

DESIGNING FOR DIGNITY



Sky Central Workplace, London, UK

DIGNITY

noun [U] /'dɪɡ.nə.ti/

- the fact of being given honour and respect by people
 - a sense of your own importance and value

Oxford English Dictionary

Globalisation, digital disruption and economic inequality are changing our world – and the way we work. Those seismic shifts appear to be affecting us on a much deeper level, compromising our sense of dignity in the context of work and the workplace.

From permanent employees to gig workers, no one is immune to our more precarious, fast-changing reality. Once upon a time we believed we could count on 'career agility¹' and continuous learning to support ongoing employability. Now we face the constant threat of losing our jobs or occupational status.

It's no surprise the digital economy has helped create an ever-expanding precariat² – a social class with little to no security or predictability – and

contributed to rising levels of stress, burnout, unhappiness and depression in the working population.

This is a worrying state of affairs given we spend so much of our lives at work – and it has such an impact on our identity. The social interactions, job satisfaction and recognition we receive there play a powerful role in building our self-worth and shaping how others perceive us.

That sense of dignity is a foundation for human flourishing, creativity and innovation³. Recent empirical research also suggests dignity in the workplace contributes to higher engagement and lower turnover⁴.

Not surprisingly dignity has been put forward as the ultimate purpose of business⁵ – and the ultimate measure of their success.

In the face of so much uncertainty, how do we protect something that's so valuable to us as individuals and as a society?

A call for aligned workplace design

Workplace design can make a difference, because it shapes not only where and how we undertake our work but the quality of our overall experience as an employee.

Today, more and more architects are embracing experience design by combining the physical environment (e.g. furniture, lighting, artwork, plants) with services (e.g. espresso bar, childcare) and programming (e.g. mindfulness meetups, speaker series) in a way that makes life better for employees each day.

Experience design can also influence our sense of dignity in the workplace when it's aligned with the organisation's structure, leadership approach, recruitment practices, incentives and culture. The design outcome can support respectful interactions between employees, greater recognition of individual contributions, action on equality and a recognition of the inherent value of people. That alignment is the key, or else potential game changers for the organisation could result in costly gimmicks⁶.

Experiments in office 'innovations'

Workplace design innovations have a checkered history⁷. Take Robert Probst's concept of the 'action office', outlined in his 1968 book "The Office: A Facility Based on Change⁸". His aim was to create a modular, "forgiving" design that gave employees more control and flexibility to reconfigure their work environment to suit their changing needs and preferences.

Successful incarnations of this design philosophy can be found in workplaces such as Sky's head office⁹ in London, UK. But in many cases the application of Probst's ideas can result in soul-crushing work environments – a mainstay of office satires from the popular 'Dilbert¹⁰' comic strip to Jacques Tati's seminal film 'Playtime¹¹'.

Radical office design solutions like the 'action office' or Jay Chiat's 'virtual office¹²' often have largely failed to improve people's daily working lives or sense of dignity. The reason? They've been imposed top-down, with a logic driven by efficiency, which has essentially denied employees greater autonomy or individuality.

