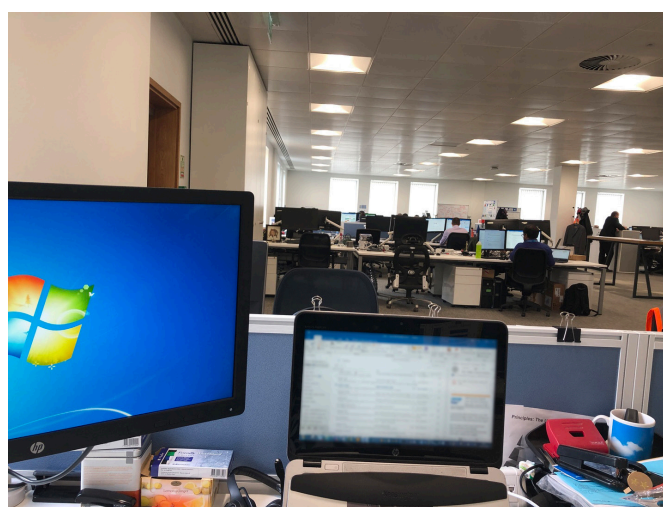


Figure 2 – One of Uniper's breakout spaces and a desk's eye view<sup>1</sup>

Despina Katsikakis of Cushman & Wakefield says: "I think the office is not going away anytime soon; there will continue to be a significant need for face-to-face interaction alongside immersive virtual interaction. But it will become a different type of environment. **I do not want to travel for an hour and sit at a desk and look at my computer; I can do that in a much better environment [at home] and have gained the commute time. So when I come into the office, what is it that I come in to do? It is really about meaningful and unexpected encounters, collaboration, brainstorming and unique experiences.**"

One person mentioned "Pretending to be completely offline" to find some focus time, suggesting a need for fairly firm boundaries for focus time, in contrast to the open and informal collaboration that occurs in a space like the canteen.

1. All photos in the case studies were taken by the employees themselves. To protect the anonymity of our participants and the organizations they work for, no individual faces are shown.

## The virtual canteen: opportunities to connect

As we mentioned in the case study on *orchestration*, in modern organizations there are very few teams that are solely and completely co-located, meaning companies need to develop strategies for building trust between increasingly distributed teams.

WWSC founder Reimar Kosack suggests introducing *open Fridays* in which at a regular cadence everyone can optionally join a channel or chat and anyone can raise any issue at all and open it up to all-company dialogue: "I think that's the most clever way to change a company."

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## The right tool for the right job

Choosing both the right space and the right tool to facilitate collaborative work seemed to be a common challenge. This was mentioned both at the team and individual levels: "The meeting room has no Jabra speaker that works well with Skype. Colleagues in Germany, listening in their non-native language, find it difficult to follow conversations."



**Figure 3 – Audio quality is particularly important in a multilingual team**

With the Uniper team being distributed and frequently communicating through phone calls, struggling to find space that isn't too noisy and distracting, particularly with headphones that are not up to the task, seemed to be a common problem.



## Headphone headache

"This is my standard issue cheapo headset ... firstly they are not that comfortable, they break easily (for something that is in and out of my bag daily), however my main gripe is that they are not noise-cancelling. As such I have purchased my own equipment to help me do my own job (£30 large head cans) which have a form of noise cancelling. I am on at least three calls a day; sometimes as many as seven or eight. There is so much noise in the open-plan office that I can't do my job without supplying my own kit. I could easily ask for a new set of the broken standard-issue ones, however they are not that useful due to reasons above."



Figure 4 – Not the right tool

## Developing policies for devices

Bringing one's own device, or communicating through unofficial channels, was a fraught issue that emerged in several interviews. There is a complicated balancing act between keeping up with the risks of information security and enabling people to meet company goals around collaboration and efficiency. Social media consultant Euan Semple described one consulting engagement: "In a financial services group in Hong Kong, the board confessed to me that they were using WhatsApp to communicate because they were so frustrated waiting for IT to give them a secure option." At another company, Semple described an information security officer discovering a very productive and focused collaborative working environment among team members sharing a private Facebook group. As this contravened company policies around social media usage, the management team shut the group down, leaving employees wondering why they should bother trying to be more collaborative. (And, quite possibly, whether their leaders were operating to the same rules that they were expected to follow.)

Communication technology is always about the communication and never about the tech itself, so organizations would do well to consider what their user needs are when implementing device policies. Julie Pierce and Michelle Patel of the Food Standards Agency described experimenting with different use cases for communication across a varied workforce: "I think our workforce is interesting, because there's quite a variety of working situations. Yes, there are people who may be working from home at the moment. But they would traditionally have been sitting in an office in Westminster, writing policy, doing that sort of thing. [The scale runs] through to the people who are standing on the line in abattoirs. **They are standing in an industrial situation, and they are also standing in somebody else's business premises, and they are having to work in an extremely difficult physical environment. It's wet, noisy, smelly and dangerous. And it's not *your*<sup>2</sup> employer's environment, as well: we have people who are travelling around who go and inspect different places.** They are what is now becoming a 'traditional' mobile worker who goes around a different place every day ... **We thought it was more equitable for everybody to have a work device. But we then have erred on the side of everybody gets a work device, unless you make a case that you really do not ever, ever need to have one. And I'm just talking about a smartphone, trying to make everybody feel equal. It comes back to the collaboration.** You use that device for various things, including collaboration, including sharing information for more informal conversations with your colleagues. We then try to encourage people to do it, and just do it because they can and see where it goes. This isn't about the tech, but the underpinning tech just has to work, well enough and consistently."

2. Emphasis mine

Several people at Uniper also mentioned not being comfortable taking video calls from the desk:

- "I never video call from my desk ... too much going on in the background that is distracting."
- "Currently in a project meeting on Skype, I have had to mute myself as it is noisy in the open office."
- "No videos from the desk."

On a deeper level, the Uniper participants' recognition of meeting the needs of others (for example, being aware

that the German team is having trouble hearing due to insufficiently powerful speakers, or self-consciousness about background distraction in the office when on video calls) reveals a level of team-wide consideration and care: people aren't simply grumbling about their own experience, but about making sure the environment is conducive to collaboration for everyone. This suggests a level of willingness to experiment and try different solutions which could better facilitate greater effectiveness across the whole team.

## Digital proxemics: closing the communication gap

Anthropologist Edward T Hall coined the term *proxemics* to describe how people use space to negotiate social and cultural meaning. Thanks to Hall we have the concept of personal space – one of his four major categories of spaces: intimate, personal, social and public space<sup>3</sup>, as shown in Figure 5.

