



LEARNING TO BE SMART

Today's workers don't just need a desk and a chair, they want variety, flexibility and inspiration. **Dean Gurden** hears how designers and fit-out firms are responding to the challenge

How many of us can say we like where we work? We might enjoy our job, but all too often we're asked to do it in an environment seemingly designed to frustrate our best efforts to do it well. Thankfully, today's workspaces are changing and fit-out specialists have a crucial role to play in their transformation.

So what's been going wrong? According to Andrew Mawson, managing director and founder of workplace consultancy AWA, people are starting to realise that the bland, open-plan office spaces based on a hierarchical structure are inappropriate for today's ways of working.

"In the past, people designed offices without access to any data whatsoever," says Mawson. "In fact, in pretty much every project we've been brought into, the balance of meeting places has been wrong."

AWA's research shows that the average size of a meeting is 2.5 people, but most meeting



BSI refurbishment using PAS 3000

The BSI knew it had to walk the walk as well as talk the talk when it redeveloped its own offices in Chiswick, west London (pictured here and overleaf) at about the same time as launching its *Code of Practice for Smart Working* (PAS 3000).

“There wasn’t much out there that joined together information on the concept of workplace, behavioural change and fit-out,” says Sally Sellers, HR director for knowledge solutions at BSI, who was involved in delivering the refurbishment.

“The guidance is a toolkit that brings it all together. Loads of fit-out contractors are experts on furniture and fittings, but this guide deals with the behaviours you need to understand to get the benefit from all these products and solutions.”

As a result, the BSI offices have been transformed. “People used to say the space felt very 1950s, very silo-ed. Everyone had their own large desk, there were no breakout spaces – it was

unsustainable,” adds Sellers. “The new environment is vibrant, open and fresh, and encourages people to choose a workspace for what they’re doing. This could be a sitting desk, a standing desk, an open conference room, a kitchen space or simply a collaborative table. And all these areas are fully technology-enabled.”

Too often, Sellers believes, businesses buy in a whole stock of furniture without giving any thought to their staff work culture and behaviour, or how people are going to use it – it looks good but is ultimately a waste of money.

“As well as helping you think about the behavioural side of things, the PAS 3000 gets you to ask exactly what the business is trying to achieve,” she says. “It takes you through, step by step, what you need to do to make this happen, including how you work with your senior leadership team, how you work with your employee base, what guides you need to write and what tools you need.”



PHOTOS: LIBIPEDDER

spaces are designed for six to eight people. So staff find most of these rooms over-booked and under-populated. “Often only 50% of the space is being used in these badly designed offices. So it’s all about getting the alignment tighter,” says Mawson.

IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology has had a big influence on office spaces and is continuing to influence their transformation.

Mark Catchlove, director, knowledge and insight, at furniture and office designer Herman Miller, says: “When designing offices and furniture in the past, you had to cope with big technologies, such as large computer screens, hard drives and printers – people were often incidental to what you had to get into the space. That’s changed – technology now supports any way you want to work.”

So technology has gone from being a driver

to a supporter and, in doing so, has added an important element to modern office space: choice. Companies are realising that their staff don’t do the same thing every day.

As Joe Cilia, technical manager at FIS, explains, it’s all about the three Cs. “We’re either communicating or collaborating with people or concentrating on our own work,” he says. “Office spaces are starting to reflect this behaviour, and the fact that people are no longer tied to their desks. Technology has allowed this to happen. Suddenly we’ve got communication going on across the silos.”

Cilia believes the new generation of workers is much more demanding – they want to work flexibly, like they did at university. To attract and retain them, not only must companies provide an environment where employees can breathe fresh air and see outside (aspects addressed by environmental assessment methods such as the WELL Building Standard,

BREEAM and SKA), but they must also allow them to work smarter.

The British Standards Institution has recognised this and produced its specification PAS 3000:2015 Smart working.

Its author is Andy Lake, director of Flexibility, a website promoting smarter working (flexibility.co.uk). He explains that smart working has been around for some time, but the financial crisis accelerated its development, particularly in the public sector.

“Even before the Cabinet Office commissioned the guidance, the Government Property Unit had been pushing this agenda of efficiency and reform and trying to get the whole of the public sector, not just central government, modernising and working more effectively.”

All age groups are having an impact, he says. “Working in a more virtual way is natural for the upcoming generation, but it’s really been the



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older generation that’s been driving the flexible work agenda, and the technology companies that have allowed it to happen,” says Lake.

VARIETY OF SETTINGS

The PAS 3000 guidance recommends that companies offer a greater variety of settings in their offices. The old model of desks, formal meeting rooms and storage should be replaced with one that offers a variety of activity-based working areas.

There should be informal collaboration spaces, places to huddle, quiet spaces, project rooms, fewer but more flexible meeting rooms and less space given to unnecessary storage.

Those leading the charge are technology firms, according to Lake, closely followed by financial services organisations. And in the UK and the Netherlands, the government and public sector have been making great strides.

Fit-out firms and designers have a major part to play in pushing the smart working agenda, he says. “The main thing is to get the conversation with clients away from desks and desk ratios. Everybody wants to retain their territory, but by talking it through, you can get them to think differently,” says Lake.

“There’s a tendency at the implementation

stage to rely on current ways of working that just need to be tweaked a bit. But you have to think about what’s coming down the line. If you’re investing millions in new offices and technology, you want to be thinking seven to 10 years ahead. Are we going to get less mobile or more? Will it be completely paperless? What about voice and gesture-activated technologies and improvements in screen technology, such as intelligent partitions that have screens embedded in them?

“If you’re already in the mode of thinking and working in a smarter way, adapting to and making the most of these innovations will be far easier.”

It’s true that, outside design and build contracts, architects and design firms call the shots. But Catchlove urges fit-out specialists to work with them. “A lot of designers produce a scheme, not because it looks hip and trendy, but because they’ve done a workplace strategic analysis,” he says. “Fit-out people have been known to try and substitute products because they might get a better deal for themselves or the client.”

Working together, however, designers and fit-out specialists can give businesses the office space they need to work smarter.

Sound check

Acoustics are often overlooked in an office design, says Paige Hodsman, concept developer – office environments for Saint-Gobain Ecophon.

“We rarely see good acoustic solutions. The problem is that when clients receive acoustic reports, they don’t understand what they’re looking at, so it’s often value-engineered out, the office is built and then it’s realised that there’s a sound issue,” she says. “By then, it’s like putting a plaster on a gaping wound.”

Acoustic issues must be tackled early in a project, says Hodsman. And that means clients and end users should be better educated on the subject. They need to be aware that if they get the specification wrong, it can have a detrimental effect on the business.

It’s important to offer choice to end users, she adds. “Some might really like working in open-plan offices – they enjoy hearing other people talking and the general stimulation it brings – whereas for others it’s really distracting,” says Hodsman. “Yet people are often thrown into one-size-fits-all solutions and have to make do. That’s it in a nutshell – we’re often just coping with the office spaces we’re given, not thriving in them.”

- For more information, download Saint-Gobain Ecophon’s guide, *Planning for Psychoacoustics: A Psychological Approach to Resolving Office Noise Distraction*, at bit.ly/2pPuuzO

Find out more

Here are a few places to learn about smarter working:

- Worktech Academy: www.worktechacademy.com
- Workplace Insight: workplaceinsight.net
- BSI’s PAS 3000:2015 Smart working: shop.bsigroup.com
- FIS A Client’s Guide: *Office Fit-Out and Refurbishment* (see p14)

