

## CHANGING EXPECTATIONS OF WORKPLACE USERS AND THE SHIFT FROM PHYSICAL DOMINANCE

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### ABSTRACT

Organisations are recalibrating physical workplaces to better support the human experiences employees now expect when they come to the office. For many this has come in the form of a thinly veiled carrot and stick incentives that ignore an underlying point of conflict that is brewing between the needs of individuals and those of the organisation. This approach also overlooks considerable differences that result from changed temporal arrangements due to hybrid work and strong evidence that suggests the physical environment is rapidly becoming just one of many portals that employees will use to connect with an organisation.

This paper presents findings from 33 interviews with workplace professionals conducted between April – June 2024 exploring changing user expectations, and the physical attributes currently used to address them. Our findings indicate a need for the reinvention of physical workplaces, and the broader work ecosystem are necessary to deliver the experiences employees now expect. The data shows a weakening in the influence of physical space compared to other attributes of work and organisational culture.

Key words: workplace experience, users' expectations, corporate real estate,

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

A point of friction has emerged between individuals' desires and those of the organisations they work for. On one hand employees want to continue exercising agency over when and where they work that many gained post pandemic, they also have different expectations of their physical environment and the type of experiences that working delivers. On the other hand, organisations generally believe in the power of togetherness and face to face interactions to achieve organisational objectives; many are making changes to their office design and now offer attractive incentives to lure workers back to physical workplaces (Herbert, 2024). These conflicting ambitions are the backdrop for this paper.

One challenge in charging forward with office redesign in the absence of information is the likelihood that organisations will rely on the same types of spaces and services they used in the past to paint a picture for a different future. Since the pandemic mindsets have shifted and there has also been an explosion in the popularity and widespread adoption of the hybrid workstyle. Hybrid is a catalyst for changing temporal frameworks and emotionally situated contexts that require consideration.

In lock step with hybrid comes a growing demand for different types of experiences in physical and digital environments that go beyond performance enhancement. The intention of this research is to provide professionals who design and deliver workplaces fresh data related to this evolution in thinking. It aims to clarify what experiences are desired and provide advice on which aspects of physical environments are effective in delivering those sought after experiences by investigating the following research questions:

**RQ1 What human experiences do organisations and employees expect workplaces to deliver?**

**RQ2 What design features, attributes and cultural situations are essentials in future workplace and which ones can be left behind?**

This study expands awareness of how events like the pandemic and the sociomaterial aspects of technology have impacted our thoughts, feelings and expectations of work. The research canvasses a cross section of highly experienced practicing professionals in Australia who have had responsibility for the planning, design and delivery of hundreds of workplaces for over a decade. Some are directly involved with physical aspects of space e.g. designers and architects and others focus on strategy and planning, lease negotiation or they are

employees in organisations with responsibilities for the uptake of workplace initiatives and ongoing maintenance.

This paper makes suggestions for types of spaces, attributes and organisational qualities that will be necessary in future workplaces. The research also notes features of the workplace that should be abandoned because they no longer serve a purpose.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Hybrid work and the impact of new technology

Hybrid is a style of work that grants employees permission to split their time between home, the office or other locations where work can now occur; its inherent flexibility explains how it has become the dominant work style for knowledge workers (ACAS, 2022). 54% of Australian knowledge workers practice some form of hybrid (Hopkins & Bardoel, 2022). The Future Forum Pulse survey of 10,646 knowledge workers across the U.S., Australia, France, Germany, Japan, and the U.K., conducted from May 2 to 16, 2022 found hybrid is the preferred way of working for 49% of employees around the globe (Future Forum, 2022). While the notion of working flexible has been a part of the workplace lexicon for decades, rapid changes in technology and a willingness to consider alternative ways of working during and after the global pandemic brought a unique opportunity to reinvent the way workers connect to work and workplaces (Psychogios & Prouska, 2019).

One of the most significant points of difference in hybrid work is the new temporal framework it provides which is largely due to advancing technologies that allow ties to physical presence to be broken. Often referred to as digital working, employees work together in different locations simultaneously in a ‘space of flow’ and ‘timeless time’ (Aroles et al., 2021) further cementing the notion that work is no longer just a place but an activity (Durakovic & Aznavoorian, 2024). Complications of the digital workplace that must be navigated are the fact that different workers have different spatiotemporally and emotionally situated contexts (Waizenegger et al., 2020).

