

Agile Workplaces- An Innovative HR Initiative

Dr. Kajal Bhojwani

Asst.Prof, Department of Commerce and Business Management

Smt. Chandibai Himathmal Mansukhani (CHM) College, (Affltd. to Univ of Mumbai)

Maharashtra,India

ABSTRACT

People management is central to the thinking and practice of management today. Gone are the days when management paid only lip service to the importance of people and employed ad hoc ways to manage them. Moreover, we have stepped our feet into the 21st century, where the world around is moving very fast. Host of factors like globalization, technological revolution, political realignment, religious fanaticism, etc, influence the business decisions including management of people. For better management of people, HR functions are applied in the best possible ways by industries around the globe. The concept of Innovation has become an imperative feature of contemporary organizations. Even the people management is practiced with innovative approaches. One such approach that is recently acquiring its place in the field is "Innovative Workplaces." This novel concept has proved its success which is evidenced by benefits derived by many industries across the world.

*This paper on "**Agile Workplaces- An Innovative HR Initiative**" is an endeavour to understand the essentialities and need for the innovative workplaces in the modern-day organizations. This paper also revolves around the benefits of, challenges in front of and ways towards innovative workplaces. Lastly, the paper also focuses on procedure for designing innovative workplace.*

Keywords: *Agile workplaces, employees' productivity, enthusing employees, innovative workplace benefits*

1. Agile Workplaces- An Innovative HR Initiative

Organizations employ millions of workers and own or lease buildings with millions of square feet areas globally. Sadly, most of the organizations suffers from poor workplace design and does not adequately support the increasingly collaborative work style of today's information-based workforce. The result: less productive and satisfied workers and higher costs due to inefficient space use. Moreover, one of the responses to intense economic competition has been to adopt innovative practices in the workplace with a view toward increasing the performance of the workforce.

According to Schriefer (2005), workplace strategy is "the dynamic alignment of an organization's work patterns with the work environment to enable peak performance and reduced cost." [1]. In *The Agile Workplace* Bell and Joroff (2002) estimated, based on survey data, that only five percent of U.S. corporations use space as a strategic tool [2]. To offer the best value in today's chaotic work environment, workplaces must go beyond simple function and aesthetics to become a *strategic*

business tool that supports emerging work practices and organizational culture. Here comes the idea for workplace innovation also habitually termed as innovative workplace.

Workplace innovation is defined here as the introduction of new elements to the physical working environment or accommodation, ICT and other facilities in order to improve their harmony with new working methods. Innovative workplaces are cost-effective, flexible, and sustainable work environments that support organizational change and collaborative work styles.

2. 2. The Need for Workplace Innovations

The work environments that companies have provided for the past half-century are increasingly unsuited to emerging patterns of work and are inhibiting workers from performing to their full potential. (Schriefer, A.E; 2005). In today's highly competitive global business environment organizations are increasingly revisiting their workplace strategies because fixed office space and inflexible work arrangements provide little or no value to most organizations Flexible workplace strategies are required to accommodate the rising mobile workforce. And also, today's generation of workers expects adaptable office environments with high-tech features. Collaborative office environments are also on the rise, as team- and project-based work is becoming the predominant work style. All these workplace pressures, accompanied by continual advancements in technology, are transforming work patterns and creating the need for more innovative workplace strategies.

Designing offices to release innovation potential within the organisation links the application of a number of design processes (including space-planning, interior, architectural, furniture and lighting design) directly to the realisation of organisational goals. As the knowledge-driven economy of the 21st century places a premium on generating new ideas and intellectual property, the creation of more innovative workplaces in which fresh thinking can develop and teamwork can flourish has become a central preoccupation for senior managers in many different types of organisation.

As a concept, the 'innovative workplace' responds to a growing recognition within employing companies that the physical working environment can have a profound effect on an organisation's culture and on the individual's performance. Successive anthropological studies have demonstrated a proven connection between habitat and human behaviour. Today, there is widespread acceptance that the traditional habitat for white-collar work - the modern office - has significant shortcomings in terms of planning, layout, facilities and aesthetics. These shortcomings prevent organisations and individuals from working to their full potential in terms of innovating effectively.

Forward-thinking organizations of all sizes and across all industries have come to recognize that *innovative workplaces* can enhance employee and business performance— resulting in long-term cost savings and/or improved organizational performance. These companies have begun to tailor their workplaces to meet their particular needs. They are seeking ways to use their space and technology investments to enable rather than inhibit progress toward their objectives. (Schriefer, A.E; 2005)

3. Characteristics of Innovative Workplaces (GSA, 2006)

To be an effective strategic tool for the organization and serve varying occupant needs, workplaces must incorporate the following characteristics

3.1 Spatial Equity

Workplace needs to be humane, well-designed workspace that meets the user's functional needs and provides individual access to privacy, daylight, outside views, and aesthetics. This concept means that all workers have the space, equipment, and support they need to excel at their job, with equal access to important workplace elements, such as natural light, outside views, and space to talk privately. Organizations can no longer ring the outside of a building with private offices, cutting off natural light and views to people sitting inside, and expect them to perform at their best.