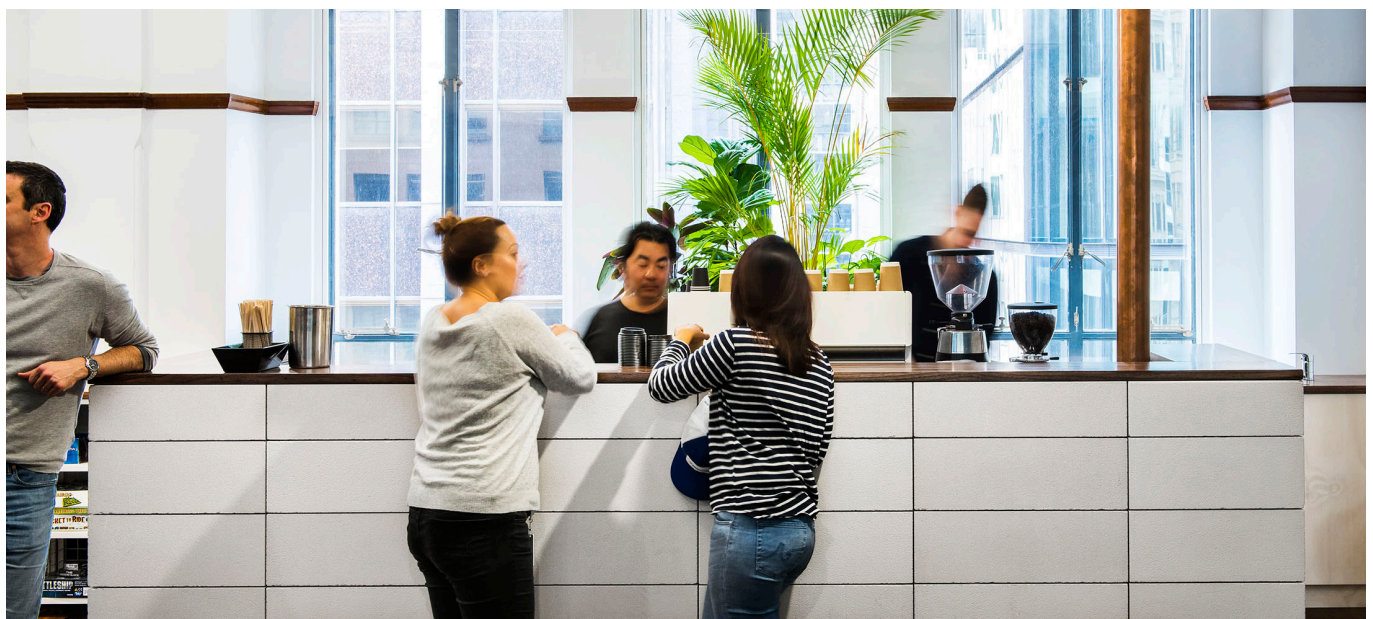
There's plenty to learn from these failed experiments in office design. We have the opportunity not just to improve the outcome but the way we get there – looking at the whole process of designing, deploying and incrementally adapting workplaces as well as the people we engage in our efforts to create workplaces with dignity in their DNA.

Seeking answers across sectors and disciplines

To understand how we can better protect and promote dignity through workplace design, we need to cooperate across sectors and disciplines to look for more nuanced, effective solutions.

That's why Hassell¹³ and the University of Melbourne's Centre for Workplace Leadership¹⁴ have worked in partnership, along with a diverse group of international academics and industry collaborators.

As a team, our efforts were not limited to secondary research. We also collected empirical data from one of Australia's top 50 ASX organisations. Our data collection methods included a workplace dignity survey, ethnographic observations, employee interviews, workplace performance benchmarking and social network analyses.



Atlassian Workplace, Sydney, Australia

FINDINGS: The value of both 'in person' and 'in private'

One of our key findings: participants with a higher frequency of face-to-face interactions with colleagues also reported higher levels of dignity.

Phone conversations between co-workers proved to be a poor substitute, given that those participants' dignity score was not

associated with their frequency of calls. This suggests that it's not just interaction that matters, but encounters within the physical environment.

Organisations often choose open plan office layouts for this very reason – the promise they'll bring employees closer together by removing the physical boundaries that limit informal, unplanned interactions.