With the help of software like Trello released by Atlassian in 2011 organisations can manage distributed teams and their work outputs in Cloud-based systems like Google docs and Microsoft OneDrive, activities can be organised, ideas shared, and project progress tracked (Hopkins & Bardole, 2022). When time and place are no longer limitations, and there is availability to highspeed digital networks (Ajzen & Taskin, 2021; Kingma, 2019), work can happen anywhere with the proviso the organisations grant their employees permission.

Technologies that make hybrid work possible are advancing rapidly, the digital workplace experience is becoming more authentic and immersive and in time the negative aspects of remote working that include a lack of transparency and an inability to build trusting relationships will be overcome (Nartker, et al., 2023). Additional hurdles in the form of security and the potential to exacerbate isolation due to the digital divide are being investigated with promising results from newer versions of virtual reality that are able to create shared simulated physical collocation that can nurture camaraderie and a sense of belonging (Orel, 2022).

The introduction of artificial intelligence brings the possibility of further breaking down distances through advancements in photo-realistic, volumetric videos that make it possible to feel you are sitting across the table from distant coworkers (Goode, 2021). Other advancements like mixed reality headsets that rely on eye-tracking and gestures as a user interface blend the real-world with digital content. This lays the foundation to abandon both desk and keyboard in the future (Gans & Nagaraj, 2023).

Soon it will be possible to create models that predict specific emotional responses (Lu et al., 2015) increasing the power and humanity of the digital workplace (Kolakowska et al., 2020). As technologies progress it is important to remember the digital workplace is a phenomenology; therefore, much more than an assembly of specific technologies or peoples’ interactions with them (Baptista et al., 2020). The digital workplace is an assembly of complex influences and experiences that occur in physical and digital spheres; consequently, the phenomenology is a combination of information received through multiple channels including technology, space and social rules (Baptista et al., 2020; Coetzee, 2019; Koffer, 2015). It is relational, constantly evolving and embedded in broader social contexts (Bandura 2001).

Technology mixes social aspects of how we interact with material objects, this blending is often referred to as the sociomaterial dimension of technology (Orlikowski, 2007). Technology only becomes meaningful when it

is used (Beyes & Holt, 2020; Dale & Burrell, 2010), if uptake is low, knowing the full potential and true properties or capabilities of the technology is impossible because determining impact relies on seeing the product in use (Carlile et al., 2013; Lindberg & Lyytinen, 2013). Only by working with, and seeing how technology is used, can we understand its possibilities. It is an experience born of being practiced or lived in (Beyes & Holt, 2020; Dale & Burrell, 2010; Kingma, 2019).

## **2.2 The shift to people centric themes.**

The connection between purpose and an individual's sense of meaning has expanded particularly with younger workers (Atlassian 2021). Recent research suggests employees expect the workplace to contribute to positive feelings that enhance their work and personal lives (HqO & Worktech, 2022; Jin et al., 2022; Colbert et al., 2016). The seeds of what may seem novel, impenetrable and people related themes such as psychological safety (McQuaid, 2023; HqO & Worktech, 2022), togetherness and belonging (Durakovic et al., 2023), innate human needs (Pierce & Brown, 2020), collective cognition (Akoyo & Askanasy, 2020) and inclusion can be seen in earlier work of scholars like Mintzberg 2009 - belonging and community, Pierce & Jussila 2010 collective psychological ownership & feelings, Holt-Lundstad et al., 2015 – social & physiological benefits of connection, Spinuzzi et al., 2018 – social isolation, Appel-Meulenbroek 2018 – employee needs and preferences.

The link between the physical environments and health, human performance and productivity is well established (Candido et al., 2019; Colenberg & Jylha, 2020; Marzban et al., 2023). More recent studies focus on the shift from the physical workplace being where work is done to the workplace becoming a vehicle for social connection, learning, mentorship and belonging (Babapour Chafi et al., 2022; Colenberg & Keyson, 2021; Durakovic et al., 2023; Windlinger & Gerber, 2023). These studies point to a future where the workplace is an ecosystem (Knoll, 2023) comprised of different physical and digital portals accessed in different ways at different times (Hq0 & Worktech, 2022). For it to be successful, the ecosystem must acknowledge human values and concerns and incorporate the socio-spatial complexities of emerging styles of working like hybrid that have proven to be tremendous sticky (Tahsiri, 2023; Appel-Meulenbroek & Danivska, 2021; Oseland, 2021). Merging the pieces and parts will take the efforts of professionals from multiple disciplines including designers, organisations, real estate and government (McKinsey, 2023, Clifford & Pineo, 2023; Armstrong et al., 2023; Fair Work Ombudsman, 2023; OECD, 2023) working together.

