

# Working Group: Workspace Design

hosted by UnitedHealth Group

Eden Prairie, MN  
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## Key Takeaways

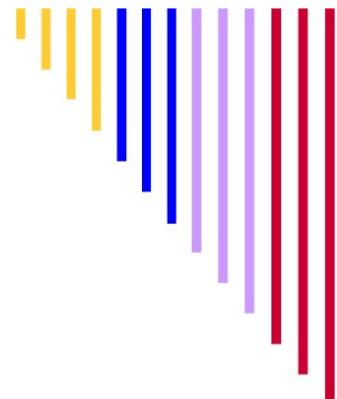
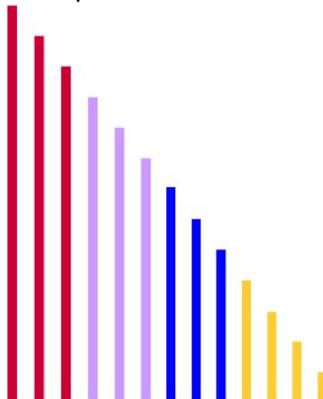
1. Start with the goals/objectives of the workplace design initiative and make sure that there is clarity in order to increase the impact and success of the project.
2. Change management is a key part of the success of new workplace design and this could include getting buy-in early from leaders and employees affected; providing socialization and learning opportunities to help employees navigate in the new space; following up and tweaking changes once employees have had a chance to work in the space.
3. Measuring impact of workspace changes is hard; look at multiple strategies to assess impact on productivity, engagement, collaboration or other intended outcomes of the workplace design initiative.
4. For workplace design initiatives that are tied to driving culture or work changes (e.g., increasing collaboration, creating stronger communities), design changes should be accompanied by other initiatives to support the change effort (e.g., training, leadership behaviors, performance management) to increase the likelihood of success.

### Participating Companies

3M  
CHS  
Cornell University  
General Mills  
Johnson Controls  
Pentair  
UnitedHealth Group

## Goals of Workspace Design Changes/Initiatives

Participants in the session noted that it is critical to gain clarity from leaders on the intent/objectives behind the change. During the discussion, participants noted a number of potential goals/objectives. In no particular order of importance, participants identified the following goals:



- **Attraction and retention of key talent pools.** Participants noted that there are changing expectations regarding how employees want to work and what they need/want from workplace settings. Further, there is greater competition for top technical talent, and workspace can be a deciding factor that can differentiate companies in the minds of applicants and current employees. It's important to potentially think through how the workplace creates an exciting/interesting place to come to work (lighting, shared spaces, integrated technology, etc.) and how the space creates flexibility in options for how to work within the same office (e.g., quiet spaces, collaboration spaces). It may be necessary to modernize the workspace and improve the employee experience along these dimensions in order to attract and retain top talent.
- **Drive culture and underlying behaviors.** Change in the business environment has had large impact on how work gets done, so there is a need to tailor the workspace to both support and drive culture and expected behavioral outcomes that underpin key work outcomes. For example, more company outcomes require higher levels of collaboration, greater agility, faster speed in decision making and the workspace needs to enable these behaviors.
- **Support healthy living.** Participants noted that some of the changes are to promote health and wellness in the workplace. For example, companies have changed space layout to move closed offices from the exterior of the building and created more open work environments to create greater access to natural lighting, airflow, etc., for a greater number of employees. Others have increased the amount of open collaborative spaces, internal walking areas, open-seating meeting areas to promote employee movement throughout the day. Increasingly, companies have rethought work stations to promote greater movement (e.g., sit-stand desks, treadmill work stations), improve ergonomics, etc.
- **Reduce cost through higher space utilization.** While often not discussed as the first priority, many companies have been rethinking workspace design as a way to re-look at building utilization as the cost of real estate continues to climb. Some companies have completed redesign projects as a way to create more attractive work spaces to encourage employees to come back to the office with more frequency. Others have utilized new thinking on open-space architecture as a way to accommodate more employees in existing square footage.
- **Create connections.** Many of the participants noted that a key goal of their recent redesign projects was to increase connections. Some noted that the workspace design was to create larger and stronger communities between employees and/or between employees and leaders by breaking down physical barriers that previously limited interactions. Others noted that space redesign can also help build stronger employee connections to the brand/mission of the company by how the space reinforces key values or visually connects employees to the company's purpose, products, or customers.
- **Increased flexibility.** Open workspace architecture also has been essential for some companies in creating flexibility. Some noted that new workspace designs increase the flexibility for teams/employee groups as furniture can be quickly rearranged/reconfigured to accommodate different activities/needs – new designs are far more flexible through the use of kit systems compared to hard wired offices or large walled cubicles. Similarly, the new workspace systems and designs can accommodate headcount flexibility for firms that go through rapid ramp ups or downs through different cycles or times of the year.