Communications professor John A McArthur observes that the unspoken rules of video chat mirror the proxemics conventions of intimate space, personal space and social space: "When participating in a video conference for work, the camera is usually placed so that the speaker's head and shoulders can be seen at once, giving an approximation of social distance. This might also mean creating a more formal camera position by setting the camera or device upright on a desk or workspace and controlling the background information.

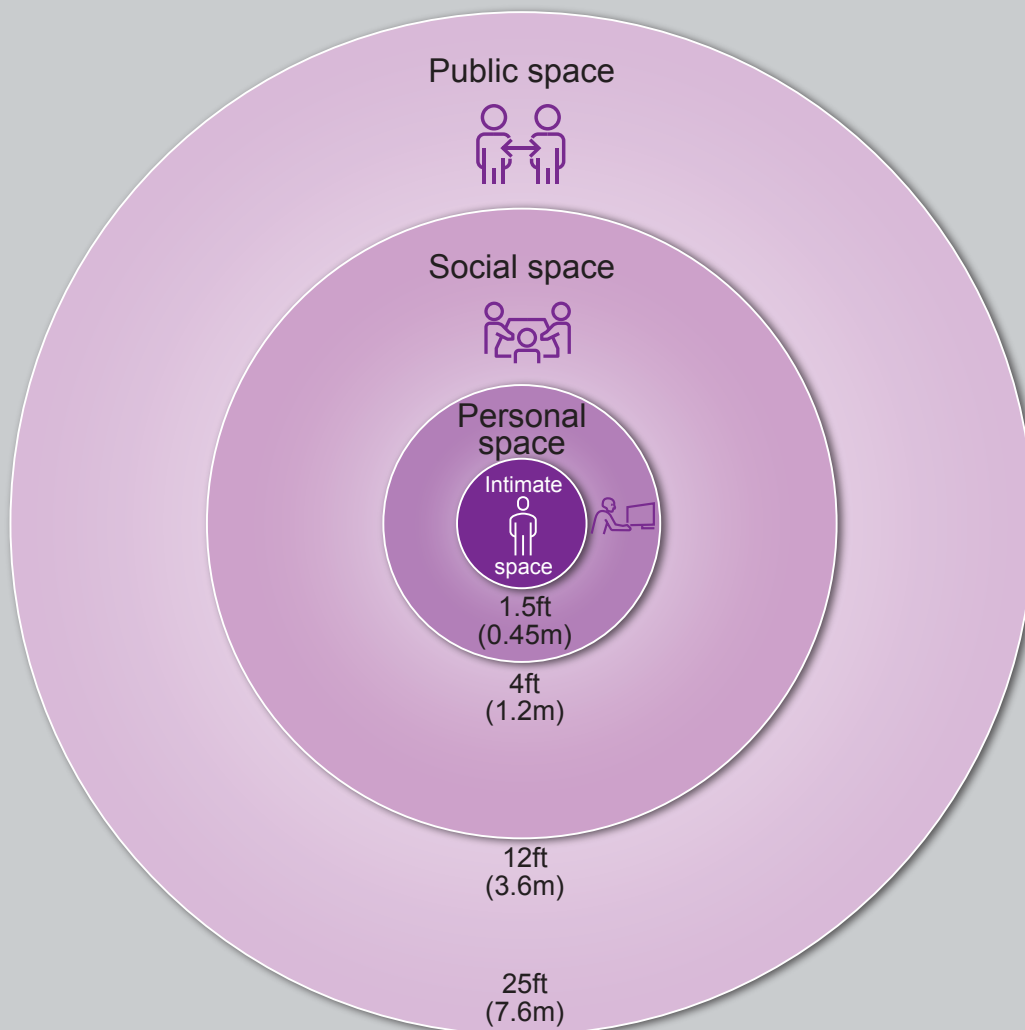


Figure 5 – Edward T Hall's Proxemics



When speaking to a friend, we allow the camera to move close to our bodies, often showing the whole face with the head's perimeter discernible at the edges of the screen, a digital approximation of personal distance. Interestingly, in this scenario we also allow the camera to move around our environment with us, jostling the image, but creating a more informal tone reminiscent of the linguistic patterns at personal distance."

McArthur suggests that since digital technologies remove many of the cues we use in person to distinguish between personal and social distance, people sharing online spaces would do well to default to the conventions of conversations at a comfortable social distance: behaving as you would with someone who's standing about four to seven feet away from you<sup>4</sup>.

In LEF's *Use & Misuse* guide, we advocated learning to look into the camera rather than at the screen when you

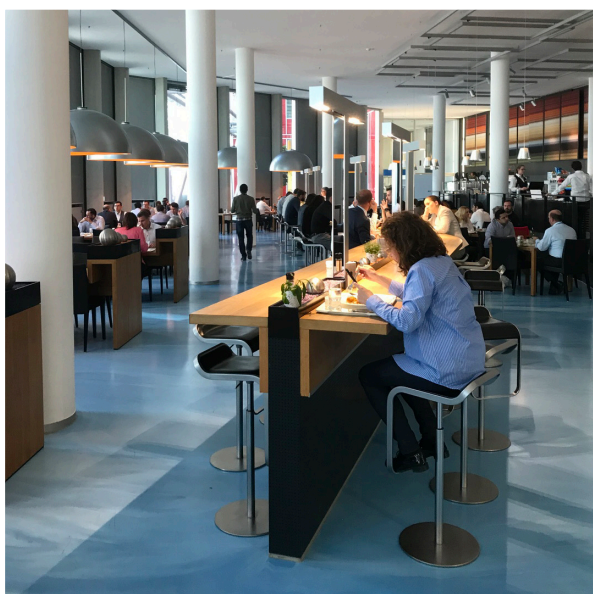
are speaking: this may feel unnatural to the speaker, but for listeners the eye contact gives a reasonable replication of eye contact in a real conversation, underlining your sincerity and encouraging attentiveness. Because there is a more limited canvas for body language on a video call than in person, exaggerating expressions and head movements gives listeners a more accurate understanding of nonverbal communication.

For multi-person conference calls, proactive moderation is key. This requires more formality than an in-person meeting: the chair must keep track of who has spoken and involve those who have not. The group needs clear, agreed signals to keep the conversation flowing. And because of the additional formality, pay attention to the informal rapport-building aspects of a virtual group discussion, perhaps by building in specific time for this at the start or end of a call.

## Worthy of notice

At Uniper, the canteen is much more than just a place to eat. The team uses the canteen both as a way of staying in touch and building social camaraderie, and to find out about important projects in different parts of the business.

