

THE **SABPP™**

FACT SHEET

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**OUR RELATIONSHIP
WITH SPACE AND ITS
MANAGEMENT IN THE NEW
NORMAL**

INTRODUCTION

The previous March 2022 Fact Sheet discussed our *lived experience* of the new normal, specifically our experience of time and its management as well as our relationship with these. This was against the backdrop of the February 2022 Fact Sheet that explored the evolving *narratives* of the new normal and posed the question of what we mean by 'new' and 'normal'. In this Fact Sheet we will continue to explore our *lived experience* of the new normal and focus in on space.

The Fact Sheet explores the lived experience of space and the management thereof through the following questions:

- » are we returning to the office-as-it-was or will we reimagine and reinvent it?
- » how do we reimagine and reinvent the office and spaces?
- » how will business districts (or commercial and business centres) and environments evolve?

As the discussion on the above questions progresses, the Fact Sheet identifies the need to go beyond conceptualising space as something simply physical. That is, as a simple natural phenomenon with the only property of physical extension as measured by square meterage and that can be demarcated by the office layout. To go beyond this means appreciating the experience of space as having quantitative and qualitative aspects. More importantly, it means appreciating space itself as a subjective and social phenomenon. Relatedly, the Fact Sheet shares some of the theoretically informed approaches to space and the implications, for example, for learning and development; specifically, leadership development.



INTRODUCTION

RETURN TO THE OFFICE-AS-IT-WAS OR REIMAGINING IT?

HOW DO WE REIMAGINE AND REINVENT THE OFFICE AND SPACES?

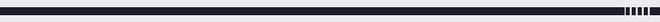
HOW WILL BUSINESS DISTRICTS AND ENVIRONMENTS EVOLVE?

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RETURN TO THE OFFICE-AS-IT-WAS OR REIMAGINING IT?



There are continuing debates and contestations on employers' call to their employees to return to the office. Some of these were discussed in the August 2021 Fact Sheet. In this Fact Sheet we can ask, what are the employees returning **to**. What is the space we are (re)creating for employees for their return? This question can be broken down as follows:

- » Is it the office as-it-was (with safety compliance for COVID) or are we reimagining the buildings, infrastructure, and its many spaces?
- » Are we reconsidering offices as well as desks and their configuration and use?
- » Are we limiting our discussions to 'hot desking' (such as the booking of shared desks) or 'office hotelling' (such as the booking of shared offices and rooms) for flexible working and not thinking more broadly?
- » Are we only considering the possibility of remote or hybrid working when reimagining spaces?

We can begin deliberating on the above questions by first asking how the office space was seen before the COVID pandemic. What was the purpose of the office, and what role or function did it serve?

Looking back, there was no singular purpose, role, and function. The office catered for many purposes, from providing the infrastructure for the business value chain and completion of tasks and work, to co-locating and enabling the corporate functions (such as the management and support functions). And it was designed and continuously reconfigured to meet different roles and functions as the organisation and its business model and needs evolved. As outlined in the below quote from a McKinsey article, it was important in the functional role of enabling productivity and collaboration as well as for the aesthetic, marketing or brand management,

and cultural roles. It was a concrete reflection or expression of the brand, culture, and aspirations or vision of the organisation – for example, consider the deliberate design and the statement made by the exterior and interior design and décor of the corporate offices in Sandton.

"Before the pandemic, the conventional wisdom had been that offices were critical to productivity, culture, and winning the war for talent. Companies competed intensely for prime office space in major urban centers (sic) around the world, and many focused on solutions that were seen to promote collaboration. [O]pen-office designs, hoteling (sic), and co-working were the battle cries [on facilitating collaboration]" (Boland, Smet, Palter, & Sanghvi, 2020)

Along with prime offices and urban centres, we can also consider the Silicon Valley ‘complexes’ that were created by the large tech companies such as Google and Apple. These created prime spaces and layouts internally within their complexes for individual and team working as well as collaboration, innovation, and recreation. And internalised various services within the complex by hosting restaurants, snacks vending, laundry, and a gym. These spaces and internalised services were aligned with their business model and activities of aggressive growth and expansion of product, services, and market share, and related growth and expansion of talent, productivity, engagement, and teaming needs.

