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How do we collectively learn from the global pandemics' impact on work?

Through a series of round table discussions we are looking to define the positive and negative outcomes of the pandemic and how we can use them to generate a revitalised approach to our design and delivery.

Conversation one in collaboration with Lily Grey

February 2021

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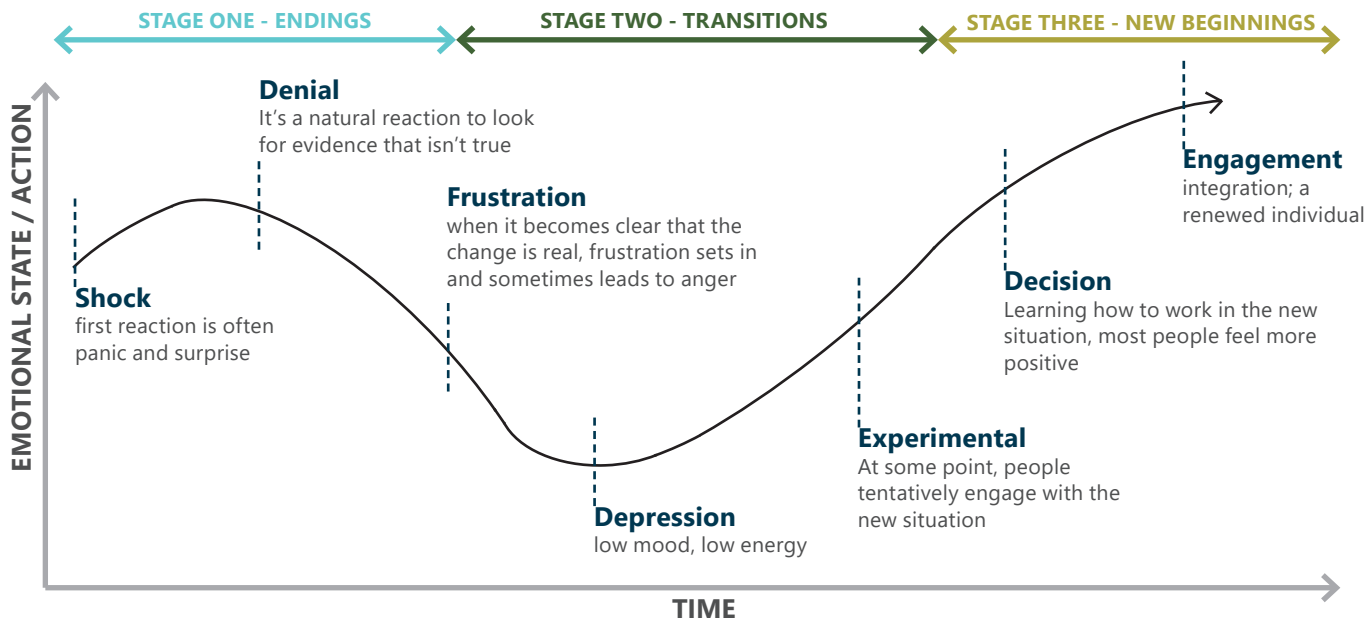
People have been asked to change pretty much everything about their lives - work, home, school and as a result this will all need scrutiny if we are to develop the new normal in an intelligent and sustainable way.

As the conversation between employer and employee turns away from 'rescue mode' and starts to determine a more strategic approach toward a back to the office or not policy, we are aware a period of intense consultation will be required. As a collective of consultants we will need to understand the seismic shift that has occurred for many people in the last 12 months.

Many organisations had already taken huge steps towards hybrid working environments and activity based working – the pandemic has pressed the accelerator for many and shown the art of the possible for others smashing the perception it was impossible or inappropriate for their business.

Lily Grey are currently working with clients on the extreme ends of the scale from highly traditional clients who are looking at how best to overhaul existing systems in a reasonably conservative manner, through to organistations that are looking to forget everything they've ever known and take this opportunity to start from scratch. Even developing software to resolve challenges as they appear.
These clients can be defined along a scale of risk taking or risk aversion and this is perhaps an interesting approach to how end users will be perceiving the current challenges.