- "We meet each other at the start of the day in our canteen for a coffee. There we see different people."
- "I love this space. It is our canteen. I see many people here and have unplanned conversations. Today I heard about a great AI project that I would otherwise have missed."



- "What I achieve, I achieve through others. **Therefore I like to be seen and make myself available.** Before my meetings started today, I sat in our canteen and read my mails. Various people talked to me. **I cannot lead from behind a closed door.** If I really need quiet time I can work at home."

There is also something about the expression of *being seen* that is a subtle signal about the Uniper culture: the team seems to highly value transparency and visibility. "I would hate to be stuck at one desk," said one person. Another focused on the value they could add if they had more flexibility in their working environment: "I have a varied role but a fixed working space that is allocated



Figure 6 – The all-important canteen

to me. This limits the impact I can have." Kerri Miller, Developer Advocate at Travis CI, also touched on the importance of transparency for getting work done in a collaborative way: "As a tech worker, I'm very addicted to the idea of showing my work ... I need to do all of my work publicly, which includes all of my mistakes,

all the bugs, all the errors, all the bad assumptions I've made about the project. **You have to develop a culture of failure where it's OK to make mistakes, where mistakes are recast as learning opportunities, where you can laugh at your ridiculous bugs or silliness that you've done on the way.**"

## The virtual canteen: opportunities to connect

A big challenge for remote and distributed teams is creating the naturalistic, off-the-cuff interactions that happen in office spaces like canteens, lunchrooms and kitchens. Indeed, studies have shown that the incidental social bonds that develop among smoking buddies leads to greater informational access for those in the clique<sup>5</sup>, not to mention the boost to productivity from taking breaks throughout the working day. We're certainly not recommending encouraging smoking, but the micro-interactions and social conversations that happen informally are critical to creating team camaraderie and a mutual sense of *what makes one another tick*.

Knowing how to talk to someone in an informal way about something that isn't important to work is a core skill that becomes even more important when there is something critically important to discuss. Better to build in plenty of practice time through informal encounters than to depend on everyone knowing how to pull together automatically when an urgent situation arises. Introduce *virtual coffees*, have an optional dial-in time

for the team to spend time together chatting, or simply set aside time during a regular meeting for the team to check in and chat socially – these are all ways to promote a sense of trust and give people informal opportunities to pick up on things they might want to collaborate on or take part in. For co-located teams looking to replace the smoke break, healthier habits like employee games rooms or corners, fitness classes or informal brown-bag learning lunches, or even just places to congregate with healthy(ish) snacks can provide opportunities for micro-socialization.

Given how distributed Uniper is, it seems particularly important to find ways of replicating that offline canteen camaraderie and information-sharing capability through transparency and visibility in a digital way. Elia Mörling of remote collaboration software tool maker Idea Hunt describes a method his team uses to replicate those offline *tea break* moments in what can otherwise be very formal meetings: **"Every now and then [on our all-hands call] we actually do a little game, or some little exercise that we put in there consciously.** Because to do the team building [remotely] you really have to articulate and be more mindful about it."

## Change provocations

In each case study we present a brief selection of what we think are the key tips, hints and provocative questions to take away. The appendix of the report includes an extensive directory of organizational prompts for the leadership, team and individual levels.

- **Quality kit creates trust.** The right tool for the right job is important in any workplace, but there's a special emphasis in distributed, multilingual teams on audiovisual equipment that supports communication. If you're struggling to hear the other side of the conversation because of background noise, low microphone volume or dropped and garbled calls, it's impossible to have an effective communication experience. If your team makes a lot of calls, make sure

you have the equipment, and the environment, to support their productivity.

- **Camaraderie counts for a lot.** Having physical spaces that feel inviting, like home, to draw people in, both for focus time and to connect with each other intentionally or by chance, is important. And that needs to be mirrored in online canteen camaraderie. These don't need to be big times and spaces; they can also provide 'micro-socialization'. Knowing how to talk to someone in an informal way about something that isn't important to work is a core skill that becomes even more important when there is something critically important to discuss. It's better to build in plenty of practice time and allow informal trust to ripen through regular encounters than to depend on everyone knowing how to pull together automatically when an urgent situation arises.

## SELECTION

### Quality kit creates trust

The right tool for the right job is important in any workplace, but there's a special emphasis on audiovisual equipment that supports communication in distributed, multilingual teams

Can you anticipate when you need quiet surroundings or privacy for calls? How do you avoid having to hang around in corridors making calls?

Have you formed a collective agreement for when to focus on the most efficient way of getting the job done given current skills? Have you allowed time to innovate with new tools?

Is the company kit reliable & easy? Are there everyday obstructions to productive work? Are people encouraged to play with new technologies & approaches?

### Camaraderie counts for a lot

Having physical spaces that feel inviting, like home, both for focus time & to connect with each other intentionally or by chance is important

How can you balance solo working time with showing up, seeing & being seen, creating lines of sight, connections & deepened mutual awareness, rapport & respect?

What spaces, physical or virtual, temporary or permanent, does your team call 'home'? Where do you belong, kick back & be at ease with each other & with guests to the team?

How are you showing up in communal spaces? How are you demonstrating the behaviours that you want to see? How are you contributing to the atmosphere of the spaces?

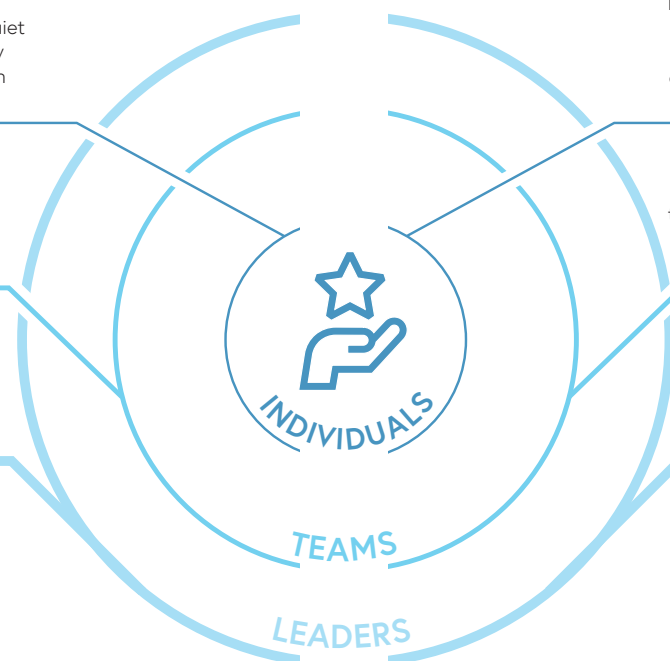


Figure 7 – Key change provocations

## CASE STUDY

supplementing the LEF Report

# RECONFIGURING THE COLLABORATIVE WORKSPACE: MAKING THE MOST OF TIME, SPACE & ATTITUDE

## CONDITION

This is the fifth extended case study supporting our report *Reconfiguring the collaborative workspace: making the most of time, space & attitude*. All the case studies contain rich detail expanding on the primary conclusions and change provocations described in the report, exploring the nuances of our learning in a deeper way. Details of our research methodology are given in the report.

