

It's not often that workplace management becomes national news but that happened at the end of February when the world became very interested for a while in the way we design and manage offices. The reason for this was the decision by Yahoo to ban homeworking for staff at its headquarters. The resultant period of shirt-rendering at this challenge to received wisdom told us more about the changing view of the workplace than the actual decision by Yahoo.

This crystallised a number of debates, not merely about flexible working but also about the nature of collaborative working and the greatest question of them all; what is the workplace? When the workplace exists as bricks and mortar, as digital space and as an abstract thought in somebody's head, what are we to make of it and what becomes of the roles of the three once demarcated professions most in touch with these aspects of the workplace: HR, IT and facilities management?

These were the questions addressed in the Worktech London conference in late November, where 300 delegates took part, led by some of the world's foremost commentators on work and workplaces including Charles Handy, Dave Coplin of Microsoft and the author and academic Greg Lindsay.

Charles Handy framed his keynote address in typical style in terms of the ancient Aristotelian idea Eudaimonia which can 'happiness', 'human flourishing' or 'self-fulfillment', this covering several layers of the hierarchy of needs a couple of Millennia before Maslow defined it for the modern world. Handy delivered a provocative and interesting interpretation of how eudaimonia might reframe how we employ and are employed, not least by challenging a rather more persistent hierarchy. 'A 21st century democracy will not stand for continually rewarding 1 percent of the company while the other 99 percent continue to suffer,' he said. 'You only have to look at the Arab Spring and Occupy Movement to see the power of people's voice. We need employees at the bottom of the organisation to have more of a voice. This takes power away from the people at the top, which will pull down the glass towers.'

Dave Coplin is chief envisioning officer at Microsoft UK. He agrees with Handy that there is a danger that people are becoming emotionally detached from their employment. 'When it comes to HR, not to mention other disciplines, and the major challenges they all face as professions I am invariably drawn back to a stat I saw recently which claimed that an amazing 71 percent of the US workforce is disengaged from what they do' he says. 'In the UK I believe it's slightly less but even so is something like 65 percent of the total workforce. So if you could do one thing for these people it would be to increase their level of engagement with their jobs. It's the gift that keeps on giving in terms of happier and more productive people and in turn happier customers and other benefits for the organisation.'

Coplin argues that this disengagement has its roots in a disconnect between people and what they do. 'The processes of work that we have evolved have taken us far from what we have known in the past,' he says. 'And what we are discovering now is that we can spend 8 hours a day just responding to emails and that is simply not productive. I'm not blaming anybody for this because we've all been there, but when people become focussed on processes like responding to emails, they end up hating the technology. It becomes a prison for them rather than an enabler. It constrains rather than changes what we do.'

The writer Greg Lindsay sees similar constraints in the way organisations are structured. 'We often start from a flawed or narrow perspective,' he argues. 'So if you take something like an org chart, which is how many organisations visualise themselves, you begin from a false point. It's a terrible approximation of how work gets done and how people interact with colleagues and the organisation.'

But according to Lindsay, there is an alternative and it lies in creating a workplace that approximates to the complexity of the organisation and its myriad relationships. 'The challenge is how we use offices to engineer serendipity,' he says. 'This is not about the creation of any supposed watercooler moments but something far more sophisticated. It's about creating an informal assemblage and one in which one of the more interesting and productive aspects is how technology is applied. You have to figure out what and where the organisation's networks are, both those inside the office and those outside. This is where I think some solutions fall down because essentially what they do is create a big plain on which people work and then wait. What they are suggesting is that all you need to bring people together is to give them coffee.'

For Dave Coplin, this serendipity can be engineered to a large degree with flexible working, but he is cautious of the baggage the term carries. 'Flexible working is not about working from home,' he states. 'That's a common misperception. It's about working anywhere, whether that is client premises, train stations, airports, home or the local cafe. The other problem that we have with the idea is that it is still seen as a perk when we should see it as a strategic opportunity. If it is seen as a perk, it becomes about the individual and can cause friction between employees. That in turn can change behaviour in negative ways such as encouraging employers to show signs of working harder such as by getting up earlier to send out a few emails. My view is that it already affects so many aspects of the organisation that we will soon see flexible working become a board level concern and part of any strategic decision making.'