3.2 Healthfulness

It should have clean and healthy work environments with access to air, light, and water— and free of contaminants and excessive noise. Construction materials, furniture, office equipment, and cleaning products/processes can add harmful contaminants that pollute the indoor air. Liberal amounts of fresh air must be provided to the space when occupied, and ventilation systems must be designed, tested, and maintained to ensure good air quality.

3.3 Flexibility

Innovative workplaces as the name suggests, should be easily adaptable that can support varied work strategies and help balance an individual's work and home life—including systems and furnishings that accommodate organizational change with minimal time, effort, and waste. Easily reconfigured infrastructure and furniture, including freestanding work surfaces, mobile storage units, modular walls, and access floor systems—to distribute power, data, and air— are leading examples of flexible systems. Flexible work strategies, such as flex-time, job sharing, and telework programs, allow employees to work how, when, and where they are most productive—contributing significantly to employee satisfaction and work-life balance.

3.4 Comfort

It also need to concentrate on occupant-adjustable temperature, ventilation, lighting, acoustic, and furniture systems providing personal and group comfort. Allowing people to control their workspace goes a long way toward satisfying their needs and reducing complaints. Providing furniture and task lighting that occupants can reconfigure to suit their work needs, and giving them the ability to adjust lighting levels, temperature, and ventilation within the personal workspace will result in more satisfied and productive employees.

3.5 Connectivity

Innovative workplace shall integrate a robust communications system providing access to people and/or data from any place, at any time. "Follow-me/Find-me" technology (enables callers to find you wherever you are by dialing just one number), wireless voice and data technology, and virtual networking (logging into your company's network from any location) are examples of advanced communications systems that improve employee productivity.

3.6 Reliability

Efficient and state-of-the-art building, security, computer, and telecommunication systems that are easy to maintain is another important characteristic of innovative workplaces. Providing heating, ventilation, air conditioning, lighting, power, security, telecommunication systems, and technology equipment that provide reliable service with minimal disruptions can bring enthusiasm and generate interest in workers.

3.7 Sense of Place

Innovative workplace is one that has a unique character, with an appropriate image and identity, instils a sense of pride, purpose, and dedication for the individual and the workplace community. One test of workplace success is whether the space would pass the “relative test.” Would most of the occupants be proud to bring in family and friends and show them where they work? If not, the workplace has not yet achieved an appropriate sense of place for the people using it. It is good to add some recreational amenities in the workplace, such as a television lounge (that doubles as an informal meeting area), informal seating or lunch areas, or a small area with a pool or ping-pong table. Consider providing some areas that incorporate color and direct sunlight to warm up neutral tones typically used in office furniture.

4. Benefits of Innovative Workplace

An innovative workplace is not just a motivating factor for employees. It is also a lucrative business decision that can help organizations to gain success in many ways. Some common benefits are listed in this section:

4.1 Improved recruitment and retention

The workplace is a proven factor in hiring and keeping a world-class workforce, resulting in improved recruitment and retention rates and decreasing expenses to replace staff. Knoll reports that a Hay Group (1998) study found that half the people planning to leave their current employer were dissatisfied with their workplace, while only one-quarter of those staying were dissatisfied[3]. A study commissioned by the American Society of Interior Designers (1999) also found that 51 percent of employees surveyed said the physical workplace would impact their decision to leave their job[4]. Similar studies show that employees are happier when they have control over how and where they work, resulting in a better work-life balance and higher retention rates.

4.2 Reduced Absenteeism.

Healthier indoor environments reduce sick building symptoms and absenteeism. A Canadian study revealed that approximately one-third of employees' sick leave can be attributed to symptoms caused by poor indoor air quality. The same study found that communication and social support enabled by open office plans are strong contributors to healthy workplaces and lowered absenteeism. (Charles, K. et al; 2004)[5]

4.3 Increased productivity and performance.

Flexible, adaptable work settings allow people to customize their workspace to suit their

individual needs, providing improved comfort. When given control over their environment, workers are less distracted and more productive and satisfied with their jobs. They also report fewer complaints to building management.

4.4 Occupational Health and Safety Concerns

Healthier, more ergonomic workplaces can also improve performance and reduce expenses. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (1999) reports that repetitive strain injuries caused by poor ergonomic design, including computer use, cost business and industry as much as \$54 billion annually in workers compensation and other costs[6]. A National Institute of Safety and Health (NIOSH) study found that installing ergonomically designed furniture reduced health complaints by 50 percent and increased productivity by 23 percent.

4.5 Apposite Communication

In addition, effectively planned work spaces allow workers to interact on an informal basis as needed, increasing collaboration, teaming, and social ties, which can create more cohesive groups and more creative problem solutions. Research by Charles, K.E, et. al (2004) has shown that supportive co-worker relationships help people in dealing with stress. Herman Miller (2003) found that enabling teams to collaborate and share information improved work group process quality by 3 percent and decreased project cycle times[7]

4.6 Other Benefits

Some other benefits of Innovative workplaces include more effective space utilization, efficient operations and maintenance, greater customer satisfaction, Identifying performance measures to encourage and track continuous improvement and so on.