The headline concepts that emerged from our fieldwork were:

- *Agency*, as in the power and independence to influence one's own environment

- *Standards*, in the sense of useful enabling constraints but also banners or flags to rally around
- *Orchestration*, in both its musical and mechanical senses of many different parts coming together to form a complex yet organized whole
- *Selection*, the rich variety of choices that people have agency to act upon
- **Condition**, the state or working order one finds oneself in; the work one undertakes in order to achieve one's optimal state

This case study focuses on the ethnographic detail demonstrating the organizing principle of condition, as we found it in the organization described.

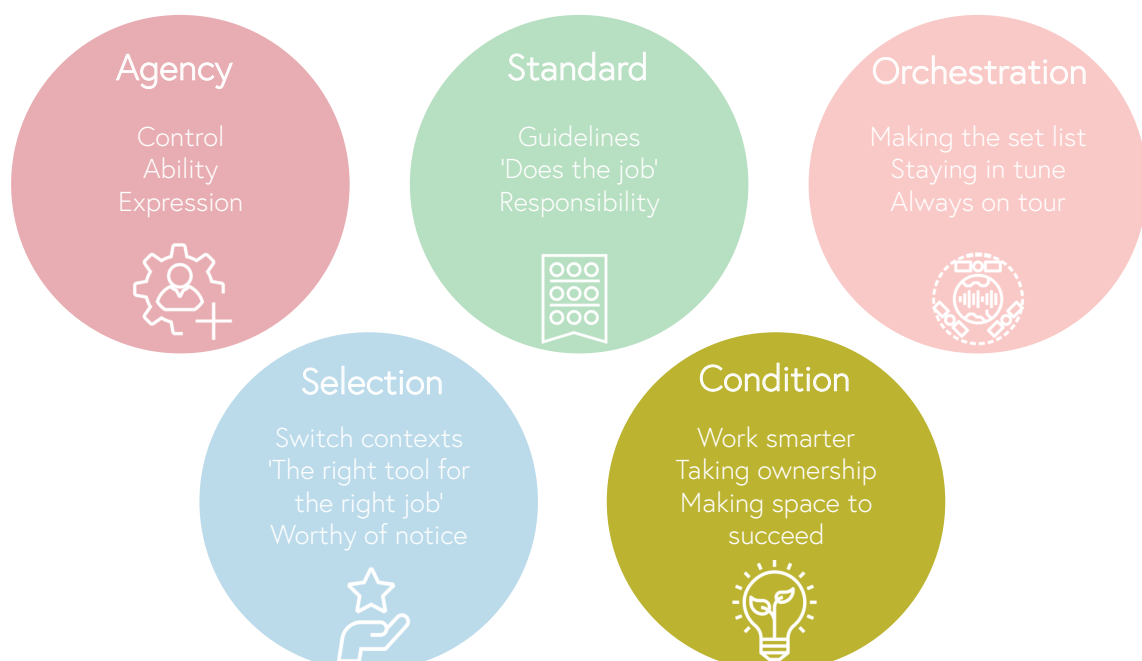


Figure 1 – The five organizing principles and their key features

## Condition

Work smarter  
Taking ownership  
Making space to  
succeed



## The team

Younger Insurance<sup>1</sup> is a large health insurer in the US employing more than 22,000 people. It serves nearly 15 million members. Younger Insurance offers group life, disability and dental solutions, as well as a range of other individual policies. It also provides various care management and wellness resources. The teams participating in this study primarily came from two groups spread across multiple geographic offices located around the US, some working in new, open-plan collaborative floors with very few barriers between desks, others in more traditional cubicles.

This case study raises the possibility that learning to *read* an organization, and the implicit conditions and conditioning that are at play, through its physical layout and culture, is a skill that we all need to develop. In particular, as organizations become increasingly digitized, learning the unique dialects of their digital spaces becomes ever more important. This case study also demonstrates the power of choice; its key point is how we need to create an environment that makes those choices viable. It also explores the inevitable bumpiness of the change journey as it plays out not just in the physical and virtual collaboration spaces but right through the fabric of the cultural operating system.

## The organizing term: condition

*Conditions* are the circumstances or surroundings in which we operate. They can also be the state or order in which we find things (or ourselves). We condition things to make them ready or keep them in shape – like an athlete undergoing conditioning to prepare for a big match.

What are the right conditions to *work smarter, not harder*? How do we condition ourselves into new, healthier and more productive working habits by taking ownership? This case study is all about making a workplace that works for us, not against us.

## New spaces, new norms: the turbulent change journey

Of all the organizations we studied, the Younger group had the most fraught relationship with its digital and physical working environment. This is perhaps because it is in the middle of a cultural shift that is playing out in physical spaces and the operating model. Younger told us that it is currently on a journey to a flatter structure with fewer layers of leadership. While most people would say they feel more comfortable working in the latter than the former, negotiating that change is a bumpy ride. We heard some natural reservations from team members who are unsure how to negotiate their needs in an uncharted future. In other case studies we've discussed *enabling constraints* as essential features that create the shape of the way groups work together. We're certainly not advocating a return to the old ways simply because it's a more comfortable type of discomfort, but we think this is a great example of how even beneficial changes may involve a period of challenging – and painful – growth and acclimatization before new habits, attitudes and a shared understanding of enabling constraints feel as natural as the old ways.

Adopting new ways of working is a common challenge in businesses that are negotiating a change in working environments and seeking to support the corresponding changes in working practice. In particular, introducing a more open-plan style appears to shake up people's perceptions of how to manage organizational hierarchy until they develop an understanding of new organizational signals.

Despina Katsikakis described a rebalancing in how organizational space is used: "Many years ago, we used our office as a lab by implementing new ways of working on ourselves. So we had mobile telephony within the office and no assigned seating, except for the PAs, who were the anchors for everyone. One of the things I used to do is invite the boards of directors of companies that we worked with to have their meetings in our office. I would walk them around and show them the environment and get them to understand what this meant in real terms. I was walking around the board of the BBC, and the then Director General suddenly stopped in the middle of a tour. And he said: '**I totally get this! It's reverse hierarchy. The more senior you are, the more toys you get to be liberated from the office. And the more junior you are, the more locked you are to space,**' which I thought was an exceptionally astute observation." The proliferation of inexpensive collaboration and communication tools means that

1. A pseudonym taken from the Younger Family in *A Raisin in the Sun*, for whom an insurance payout played such an important role.



being *liberated from the office* is at least notionally within the reach of all information workers. What kinds of signals do we now need to look for to understand organizational power?

