# Brave New Workplace

The breadth and speed of change in today's workplace is unprecedented. The old approaches we've used for almost 50 years no longer apply. The new models taking their place are much more complex, but also offer substantial benefits: to truly connect work and place, to more aggressively support "the business of the business," to use space ever more wisely and efficiently, and to enable effective adaptability to changes in work practice, social needs, and technology as they happen.

Seizing the opportunity

Workplace makers' goals for our workplaces have been pretty consistent over the years: to bring workers together to accomplish the organization's goals by enabling the effectiveness of those workers; and to do so as efficiently as possible. We have also wanted to use space to materialize or express our organization's brand or culture in compelling ways to support attraction and retention.
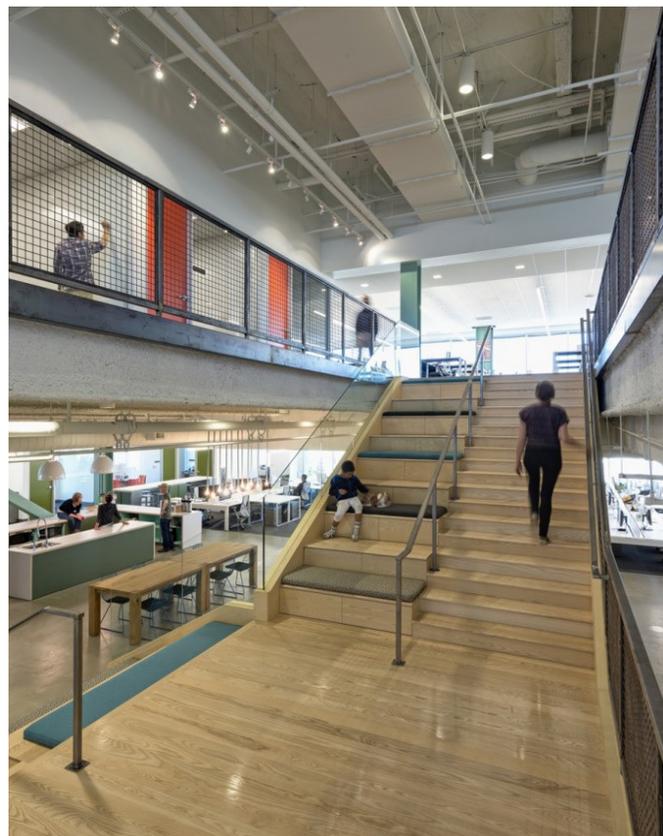
At Allsteel, we believe – based on hundreds of our own interactions and watching others help their clients sort out how to approach the design of their work environments - that one more goal should be added to those mentioned above: *agility*. Restating this set of goals below, we have found it helpful to use the four categories we describe like a checklist to ensure that we're thinking holistically and thoroughly addressing all the opportunities that a good workplace strategy can support. And as a call to action.

Alignment – the workplace must be in *context*; it must consistently and in physical *and* behavioral ways express organizational culture and brand and effectively respond to economic realities and demographic and social changes. First and foremost, though, the workplace must be an enabler of value creation and achieving the desired business results. To support that, we must deepen our understanding of the business of the business, and their most critical/business-goal-supporting processes and work practices.