5. Challenges of setting up Agile Workplaces

Conceptualising the innovative workplaces is not a tranquil task. It requires much painless efforts of the people to make it a long way going organizational strategy. However, at the outset there are few conflicting agendas which need to be addressed.

5.1 Organizational Needs Vs. Individual Needs

Traditionally, office managers have been in charge, and employees have had little say over their environment. But does this bring out the best in people? Designing innovative workplaces must **reconcile the needs of the organisation with those of the individual.**

5.2 The Skepticism of Flexible Working System

In the mix of office-based, mobile and home working, how can innovation be managed? Innovative workplaces must **balance the need for fixed real estate against the reality of increasingly flexible and fluid work patterns.**

5.3 Cost

Any changes to the physical fabric of buildings such as knocking down walls or introducing new spatial layouts can be costly, complex and highly disruptive. Many of the most highly publicised examples of innovative workplaces are expensive corporate schemes which feature extensive

remodelling, new atria and bespoke furniture. This level of cost is not relevant to all organizations, especially like SMEs or certain public sector organizations.

5.4 Involvement of Employees

Making the workplace innovative is not a day's job. Nor it is a one man show. Thus many organizations can think that they can appoint special committees to look after the issue of innovative workplace. No doubt it can create wonders. But the verity is, that implementing the innovative workplace cannot be successful though it may have n number of groups involved unless it confirms the participation of all the employees. Employees can contribute to the workplace issue through input supply in form of need and requirements. However, involving all the employees together is not a tranquil or calm and serene task.

5.5 Commitment of Top Level Management

Top Level Management is better concerned with formulating strategies and making the businesses much more lucrative. As a rule, no game can succeed without the commitment of leaders. This is an epitomic rule for the implementation of innovative workplaces too.

5.6 Accessibility

Part of making workplace more innovative is making it more accessible to all ages and abilities so that everyone can contribute at an equal level. This is of growing importance as demographic change introduces greater diversity in the workforce. Regulatory compliance is another issue here.

6. Some Measures to Introduce and Implement Innovative and Agile Workplaces

Lots of impediments and challenges can be the part of process of implementation of innovative workplace. However the implementers need to focus and concentrate on the strategies that can bring a synergy effect. The outcome needs to be a win-win situation, benefiting employees and organizations together. Following are the six important measures to make the implementation programme successful.

6.1 Preliminary Phase

Redesigning and resetting the workplace requires an important phase of preliminary research which begins with setting out the business objectives that organization want to achieve by introducing the innovative workplace. Secondly, it would be better to study and benchmark the offices of other organizations. Another important issue is to analyse those areas of organisation that needs improvement. It would also be better to seek what constraints could be occurring in the midway of planning and implementation.

6.2 Involving and Training Employees

As stated earlier, employee involvement right from the beginning is an imperative step. The teams of managers and employees need to be formed at the first instance to discuss with their change perspectives and also for gathering requirements in form of inputs for planning the innovations to be introduced. Conducting frequent meetings and training becomes another sequential step over here.

6.3 Confirming the Commitment of Top Level Management

Consistent support and patronage of top level management is another important input. Top level management can guide with regard to synchronization of organizational goals with workplace physical structure goals. They can be the key players in designing the blue print of the required edifice.

6.4 Setting the Budgets with Pragmatic Approach

The cost of introducing the workplace change can be sometimes very high. Whatever the case may be, experts need to ponder budgets with some realistic approach. Many a times it happen that budget is set but costs may over run. This act can be outrageous and despicable. So a realistic budget setting becomes an essence.

6.5 Involvement of Consultants

Consultants play an advisory role. Their inputs also become imperative for drafting the blue print of the innovation. No doubt organization may have its own group of champs, but still involving the consultants can be a graceful act. However one thing that need to be consider again is their pay-cheques. These consultants can charge very high for their services and this must be mulled over while setting the budgets.

6.6 Post Implementation Assessment

Hardly there are projects which get success at the first attempt. Some modification and alterations are the part of the system. A post-implementation assessment work will be an attempt to seek the gaps in the implementation program and to comprehend difficulties if any, of the people working on site. Corrective measures for the same will be necessary to take.

7. Conclusion

Innovation is the key to any business. Business success definitely is the outcome of one or the other innovative practice adopted by the corporate houses in the contemporary times. One such innovation that can definitely facilitate the business success is innovative workplace. Innovative workplace has a knack to keep the employees' morale strong and elevating. Job satisfaction, better productivity, high zeal among the employees are few other benefits of the same. However, it's not easy to craft the workplace structure as innovative. There are number of challenges and impediments in the way. Organizations now-a-days are concentrating on such issues. Moreover it has become a need of the hour to concentrate on this issue. Thus organizations can link innovative workplaces with employees' performance and productivity which can lead to lucrative business prospects.

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