This paper represents a part of a larger research project that aims to identify the design features and attributes in workplaces that can best deliver the types of expectations employees and organisation expect in contemporary, post pandemic workplaces. The first phase of the research presented here focuses on insights into which design features, attributes and cultural contexts contribute to positive human experiences that workers today expect

## **3.0 METHODS**

A total of 33 practicing professionals each with a minimum of ten-years were recruited through personal and professional networks. Each expert is responsible for either the planning, design or delivery of corporate workplaces across a range of industries including: legal, financial, professional services, technology, government and insurance. Participation was voluntary. This study received approval from the University of Melbourne's Ethics Committee reference number 2024-28642-51813-3.

Below is a listing the participants highlighting their role and expertise.

- Workplace Strategists (total participating = 3) Strategists work with clients to understand their business, brand and cultural ambitions and create objectives that describe what the workplace must do and articulate the reasons it is important.
- Workplace Designers (total participating = 8) Designers create solutions to briefs that are developed by strategist or end users.
- Experience Designers (total participating = 3) Experience designers consider a broader range of influences on user's experience beyond the physical, this may include digital or other sensory and cultural inputs.
- Tenant Advisors (total participating = 5) Advisors work with end users to select buildings and negotiate leases.

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- Building Developers (total participating = 1) Developers build speculative commercial office buildings.
- Architects (total participating = 4) Architects focus on the design of the buildings that workplaces go into.
- End Users (total participating = 7) Employees of organisations who are responsible for the delivery of workplaces.

Interviews followed a semi-structured, qualitative research approach that allows for dialogue and modification while focusing on the meaning of an event or experience and the participants' interpretation of it (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Questions focused on the professional's experiences with their clients and what they, in their professional capacity, felt the implications to the workplace might be. It is acknowledged the chosen cohort works with a limited subset of Australian workplaces. The research intentionally focuses on organisations who understand the role of physical environment in delivering organisational outcomes. We have deliberately not pursued those who view the workplace as a cost to the business or believe it incapable of delivering value beyond satisfying functional and pragmatic needs. The starting point for all involved is workplaces are business tools.

Interview questions were informed by the literature review that indicated employee's expectations shifted during and after Covid due to the widespread adoption of hybrid work practices and other post pandemic changes in mindset, attitudes, and beliefs related to work. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. Transcripts were processed and cleaned of repeating words and filler phrases such as 'you know' and proofread for grammar. Identifying information was removed and participants were assigned a letter and number according to their expertise e.g. WD1 – workplace designer one. The transcripts were analysed and coded using NVivo14. Initial coding was undertaken by the primary researcher in an open inductive manner following no predetermined framework (Creswell, 2023). Themes were developed based on the frequency of topics mentioned in the interview transcripts. The process of identifying codes occurred by reading each interview transcript in NVIVO. Concepts emerged across the entire breath of transcripts and were not solely the product of explicit responses to specific questions. After the initial coding, analysis of big picture themes and sub-themes was undertaken by the lead author in consultation with other authors using NVivo word frequency tools and cross matrix evaluation.

#### **4.0 FINDINGS & DISCUSSION**

Table 1 features two comparisons of the data that emerged when the participants were asked about their clients' expectations of the workplace. The left column illustrates five themes created by the researchers from statements made by participants that were manually coded in NVivo. The associated words and phrases that contributed to the theme and the number of times they were referenced are included in the table.

This is compared to a second analysis in the right column using the NVivo word frequency tool across the entire transcripts of all 33 participants, this analysis includes how many of the 33 participants mentioned the word and the percentage that represented. It should be noted the right-hand column reflects the frequency of a word, but the word is not in a context. Nevertheless, from this analysis it is interesting to see that similar ideas emerged across the two.