A management exercise or an opportunity to totally refresh their thinking and approach to work, workplace and business growth?



Kubler-Ross Change Curve

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The blended workplace - why choose home over office?

A potentially underestimated casualty in the virtual workplace is the 'water cooler moment'. Many people have felt more productive at performing simple tasks at home but it's generally agreed they have lost the element of collaboration that ultimately leads to the next big innovation.

Ensuring that everyone is fully engaged and aware of the end goal whether in the office or working elsewhere, is going to be key to the successful implementation of the new normal. How managers dictate the balance of time spent where and how much will they be led by the employee will no doubt vary across organisations but parameters will need to be clearly defined and in consultation with all to make this successful.
It needs to be broken down into more granular review for individual organisations.

In conversation with Tricia and Katharine it was felt that the most important categories for analysis would be;

- **Life stage**
  i.e. shared accommodation, poor connectivity or requirement to remain local to home
- **Career stage**
  highly independent worker, responsibility to oversee teams/personnel development or commencing career/apprentice
- **Personality preferences**
  introvert vs. extrovert: the office environment inadvertently favours the extrovert, working from home the introvert
- **Activity analysis**
  whether that be a narrow spectrum of tasks with considerable repetition or a hugely varying complex task base interacting with a large team and client facing
- **Appetite for risk**
  traditional business sectors vs. the innovative and entrepreneurial appetite to embrace new ways of doing things
- **Inclusion**
  there is little doubt that the pandemic will contribute to diversity gaps, for example the burden of women homeschooling, but there may be an opportunity to garner opportunities, e.g. could disabled working from home reduce access issues?

Pandemic aside there are four fundamental reasons why business makes change, often a mixture of all four in varying orders of priority;

- **Growth/contraction**
- **Cost cutting –** greater efficiencies sought
- **To better support staff** – e.g. greater flexibility life balance, wellbeing and in the instance of the pandemic – save lives
- **Brand attraction** - to retain talent/increase customer satisfaction/showcase skill and expertise

Design influences all of these directly or indirectly and what we do know is that the principles of creativity, collaboration and problem solving are vital at a time of great change such as now. Businesses simply can't make innovative leaps forward without giving their people the right tools and that includes the right environment, whether home, office or business hub.

Tricia cited the work they do with many creative media clients who accept the fundamental importance of chance encounter in their daily activity, the 'water cooler moment'. The virtual workday can be too structured and by the very nature of diarising we lose the everyday casual interactions teamwork is based upon.
Studies have also shown how important casual meeting and friendly onboarding of new staff can be to the productivity of a business. One of Lily Grey's clients has grown so significantly during the past 12 months that 80% of the workforce have never physically met one another.

Time that employees do spend together in a shared space will be precious and needs to be utilised to its maximum effectiveness. Space will need to be adapted to be highly flexible, perhaps changing on a daily basis, for the given tasks required of the teams who are present in the office.

