

Can Workspaces be productive ?

¹As with any other resource, workspace has a cost. As with any other resource, it should also have a value and contribute in a positive way to the performance of the business. It is the value/cost ratio which defines business productivity - and that must be optimised.

The overall cost of office property – buildings and their associated services – represents, on average, 10-12% of the turnover of a service industry's business. It makes up the second element of expenses after wages. A common way to improve the value/cost ratio is to reduce the costs. In the circumstances, this would appear to be sensible.

Reducing costs

Such cost is reduced, particularly, by:

- ?? Limiting the cost of the building itself (whether bought, being built or rented). However, the building cost alone cannot be taken into consideration. The building becomes useful once built or bought or rented). Therefore, in order to find out its actual cost, it is necessary to take into account its maintenance cost and the cost of service it provides during its use (heating, security, flexibility etc.).
- ?? Changing the location, for example, to move from a city centre, where the rates are more expensive, towards the outskirts, even the countryside. It is not without consequences. For example, staff will see the time they spend commuting increase, sometimes considerably. Those who are flexible to changing firms, usually not the worst, may not follow, others follow reluctantly.
- ?? Increasing the occupancy density by reducing the area per user. There is no such thing as good space a priori, in the same way there is no good density either. However, very restricted workspaces often lead to a poor working conditions: acoustic discomfort, worsening atmosphere, waste of time etc. One can therefore lose in work productivity what has been gained in area.

Sometimes the above three measures are gained at the same time, with their positive and negative consequences. However that may be, all three come under the same analysis: one cannot do without the building, but although essential it does not bring much to the business. Economically speaking, it is only taken into account from a financial point of view (its cost), therefore it should be minimised as much as possible.

The firm F works minor miracles in benchmarking. Its property costs have been reduced by 30% in a year and it is, by far, ahead of all its competitors. Their competitors of course know it well: the best executives of F told them the fact when they left F to go and work for them!

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The influence of new technologies

The new techniques of data processing and information technology argue for the relative abandonment of the importance given to workspaces – there are some businesses which no longer have office blocks (very rare). A notebook, a cellular phone and a modem allow anyone to be in contact with the business information system, with his/her colleagues, with clients, suppliers etc. Other businesses, having pushed their staff out, the sales staff among others, relocated them. The employees were not sure who their employer was anymore, was it their business or was it the clients. Through lack of offices in which to meet, they used bars. Consequently, productivity decreased. Even though things may be possible, they might not be effective.

The business of the future... across time

In the early 1980s, large conferences led by experts were organised to describe “the factory of the future”. From 1995 everything would be automatic (or very close), clean, safe. No more production line noise, tiredness. The dream is over and like before, factories are noisy (although some slightly less), there is still a lot of manual work, using the same tools as before, the production line is still going well, and the breakdowns too. No need to visit the worst ones to realise that !

In the mid-1960s, an American futurologist had planned the end of commuting for 1985. Thanks to computers and television, everyone would stay at home. He wrote that the main problem would be to teach children – of course school would be from home too – that the image of a tree on their screen is not really a tree. From time to time, they would need to be taken outside, in order for them to be able to relate to the physical reality of what they will only have known for a long time on their screens.

Today many people wonder what offices will be like in ten years time. For most of them, they will be much the same as today. They are already in use. Buildings last longer than our fantasies.

Admittedly new technologies modify a fair number of work parameters, especially office work. They must of course be taken into account in choices of property and at the time of the organisation of workspaces. Without a doubt, these techniques will develop more and will bring along new changes. Rather than agreeing, a bit hastily, to the abandonment of workspaces, it will be necessary therefore, tomorrow as well as today, to wonder about the positive role played by spaces in the business which uses them and how to improve them. Rather than trying to foresee it, the true difficulty and the true stake lies in knowing how to cope with change.

What is the workspace used for?

Obviously workspaces are used to work. But precisely what does “to work” mean and what kind of space is needed for work?

To work, as one knows well, does not amount to a simple task planned in advance. Having believed it – or wanted it – is indeed one of the main limits that Taylorism or Fordism have known for some decades. “To work” is to solve problems. They can be of

a very varied nature, more or less difficult. More or less time, energy and competence are required. "To work" is also, often, to anticipate the problems which will arise in order to deal with them when they occur. It may be a fault on a production line, or the decline in sales of a product. Each one, in his/her occupation and his/her job, summons up far more for the work than that which is expected. The ingredients vary: shrewdness, knowledge, skilfulness, savoir-faire, intelligence, experience – and all are necessary sooner or later. The role of the workspace is to guarantee the best conditions for the work.