In table 2 that follows is a selection of participants' comments to questions relating to RQ2, the design features, attributes and cultural situations that they felt were essentials in future workplace. The comments have been categorised across the five key themes.

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**Table 1 – Key Themes - Users Expectations of the Workplace**

CODED THEMES		KEY WORDS FROM ALL TEXT
Participant statements (words and like phrases) coded into themes manually by researchers		Words participants referenced most from all text (number & percentage out of 33 participants) using word frequency tool
Services 62	Safety & Ergonomics (13) Food (24) Curated events, Hospitality & Cleaning (25)	Food (18) 55% Coffee (25) 76% Cafe (12) 36% Amenity (12) 36% Curation (10) 30% Hospitality (8) 24% Cleaning (9) 27% Safety (7) 21%
Spaces 99	Plants & Outdoor Space (9) Nonhomogeneous (41) Homey / Human space (24) End of Trip (13) 3 <sup>rd</sup> Spaces (21)	Kitchen (15) 47% Plants (12) 36% Outdoor Areas (9) 27% Nonhomogeneous (10) 30%
Technology 119	Support Digital & Hybrid (15) Functionality (52) Noise Reduction (26) Sustainability (17) Desk Management (9)	Technology (23) 70% Hybrid (15) 45% Digital (15) 45% Noise (12) 36% Functionality (18) 55%
People 140	Together, Connection & Community (75) Communication (40) Gender, Neurodiversity & Individuality (19) First Nations (6)	Community (24) 72% Connection (26) 79% Neurodiversity (10) 30% Individuality (23) 70% First Nations (2) 6%
Attributes & Culture 191	Trust (13) Societall Issues (77) Permission, Barriers & Performance (10) Pride, Express Brand (18) Wellness (27) Omniprescent (18) Flexibilitiy & Choice (28)	Purpose (21) 64%, Responsibility (21) 64%, Leadership (16) 48% Trust (11) 33% Healthful (17) 52% Flexibility (20) 61% Wellness (32) 97% Permission (8) 24%

**Table 2 – Essential Ingredients in a future workplace**

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ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT	DETAILS, PARTICIPANTS COMMENTS
Services	<p><i>Well hosted, where you feel looked after</i>  <i>Some sort of activation</i>  <i>Activity or a guest speaker on a regular basis.</i></p>
Spaces	<p><i>Beautiful kitchen &amp; break out</i>  <i>A place for people to connect</i>  <i>Big areas where everyone socialises</i>  <i>Variety in space</i>  <i>Physical environments that allow me to work in different ways at different times</i>  <i>Diversity, quiet spaces, loud spaces, hear water, feel breeze, feel nourished</i></p>
Technology	<p><i>Smart, intuitive tech</i>  <i>Good connection</i>  <i>Functional, easy to use</i>  <i>Intelligent technology platforms</i>  <i>Collaboration tools</i>  <i>Scheduling tools</i></p>
People	<p><i>A genius designer</i>  <i>A behavioural psychologist</i>  <i>Nontoxic people</i></p>
Attributes & Culture	<p><i>Nontoxic culture</i>  <i>Permission</i>  <i>Individual &amp; team choice, agency</i>  <i>Flexibility</i>  <i>Social connectivity</i>  <i>Purpose &amp; intention</i>  <i>Respect, choice, trust</i>  <i>Being there for each other</i>  <i>Work respectfully with admirable people</i>  <i>Workplace health and justice</i>  <i>Trust and relationships with people</i>  <i>Delight &amp; joy</i>  <i>Identity</i>  <i>A meaningful job</i>  <i>Something that makes me smile every time I walk in</i>  <i>Camaraderie &amp; sense of belonging</i>  <i>Capacity to have some fun</i>  <i>Being able to enjoy every day</i></p>


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What is immediately clear from the table above is a large percentage of comments, particularly those that fall under the themes of People and Attributes / Culture are not about space but refer to job design and organisational culture, brand and identity. While the Technology and Services themes are not technically about space, they are significant enablers that activate space and ensure it functions smoothly. Technology and services can also be seen as reinforcement of brand and organisational culture. The most notable finding from Table 2 above is the surprisingly large percentage of interviewee comments that describe a vibe or type of experience of being at work that is positive and supportive.

