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TIME & SPACE CONTINUUM

IT HAS BEEN MANY YEARS SINCE INFORMATION TRAVELLED ACROSS A BUSINESS VIA PAPER, FROM INBOX TO OUTBOX, COLLECTING SIGNATURES ALONG THE WAY, ENTIRELY VISIBLE AND ENTIRELY TRACEABLE. NOW, WITH DATA AND INFORMATION ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY TRAVELLING DIGITALLY IN MOST ORGANISATIONS, IT IS FAR HARDER TO IDENTIFY THE KEY PLAYERS AND THE BOTTLENECKS.

In recent years, Organisational Network Analysis (ONA) has provided a structured way to measure and map the formal and informal relationships, connections and collaborations between people and groups within a business. This process makes visible how and where communications, information and decisions flow through a business, whether employees are in the office or elsewhere. ONA network maps identify the most influential members of the team, the subject matter experts and those who are underused, for example. By doing so, they allow businesses to take steps to enhance the flow of information, make best use of personnel and recognise and reward individuals and teams more fairly. One aspect ONA highlights above all else, is the value of social capital, making explicit how important relationships between team members are in driving productivity, innovation and success. Businesses will often seek to optimise opportunities for colleagues to develop their social relationships and share information. If you consider that “space is a strategic tool” - as Dutch architect Stephanie Akkaoui Hughes puts it - an office enables both planned and formal communications and those all-important informal, organic interactions.

In recent times we've seen office space designated to 'social zones' - screened off seating areas and pods - providing places

for conversations and informal meetings, while open and relaxed seating is an ideal location to gather for a chat. An illustrative example was the placing of sofas at a corridor intersection, where

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colleagues from two teams often passed each other. Savvy leadership at that business saw the benefit of the catch-up conversations that so often took place there, then took steps to encourage them. Notably, the new era of hybrid and homeworking has inevitably had a cooling effect on social interactions - moments vital to network expansion and ideas shared outside normal business channels, often sparking innovation. While meetings can be moved online, replicating these now clichéd 'water cooler moments' digitally, is difficult. Some businesses have tried, but success has been limited.

If we consider the four core working behaviours as the 4Cs - Contemplation, Concentration, Communication and Collaboration - all are important, but the latter two have come to the fore in offices since the pandemic. While contemplation and concentration are often - but not always - easier at home, collaboration and communication are best suited to the office. With fewer people in the office at any one time, the temptation is to cut down the workplace floor plate, but there is an argument for more open spaces and casual seating, improved kitchens and canteens, to maximise opportunities to develop that vital social capital. ONA makes clear the function and value of the networks and relationships within an organisation and in the light of that, the office space can be understood as a means of developing and sustaining them. Now the aim of the physical workplace is to be a magnet, a place where people are drawn to rather than compelled to be and where relationship-building is prioritised. In the best examples, it provides a setting which sparks creativity, supports communication, optimises collaboration and helps team members build the positive, trusting relationships which underpin a business' success.

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