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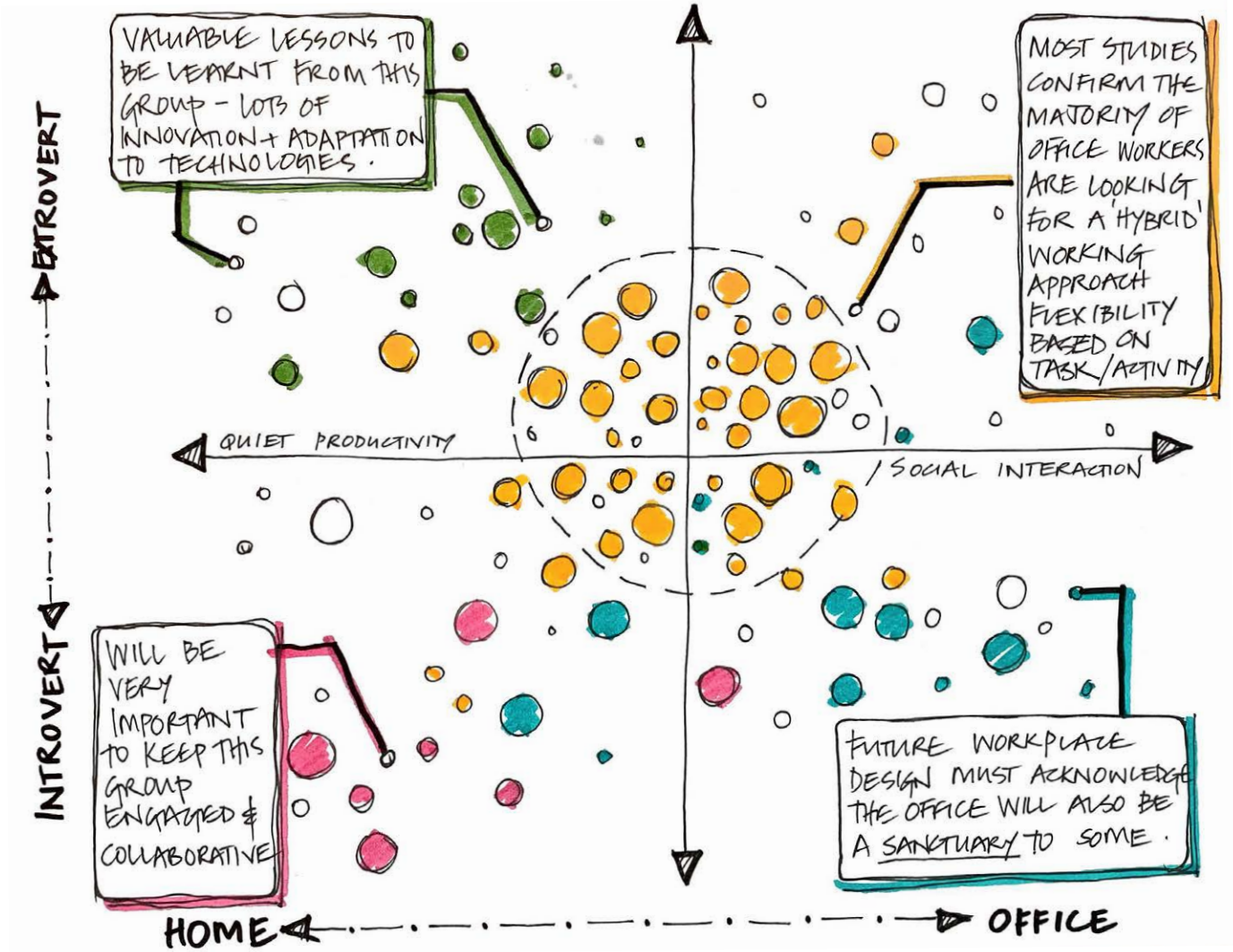
The blended workplace - why choose home over office?

Management approach to accountability, presenteeism and empowerment will be critical to the hybrid working model.



The pandemic has made the introvert King

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Worker or human?

"People just really like doing stuff where we squish ourselves in next to each other. The roaring 20's was just about being near people again after two years of isolation. As a direct result of the Spanish flu where European cities were deserted for a long period – we spent an entire decade building places for people to get together and socialise."
Dr Hannah Fry- The last Leg

From a positive standpoint people have adapted rapidly to not being together implementing many ways to socially interact on virtual platforms e.g. formalising the 10 minutes of 'banter' as agenda item one, Zoom pub quiz on Fridays. Sadly studies are starting to confirm that this is significantly falling away as it feels a pale imitation of the real thing and too contrived in many instances to have the same positive impact.
This problem has been compounded by our work being ever present in our homes. We are going to have to understand the training and self-disciplines required to segment and order the day if WFH continues. Workplace psychologists are starting to see evidence of significant loss of productivity due to the lack of specific on/off buttons like a specific train to catch, school pick-up time etc.