Mark Catchlove spoke about the operational importance of supporting employees with the right tools, equipment and spaces no matter where they sit in the organizational hierarchy: "The world of work is becoming more democratic. **For a company, particularly in the world of tech, your next big idea can come from anywhere in that business. So you'd better make sure that you're not giving the best just 'up here' [in management], and not supporting 'down here'.**"

Dr Kerstin Sailer of UCL says: "**If you have power [that] manifests itself in the corner office, with the biggest square footage, and the nicest furniture and the best views ... everyone knows their place in the organization. The way to rise up the ranks is to get a nice office. When you replace all of that and tear down the walls and say, 'We're now all open plan', the power relations don't go away, they're just invisible. Then it just becomes much more difficult to manoeuvre, you need extra levels of information.**

I remember one example where they put everyone in open plan, including the Managing Directors of whole business units. Those people were looking after 300-400 people, big business units ... and they just set them in an open plan in what would have been the equivalent of the corner office. Kind of in a corner with their backs protected. Someone who would be able to read the space would have been able to tell 'this is more likely going to be an MD', but then in other places of the office, that position would have been someone just ordinary or way more down the ranks. There's also interesting research about the people being next to senior people in open plan: they don't get as much communication because people don't come to them. Quite obvious when you think about it."

## Examining extremes

It's also worth mentioning a methodological risk that sponsors of collaborative workspaces and working practices need to be alert to. Extremes of dissatisfaction and satisfaction tend to show up in surveys more strongly than middle-of-the-road responses: it's hard to get excited about "feeling meh about something", as one of our sponsors within Younger pointed out. It's possible that, as well as coinciding with major cultural change, in this case we hit on the passionate few who were using this research as an opportunity to vent about changes they fear, or which they feel they've hitherto had little input into. We nevertheless believe there are valuable insights to be gleaned from this field site:

- First, when respondents do represent a vocal minority, their voices are still likely to be influencing the rest of the group and their concerns should be addressed. That's not to say their opinions should be the only factors driving action, but they must not be discounted completely either. And certainly, giving them a way in which to express their feelings is vital.
- Second, it's important to find alternative methods for engaging with the remainder of the workforce to seek alternative perspectives so those aren't drowned out.
- Finally, we can still learn about organizational values and invisible governing principles even where they are being expressed in challenging ways. In Younger's case, for example, the challenges around extreme presenteeism seem to reflect the *hero culture* of wanting to be recognized for overcoming big challenges – a common tension for organizations moving to more collaborative working practices. In order to do this, Younger is unconsciously creating an environment where there's always an urgency to be solved. This desire to be heroic could be harnessed to encourage healthier and more productive organizational behaviours by reframing what it means to be a hero in the organization.

## Time. Space. Attitude.

**Time:** Of all the participating groups in our study, the Younger Insurance participants demonstrated the least sense of control over their own schedules. While they reported higher-than-average levels of focus, this appeared to be a hard-won quality. A few people mentioned feeling OK about their calendars, but most people reported working long hours to accommodate meeting schedules or to find focus time which they otherwise don't get during the working day. In Younger's case, we wonder whether the challenges expressed as problems with long hours or inconsiderate scheduling are fundamentally reflective of wanting to find more focus time by being involved in fewer meetings. At the surface level this is showing up as long hours; a deeper enquiry might show people are afraid of declining meetings or asking whether their presence is truly necessary. Unsurprisingly as Younger negotiates the transition from command-and-control to a more consensus-building style of management, the intricacies of who needs to be involved in which decisions are still being negotiated. Learning to let go and delegate some decisions to others, as well as having permission to decline some meetings, would give people more solo focus time.



**Space:** At Younger, employees are seeking both physical and digital environments that support their need for focus time or one-on-one conversations. This was often couched as a need for *privacy*, which includes being able to hold private calls and do work without fear of being overlooked. Open and spontaneous collaboration may be facilitated through workspaces with fewer physical barriers, but for the most part at Younger, people seemed disinclined to focus on these capabilities and much more vocal about the aspects of their roles that they currently do not feel the available tools and spaces support them in achieving.



**Attitude:** The noise and inability to *hide* from others in both open-plan offices and cubicles seems to make things challenging for people at Younger while the transition to new spaces and working policies is coming into effect. This isn't to say that people there are not in fact productive, nor that they are doing things they shouldn't be doing, but rather that there is a fundamental organizational value here (perhaps articulated as "I must be seen to be working") that people are striving to uphold, and fearing that they are not doing so sufficiently. Being willing and able to advocate for and claim space to do the best job is an attitude which could, if fostered, transform a painful change into a personally satisfying one.



## Work smarter, not harder: Getting out of the cube

One striking finding was the preponderance of respondents dining *al desko* (our term, not theirs) – the majority of participants either didn't take lunch breaks at all or only stepped away briefly to fetch sustenance before returning to the desk to eat.

### Al desko

*"I tend to work and eat my lunch to stay productive."*

*"I take 3 breaks per day. Most are for 15 minutes to fetch coffee or lunch – which I bring back to my desk so I can continue to work."*

*"I rarely get up ... if I do it's for the restroom. I did walk downstairs to microwave my lunch. I need to move around more during the day. However, I have too many meetings ... "*

At least among our respondents, the early starts and few breaks seem to reflect an *always on* culture with little time for reflection or refreshment (in the mental as well as physical sense). When we shared the study findings with the primary sponsor within Younger, they spoke about the "hero culture" in the company. Like so many unwanted habits and behaviours, this one comes from a positive intention: wanting to be recognized for *saving the day*, and demonstrating one's commitment to the work. But there are ways to do this that don't involve over-taxing oneself or others by long hours and demanding lots of meetings.