If one investigates on further than an individual's work, the equation is relatively easy to solve. Still, it is essential to pay attention to detail, in that the activities of some can be different from others, therefore their spatial needs vary too. But a company only takes its meaning in collective work. It functions on the hypothesis that the organisation of collective work would be more efficient than the simple addition of individual jobs. It is for this organised collective work that the workspace also has to guarantee the best conditions. A certain number of these conditions are known, one can research others.

One of these conditions is the understanding of the organisation and of its role in the production. The space contributes to an understanding when it offers a good readability of this organisation and of the production process. Another, widely recognised today, is the communication between people. The space can play as large a role in facilitating communication as it can in restricting it badly. In the same way, the feeling of belonging to the same group, beyond differences or even conflicts, can rely on the building itself, when the latter does not create systematic ruptures or oppositions. Of course, space must also guarantee the flow of people, information and materials, while minimising waste of time and risks, as much as possible. The control of the flow remains, to this extent, one of the first requirements of a production space, whether in industry or services.

There are also other fields where one can rely on the planning of spaces to develop some of the business' objectives. For a long time, it was the first means of controlling work. It still is sometimes. It can also work towards a better management of stocks. In another way, one might want to reinforce people's autonomy or interaction. There could be research to help the setting up and evolution of project groups of various sizes and time spans, or to keep work zones away from the inquisitive eye. The list is far from being restricted. In relation to a business objective, it is always possible to study in which respect and how, the space might make things more difficult, and in which respect and how it can help.

The contribution of space

For a long time the business' property (building and developed areas) was considered as simple capital. As a matter of fact it has a certain inherent value and cost which can be defined. It is disposed of according to need, the case being that it becomes economically or functionally inadequate. The inherent value is reassessed and changed and the cost is controlled. It is not managed as a resource whose value could be increased by its current use.

On the contrary, property can be considered as one of the business' resources, a potential whose use and contribution in value can be expanded by effective

management, so that it becomes an active factor of productivity, and affects the business' performance.

The notion of "human resources", today widely established, has meant a change in management. From looking at people as a stock of workers, now they are seen as a strategy of development and enrichment of that resource. Nowadays the management of human resources is essential to the business "global strategy" Some businesses have started a similar change as far as their spatial resources are concerned: the conception and management of space has taken on a major dimension in their politics.

Figure 1 illustrates the principles which allow the enhancement of the value of a resource. Its starting point is the business' objectives. It is not only concerned with its final objectives (e.g. increasing its share of the market, its productivity or its margin), but above all with the intermediate objectives which the business has put into place in order to achieve the final ones (e.g. reducing its stocks, improving the communication between people and groups, promoting teamwork, reinforcing relations with clients).

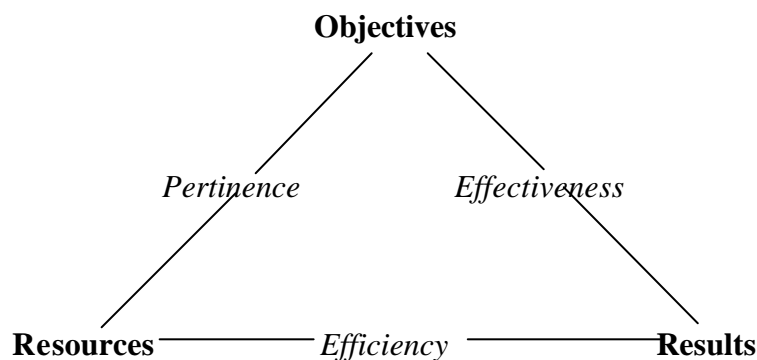


Figure 1 - Analysis triangle of the use value of a resource

To reach these intermediate objectives, a number of resources (monetary, human, technical, .., spatial) are available. In order to achieve the set objectives, the pertinent resources must be examined. When there is a structured information system in the business, covering a wide field of resources, this provides a certain number of indicators. If not, it is experience and intuition which, initially, compensate for the absence of indicators.

The implementation of these resources lead to results. Hence a double question: are the results close to the objectives, and if so to what extent? It is the effectiveness variable. Do the results obtained correspond in a satisfying way to the value of the resources mustered? It is the measure of the efficiency of their use.

Piloting tools

What is the role and the use of such an information system as far as spaces are concerned? In brief, it must enable the piloting of the productive use of the resource.