Coplin has a number of concerns about this, not least for organisations to make themselves more aware of the nature of the work people do and what this means for employees. 'We need to

recognise that flexible working puts a large initial burden on people by making them decide where and how they will work each day,' he says. 'When we worked in the same place and same time each day, we didn't have to make those choices. One people are used to deciding it stops being a problem but managers must know how to support people with the same infrastructure they would enjoy if they were in an office. In particular they need to understand how to support people in a self-directed way. We are witnessing second generation collaboration already. In practice this means people expect instant access to others and will drive a different culture based on flat, open and transparent communication. All the old hierarchies will crash down. Social media will transform brands. And it's all out there and available to each of us.'

Coplin does not believe however that this is purely a technological issue to be solved by more technology. 'Well, I'm the guy in the IT industry, but I still recognise that the solution is dependent on culture rather more than technology,' he says. 'Take a solution like Yammer, which is an interesting piece of technology but what is most important is the culture it creates. Social media like this should become the memory of the organisation so that each new person that joins never has to ask the same series of basic questions. That is where its power lies. It's all about leadership rather than management. And what leadership is about is setting up employees to be successful then getting out of their way. It's about making them feel they are being treated as professionals and making them understand they are expected to make decisions.'

Greg Lindsay argues that the physical workplace can play an essential role in sending these messages to people. 'Unquestionably the best new office designs are those which create unforeseen encounters in much the same way as we see in an urban setting,' he claims. 'There are a number of ways of doing this. Facebook for example is looking to create this type of workplace by essentially putting everybody in one big room at its new HQ. That is essentially the vision of Mark Zuckerberg. And you can see the thinking behind what they've done up to a point. But it relies on an assumption that, when it comes to bringing the right people together in the right ways, that you know who the right people are to begin with, even if you have designed flexibility into the layout of the offices so they are able to change quickly as a way of creating new interactions. So I'd say there are better ways of maximising the chances of the right interactions happening in practice.'

'That said, you have to accept the obvious caveat that what works as a feature in one place won't necessarily work in another,' he continues. 'But you can see shared principles. One is about how you use the data about how people work and interact. If you take a company like Hitachi, they acquire data through networks and social media and apply it to make better decisions about their workplaces. One of the points of reference I always return to in this regard is the work Tom Allen did at MIT in the 1970s, particularly in establishing the principle that there is an exponential drop in the

frequency of communication between people as the distance between them increases. Nowadays we might see that in terms of technological as well as physical distance but the central point remains valid. So the important thing is about how you cut the distances between people, however you define distance, optimise for value and organise the various aspects and networks of the workplace accordingly. There is a great opportunity for professions like FM and HR here and I'm not sure they are making the most of it. Well actually I am sure. They are missing out and they need to look into their opportunities more.'

Dave Coplin believes that one of the best ways of identifying these opportunities is with using that most talked about and vexed issue in HR circles: Big Data. 'There has to be a change in attitude towards data,' he says. 'You can't work with information in silos that are most directly linked to what you do. And big data takes this one step further because it's about everything, not specific parts of it and samples. So you can create distribution curves of data that allow you to see right to the heart of any issue. Big data will change everything because it will force us to question all of our preconceptions. Professions such as FM, HR and IT will no longer only see the data that affects what they do but will cut across every facet of the organisation. There will be no disparate data sets.'

'In practical terms this means we will be able to relate to each individual in an holistic way,' he continues. 'And the more holistic the view of the individual, the better the organisation becomes at developing a productive relationship with them. The better able the organisation will be at accounting for an existence outside of work, including taking account of those with portfolio careers, the connections they have and to find ways of supporting all those aspects of their lives. All organisations need to work out how they will acquire and apply data. For them, data scientists will be the new rock stars. Big data challenges everything. Most of the knowledge we currently apply is based on a handful of sources. But very soon we will be able to base decisions on everything.'

About Worktech

The 10th annual Worktech conference took place over two days in November at the British Museum, with a unique blend of ideas, case studies, workplace innovations and visions of the future. It's brought together professionals from real estate, facilities, technology, HR, architecture, design and executive management to examine the collision and convergence between these disciplines.