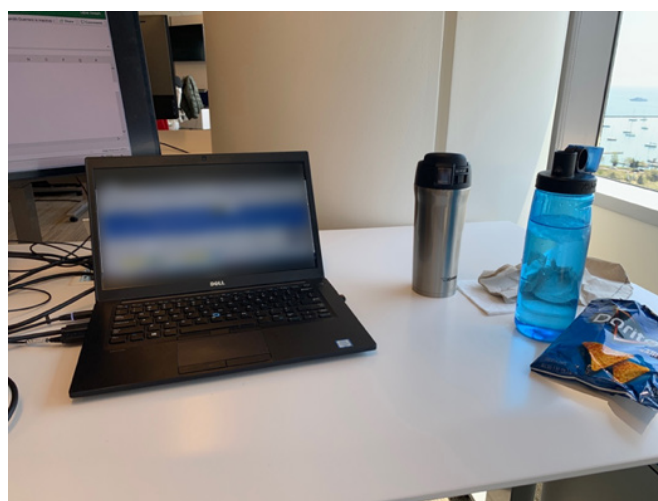


Figure 2 – The *al desko* experience<sup>2</sup>

Throughout this report we have discussed the importance of diving below the surface of things to get at what's really going on – for example, a fixation with being physically present rather than working from home

can reflect deeper anxieties around how to connect, build rapport and create trust with people when the digital channels and practices for this aren't very strong. **It's an old adage and one that can be frustrating to put into practice, but in this case the evidence is clear: taking breaks and having downtime are essential for boosting productivity. Work smarter, not harder.** The incremental gains of staying on a task decline sharply after 90 minutes.<sup>3</sup> There is a wealth of research<sup>4</sup> demonstrating that the mind needs a break from intensive tasks in order to keep in peak operating order<sup>5</sup>, both in terms of short breaks between tasks and longer durations of rest for sleep and on vacation.<sup>6</sup> Staying at one task too long produces diminishing returns and eventual exhaustion.

If this working environment resonates with your own culture, an action step could be encouraging the team to introduce *mental conditioning* breaks to improve productivity. **People may feel that they are demonstrating valour or commitment through staying late and never leaving their desks, but to actually achieve more, they need to get out of the cube.**

There are a number of options for overcoming the attachment to staying at the desk too long, a symptom of *presenteeism*: develop a culture of *walking meetings* for conversations; encourage the team to leave their desks for lunch breaks; introduce a regimen of deliberate time management including breaks. Even the much-maligned background soundscape brand Muzak, bane of elevator users everywhere, was initially designed as a productivity aid: "It patented its 'Stimulus Progression' approach, breaking the day into 15-minute chunks and altering the intensity of the music played in each, according to the fluctuating energy levels of the labour force."<sup>7</sup>

Don't bring back the Muzak. But putting in some inviting dawdling spaces – like ping-pong tables or other games areas, seating areas with plush chairs and plants, or messaging boards with interactive changing content (internal or external) – can be an invitation to step away from the desk for a few minutes. Remember you also need the social nudges to rest and play in work space and in work time for these beacons to achieve their goal as magnets for gatherings.

## Taking ownership: Being your own advocate

To create the conditions for success, we need to take ownership of our own best working practices. We noticed a lot of angst about a perceived lack of control over one's own schedule or one's own physical environment:

- "Too many meetings. I have to work late to get my actual work done."
- "There is a phone in a conference room that is broken. It limits my use of the room and missed collaboration opportunities."
- "I am usually in the office at 7 but co-workers think nothing of scheduling meetings at 4 that keep me here till 5 making it a 10-hour day."
- "I wish I had more control over people who have a lack of awareness or consideration for others in the blue workplace floors [open-plan office floors]. Often times, people do not mute their notifications on their laptops or talk very loudly near my workstation ... sometimes while I am in a meeting."
- "[To concentrate] I have to log out of instant messenger because nobody respects 'do not disturb' on that."

Indeed, when asked what their ideal working environments would be, most respondents focused on higher walls and doors that close, as in Figure 3.

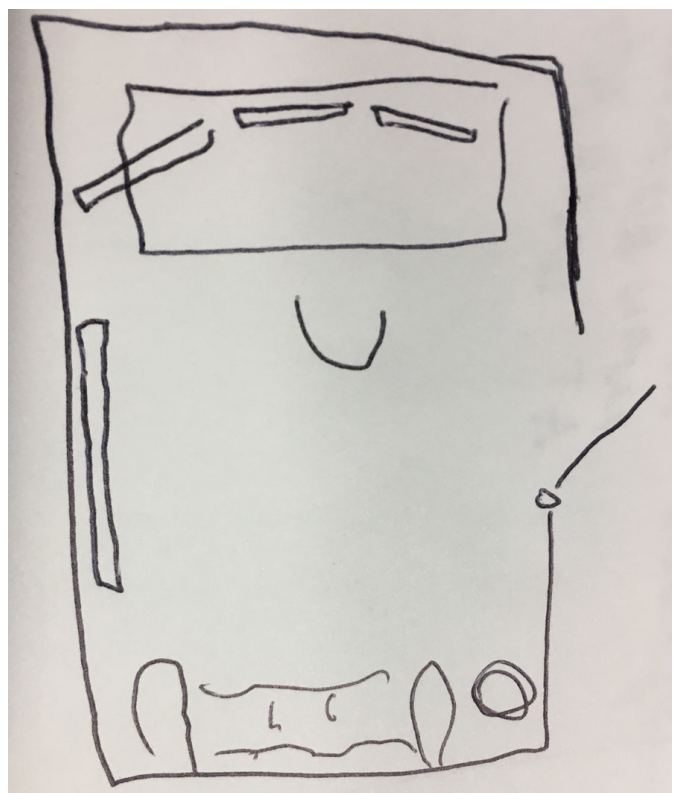


Figure 3 – One respondent's ideal workspace

But as mentioned above, we think this is a surface reflection of some deeper underlying needs, particularly around finding the physical and digital tools to support solo reflection time or better informational control (such as not being overheard on confidential calls.) There

3. Tony Schwartz, 'For Real Productivity, Less is Truly More', *Harvard Business Review*, 17 May 2010 <https://hbr.org/2010/05/for-real-productivity-less-is>

4. Kenneth T. Strongman and Christopher D.B. Burt, 'Taking Breaks from Work: An Exploratory Inquiry', *Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*, June 2000

5. Robert A. Henning et al, 'Frequent Short Rest Breaks from Computer Work: Effects on Productivity and Well-Being at Two Field Sites', *Ergonomics*, January 1997

6. K. Anders Ericsson et al, 'The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance', *Psychological Review*, 1993.

7. 'Playlists hit the right note as music returns to the workplace', *Financial Times*, 20 July 2017 <https://www.ft.com/content/85d318da-6baa-11e7-b9c7-15af748b60d0>



is a real opportunity here for people to be their own advocates and to make clear to colleagues their own best ways of working in order for the whole team to be more successful. For example, does the person who schedules 4pm meetings know that some of their colleagues start work at 7am?