The most common ways of managing spaces, in businesses which have implemented it, are the audit and benchmarking. An audit consists of comparing a state of affairs with the state considered to be normal. For example, for a services industry business, the average area per job will be compared with the standard areas of offices in the same sector of activity. It will be concluded eventually that the density is either excessive or insufficient. Benchmarking consists in comparing the values of a certain number of variables of the business, obtained by similar or competing businesses which have recorded better results in the same field – the intention being to do better than them. For example, by analysing the breakdown of the maintenance costs of the competitors achieving the best in this area, a business will manage to reduce its own costs.

These methods though they are a useful means of reference, even of improvement, have a limit. They never try to find out, for a given business, what buildings and premises are used for, and how such methods could be used to increase their value for this business.

In some sectors of activity, space is a well-used resource equipped with top quality information systems. It is the case in particular in commercial mass marketing where a whole array of techniques were created for this purpose, namely merchandising. Many banks in the world have seen similar studies through, followed by implementation. Of course, these methods and measures are not of concern to workers, but to consumers. There is nothing to prevent considering the link between work and space with the same care as the link between purchase and space.

The piloting management does not attempt so much to compare as to aim at objectives, by building an information system which, as it goes along, helps to check that the means are adequate and properly used, and, if not, to rectify the way things are going. These objectives can also be, without a doubt, objectives in terms of cost. To lower maintenance cost, or to increase the occupation density by preventing the waste of square metres, are perfectly valid objectives, provided their achievement does not mean a loss in the quality of spaces, which could harm productivity and would eventually lead the business to a financial loss. But the objectives can be of a very different nature: for example, to support a policy of team work by spatial strategies can lead to a slight increase in the cost of the building or of its development. If the success of this policy allows noticeable growth in the quality of the business' products or its reactivity, and by that, increases its margins, then the resource used will have been widely enhanced.

Some criteria and indicators

A building can be appreciated in many ways. If one takes for example the office blocks only, they can be analysed from the following points of view:

- ?? Architectural: the exterior, the relationship to the environment, the image, the lines of the structure.
- ?? Functional to utilisation: traffic, the nearness/distances, the various conveniences: post, caretaking, etc.
- ?? Functional use: everything which is not strictly organised, for example informal communication.
- ?? Pleasantness: personnel, clients, visitors.

- ?? Economical: the construction purchasing or rental cost, but also the maintenance cost with possible various financial factors.
- ?? Evolution: internal and external flexibility, durability, maintenance, environment, etc.

Within the framework of the business' policy, some organisational parameters could be enhanced. For example:

- ?? Centralisation / decentralisation: on different scales, from the firm as a whole to one service.
- ?? Relative autonomy of people or groups / strong hierarchical organisation.
- ?? Individual work / group work; groups of various scales.
- ?? Large / small variability of structures.
- ?? Territorialism / making people or groups mobile.
- ?? Promoting intimacy / forcing mixing.

There are also some technical parameters, such as:

- ?? Workpost allocated / shared / non allocated.
- ?? Individual multifunctional workposts (traditional office) / give a greater importance to collective equipment at all levels (conference rooms, combi-office etc.).
- ?? Give to places a statutory role / "all human being are born and remain equal".
- ?? Demonstrate or make commonplace the diversity of individual and collective situations.
- ?? Working hours 9 a.m. - 6 p.m., or 24 hours.
- ?? Peoples mobility or non-mobility.
- ?? Specific collective rooms (from kitchenette, photography room and cafeteria) / non-specific rooms, whose quality is improved by the use made of them.

Finally, let us not forget the economic parameters:

- ?? internal invoicing of the occupied areas and services in use / free use without internal cost for users.
- ?? Research in savings on property / research for the best congruence between organisation and spaces.

To pilot, consists of working out reference points, criteria and indicators which allow a policy to be driven through. equally well on a daily basis as in exceptional moments. In order to build criteria and indicators, use can, of course, be made of techniques such as auditing or benchmarking. However, these techniques alone are not sufficient to pilot, and even less to formulate the policy. It is the information system which has been built, and which is updated regularly, either with internal facts about the business or external facts, which constitutes the means of piloting.

Compared with other aspects of the business' management, the aspect of space has a particularity which can be a difficulty. A large number of the criteria and indicators taken into account are qualitative, apart from costs, surfaces and some other similar

data. This is one of the reasons which delays the setting up of an information system, too much importance being attributed to the quantitative aspect. Without going into too much detail here, let us only recall that the human space is a complex system, whose qualitative dimensions prevail widely over those we can measure.

Anyway, such an information system cannot be dedicated to a particular business. From one business to another, the objectives to reach are different, the strategies diverse. Besides, at times it will be necessary to stress such and such an aspect, and use such and such means. As a matter of fact, the information system, once established and regularly updated, must be able to serve objectives changing with those of business, so that the workspaces remain permanently productive.

Further Reading

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