A limitation of this study is all participants work in a similar role, they delivery workplaces either as consultants to organisations or as employees of organisations. The researchers expected to see a bias towards physical aspects of the workplace but surprisingly the responses to RQ2 were quite the opposite. The future direction they described has the potential to work against participants self-interest. If the workplace were to significantly diminish or go away completely, they might lose their jobs.

Nevertheless, the comments lean definitively toward other aspects of organisation culture and the design of work as summed up by a participant who noted

**Quotation 1 –**



*“Maybe the space isn't as important as we like to think it is”  
“What's the purpose of work?” (Workplace Designer)*

Plausible reasons for such weighted preference to organisational culture can be seen in the descriptions of hybrid work found in the literature review. Aroles’s ‘space of flow’ and ‘timeless time’ speaks of severing connections to physical space, Baptista, Coetzee and Koffer describe a potent phenomenology of digital work that incorporates information from multiple sources, and Bandura’s evolving social contexts lay the foundation for an expanded notion of where and when work is done. The experts no doubt see and feel the effects of these shifts in the conversations they have with their client. Consequently, their version of the future workplace is expanding and becoming more comprehensive.

In addition, the experience level of participants plays a part because it affects the way they think of workplaces. They approach the workplace from a strategic perspective and consider the workplace to be a business enabler. Also they understand that people, place, process and technology work together to deliver strategic objectives and believe transformative outcomes are not the result of space on its own. Many voiced frustration that clients have unrealistic expectations for the workplace to be more and do more than is possible, including make up for poor leadership.

Quotation 2 –

*I think they think the workplace will do a lot of heavy lifting. Actually, they're expecting it to do is the job of leadership. I mean all levels of leadership, from the top, through middle management, etc. They're expecting the workplace to almost replace that role (Workplace Strategists)*

*So now the office needs to be this all singing, all dancing thing which it can never be. There's only so many tricks in the book (Workplace Designer)*

*They say workplace will be king forever and I am very much like no it won't (Workplace Strategists)*

The sheer number of participant responses in the Attributes and Culture theme compared to the four others point to a hybrid future where the most desired work experiences include human attributes such as caring about people, their feelings, relationships with one another, as well as organisational integrity and trust. These findings are in line with the evolution of expectations noted in the literature. Study participants suggested the legacy of focusing on tweaks to physical space and the inclusion of attractive incentives that make work more palatable in the short term are “sugar highs” that fade over time and a distraction from the real focus which they suggest should be – reinventing work to deliver greater purpose and meaning for those who perform it.

Quotation 3

*Let's give them a pool table. Let's give them a ping pong table, bean bags and food so that they forget how meaningless their workplace and existence is...I always say design work first and then the workplace. If work is not engaging, people are not happy, you fix that at work design, not with a workplace design. It will be a different conversation (Workplace Strategist)*

The findings of this research are once again consistent with the literature review. The professionals in this study do not believe reinventing work is something architects and designers are capable of doing on their own, but they believe they play a role in the multi-disciplinary teams that will have the capability.

The second part of RQ2 investigated what aspects of the workplace participants felt should be left behind, e.g. they no longer serve a purpose in future workplaces. Responses again indicate a desire for work to contribute to enriching experiences that are meaningful as evidenced in the comments below.



#### Quotation 4

*I'm not taking any toxic people* (Workplace Designer)

*I'd leave egotistical management behind, I think that talks to that same point made regarding respect. You know people who were there just to serve their own interests* (Workplace Change Manager)

*Trash the C-Suite preciousness. The rarified none shall pass executive floor with the temple dragon stopping access* (Workplace Change Manager)

*Wishful thinking at leadership level is the thing that needs to be stamped out and I think one of the benefits of COVID was that it taught leadership that they have to reconsider ways that will keep their business flowing. They had to be more agile themselves and more adaptable to different ways of working* (Architect)

Several workplace sacred cows were noted for abandonment including allocated offices, assigned desks and the notion of the workplace being where work has to happen.

#### Quotation 5

*Work has outgrown the office, we need to have different environments because the work is bigger than the environments* (End User)

It is not surprising given the roles and bias of participants that contradictions in a features' usefulness surfaced. This was the case with stadium seats, some felt they were important spatial elements that help create community, others saw them as unnecessary wasted space. Similarly, wellness spaces were noted by several participants with caveats that they were a nice idea but were often ineffective due to half-hearted executions as highlighted in the excerpt that follows.