Humans tend to need physical social interaction to enable the emotional intelligence required to support colleagues in the workplace. We all have our 'Zoom face' now, sadly this rarely offers any insight as to how we truly feel about our work or in fact in general. Mental wellbeing in the workplace has been of growing importance to employers and has charged up the agenda as we see overwhelming evidence of virtual work fatigue. This becomes even more vital for younger staff commencing their careers and discovering who they are and where they may fit in an organisation.

Gallup workplace studies in the US showed that having a best friend at work leads to better performance.
When employees possess a deep sense of affiliation with their team members, they are driven to take positive actions that benefit the business - actions they may not otherwise even consider if they did not have strong relationships with their coworkers.
https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236213/why-need-best-friends-work.aspx

A positive that has come from WFH has been the easing of professional norms, a relaxation of dress code that helps break down barriers, the 5 year old deciding to join the zoom by sitting on your lap. The positive benefits of sharing elements of home life with our peers should be maintained and used as a step change in how we break down unnecessary hierarchies. Organisations that embed this as a norm going forward should befit enormously and hopefully enable greater team cohesion.

Corporate culture and values will play an important role as staff are more disparate the need for common goals and sense of belonging will be very important. Katharine talked about a client with a very strong, very collegiate culture, staff are well looked after but taught to expect constant change. Being a kind organisation people feel completely supported in this and get used to the continual change in their daily tasks. Slower moving companies may need more support with implementation of these strong values and there may just be more resistance all round and employees may now feel they have a greater voice in stating this resistance.

The commute to work seems to elicit one of the bigger divides in opinion probably based on actual distance, complexity and cost of travel. Movement and exercise are at the core of mental wellbeing and for a large group of people the loss of that decompression time between home, work and a meeting has been devastating to concentration and problem solving. Many people regularly use the movement between home and work as their means of exercise and as most of us share our space with someone, if not a larger group, often a rare time to be alone to think whilst exercising. We will need to get better at 'Engineering in' thinking time. Of course other groups have found the lack of commuting totally liberating, removing the stress of late arrivals and delays, over-subscribed public transport and the financial cost as a massive benefit to working from home. There are also significant environmental positives to minimising travel for work.

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Specification and the built environment

The Leesman survey of work from home now at 160,000 participants has returned an almost consistent figure of 30% of respondents saying they do not have an appropriate space to work from home. www.leesmanindex.com

The environment and the values a business sets out for its people will need to be strongly demonstrated through the design of the space. Most organisations are going to have to deal with tough decisions and complex conversations over the coming period, this will require an environment that offers the best possible way of supporting these activities.

We know that cost will play a big part in property decisions but there will be a broad range of interventions that can be implemented to support needs in both existing space and new.

In making a property decision clients may want to look at engineering the ideal day for their staff;

- **Walk/cycle/safe public transport**
- **'Bring your dog with you'**
- **Access to outdoor space**
- **Working flexibly** – physical space/working day
- **Amenities available** -a reason to go
- **Sense of identity**
- **Sustainability -** the pace of change will be massive as society and legislation align for net zero by 2050

Property decisions may make use of a broad range of options from wholly owned, partially shared within a building to the potential for a collective of shared spaces hired when needed. We believe that landlords and developers will start responding to this need, which will be great news for the sustainability agenda as we make space work much harder for a wider group of people. This may also include a greater collaboration with the hospitality industry which will seek to find broader diversity after the devastating closures of 2020.

Office space will need to be very mindful of the user groups and not just be for the large collaborative events but be able to support the needs of the introvert requiring quiet thinking space.

People have become incredibly innovative in adapting their personal space at home eg. radio programmes made in wardrobes, recording studios on bookshelves. Design should acknowledge and allow some of that individualism back into the office.

Location critical safe travel will be a foremost consideration as people will still be reticent. We will be self determining on virus tolerance and setting out our own rules alongside government legislation.

There has been a lot of debate about localised hubs in support of smaller, centralised headquarters. There are some merits to local hubs near home which offer some relief from home working but it will not substitute the need to get together with a team member who is highly unlikely to be any nearer to the hub than the centralised space.