“Some companies use their modern office layouts as a recruitment tool. Video tours of Microsoft’s offices led by interns sell the benefits of green spaces, free drinks machines and games rooms. “We have five cafes, a Starbucks and a Costa,” one intern enthused” (Jezard, 2017).

These tech company complexes may be mirroring or adopting some of the innovations in education systems and spaces as suggested in Jezard’s article:

“Professor Stephen Heppell, an expert who advises schools, companies and other organizations on how to create flexible work and learning spaces, said many of the innovations of the past 20 years originated in education systems. “It’s interesting that when you walk into the Googles and Facebooks, everything looks like what you’d see in high-achieving schools” (ibid).

Relatedly, in the textbox in the next section, the Fact Sheet will outline theoretically informed perspectives on space, specifically on pedagogic or learning spaces. On theoretically informed perspectives, it is suggested that the shifts and innovations in the discipline of architecture together with creating prime and encompassing experiences also informed the tech company complexes or campuses:

“Just a few years ago, the major tech giants seemed to be locked in an arms race to see who could fit more free candy and modernist architecture into their booming corporate campuses” (Stahl, 2021)





Watch this video on the Google complex or 'Googleplex' and how different spaces were created within and the purposes and roles these were meant to serve



WATCH HERE



Compare the above video with this one on Google taking a Lego-like approach to creating and recreating working and recreational spaces during the pandemic



WATCH HERE



And see this article on Google's continued purchases of prime office buildings:



READ HERE



Review the contrast of designing spaces around activities versus belonging as discussed in the PWC webpage and as portrayed by the accompanying animation, and the suggestion of a mixed mode office:



REVIEW HERE

The PWC webpage refers to the four Cs of design considerations: concentration, collaboration, communication, and contemplation. See the section on organisational clocks and rhythms in the March 2022 Fact Sheet on a discussion on defining and measuring collaboration and communication, and the considerations on concentration and contemplation.



For some historical and social context, see the following:

Jezard's (2017) brief and heuristic outline of the evolution of the open plan office



READ HERE

A complimentary timeline in this Guardian article by Hickey (2015)



READ HERE

An article on the contrast between the US and France on open plan offices



READ HERE

These articles illustrate, for example, how efficiency or productivity-focused office designs versus human or wellbeing-centred design have evolved and tend to repeat over time. The articles also point to the disjuncture between intentions versus realities.

We can interpret the phrase ‘battle cries’ in the above quotation from the McKinsey article by Boland et al as also pointing to the complex realities of the office as well as contestations on the design and use thereof. For example, we need to recognise the standardised, cubicle reality of many office or desk-bound white-collar workers, and the social and historical contexts of this reality:

“How many times have you watched employees shuffle into their workspace, drop their heads, put in earbuds and focus on the screen in front of them?” (Navarra, 2021)

“In the early 20th century modernist architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright saw walls and rooms as downright fascist. The spaciousness and flexibility of an open plan, they thought, would liberate homeowners and office dwellers from the confines of boxes. But companies took up their idea less out of a democratic ideology than a desire to pack in as many workers as they could” (Musser, 2009).

“Today, many companies are even reverting to the pre-cubicle rows of desks, now called “pods” to make them sound vaguely futuristic” (Musser, 2009).

Similarly, the realities of hot desking or the various forms of desk-sharing and open-plan offices were not the same as the shiny exterior of the building and the interior of the reception. The below quotes give a sense of the contrasting realities and experiences of different employees and the drivers of the employers’ office design decisions:

“Hot-desking is a heated topic, one that’s fiercely debated by the workforce. Loved by bosses and nomadic workers, it is often hated by those who face a daily scramble to find a free workstation” (Ames, 2015).

