

Co-working seems to be the golden arrow for enterprises looking to improve productivity and collaboration. What makes it an effective and successful working model?

Words *Paul McGillick* Photography *Various*

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The Australian workplace is forever buzzing with new catchwords to label the latest shifts in workplace design. True, Australia is widely regarded as among the most innovative countries in the world when it comes to workplace design. But this disguises the fact that it often entails little more than a fresh set of fittings, furnishings and finishes, turning the office into a kind of business class airport lounge.

This is not sleight of hand on the part of designers, but a failure to own the problem – namely, to understand the business in question, its culture and aspirations and only then to devise an appropriate physical environment. It is, says Gijs Nootboom from Veldhoen + Company, a failure to discern the difference between a workplace strategy and a project methodology.

Veldhoen are workplace strategists, not designers, and insist on putting the horse firmly in front of the cart. In other words, get the workplace culture right before you install the furniture. While they introduced activity-based working (ABW) back in the 1990s, their Australasian operation does not even work from an ABW dedicated office, but from Spaces, an inner Sydney co-working facility – surely sending a signal about where they think the workplace is heading.

So, what is co-working, what are its benefits and are there any potential pitfalls?

The Veldhoen base in the Netherlands was the first “office without desks” which, says Nootboom, had to accommodate their three dynamics of socialising, knowledge-sharing and project management. But, he points out that they had to apply change management to themselves if they were to advise clients.

“We felt we needed to change, to re-discover our own ways of working,” he says. “We thought that if there was one co-work location we should test it was Spaces. We can bump into like-minded people believing, as we do, that sharing is the new norm. We are an ‘out-going’ company because most of the day we are with clients, but we need a place where we can work in a very focused way, but also work in a very collaborative way. We are also too small – just 10 people – to have our own space in an economical way, as are many companies. So, why not share the costs of a bigger space with the right facilities?”

So, there it is in a nutshell. But co-working is really part of a bigger picture because, on the supply side, developers are now starting to respond to a changing marketplace. As specialist workplace consultant James Calder points out, “There is a whole range of new shared services that are starting to emerge... it is not exactly revolutionary, but I think it could be quite powerful in the market and in how people use space.”





Tenants are now requesting services or shared amenities that they are willing to pay for. Calder comments that “we are starting to see that people who, in the past, have just provided space to be rented per square metre, are starting to offer a whole range of new shared services”.

At the same time, though, specialised co-working facilities are becoming far more sophisticated and a long way from the rudimentary amenity offered by Dexus, for example, when it pioneered the concept just a few years ago. “What you’re getting,” says Calder, “is that co-working is evolving rapidly and starting to latch on to higher-end market segments rather than the grungy start-ups.”

Still, the co-working phenomenon has its own momentum, much of it originating in London where the three Interchange sites, for example, have been designed by name architects such as Tom Dixon, José Selgas and Lucía Cano and offer the ultimate mix of work, life and play, blending business hubs with social and cultural activity.

WeWork now boasts around nine individually designed locations in Australia, with six more announced (at the time of writing). At the same time, Work Club Global (with two sites in Sydney and one in Melbourne), like WeWork, has extended the membership concept basic to the co-working model to an international level with a network of bespoke amenities around the world accessible to all members.

“However,” says Nooteboom, “these kinds of environments must keep an eye on high quality, a high level of flexibility (which means you can sign up for a month or three months, and don’t have to sign up for a year or two or five), you must have all the equipment in place

from enclosed to unenclosed spaces with the virtual connection to the world (video conference, tele-conference etcetera). I think that’s still a hard concept to deal with because 75 per cent of the space is still occupied by offices, and only 25 per cent of the space is a community space. However, the community space will evolve more and more.”

And while all this is happening in the commercial sphere, co-working is also spreading to the educational sector. When its new Southbank building was opened some years ago, the State Library of Queensland established The Edge as a creative and interactive hub. More recently Studio Tate in Melbourne has re-worked a former boarding house at Caulfield Grammar School. Taking the village square as its inspiration, it has created an environment mixing independent work with collaboration. Schools, of course, have long mixed these things. And progressive schools such as the Steiner schools have based their heuristic principles on that mix. But what we will see more of is purpose-built school environments offering ‘hybrid’ learning amenities.

In the meantime, given the cost of city real estate, the importance of global networks, the need for flexible business models and a recognition of the role of collaboration and diverse work styles in the success of any business, co-working will increasingly characterise the contemporary workplace.

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