

Experiential planning and design



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In this latest article KAREN SKILLINGS discusses experiential learning and the little talked about 'lessons learned workshops', which help to avoid the mistakes we've made in previous designs, or simply help us do it better.

Experiential learning is the process of learning through experience, and is more specifically defined as 'learning through reflection on doing'.

One of the most common experiential learning processes that a design team and change manager will embark upon is the staff engagement surveys or workshops where discovery, culture or brand, mind mapping and co-creation will be discovered. This may include all employee engagement or vertical sampling throughout your organisation.

The staff engagement workshops can uncover design imperatives such as what shared facilities and learning spaces may be required, how people use established zones and mixed-use spaces, and what higher proportion of shared and bookable facilities may be required.

The gold to be found in the staff engagement workshops can be used for both design and change, as the findings are distilled into the concept design for the new workplace model, allowing the change manager to formulate many ideas that will be pivotal in designing a connected and flexible change program.

The other experiential learning process that could be undertaken may normally occur when

the organisation has a custom facility that requires significant design and expenditure – the lessons learned workshop. A lessons learned workshop is a process of review and endorsement for the inclusion, exclusion or modification of design responses to achieve 'to be' adopted requirements. This workshop is undertaken to receive feedback from the existing users of the space on the ways in which all parts of the business or a specialist space operates or could be improved.

The lessons learned workshop's purpose is to receive feedback and to ensure this feedback is considered in the new design. The workshop should avoid solutions and designing the new space (but predictably such discussions will evolve as often these users have been thinking and devising improvements throughout the past years of occupying their space).

The lessons learned process can be the beginning of the 'requirements gathering' for the design of the new workplace. It will be followed by or will occur concurrently with any number of staff engagements, including workshops that gather and define precise and detailed design and change requirements, such as the staff engagement workshops mentioned earlier.

The lessons learned workshop normally involves the fitout, design and change teams, as well as the key users of the facility who will share knowledge with us. Any relationship diagram provided at the end of the workshop is for information and reference only and is not a design brief for the facility (although can be used as baseline if required).

The workings captured in this workshop could result in an ordering of conclusions such as:

- no change – the existing provision was specifically mentioned and regarded as adequate or better and stands as the 'built' brief for the new design
- no user info – there was no specific discussion or mention of the line item as there were no users with a view to how the design has worked or is working and its continuation in the new design needs to be verified

- not applicable – the line item does not exist, or has ceased to be relevant due to the cessation of technology or some other reason
- technology – the line item requires development and design of a technology response, and
- engineering – the line item requires development and design of an engineering response.

Although this exercise is not to capture a design brief, it can serve to do this to a degree. It can support future design considerations for a replacement facility. This is the opportunity to flush out general user considerations that a general employee engagement workshop could not possibly capture for the custom facility, such as:

- anthropometry (body sizes)
- range of capabilities
- range of working postures and visual needs of the users
- control design such as auditory tasks – alarms, speakers, radios, phones, location and mounting
- working postures such as variety, seating, clearances, forearm supports etc, 24/7 requirements
- displays – catering for a full range of operating scenarios; i.e. visual, aural and tactile needs
- distribution – wall-mounted off-desk and on-desk locations, arrangement and adjustability to meet anthropometric needs
- controls – adequate space and locations, left- and right-handed users, allocations clearly identifiable and emergency controls, and
- maintenance and cable management – suitably housed and accessible.

The extra benefits of the lessons learned workshop are that the findings can be designed into a document, which can evolve and record more data as it is collected. It can also act as a design verification artefact to check the delivery of each item if it makes it into the schematic design, the detailed design development, engineering and technology designs, and fitout construction documents.



DESIGNING YOUR QUESTIONS FOR THE LESSONS LEARNED WORKSHOP

You may start with the obvious – what is absolutely critical for the design if we do it again? Other questions could be:

- What don't you use?
- In the new design will there be a replication and then cutover?
- How are we working now, where is it faltering and where we can make improvements?
- Do we understand the employee numbers on the floor?
- Did we get the ceilings right before installing video conferencing last time?
- Did the physical layout need a raised floor?
- What do you like about the space arrangements?
- What are the environmental issues with your space?
- Would you replicate anything from a workstation point of view, environment etc and, if so, what?

TOOLS OF THE LESSONS LEARNED WORKSHOP

There are people who want walls to scribble on. It is a tactile way to work in a workshop. Walls are the new paper and workshops are the time to encourage chatter, so start with drawings and then encourage conversation, but remember: capture everything! At some stage, the information gathered may be adjudicated to go into the brief for the design team or will be used in your change program.

Considerations:

- In the big scheme of things where does the facility fit into the business? Draw it up on butcher's paper – something that can be taken away to document later.
- Who is the next team with affinities and adjacencies? Draw it up and then ask for the next and the next.
- End up with a tick sheet for the other things that are discussed.

WHAT ELSE CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS LESSONS LEARNED WORKSHOP?

- Knowledge of the ergonomics and what should improve
- what needs to be on the issues list
- IT standards desired and/or required
- acoustics standards desired and/or required (i.e. would you put expensive equipment in a facility right next to a major road? Vibrations may play havoc in the facility), and
- how the physical system works, including how the interface looks with colour/contrast.

HOW THE CHANGE MANAGER WILL USE THIS INFORMATION

The change manager is trying to 'get the relationships' – they are capturing the relationships they need to solve and are identifying the priorities. To do this:

- they learn what energises you
- your feedback helps them consider focus areas for future workshops and surveys

- views and opportunities are captured, to be carefully considered as validated, and
- the outcomes may inform a new set of behaviours that everyone understands, connects to and can apply.

AT THE END OF THE WORKSHOP

The design and the change team will review the engagement results, sum up the findings and distil them into the concept for the new workplace model (if appropriate), which in turn provides a segue into further employee engagement, particularly those business units identified with affinities and adjacencies.

Are you surprised how much can be gained from having the change and design teams working together from the get-go?

The change and design teams are great partners with many opportunities to share experiential learnings that will benefit both parties in their workplace project.

A workplace project is the enabler for this partnership, and designers and change managers know that to develop innovative design solutions for their clients and, to ensure these changes are embraced, they need to work together to achieve the same goals.

This partnership enables high-quality design and smooth transitions, unifies disparate teams and creates inspirational workplaces that will retain and attract quality employees to stay on and grow with their employer into the future. Who could ask for more?

If you are interested in what else is going on in the design phase of any accommodation project, check out the Design Roadmap, which is another of my free journals available for you and your project team on my website.

I look forward to next time taking you through Phase 5 in the Accommodation Life cycle, 'the fitout phase'. ●

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