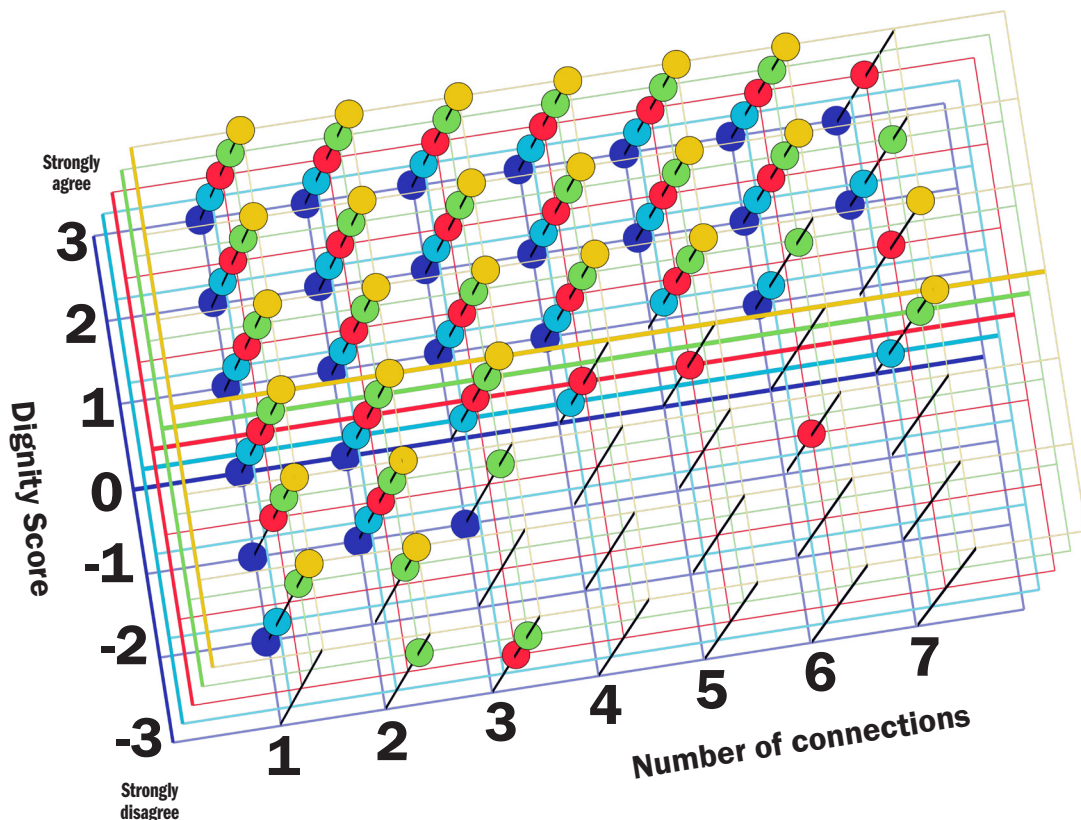
Ironically, **open plan designs can lead to the opposite: less face-to-**

face interaction.¹⁵ **And the quality of the interactions that do occur may suffer**¹⁶, as a result of employees feeling that their environment isn't suitable for discussing sensitive issues, concerns or controversial ideas.

In other words, the key variable mediating the negative effects of reduced privacy and increased crowding in open office layouts appears to be employee's ability to control where interactions take place.

Five questions of the Workplace Dignity Scale (WDS) developed by Thomas and Lucas (2018) were included in the Social Network survey. These questions correlate to four dignity factors as per below:

Questions	Dignity Factor
● People show they appreciate my work efforts	Competence contribution
● I feel just as valued as others in the organisation	Equality
● At work I have the chance to build my abilities	Competence contribution
● People at work genuinely value me as a person	Inherent value
● People at work communicate with me respectfully	Respectful interaction



WHAT MAKES A 'SUITABLE SPACE'?

Work environments are complex social settings – and research has often failed to show a consistent link to desired outcomes¹⁷ for many common elements in the physical environment.

The opposite is often true: design decisions can lead to both wanted and unwanted results. For example, many of the face-to-face interactions we observed during our research took place in improvised settings, with co-workers leaning on cabinets or perching on low windowsills. That was surprising to us, given the amount and variety of allocated collaborative spaces available.

Those sorts of impromptu catch-ups are important in supporting the dynamic and spontaneous flow of information. But at the same time they can be seen as inconsiderate, disruptive or even disrespectful, as some participants told us.

