



Are property professionals the new corporate magicians?

In my varied career as a culture change professional, I've had the great pleasure of being involved in several large scale property projects.

The idea that property projects and culture change are somehow linked would have once surprised me - perhaps it surprises you. But it doesn't surprise me any more.

Designing and moving into a new workspace looks like it's about buildings, desks and chairs. It's not.

The physical environment has a profound impact on the way humans think, feel and treat one another. What looks like being about desks and chairs is actually about territory, status and complex interpersonal dynamics. Some subtle and nuanced, some not so much.

It's an art form to use a property project to really think deeply about the mindsets and behaviours you want to encourage - the ones that will accelerate the execution of the organisation's strategy - and then design them in to the space.

And if that wasn't enough of a challenge for property professionals, a group of people who are often seen as a cost centre and are under endless pressure to reduce said costs, they also now find themselves in a unique position in organisational life.

Over the last ten years in particular, as the pace of change has accelerated even more rapidly, it has become obvious to me that the property function has become pretty much the last man standing in the need to think and plan the farthest into the future.

The property function has become pretty much the last man standing in the need to think and plan the farthest into the future. There was a time, not that long ago, that the property folks would go to the strategy folks and the most senior executives and ask what their vision is for the next ten years - and expect to get an answer. Those were the people with the ten to twenty year plans. Then somewhere along the way they became five to ten year plans, then three to five year plans and these days it's hard to find anyone planning even three years ahead with any degree of confidence.

There are some industries, like mining, where there is still a need to plan decades into the future, but by and large, that's a thing of the past. This doesn't mean the strategy folks and senior executives are doing something wrong or are somehow lacking in capability or insight. Things are just changing too quickly. Whilst the act of planning remains essential, the plans themselves are ever more swiftly obsolete.

Life has simply changed. And it's never going back to the way it was. But property professionals don't have the luxury of collapsing their timelines in response to the pace of change. They're expected to provide just the right amount of just the right type of working accommodation at just the right time. And if they don't, the consequences are often significant. For many large businesses, property is their third highest cost behind people and technology, so any mismatch between supply and demand of working space can be very costly indeed. Not to mention extremely obvious and with plenty of potential to embarrass everyone concerned.

It takes time to find the right building or building site. It takes more time to design and construct the building and/or the fit-out and the lease is likely to be at least ten years but probably more like fifteen. That means the property function is being asked to do the virtually impossible: predict what the organisation is going to look like in terms of number of workers, style of working (fixed desks, shared desks, working remotely etc.), location of workers and numerous other variables across a time horizon that is often fifteen years or more into the future and almost always well beyond the timeframe of the organisation's strategic plan. They're expected to be corporate magicians, pulling some sort of construction rabbit out of a hat.

And that's before they even start to think about designing spaces that will encourage the mindsets and behaviours that will support the execution of their business strategy.

So what is the modern day property professional to do?

In the new world they find themselves in, property professionals can't just ask others about the future strategy. They have little choice but to play a much more active role in creating the vision for the future of the organisations they serve, figuring out what are the right mindsets and behaviours that will lead to the greatest success and creating the spaces that will encourage those mindsets and behaviours.

It's a daunting task, but they need to become the new corporate magicians. I have seen property projects used extremely effectively for culture change. There's something so wonderfully visceral about the process of packing up your things one day and walking into a brand new space the next. A space that looks different, feels different, sounds different, even smells different. A new space that gives you endless opportunities to re-write the social rules of work. It's an opportunity that comes along very rarely, and when fully embraced, can turbo-charge just the culture change the organisation needs.

If you're trying to change the culture of your team or organisation and have the gift of a property project on the horizon, I urge you not to miss the golden opportunity to use it as a catalyst for change. You won't be sorry.

Fiona ROBERTSON



Fiona Robertson is a culture change coach, trainer and speaker focused on helping leaders create teams and organisations that thrive.

*She can be contacted via fionarobertson.com,
fiona@fionarobertson.com or +61 (0)3 8719 8020.*

Fiona ROBERTSON