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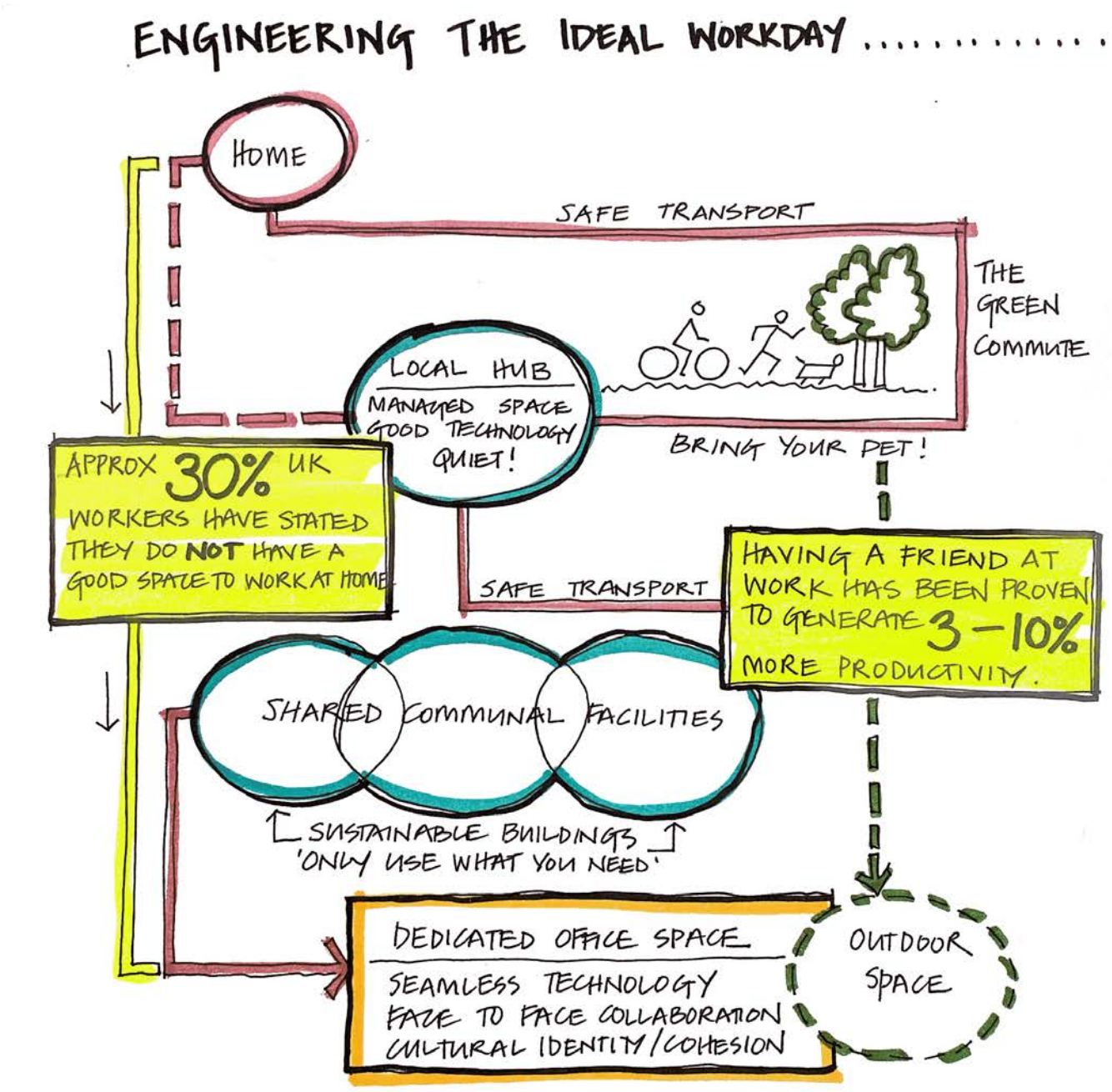
Specification and the built environment

Will people need to work full time in the future? Will AI be doing the jobs we don't want to do? How will we continue to strive for equality with the potential risk that some attain this great work-life balance whilst others work even harder to deliver it.



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