“[...] the open-plan office tells workers what their bosses think of them – that they are interchangeable and there to fulfil a mechanical task” (Hickey, 2015).

“Research indicates that the [open plan office] designs can encourage casual conversations that lead to innovation and closer-knit teams while reducing the amount of time people need to spend in formal meetings” (Ward, 2015).

“Many employers all over the world have embraced open office plans, driven by cost concerns and a desire for flexible designs that can accommodate a workforce that could expand or contract suddenly[; and] these designs actually do represent an attempt to create environments that foster productivity and a sense of camaraderie” (ibid).

“Nowadays, architects and office planners are working to better understand how a physical space can be combined with modern management philosophies—and new technology—to create environments that lead to healthier and more-productive employees, regardless of their age, personality type or title” (ibid).

These realities of contrasts and contestations alert us HR practitioners to the importance of segmenting the workforce and understanding their various needs, experiences, and realities as well as their work/task requirements. There are different ways of segmenting the workforce:

- » One can consider external and contextual factors such as the industry, labour regulations and markets, and geographical locations and footprint.
- » One can also consider organisational factors such as the business model and other internal factors such as the nature of tasks/work, the level of work, the organisation design and levels therein, and the specific functions within the organisation.
- » Other internal considerations for segmentation could be, for example, talent management or wellbeing and people risk management.

Thus, the question that is posed in the above quoted McKinsey article by Boland et al (2020) is what talent considerations will inform, and which talent segments will be prioritised, in the reimagining and reinvention of the office.

There will be trade-offs with reimagining and reinventing space as organisations will not be able to cater for all the needs of the various workforce segments from a cost, capacity, and capital perspective. The capital investment by organisations may also increase and change to hold a “portfolio of space solutions”: “the coming transformation [or reinvention of the office] will use a portfolio of space solutions [such as] owned space, standard leases, flexible leases, flex space, co-working space, and remote work” (Boland et al, 2020). The portfolio could include what is termed as ‘third spaces’, which Rooney (2021) describes as follows following the work of Ray Oldenburg:

“The idea of a ‘third space’ was devised by American sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his 1991 book *The Great Good Place*. Unlike the traditional home and work environments – the first and second spaces, as Oldenburg described them – third spaces such as bars, cafés and tree-lined squares “host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work,” he wrote.”

Relatedly, Ward (2015) makes the case for moving beyond the framing of office design as a binary choice of closed versus open plan office models:

“As businesses look for the right solution, perhaps it’s time for them to think beyond a binary “open” or “closed” model to something in between that is tailored to their particular needs” (Ward, 2015).¹

On remote work as part of the portfolio of space solutions, it is the question of what the organisation is responsible for in terms of providing infrastructure and equipment (such as computers) at the remote site or home of the employee. Remote work also brings forth the question of digital or virtual space. How do we imagine the digital or virtual working space? How do we create virtual collaboration spaces?

The opportunity and challenge for organisations is the blending of physical and digital/virtual spaces. The February 2022 Fact Sheet introduced the discussions on the metaverse and some of the considerations on augmented and virtual realities. It suggested that HR practitioners need to critically examine how blended physical and digital/virtual workspaces afford and influence how employees craft their work, job, engagement, roles, identities, learning and development, and career paths through these workspaces.

¹ See, for example, Jivan (2017, pages 42-43) for a critical discussion on third spaces in an African context, including considerations on the ‘in between’ and hybridity in relation to spaces.

HOW DO WE REIMAGINE AND REINVENT THE OFFICE AND SPACES?

We can approach the reimagining and reinvention of the office and the many spaces from a work, worker, and workforce perspectives. We can also blend these perspectives as can be seen in the video cited above on Google using a Lego-like approach to spaces: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hER7c-iqOAM>.