Effectiveness – those critical work practices, and the activities of both individuals and teams, need to be understood in enough detail to inform what those individuals and teams need the workplace to provide. Performance is enhanced when there is a "fit" between what people do, how they do it, and what the workplace(s) they use provides them. *Effectiveness* supports *Alignment* when the workplace is also consistent with cultural norms, and, as we inferred above, the work practices being supported ladder up to business goals.
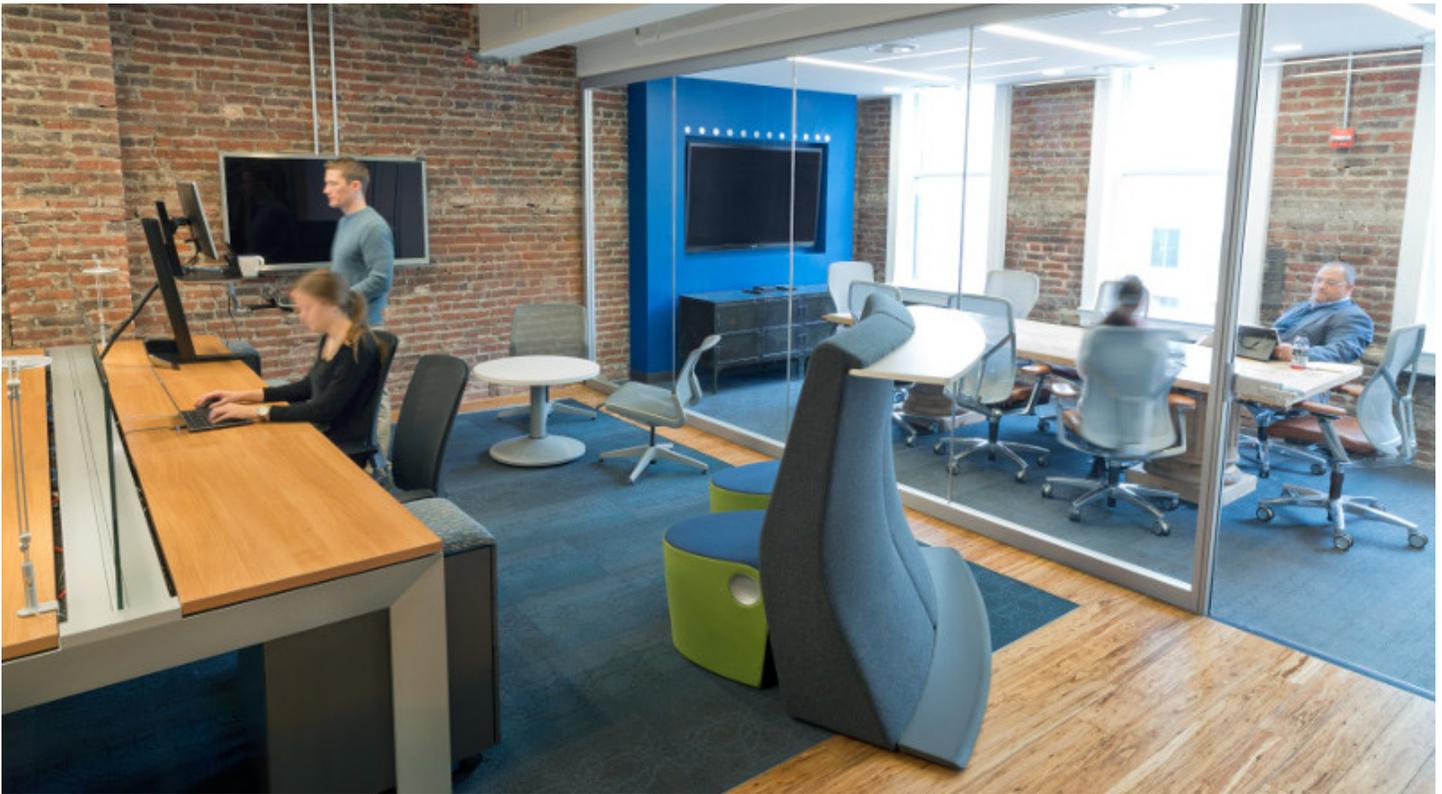
Efficiency – this is exactly what it sounds like: are we using real estate and other assets and resources as wisely as possible? Standardizing when possible, but also enabling variety or customization when it's needed. *Efficiency* links to *Effectiveness*, for example, when the space that's saved by shrinking individual work spaces is reallocated to "group" activities, like informal meeting areas or team project rooms, because they are needed to support important group work.

Agility – this principle includes both the notion of flexibility, or physical adaptability, and the idea of user choice and control. MIT's Bill Porter uses the expression "situational awareness" in this context to suggest that when workers understand how the work they do relates to the place and the tools they have to do it, they will use those resources more effectively, and be better at adapting it themselves to (quickly and intelligently) morph as they need it to.

