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Designing the Work Experience

by Jim Ware and Charlie Grantham

All the world's a stage. . .

Our most recent *Future of Work* Members Roundtable ended with a fascinating conversation about workplace design. No, we weren't exploring cubicle sizes, layouts, or the color of carpeting.

Instead, our members' comments were focused on what's inadequate, and just plain wrong, about the way most organizations plan their facilities and workplaces. As one of our members put it:

"We're still using planning techniques we developed in the 1970's, when the core assumption was that everyone needed a personal space of some kind, with a large work surface and plenty of filing cabinets. Now, we've all got laptops, PDA's, smart phones, and wireless access – and we're moving around all the time, participating in global project teams and interacting with people on other continents at all times of the day and night. Isn't it time to rethink the kind of workspaces we need and the way we plan those spaces?"

After some extended discussion the group members concluded that they should embark on an exploration of how people in other industries and professions design both physical and social work environments. And so our *Future of Work* research efforts over the next six months will focus on rethinking the workplace design process. We've been saying for years that the nature of work – and the workforce – is changing, and that the way we support work has to change as well. But the reality is that workplace design and planning approaches haven't evolved very much at all. Most CRE professionals still appear to be operating with 1970's assumptions.

So we're going to look way beyond the "normal" sources to see what we can learn about how to design work **experiences** that are consistent with the needs and expectations of the knowledge workers who are central to the success of the global, information-based, location-independent economy (yeah, that's a mouthful, but we don't know how to say it any more simply than that).

Bear with us; it's going to be an interesting journey. And we welcome your contributions; please come along for the ride. As we also note in our rant in this issue ("[Reset the Assumption Button!](#)"), Albert Einstein once observed that you can't solve your problems with the same tools you used to create the problem in the first place. So we're going to "go where no one has gone before" in search of radically new tools and processes for provisioning and supporting 21st century work (well, not really, since what we want to do is learn from others *have* gone; but we're not looking for "others" in the traditional office design professions and industries).

This article, our first step in that journey, is a simple description of the issues we're aware of at this point, along with some very preliminary ideas about where to find some of the innovative

tools and processes we're looking for. Right now we have more questions than answers, but we know that's the only way to learn something new.

Designing the Work Experience

As a starting point, **Debra Moritz** of Jones Lang LaSalle, pointed us to an important idea that was first articulated almost ten years ago by **B. Joseph Pine III** and **James H. Gilmore** in their now-classic *Harvard Business Review* article, "Welcome to the Experience Economy" (July-August 1998; see also their 1999 book [*The Experience Economy: Work is Theater and Every Business a Stage*](#), Harvard Business School Press, 1999, for a much more detailed analysis – link is to Amazon.com).

Pine and Gilmore's major insight was their recognition that the *design of experience* has supplanted services as a primary source of value in the economy. In essence, the basis of value creation in the economy has evolved from *Commodities* (e.g., iron ore, coal, and copper, as well as corn, beans, and other crops) through *Industrial Goods* (manufactured products) and *Services*, to the point that today what many consumers are looking for, and willing to pay for, is *Experiences*. It is sort of like Maslow's classic hierarchy of needs. Once base needs are met people move up the value chain looking for higher-order satisfaction. This is not to say that commodities, manufactured products, and services are unimportant, but that today we are also seeking, and able to pay for, experiences (which of course often include basic products and services as part of the offering).

Pine and Gilmore explain their view by describing the evolution of the birthday cake, of all things. To summarize their story very briefly, in the agrarian economy mothers made cakes from scratch, using farm commodities (eggs, flour, milk, sugar, and butter). Then in the industrial economy they purchased a pre-mixed package of ingredients (from Betty Crocker, for example). Later, in the service economy, they would purchase (at a much higher cost) a fully baked cake from a bakery. Now, as most parents know, almost the only way to celebrate a birthday is to "outsource" the whole experience (at another order-of-magnitude increase in cost) to a Chuck E. Cheese or some other restaurant or entertainment business that stages a special event for their child and his or her friends.

What does a birthday event have to do with workplace design? Well, when you think about it, the answer is pretty obvious. A workplace is a "stage" where work takes place. Supporting work – especially the information-based work that we focus on – is a matter of creating a context and providing the resources people need to be productive. That is, workplace design can be viewed as a process "staging" the work experience.

Given that perspective, we're wondering what workplace designers could learn from Hollywood, Broadway, music concerts, and professional sports, among other businesses. How do set designers go about creating the "background" and context, or the stage, on which actors "work"? These days a Madonna or Rolling Stones concert is clearly not just about music (if you're willing to call what those performers do "music"!). And what about major sporting events like the World Series and – in particular – the Super Bowl? Those events clearly include a whole lot more than an athletic contest (which is of course one reason why they cost so much).