- » From a work perspective we can take an activity-based approach to the office and space design and arrangements. We could identify the different activities of the business value chain and the workforce segments dedicated/assigned to these. We can then prioritise from these the key drivers of the business or organisation and how to enable these activities and the employees. What will help improve the productivity, wellbeing, and engagement of the employees? Here, people analytics could play an important role in providing key insights for reimagining and reinventing spaces.

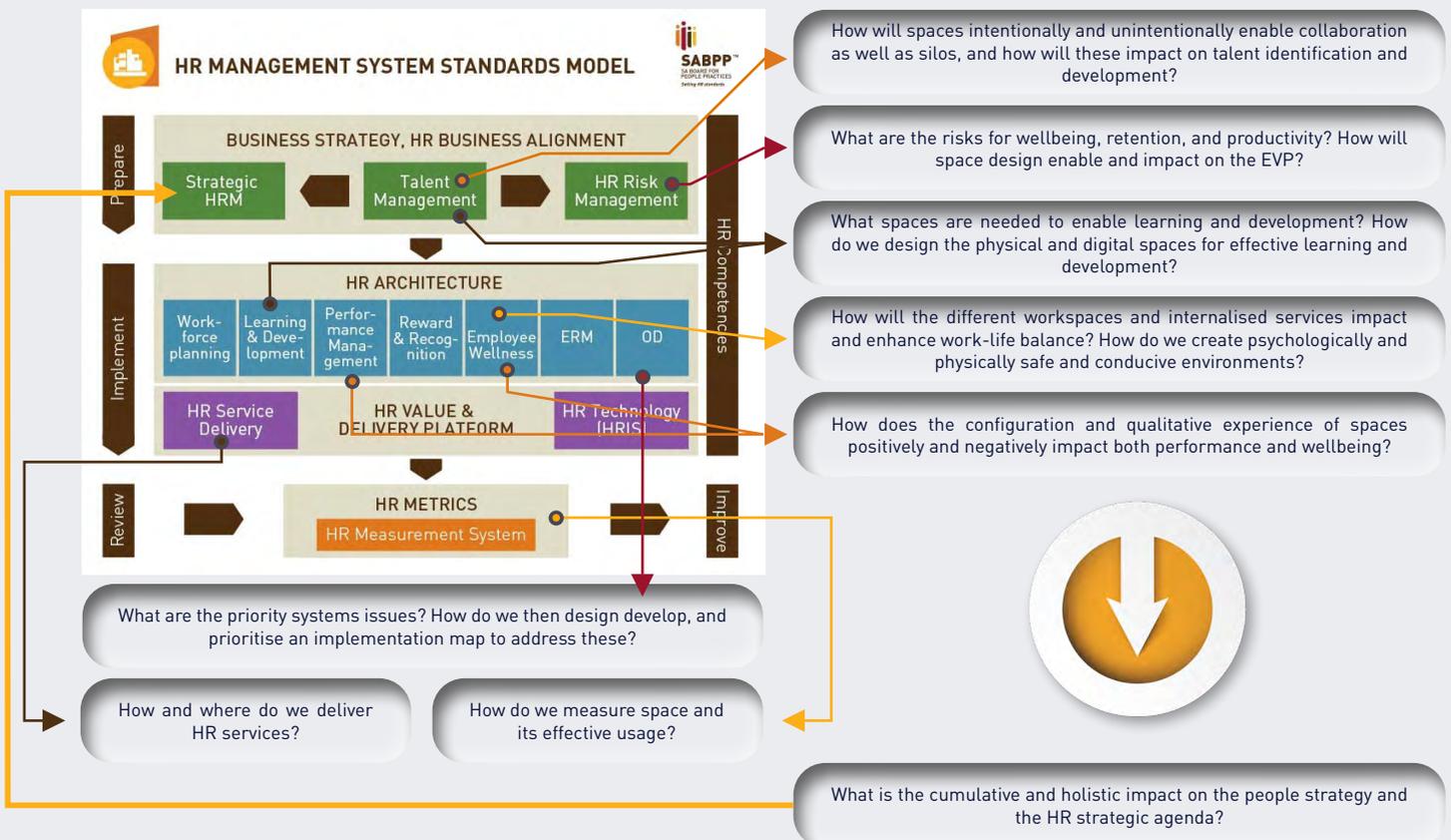
We could also identify the different phases that the many projects within organisation are at and the challenges experienced with the management of these projects. Is it the lack of collaboration and communication? Is this related to the physical and digital/virtual workspaces, including the nature of interactions between project team members?

