

Hybrids Are The New Reality

It's unstructured, complex and fluid – how do we begin to define hybrid, so that we might 'design' to it?

Words James Calder

In the field of workplace design we are brilliant at using terms that bamboozle the non-expert and provide the grist for countless inane newspaper articles with misleading headlines. Open plan, hot desking, activity-based working (ABW), and now agile, are all buzzwords that strike fear into the heart of office workers and do little to enlighten the workplace model they profess to describe. And to further cause discomfort, the real estate industry is always ready to grab and over-simplify the next fad and anoint it as the new model that will change the world or work.

The reality is that there are good and bad workplaces of every type and there is far more variety than these simplistic terms can begin to describe. Perhaps we should adopt the Inuit approach (50 words for snow) and create more meaningful terms?

Over the last 30 years we have seen five main workspace models: enclosed offices, open plan, hoteling, activity settings and agile team space. Most of the current workplace research we are undertaking highlights that it makes no sense to choose just one model and that a combination of these models often makes more sense – a hybrid workplace. This is, of course, a disaster for organisations that have embraced ABW as the final evolution of the workplace, where the new agile processes demand small teams of six to eight people working face-to-face with an owned desk. And there are also hybrids of agile processes, with some teams working partially or completely remotely.

The hybrids naturally need to vary according to the workstyle and culture of the organisation. The modern legal workplace is often polarised by fully cellular or open plan models whereas a hybrid of the two may make more sense for many firms, as preferences and the slightly different workstyles of the practice groups means that a homogeneous model is not optimal.

The legal workplaces based on the cellular model are now adding small pockets of open space to better let light into the corridors and provide diversity for groups that need the osmosis that occurs in a quiet, open space. There are a few lawyers in open plan environments that would probably work better in an office where their state of flow can be protected.

The ABW workplaces are often now having to deal with agile teams so are becoming a hybrid of shared and owned space. Project teams now exist in most organisations so creating hybrid environments with increased flexible and reconfigurable team spaces, where teams can occupy designated space for the life of the project, is in some cases becoming business critical. We are even beginning to see new academic workplace models emerge, where hybrid models are ideal for coping with the often extreme workstyles of research (office), teaching (recording studio), administration (activity settings ranging from concentration to collaboration spaces) and touch-down spaces.

All of this additional complexity of hybrids is demanding more people to help manage the space as it flicks from one model to another. New and more comprehensive change management and communications are required to help the users to transition and use the space to its maximum benefit.

This of course presents a new challenge for the workplace designer, operations manager, experience team and furniture industry. We now not only need a new range of products such as vertical surfaces and screens, but additionally a new model of arrangement as the immediacy of spaces for interactions and concentrated work becomes critical. We also now need to have activity worksettings and agile spaces side by side, with the ability to reconfigure quickly as teams change and evolve. The idea that the furniture stays put and the people move (nirvana for facilities managers!) is no longer practical in the high performance workplace, where speed is paramount. So not only do we have the complication of hybrid workplace models, we also need to transform from one model to another in real time, with this completed by the users themselves. Plenty of opportunities to keep the workplace design community busy. Now, back to developing those 50 words to describe open plan...

James Calder is CEO and founder of Calder Consultants. For more information on agile processes see: 'The history and future of agile working' – calderconsultants.com