## Measuring the Impact of Workspace Changes

One of the key challenges for many of the participants is measuring the impact of workspace changes. Several participants noted that measuring impact starts with clearly identifying the goals for the change and to then develop measures or assess performance against these goals. Because of the differing nature of some of these goals, there is not a standard set of data or even data collection method that serves as a best practice or benchmarking across firms. Instead, it is important to think through a range of different methodologies and measures to assess the impact of the change. Importantly, it is also critical to continue to monitor the impact of the change over time as often it takes time for employees to adapt to the new environment, and early assessments may not provide a good read on the long-term impact of the change.

- **Surveys.** Multiple participants noted that they have found success using perceptual measures collected through surveys of the employees impacted by the change. For example, survey items can assess employees' perceptions of (1) the extent to which they collaborate more with other employees, (2) the extent to which they feel engaged by the new workspace, (3) their excitement of working in the new space, (4) their feelings of connections to other employees or leaders, and (5) productivity. These perceptual measures provide a useful set of indicators on the extent to which the new space is helping the company achieve key goals tied to the space design change. Participants also noted that through pulse surveys or abbreviated surveys, they can also keep better track of the impact of the change over time and more quickly spot potential issues or challenges.
- **Interviews and focus groups with employees.** Some participants noted that they have been using interviews and focus groups to identify challenges or issues, to collect on-going data on how employees are adapting to the change, and data on positive impact of the change. While these methods are less useful for statistical analyses, they are good for qualitative assessment and understanding of the impact of the change.
- **Experiments or A/B testing.** Importantly, several participants noted that they have used experimental design or A/B testing to assess the impact of alternative designs and examine which designs may have the most positive impacts on different employee populations.
- **Analytics through Technology.** A handful of companies are attempting to measure the impact of the workspace changes through analytics using data collected from sensors or badge swipes. For example, data can be collected about how space is utilized from sensors placed under a work surface or from locations of employees swiping badges.
- **Continuous feedback and periodic follow-up to enhance or make changes.** No matter the methodology, there was strong agreement that the data collection should be ongoing as employees move through different stages of adapting to the change. This ongoing collection can help provide feedback that can lead to design tweaks or improvements; assess how the change leads to goals as employees adapt to the new environment and start to better understand how to operate in and take advantage of the new design environment; and spot challenges early and later in the change.

## Change Management Essential to Driving Positive Outcomes

- **Pre-change Working with leaders.** As with all change, it is important to spend time upfront with leaders to gain clarity on needs, goals, and intentions behind the workspace design changes. Key outcomes of this upfront work include:
  - **Clarifying objectives.** In order for the change to be effective, it is critical to understand the intended goals, priorities, and needs of the group in order to understand and prioritize trade-offs in the design.
  - **Understanding concerns/fears tied to changing the workspace.** Give the design team both a chance to understand and potentially design around or overcome these fears in the initial design and in the roll-out of the change.
  - **Create change champions.** Leadership involvement and buy-in helps to create change champions that enable more effective roll-out and adaptation to the workspace design.
- **Pre-change Working with employees impacted by the change.**
  - **Help them understand the what and why of the change.** As with all change, there is a greater likelihood of success if employees have had voice and participation in identifying goals or influencing key principles of the change.
  - **Understand concerns/fears.** As with leaders, this step will give the design team both a chance to understand and potentially design around or overcome these fears in the initial design and in the roll-out of the change.
  - **Engage in identifying change principles to increase outcomes and buy-in.** Employees have the best insights as to how they work, key elements in terms of unique needs of their group or tasks that they complete, etc. In addition, this early voice and participation helps to build ownership in the new space and reduces resistance.
  - **Day-in-the-life.** One great technique is for the design team to do a day-in-the-life exercise of following current employees to understand the unique nature of the work and use this data to help inform space design ideas. It's also useful to do this post change to identify where small tweaks to the initial design could significantly reduce challenges or support goals that were missed in the initial design.
- **Orientation to new space.** Because the new space may require different behaviors, have different challenges (e.g., greater noise, new seating patterns, new technologies), a period of orientation and support can go a long way to increasing the positive returns of the design change. Key areas for orientation activities include:
  - How to use new technology including new connectivity, seating, desk arrangements, lockers, room or space-booking software.
  - Creating and/or elaborating on etiquette and rules of the road for how to use and work in new space. Often the key challenges come from a more open environment where there is potentially less control or ownership of space and greater noise levels. It's critical to help the employees understand or potentially co-develop new rules for how the team will use the space, communicate, reserve quiet areas, etc.

Allocate capital/budget for adjustments to make changes/adjustments after employees have started to use the space. One key takeaway from the discussion is that most design changes missed some key issues or the client group did not clarify a key need at the time of the design or roll-out of the change. It is important to keep flexibility in being able to tweak the change to the unique needs of the group or to accommodate a missed need and a key way to support this flexibility is to build costs of small tweaks or rearrangement of design kits into the original budget so that cost constraints after the initial build-out do not prevent the optimization of the space after the employees have worked in and better understood how the space meets their needs.

**This Summary Report was prepared by Chris Collins and Beth Flynn-Ferry for participants of the Workspace Design Working Group.**

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