- » A worker perspective could map an individual employee and their day-to-day as well as their life cycle in the organisation. We could perhaps ask how we can create spaces for onboarding, learning and development, optimum performance, wellbeing, and work-life balance. We can drill down further and ask, for example, how can we enable and support work-integrated learning or learning in the flow of work. Remote working and hybrid teams provide opportunities and challenges to reimagine the employee life cycle, work-life balance, and how we provide and enable learning and development as an example. See page six of the February 2022 Fact Sheet on the opportunity for the integration of work and life or the mutual enhancement of work and personal/family, and the dangers this may pose and increased conflict it may realise between work and the personal/family. We should note that these pointers and suggestions seem predominantly related to desk-bound and knowledge and white-collar workers.
- » A workforce perspective could utilise people analytics of the workforce as a whole and segmented by various factors (as noted earlier) to explore what spaces need to be created to address the needs of the workforce as a whole and for the various segments. For example, internal factors could be individual and team preferences (including their physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual wellbeing) and the actual usage patterns. External factors such as the local business district and its environment and amenities can also be considered along with commuting experiences of the workforce segments and how to transition employees to a productive mindset and state. What services could be internalised as in the Google example to address productivity, engagement, and wellbeing? A workforce perspective could also be informed by the organisational needs. For example, organisations can consider what spaces need to be created to embed and enable the culture of the organisation. It can also consider hygiene and green environmental factors for creating a psychologically and physically safe and conducive environment.

For the workforce and previous two perspectives we need to consider cost, capacity, and capital. Can the organisation afford the capital and maintenance costs in the short, medium, and long-term? Apart from the work, worker, and workforce perspectives, we could also consider the reimagination and reinvention of spaces from a HR bundles perspective. That is, the specific bundle or combination and system of HR practices within an organisation can inform the approach to space. There are various bundles or systems of best HR practices that have been identified in various research publications; however, mostly in the US context. These attempt to segment the strategic bundles of HR practices based on empirical surveys of HR practices within organisations (Storey, Wright, & Ulrich, 2019).

The more familiar and popularised bundles are, for example, the high performance work system, high involvement work system, and the high commitment management system. Storey et al note that “there is little consensus on the approach to aggregating the practices” (p24), and indeed there are overlaps or conflation between the specific systems cited above. For the purposes of this Fact Sheet, we can consider an alternative segmentation of bundles of HR practices as cited in Storey et al. That is, segmentation into ability, motivation, and opportunity-enhancing practices. Using this we can relook the office space in terms of how it enables or supports ability, motivation, and opportunity-enhancing practices, depending on the business and organisational strategy as well as priorities of an organisation. This returns us to the earlier cited McKinsey article by Boland et al (2020), which posed the question on what talent considerations will inform and which talent segments will be prioritised in the reimagining and reinvention of the office.

Apart from the systems view of the HR bundles perspective, we could also use the SABPP HR Standards System Model. This helps the HR practitioner to systematically work through the considerations on, and consequences for, space from a HR perspective. The below examples can be reviewed with the suggestions from the previous March 2022 Fact Sheet on our relationship with time.