#### Quotation 6

*The whole Wellness suite / What other words - first aid, parenting multifaceth. I think they're often not very genuine in their well-being or humanity; they're dark rooms with no outlooks and in poor positions* (End User)

Finally, the workplace elements this study indicates should no longer be a part of our workplace lexicon include:

## Quotation 7

*Leave behind anything that's grey or beige and all the white walls that we sit amongst* (Project Manager/ Tenant Advisor)

*Any office that's in an office park in the middle of nowhere. I mean, why, it is soul destroying having to go somewhere that gives you nothing else* (End User)

*We don't need rows and rows of workstations or 2.7 mineral grade ceiling with the lights uniform* (Developer)

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

There is perhaps no time since the Industrial Revolution that such notable changes have occurred in how work is conducted and perceived than what has occurred with the evolution in workplace taking place now. Concepts employees and organisations have toyed with such as greater flexibility, agency and variety in work and a demand for purpose & meaning, motivation and engagement have become necessities in the aftermath of pandemic; they are key ingredients in a new workplace lexicon being adopted around the globe. The advancements have been rapid, they are the result of quickly evolving technologies, and most importantly, they rest on shaky ground. There is not great clarity as to what aspects of the workplace evolution are a temporary reaction to a new context, and which ones are changes that come from places deep within people that sanctify their staying power.

Debates are ongoing. In the meantime, workplaces are being modified and organisations are devising attractions to bring employees back to workplaces. What has become clear is organisations for the most part would like their people to come to the office to work and employees for the most part would like the flexibility to adjust their work schedules to include some days working from home. The aim of this research was not to identify what elements of a physical workplace would lure employees back fulltime, in fact we could argue against doing this from an environmental and wellbeing perspective. Rather our intentions are to understand why employers want this and to gain a greater understanding of the types of experiences and spaces that will deliver the experiences that workers want and need.

We start by accepting new technologies have not only changed the way we can work, they have also changed the way we want to work and in the process this has changed us as a workforce and society; the sociomaterial aspect of technology. Today it is entirely possible to have meaningful, authentic digital experiences with coworkers who are in different places and for some companies and employees this is preferred. It is great news for individuals who see the benefits, value, freedom and flexibility of increased agency, it has not proven to be such great news for individuals prone to feelings of isolation or loneliness. Nor does it support the communities they live in or organisations who have noted a decline in innovation and productivity and an erosion of company culture. This may be overcome with new technology, or it may not.

The participants of this study paint a picture of a future workplace that is multi-dimensional and comprised of variety of experiences and different portals to access those experiences. The image they have defined is not devoid of physical space but demands new types of spaces and a breed of organisation able to deliver the type of work experiences that will engage and retain the thinking and feeling human beings who work there. The study strongly suggests attention must be paid to design, culture and the overall vibe of the organisation with perhaps greater urgency given to that than the physical space. The experts we spoke to know a tremendous change has taken place that has not yet run its course; therefore, settling on a definitive template for the workplace of the future is premature and, in some ways, impossible given the constant change we are experiencing.

Even though space is not the hero of our findings, the study does offer insights into the types of spaces that should be trialled in future workplaces. First is a larger proportion of togetherness places able to support working teams and professional and social activities. The findings call for spaces that are human, homey and authentic. Moving forward a nonnegotiable element is superb technology and deliberately curated spaces and

experiences. Our study also provides insights into what will no longer fly. Homogeneous space that performs poorly, noise and distraction and spaces that do not function as intended. Excellent technology is nonnegotiable and seeding the environment with intentional experiences is required.

The most important insights this study reveals is that space should not be considered a salve for poor leadership, culture or company ambitions that are less than scrupulous. Employees see through purpose washing and mixed messages. Gimmicky space and flashy furniture are out, high functioning inspiring space is in. Perks like food, coffee and gym memberships are sugar highs that lose their effectiveness over time. If organisations hope to engage their people and keep them they will need to think about the bigger picture before launching into renovations and prioritise spending money on areas that matter rather than gimmicky spaces and attributes that create a sugar high that fades. It is likely the best solutions will involve doing more with less when it comes to workplace design.

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