

DESIGNED TO WORK

The modern workplace is less about workplace than workplaces—emphasis on the plural. Lee-Anne Duncan discovers an open plan environment, and the ability to work away from any desk at all, are part of the recipe for success.

Laura Onslow is delighted with her new workplace. “It’s completely changed the way we operate,” says the executive assistant at the Auckland financial management company, MMC. The company moved premises last September, its previous offices no longer suitable.

“We had ballooned from 45 staff to 60 and we simply needed more space. We’d knocked down walls to make room and even our managing director had lost his office. We had one boardroom, which was our only meeting space. If you needed to talk to someone you did at their desk or in a hallway, and to make a private phone call you had to go into the foyer.

“The kitchen had no prep space and not enough seating, and the queue for the microwave was often so long you just gave up. Looking back, I don’t know how we managed.”

When the top two floors of a Queen Street building came up—connected by an internal staircase—the company jumped at the chance to create “something awesome that would future-proof our company,” says Laura.

With the help of commercial interior design studio Spaceworks, MMC employees now enjoy two floors of open-plan workspace—only the CEO and MD have their own offices. They can book two meeting rooms, a boardroom, work in a dedicated quiet space and then be louder in a collaborative space. They can also enjoy the view from a large kitchen with two fridges, two microwaves, and a sound system connected to both floors. Each level has a shower and every employee has access to a personal locker.

While a vital aim of the refit was to present a more “professional client-facing image”, Laura says, providing the growing number of employees with a comfortable and functional workplace

was key. And that’s becoming mandatory for employers, says Lizzi Whaley, Spaceworks’ CEO.

Spaceworks did a survey in 2017 asking a group of employees what they want to be effective and productive, and asking employers what their concerns were. In short, Lizzi says, employees are concerned about what affects them and their ability to do their jobs, while employers are concerned about the things that drive profitability, sales and numbers.

“It’s basically the same answer to both—it’s about having productive and happy staff, and retaining the people you have groomed and trained for years. So by making sure an environment functions well, that everyone feels happy in it, and valued, you’re spending less money on recruitment, which gives you a more satisfying bottom line.”

The question is what kind of work environment functions best? What’s considered best practice in office design in particular has come a long way; from working at desks lined up like a schoolroom to cloistered offices, to grids of impersonal cubicles, to rowdy open plan floors, to—gulp—hot desking, to tele-working. In this brave new world that melds what’s hopefully the best of them all, is the balance right?

“Everyone’s had a love-hate relationship with open plan, largely because people don’t know how to use it,” says Lizzi. “From a cost perspective, businesses pull down walls, thinking it saves space and it’s all about collaboration and people working together. But open plan areas aren’t designed for people to collaborate in; they’re designed for people to work in.

“The response has been to add ancillary spaces, like collaboration areas where people can get noisier, but also focus areas where people can be quiet and have personal conversations.

Also, it’s important for the culture of a business to include social space as people who socialise together tend to collaborate and work better together.”

Over all, Lizzi says, the answer is whatever supports the functions of the people who work in that business. The way to know that? Ask the people who work there. As part of her standard way of starting a redesign project, Lizzi surveys the client’s workforce about what they want and don’t want in their new workspace. For employers who fear their people may ask for the moon, she has words of comfort.

“Often they ask for way less than what an employer thought they wanted. We ran a survey in a business recently, asking what the staff wanted to feel more valued, and all they wanted was a hairdryer in the bathroom. So we bought a \$50 hairdryer, did a survey afterwards, and the thing they loved the most was the full-length mirror and the hairdryer in the ladies’ toilets. You always get nuggets of gold just by asking. And if it’s not doable, it gives you an opportunity to discuss why.”

For MMC, there was one thing the team vetoed. “They absolutely did not want hot desking,” says Laura Onslow. “And I get that—people want their roots. I know it works for other people, but our people just didn’t want it.”

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