When we watch a Hollywood film or a Broadway play we are of course observers, not participants. But work is a participatory experience (at least for most of us). What kinds of businesses design experiences that directly involve their customers? We think immediately of theme parks like Disney World and restaurants like Chuck E. Cheese or even McDonald's,

which today often includes not only a particular “look and feel” within the restaurant itself but also a children’s play area. Or have you ever gone to a theme restaurant for a medieval dinner complete with “wenches,” knights in shining armor, a court jester, and a series of onstage playlets involving the diners themselves?

Our point is really a (relatively) simple one: the “producers” of these places and events clearly give a great deal of thought to – and spend a lot of time, energy, and money on – thinking through who their customers are, what they are seeking, and how to enable the creation of value-added experiences. Shouldn’t we be as thoughtful about the workplace?

One other nontraditional work setting that we also want to explore in some depth is medical care. In particular, we know that hospital design is undergoing a radical shift as medical professionals “(finally) discover how dehumanizing and even unhealthy most traditional hospital emergency rooms and patient facilities have become. We want to learn more about how patient-centered design came about, and what processes hospitals and their architects engage in to produce such thoughtful and appropriate facilities and services.

Using Abductive Thinking

One more idea before we end. We recently had the pleasure of enjoying a highly stimulating conversation about the design profession with **John Berry** of Greystone Consulting (he’s spent many years on the office furniture and workplace design industry, and is now actively involved in the WIRED West Michigan effort we’ve mentioned in earlier articles such as [“What Is a Knowledge Worker, Anyway?”](#) and [“What Attracts Knowledge Workers to a Community?”](#))

John taught us a new concept: **abductive thinking**. We’re sure you are familiar with *deductive* and *inductive* thinking. Deductive thinking involves applying general principles to reach specific conclusions. The “opposite” of deductive thinking is inductive reasoning, which [Wikipedia](#) describes as:

“. . . a process of reasoning in which the premises of an argument are believed to support the conclusion but do not ensure it. It is used to ascribe properties or relations to types based on tokens (i.e., on one or a small number of observations or experiences); or to formulate laws based on limited observations of recurring phenomenal patterns.”

In simple English, that means that induction usually involves a small leap of faith in that we infer a generalization from limited (but reasonable) facts or observations.

Deductive reasoning applies general *principles* to reach specific conclusions, whereas inductive reasoning examines specific information, perhaps many pieces of specific information, to derive a general principle

In contrast to these two well-known and widely practiced forms of logic, *abductive* thinking involves exploring the *possible* (versus the probable or the proven). Abductive thinking is a sixty-four dollar phrase for the process of asking “What if?” and then sorting through all the possible consequences. For example, what if we could “broadcast” electrical power through the air the way we do wireless Internet signals today? How would that change the design of workplaces? How would that change the processes and the experience of working?

Wireless power may seem like a completely unrealistic fantasy (although we know for a fact that it’s being worked on, and may be closer to reality than you think). But our point is that there

might be some real value in designing workplaces “as if” wireless power were real. For one thing, we might discover that wireless power would be so incredibly transformative in the workplace that it would be worth investing huge amounts of time and money in making it happen. Or the exercise might point us towards other new workplace concepts that are not ultimately dependent on wireless power but would be valuable even in today’s battery-dependent world.

We’re convinced that there’s something important and potentially very impactful about abductive thinking. It’s a new approach that we believe is well worth exploring as part of our search for out-of-the box insights about workplace design processes.

Beginning the Journey

This is just the beginning of our journey. We’re going to be digging into each of the examples cited here, and others, with the goal of eventually proposing a radically new – and much improved – way to design workplaces and work support services that match the needs of today’s “untethered” and globally distributed knowledge workers.

At this point we don’t have a clue where this journey will take us, or how it will end (if it ever does), but we’re totally convinced that there’s a better way to design and support the experience of work than what is common today.

As usual, your comments and reactions are more than welcome. And as always, please send your thoughts to us at comments@thefutureofwork.net.

About the Work Design Collaborative and *Future of Work Agenda*

Future of Work is a global network of resources – practitioners, thought leaders, researchers, and senior consultants – who are committed to building and implementing physical, social, and technology-based work environments that are cost-effective, socially and environmentally responsible, and personally satisfying.

We are focused on defining the future of work and helping our members and clients achieve new levels of workforce and workplace productivity. *Future of Work* produces and distributes management tools, surveys, benchmark databases, white papers and technical reports, conferences and workshops, newsletters, books and articles, and public presentations on the changing nature of work. The Work Design Collaborative, LLC, provides leadership and infrastructure services for the *Future of Work* community.

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