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# Change in the Workplace – what motivates people at work?

By Colin Stuart



**“For the vast majority of organisations their human capital is their most valuable and important asset... the workplace needs to be seen as an investment to unlock the value of this human capital.”**

*Colin Stuart, Value Rhetoric and Cost Reality, 2012*

Work places have evolved throughout history, but not always to the benefit of worker motivation. If we are to understand motivation within our workplace, we must first consider how the modern workplace developed.

## History of Change in the Workplace

The principles of the modern workplace were established by Fredrick W. Taylor (1856 – 1915). He applied scientific measurement of productivity in the workplace to improve efficiency. Tasks were analysed and split into repetitive acts. This led to a production line arrangement which Frank and Lillian Gilbreth saw could be applied equally to the office as well as the factory floor. It manifested itself as a series of regimented spaces with workers in rows in large rooms, facilitating close supervision. The most obvious example would be the typing pool.

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Technological advances in the 1940s and 1950s helped make the office even more efficient and regimented. Air conditioning and the invention of the suspended ceiling allowed the building of large deep efficient open floor plates.

During the 1990's and 2000s the advent of Wi-Fi, roaming profiles, virtual private networks and portable laptops increased worker mobility, allowed more effective hot desking within the office environment and facilitated home working on a corporate scale. A number of companies started to implement flexible working environments within their offices, moving to completely open plan environments and utilising hot desking and hoteling to create exiting office landscapes with maximum flexibility.

## How Change in the Workplace can affect Morale

The trend post the millennium has been to focus on the workplace as a cost that can and must be reduced to improve operating margins. The new technologies have been harnessed to reduce the desk footprint and maximise desk sharing. Although not bad per se, if they are done in isolation to other measures it can be a retrograde step that hits staff morale. Home working is on the increase but driven largely by the desire to reduce office costs rather than a step to empower the individual and unlock the value in the organisations human capital. (Myerson, Bichard, & Erlich, New Demographics, New Workspace, 2010)

But we must consider – is increasing efficiency alone a long term answer? With the efficiencies within the current model of the office almost at a maximum, where do we go from here? In trying to be even more efficient we could damage productivity, creativity and culture. Morale will suffer and absenteeism and attrition rates could increase.

It seems that the design of offices and the way they are utilised has not fundamentally changed for over 120 years, despite the global workforce changing in the 21st century with almost 50% of the UK workforce now classed as “knowledge workers”. Our current workplaces designed and based on Taylorist principles are no longer relevant for the modern knowledge worker, enabled as they are with all the latest mobile technology.

## Understanding the Knowledge Worker

To maximise their potential and productivity knowledge workers need to collaborate, to share knowledge and spark innovation. It is often in the chance encounter rather than the formal meeting that new ideas are created and new products developed. Companies that use their workplace to encourage this sort of interactivity are the ones most likely to succeed in the highly charged competitive corporate world. Studies have shown a high degree of correlation between the level of interaction between staff and the development and speed to market of new products. However, knowledge workers as well as benefiting from interaction with their colleagues, also need quieter environments to develop that knowledge in isolation, to read or write that important report.

Change in the workplace if undertaken with the right focus on ultimate goals can lead to fundamental changes to corporate culture and staff behaviours. Significant measurable benefits can result from changing your workplace model to a newer smarter way of working, as has been found by a number of organisations. This must, however, work alongside a clear and achievable financial return on investment.

Benefits to the organisation in terms of improvements to morale (and consequent reductions in staff attrition and absenteeism), will include

- improved attraction of the right quality staff,
- improved productivity due to increased collaboration,
- changes to corporate culture and evidence of desired staff behaviours,
- improved interaction and innovation,
- greater flexibility to respond to market challenges,

- improved customer service,
- greater knowledge sharing and
- higher motivation.

Next time we'll talk about the benefits of Flexible working for Employers. In the meantime, why not talk to us about how to facilitate change in your workplace to bring about the best returns? Please visit our website at [www.bakerstuart.com/](http://www.bakerstuart.com/) and subscribe to receive future articles or follow us on twitter [@bakerstuartltd](https://twitter.com/bakerstuartltd) or LinkedIn <http://www.linkedin.com/company/bakerstuart>

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<p><b>About the author</b></p>		<p><b>Colin Stuart</b> is a specialist in workplace and occupational strategy. He has an award winning track record in the design and delivery of workplace transformation projects. A published author and speaker with an intrinsic knowledge of the drivers of corporate clients both in the public and private sector and how property can respond to those drivers in order to deliver maximum benefit to the business he has delivered major change programmes and real estate projects in both the public and private sector</p>

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### Further reading:

*Myerson, J., Bichard, J.-A., & Erlich, A. New Demographics, New Workspace, 2010, Surrey: Gower.*

*Nelson, D., & Quick, J. Understanding Organizational Behavior, 2008, Mason, OH: Thomson.*

*Stuart, C. Value Rhetoric and Cost Reality. In K. Alexander, & I. Price, Managing Organisational Ecologies (Ch. 11), 2012, New York: Routledge.*