Agility is taking on greater urgency these days to enable the workplace to keep pace with the two major catalysts of change: technology and the ongoing evolution of a given organization. When you consider that many businesses, especially those in leased facilities, only make major or even moderate changes in their workplace every seven to ten years – usually triggered by that lease's expiration all while their business (not to mention technology) has

changed in hundreds of ways over that same time span – you see the disconnect.

New ways of working make all this even more relevant

In response to new ways of working made possible by the plethora of new technology, the office is changing in a number of fundamental ways. While this topic could take up a book and not just this short paper, we want to point out how *planning* – that is, *allocating* and *arranging* space for the office – has evolved over the last decade or two, and will likely continue to do so at an ever-faster pace. In particular, how and why the types of spaces and amount of those spaces relative to other space types are shifting in major ways for many organizations.

At the risk of over-simplification, the "why" might be explained by two fundamental shifts. First, social change is moving us towards a more egalitarian, less "entitled" attitude towards space. Second, technology is enabling both mobility and constant access. We now have unprecedented levels of choice about where, when, and even how we work.

As we place less and less value on space as a status marker and more on its functionality and ability to meet our needs, we move away from *status-based* space allocations to *function-based* space allocation – causing us to have to consider what kinds and how much of

each space we need to support what we do. And, as we advocated above, to delve more deeply into the critical activities of a given team so that we can provide the right places, technology, furniture, and degree of acoustic support to match their needs.

Space planning has become more complex

While there are still a large number of organizations applying the planning patterns we've used for the last 50 years – private offices and open plan workstations making up to, say, 80% of a floor plan, and the other 20% shared spaces like break rooms, copy areas, and meeting spaces for 6-8 or more – others have moved to an expanded group of settings and are allocating space very differently. Many organizations have realized that their workers are – on average (with notable exceptions like call centers) – in their assigned seat less than 40% of the time. They've shifted to planning for the 60% of the time that workers are elsewhere – usually with others, or finding a quiet space to do heads down work.

Those who have pushed the furthest are at a ratio of group spaces to *individual* spaces approaching one "we" seat for every "I" seat. And generally, those spaces for *individuals* – whether that's a private office or an open plan workstation – are getting smaller, and taking more forms. In addition to the typical 10'x12' office, there may be smaller unassigned offices and even smaller focus rooms, for example.

Even more change is taking place in those spaces for *group* activities or heads down, "getting-away-from-it-all" work – they're expanding in both variety and quantity. These may be either open or enclosed, located in "public" areas or within a team's own neighborhood, fixed or meant to be easily rearranged. They may have names like "huddle," "war," or "scrum" rooms. They may just be some soft seating in a nook near a great view, or an open area provisioned with a mobile monitor and multi-level seating.

In this brave new workplace, then, there are additional areas to explore to fill out what has, in many cases, become a rather anemic design process in part because of the pressure to reduce fees and timelines: those exercises that delve into and interpret the goals, needs and activities of the organization, and consider what's possible and proven, given what we know about new ways of working.

A more robust discovery process is critical

Much gets lost when we reduce the discovery process to a numeric "how many of X do you need" exercise. Or if we blithely apply some hot trend without considering its real relevance to the work being done. While there can certainly be an element of "fashion" to the way a need gets interpreted into space (in material usage, color palette, and overall aesthetic direction), it's still critically

deep understanding of the organization

BUSINESS DRIVERS / CULTURE   BUSINESS PROCESS   REAL ESTATE STRATEGY   WORKER CHOICE/CONTROL PROTOCOLS   CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

traditional design process: feasibility › vision › program › design › implement › manage

WORKPLACE TRENDS   WORKPLACE 'BEST PRACTICES'   APPLICATION DEVELOPMENT   TRANSITION SUPPORT   CONTINUOUS ADAPTATION

workplace models and best practices

important to truly understand that need to begin with. Like the diagram above makes clear, it is not enough to be informed by best practices and what's "of the moment," we can only approach optimization when we are in alignment with the organization's particular culture, strategy, circumstances, and capabilities.