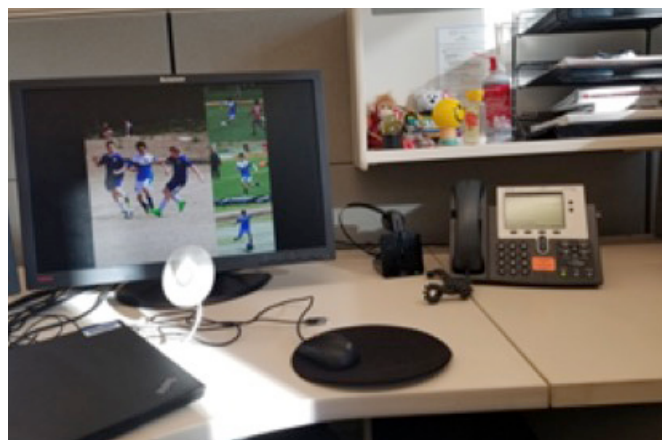
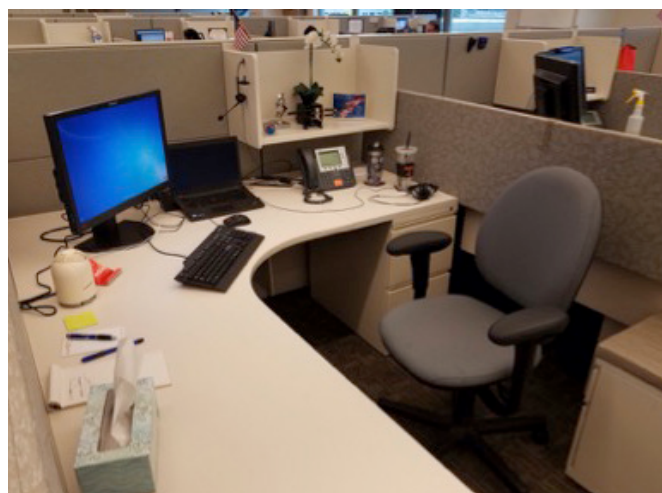
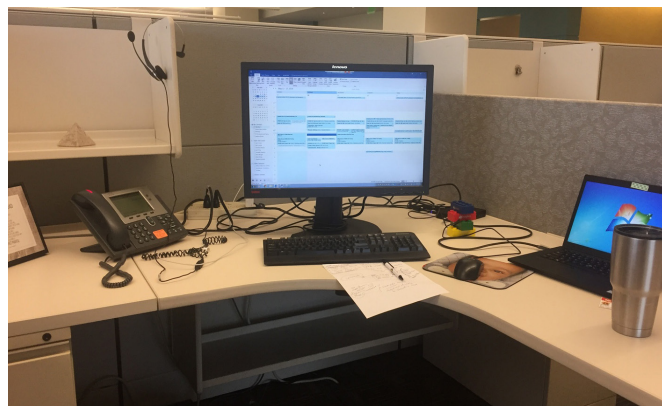
## Making space to succeed: Supporting personal productivity

A widely cited recent study showed that open plan offices, far from increasing in-person collaboration, actually tend to decrease face-to-face interactions and drive up digital communication patterns<sup>8</sup>. The authors believe that physical boundaries in workspaces create the necessary enabling constraints that give employees clues about who has what kind of information at what time – powerful clues to navigating an organizational structure. Take these physical cues away and employees are likely to replicate those signals in a digital space (e.g. through patterns of who cc's whom in what email, and who has access to what channel in the company chat).

One way the Younger Insurance teams seem to be negotiating the meaning of spatial clues is in their stated desire for more privacy and personal space. Digging deeper, we think this shows a wish for a more fundamental sense of autonomy and control over one's working environment. Comments like "Some of my co-workers have standing desks which let them view my screen at all times" seem to reflect a disinclination for being observed. This clue about wanting more privacy, plus the *always on* culture mentioned earlier, might indicate a level of anxiety about *getting caught* not being productive.

At the group level in Younger Insurance there are clearly some common environmental needs, like small meeting rooms or calling spaces, which (at least for these participants) aren't currently being met in the most effective way. One concern is confidential meetings, with one respondent saying: "It is almost impossible to find a place for one-on-one conversations. Not much privacy in the office. Have to go to a hallway next to the maintenance elevator." Another participant said: "I used to have an office ... Now I sit in a cube and have to find a private space for confidential conversations."

A commonly reported challenge in both cubicles and open-plan offices is distractions and interruptions: "There is really no way [to concentrate] in a cube situation. People come up all the time even when you have headphones on." Echoing this: "[I am distracted by] loud talkers in cubes nearby." Finally: "I hate open workspaces. I work almost 100 percent on the phone, not face-to-face. I like to have some personal space."



**Figure 4 – Cube life**

This is about collectively identifying the group's working activity needs and advocating for physical and digital spaces that support those needs. The majority of respondents for this study seemed to spend large amounts of their time on phone calls. As we've identified in other workspaces, taking phone calls in noisy group environments is counterproductive. Where the conversations deal with sensitive information, there's an added need for spaces in which to have confidential conversations. In other working environments we've seen small pods or sound-muffling wingback chairs that allow people to get away from the main working floor to conduct calls. While Younger demonstrably has some of these breakout spaces, they don't seem sufficiently *private* or plentiful to meet employees' needs.

8. Ethan S. Bernstein and Stephen Turban, 'The Impact of the "Open" Workspace on Human Collaboration' *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 2 July 2018



**Figure 5 – A breakout solo working space. Note that the privacy screen behind the chair won't muffle sound and barely conceals any of the screen**

## Navigating new norms

In other case studies we explore the characteristics of successful distributed and remote working at length; here we emphasize the *change* aspects. What does it take to bring a change in working environment about?

One option might be to experiment with more remote working, giving people a greater sense of autonomy over their working environments. This does require attention to workers' home-working setups, both physically and by ensuring people have the right communication habits and channels to keep one another in the know. There is a question of shared ownership here: collectively identifying the group's working activity needs and advocating for physical and digital spaces that support those needs.

Another option might be to experiment with more remote working, giving people a greater sense of autonomy over their working environments. This does require attention to workers' home-working setups, both physically and by ensuring people have the right communication habits and channels to keep one another in the know. In our Mundipharma case study, we mentioned a cautionary tale or two about unanticipated negative consequences of shifts to remote working.