Other employees said they prefer meeting rooms where it's quiet and private. But whether they used an enclosed space or a windowsill, the

people interacting didn't consistently choose a setting that appeared to be the ideal match for the length, nature or noise level of their meeting. This shows how subjective the concept of a 'suitable space' is, including for other workplace activities like writing or reading.



Workplace observation illustrating the spontaneity and fluidity of interactions. A filter and masking are applied for anonymity.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Personal space can be a factor in maintaining a sense of dignity at work.

Personal space offers control and autonomy, giving an employee a buffer from supervisors or coworkers constantly claiming their time and attention.

‘Owning’ a space also offers the comfort of routine and the option to customise or personalise the work setting. That last point can also send important social signals to coworkers, as one employee we interviewed noted:

“I used to have all kinds of mementos on my desk. When my things were taken away from me it made me feel like a brick in the wall. I lost my individuality. Look around – everyone’s desk is bland.”

That loss of individuality can cut particularly deep right now, when so many organisations are saying they want to create a more inclusive culture and encourage employees to engage with their ‘full selves’ at work.

To make things more interesting, how we feel about dignity is personal. Employees in two identical work settings might have totally different experiences of dignity.

But broadly speaking, people feel a sense of dignity when they are treated with respect and in a way that demonstrates they have inherent value (i.e. they do not have to earn it), when superiors interact with them as equals and when they can contribute to the company.

Nesting, toweling and compromising – all common reactions to flexible space

Ownership is at odds with contemporary, flexible space strategies where ‘nesting’ – occupying the same space for days on end – is either discouraged or forbidden. Now, we’re seeing the rise of a new response – ‘toweling’. The term describes the habit of dropping off a jacket, laptop or other object to claim a spot – just like tourists who drop a towel to reserve a poolside seat.

This recent practice causes frustration for those who have to police an unallocated desk strategy. But even worse, some employees are intentionally choosing an unfavourable desk (due to glare, temperature or location) because they know that no one else will claim it. It satisfies their human desire for familiarity and routine, but it can also erode their sense of dignity in the process.

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF DESIGNING FOR DIGNITY

In his seminal Principles of Scientific Management¹⁸, Frederick W Taylor wrote, “In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first.”

Thankfully, workplace cultures are shifting away from that approach, and so are the expectations of employees. They’ll no longer accept a workplace where they feel like a cog in the machine – an ‘instrument’ valued only for clear contributions to the bottom line.

At the same time, there’s a greater focus on addressing unfair treatment, status inequalities and social stigma in both our society and our working environments. As work becomes more ‘human’¹⁹ and therefore nuanced, it’s even more important for designers to understand how employees gain dignity– and how to design for it.

Our exploratory research identified three fundamental ways in which workplace design can expand (or erode) dignity.

FIRST, design based on careful consideration of the specific needs of inhabitants can support the face-to-face interactions that are essential to nurture dignity on the ‘social stage’ where work plays out.

SECOND, dignity is affirmed when people are treated as inherently worthy of respect – and that can be crystallised through workplace design. It’s crucial that ‘dignity in design’ isn’t compromised by productivity or efficiency goals, or an organisation could actually end up with an environment that passively – yet pervasively – undermines the dignity of employees.

THIRD, workplace, experience and organisational design need to work in harmony – just like a sturdy, three-legged stool. For that to happen, we need to see early, authentic multidisciplinary and cross-departmental collaboration between groups such as HR, IT and facilities management.

In today’s harsh business climate, those steps could seem difficult to take, and it would be tempting to stick with siloed efforts to cut costs and boost efficiency instead of rethinking the workplace. But, in an increasingly knowledge-based economy, there’s an expectation that we can (and should) leverage knowledge and expertise from across functions and stakeholders to do more to shore up dignity at work.

**Carefully designed
workplaces support
the face-to-face
contact that's
so essential to
our dignity as
employees.**



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