Managing noise is critical
While there are many other attributes of the physical environment we might have focused on here, acoustics demands our renewed attention. All these new kinds of spaces or settings – even the enclosed ones – add complexity to acoustical challenges. A lot of early experimentation with this expanded set of settings proved that we don't always get these things right, especially the noise issues.

In addition to good acoustical design principles, we believe we need to be more deliberate in how we arrange spaces, not only to satisfy good massing concepts and critical adjacencies, but also to support the acoustical performances of the settings so they in turn effectively and appropriately support the activities happening in those settings. Think zoning. We don't intend for this idea

to take the place of relevant adjacencies, but rather to complement it.

Adjacencies tell us what needs to be near what – like placing a team's project room really close by instead of down the hall somewhere. Or putting the more public spaces along major circulation so the traffic to and from those areas doesn't cut through a neighborhood.

Zoning adds one more layer of consideration to this mix and suggests that once we satisfy critical adjacencies, we might group settings by noise level: settings for *interaction*, for *quiet* and, for *privacy*. This reduces the likelihood of competing acoustical strategies cancelling each other out, and the users being unsure about what they can reasonably expect from each setting. This approach could also reinforce the cues that help set expectations of how one might expect a given setting to perform and inform the explicit protocols that should be developed to support the intentions for the space.

Enabling continuous adaptation is critical
We must also anticipate the need for settings to be agile and able to quickly adapt to inevitable change over time. We mentioned above the concept of agility or adaptability, and that we think of it as having two parts: the physical flexibility needed to easily morph, repurpose, or reconfigure, plus putting more choice and control in the hands of the users of a given space, so they can take it upon themselves to make changes as they need to. We're seeing more and more organizations empowering their workers to rearrange or repurpose their team's space as needed – to better match a change in their work practices, or because one phase of work requires a different setting than another, for example.

We're solving for all these challenges ourselves as we refresh our own Allsteel headquarters in Muscatine, Iowa. We are putting several new capabilities and processes in place:

- Rebalancing the ratio of individual to group spaces
- Modifying our infrastructure to be more "plug and play" – e.g., a power distribution grid so we can move our demountable walls and furniture more readily
- Using the process maps we create as a part of our dedication to "lean" methodologies as the basis for workplace design and change

- Empowering our members to make those changes when they need to better align with their processes and preferences
- Tracking our utilization of space to enable us to tweak the mix and reduce the waste of under-utilized space

It's obvious that technology and social change continue to impact the ways we work. We believe we can do better at enabling the workplace to keep pace with these influences as well as with the ongoing evolution of the business.

This much needed agility has, as we see it, two parts: not only should the infrastructure and our ongoing management practices become way more supportive of change, but we have to educate and empower our workers to bring about many of those changes themselves. To create informed workplace consumers who are enabled to make necessary change on demand. ∎

Workplace Advisory at Allsteel

The Workplace Advisory team listens. And we apply research and our extensive workplace experiences and insights to assist organizations develop and implement a situationally appropriate workplace strategy: one that aligns with their organizational culture and business goals, supports their workers' ability to work effectively, utilizes their real estate assets as efficiently as possible, and is highly adaptable to changing business and work practice requirements.

INSIGHT from Allsteel
The INSIGHT mark identifies material – papers, presentations, courses – created specifically by the Workplace Advisory team to share our workplace strategy knowledge and perspective. Additional INSIGHT material may be found at allsteeloffice.com.

About the Author
Jan Johnson, FIIDA, leads the Workplace Advisory team at Allsteel; and has spent her career strengthening the correlations between business strategies and the planning, design and management of work environments. She is highly respected as a workplace strategist and frequently writes and speaks about workplace topics. She serves on the Council for Interior Design Accreditation, and the Knowledge Advisory Panel for CoreNet Global's Workplace Community; and has taught courses in CoreNet Global's Master of Corporate Real Estate (MCR) program since 2009. Jan recently helped develop the core competencies that define workplace strategy and the related content for CoreNet Global's three new MCRw courses.