A change in working environment, whether that means more remote working or not, requires attention to the accompanying cultural shifts. Adrian Cockcroft, formerly a Distinguished Engineer at Sun, describes an instance of this going badly: "One of the contributing factors to Sun Microsystems' decline was when they introduced this 'hotel system' where you booked a random place to sit, that changed often, and which broke up team communication patterns. Nobody could find each other; there was no personalized space, you had lockers for some of your stuff and that was it. **People started to disappear – they'd be working from home all the time, phoning it in, or they'd even resigned and nobody would know. And other people would be working away like mad and there was no way to tell.**"

Quintessence Anx says this need for visibility can be managed effectively in remote and flexible teams through better informational signposting, though it's particularly challenging with teams in transition or partially remote teams: "When you have a team that's already set up with an expectation of remote and people are already remote, I would say the tools work really well because your mental model of your daily work is built around weaving in communication, collaboration, etc. that is remote [-friendly]. **The downside is when you have a team that's either hybrid or transitioning. Some people are in office[s] together, and you'll find that the 'office people' are just talking to the open air, because that's what you do. And the remote people have to play catch-up for whatever live communication has occurred.** I see that as a disadvantage because even with all the tooling in the world, unless your perception changes, you're not going to bridge that gap."

PJ Hagerty of DevRelate echoes this: "**A lot of times, the remote people get treated like second-class citizens.**" Hagerty also points out a simple way to mitigate this challenge is to enforce working-from-home days among people who are typically co-located in an office: "If you start that policy, and then you hire your first remote employee, they don't feel like they're the first remote employees. People in the office get a sense of what it's like to not be in the office."

The Younger team also has the opportunity to learn to use the spaces at hand more effectively: walking meetings will impact space utilization, and with so many people eating at their desks presumably the cafeteria has space (especially outside peak food times) to provide a refreshing change of scene and possibly even a perceived more private working environment to take calls and the like.



## Change provocations

In each case study we present a brief selection of what we think are the key tips, hints and provocative questions to take away. The appendix of the report includes an extensive directory of organizational prompts for the leadership, team and individual levels.

- **Read the room.** Successfully navigating organizational culture requires an ability to understand unspoken expectations and norms. As organizations' physical spaces change, many of the traditional physical symbols we've depended on for *reading* the organization have disappeared. The underlying power structures are still there, but are more challenging to read since the new symbols and signs aren't yet settled.
- **Create a workplace that works for you.** With any proposed working environment change it's critical to empower teams to take an active role in considering

how they want to work together in the new space: What's currently working that they want to keep? What new goals do they want to achieve in the new space? What habits and practices do they need to develop to make that feasible? Again, this requires digging underneath the surface to find out not only what is important but also why: What meaning do teams attach to their current spaces, or imagined future spaces? What alternatives might allow them to achieve the same ends? For example, rather than focusing on the stated desire for what is basically more enclosed cubes, and instead looking at the deeper need for more focus time and confidentiality in calls, could Younger develop environments that support more activity-based working, with quiet spaces for reflection time and ample phone booths or other small meeting room spaces to take calls from? Or remove the cubes entirely and encourage more remote working?

## CONDITION

### Read the room

Successfully navigating organizational culture requires an ability to understand unspoken expectations & norms

What spatial clues do you use to tell you how this workspace works? How do you test your assumptions & fill information gaps?

Where is your team's 'home' digitally & physically? What features of this space give you a shared sense of belonging? How do you invite others in?

Whether you want them to or not, people will 'read the space'. What signals are you sending through the way spaces are organized & inhabited?

### A workplace that works for us

With any proposed working environment change, it's critical to empower teams to take an active role in considering how they want to work together in the new space: what's currently working that they want to keep?

What support is in place to prepare you for new ways of working? How can you be your own best advocate for ways of working that work for you?

How does your team adopt or adapt working guidelines? What experiments could you design to discover more productive patterns?

How could a change in working practice create unexpected impacts? Are you ready for quick repairs if needed? How do you convey what 'good' is?

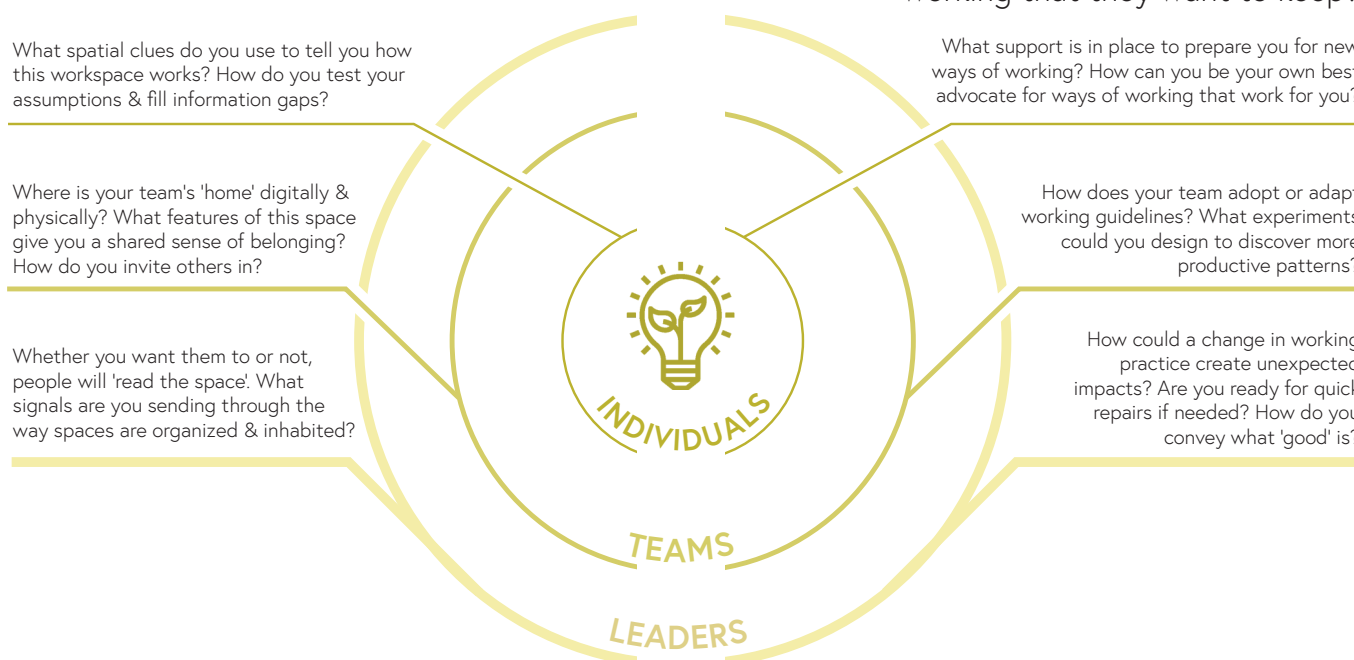


Figure 7 – Key change provocations

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