Theoretically informed perspective on space: The case of pedagogic and learning spaces

Implicit in the above discussions on the office spaces or workspaces is that these are simple natural phenomenon with the only property of physical extant. Thus, space can be simply quantified in terms of square meterage and the physical design, configuration, or layout of the total square meterage. Jivan and Paile (2019), however, provide a critical examination of this assumption and identify different analytical and theoretical approaches to examining space. They focus on the pedagogic and learning spaces of leadership development. Refer to their article for an outline of the following approaches that shift from physical to socio-cultural and socio-material conceptualisations of space, and to see how these can help inform critical learning and development practices (specifically, leadership development):

- » space as the physical and architected spaces for learning and development, such as the formal learning space of the classroom or the non-formal learning space such as the workspace and the immersions of leadership development programmes
- » space as encompassing the various interactions and processes based on various learning modalities, including immersions and action learning in leadership development programmes
- » space as cultural and discursive constructions with historical connotations, which means being cognisant of power, social dynamics, and identity dynamics in learning and development
- » space as not only discursive constructions, but embodied social realities, which requires critical reflection on power and identity dynamics including inclusion and exclusion
- » space as networks of embodied individuals and specific local arrangements of different various bodies, institutions, and architectures that can enable, disable, and stunt learning and development



HOW WILL BUSINESS DISTRICTS AND ENVIRONMENTS EVOLVE?

With the large-scale experiment in remote working and the reduction in office use, there have been speculation on how the office landscape and the business district will evolve (Stahl, 2021). Although some have suggested the end of the centrality of the office and, thereby, the end of office parks and the business districts and services these are embedded within, perhaps a more nuanced and evidence-based approach is needed. Certainly, HR practitioners will need to attend to how the external environment of the office is evolving, including third spaces as described by Rooney (2021). What impact has COVID had on the surrounding businesses and business district? What amenities in the area do the employees rely on or utilise regularly? What impact will their absence have on employees? These are some of the questions the HR practitioner may consider. Before this, a realistic appraisal of how, for example, the business district, surrounding safety and services (including food services), and commuting options and experience are evolving needs to be undertaken. Global, anecdotal evidence may not provide sufficient substantive grounds for making local generalisations and inferences on specific business districts. Consider the earlier noted trend of global tech companies that are purchasing prime office spaces that are becoming available due to other companies downsizing their physical footprint. The HR practitioner needs to contend with these paradoxical trends with their stakeholders.



IMPLICATIONS FOR HR?

The HR practitioner is presented an opportunity to help their organisations reconsider how they think about and design and manage spaces. And clearly articulate how these spaces could facilitate and enhance culture, collaboration, and communication as well as the productivity, engagement, and wellbeing of employees.

“Perhaps the biggest benefit of the open office movement is that it has led more business leaders to consider how the physical space in which people work is linked to their productivity and engagement” (Ward, 2015)

As discussed in previous section, there are different perspectives and system models to help inform this reconsideration of space and the design and management thereof. In the short-term the key question the HR practitioner needs to address concerns the office that employees are returning to. Immediately, it means attending to the current organisational priorities and challenges as well as the employee pain points and needs. And then reconfiguring the physical and digital spaces to address these with various stakeholders such as the line management and the logistics, facilities, and ICT functional departments. In the long-term, the HR practitioner could work with the various stakeholders to design and manage the portfolio or hybridity of space solutions. Here, consideration needs to be given to how the surrounding business districts and environment as well as transport and other amenities will evolve.



CONCLUSION

As we critically engage with the narratives of the new normal and what these mean, we similarly need to attend to our lived experience. The previous Fact Sheet focused on our lived experience in terms of the experience of time and the management thereof, and the present Fact Sheet attended to our lived experience of space and the management thereof. The HR practitioner will need to consider both the experience of time and space together, including how these are managed together. This includes the quantitative and qualitative aspects of our experiences. The Fact Sheet also outlined possible perspectives, including theoretically informed ones, and system models to approach spaces within and outside of an organisation in a critical and systematic manner.

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PREVIOUS EDITIONS OF THE FACT SHEET

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