Ramp Up Your Workplace Innovation With Agile Experiments

Locatee

Today, corporate real estate, workplace experience and facilities managers are faced with more uncertainty than ever before. Let's list some facts here first:

- Workplace leaders do not know when COVID-19 will truly "stabilize" and open the road for a definitive return-to-office movement

- Workplace leaders are evaluated through far more criteria than before the pandemic: cost savings, cost efficiency, space efficiency, ROI, workplace experience, office attendance, talent attraction/retention, sustainability, D&I and the list goes on.

- Workplace leaders are faced with the challenge of enabling a positive and productive workplace. Orchestrating individual flexibility, team culture, office presence and productivity are among the most prevalent topics for workplace leaders.

- Workplace leaders are mostly in the dark when it comes to understanding office presence, office presence intent and sentiment, and activity-led office presence.

- Workplace leaders are tasked with implementing, enabling and making a success out of a working policy (hybrid or otherwise) that is oftentimes not rooted in employee's expectations, patterns and behaviors.

The positive aspect of this has been the renewed importance of the function within the organization, as the workplace is not longer the obligated infrastructure it once was, but is fast becoming a key service to the organization and its members. However, this also translates into heightened scrutiny and pressure to deliver on these more diverse objectives we have listed above.

High pressure and high uncertainty is tough on any business function. The expectations of results are through the roof, but there is less of a clear path to these results than usual. We see this in our discussions in the market – there is often confusion for workplace leaders as to where and what to start with in order to build the next great office experience of tomorrow. It is quite likely that firms such as CBRE, JLL or Gensler are seeing booming activity these days, as many will turn to outside support in the hope that someone will be able to sort some of these things for them.

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When Planning Does More Harm Than Good

In such a context, traditional planning is not the answer.

Regardless of what you'll want to tackle first, you won't be able to plan it for your full area of responsibility. You won't get the internal buy-in for that – you'll need to show a business case and some results initially. Nor would you want to plan and implement across all your portfolio, only to figure out that there was something wrong in your assumptions – and have heavily invested resources into something that doesn't lead to demonstrable results.

"Many organizations are also too conservative about the nature and amount of experimentation. Overemphasizing the importance of successful experiments may encourage employees to focus on familiar solutions or those that they already know will work and avoid testing ideas that they fear might fail. And it's actually less risky to run a large number of experiments than a small number." ①

Long term planning also prevents you from adapting quickly to the things you should learn while actually implementing strategies.

This is why we at Locatee often work with first-time customers on pilot projects. Roll-out one location, prove the value of data for decision-making and strategy-building, and expand from there.

It corresponds to an agile mindset where quicker, smaller pieces of experimentation lead to stronger confidence in the results and the pathway to success. But the "pilot then scale" mechanism shouldn't be confused with a culture of experimentation. While it is a good way to mitigate risk, innovation requires a lot more than simply scaling down that one project initially. It is not about scaling down an initiative. It is about focusing on the impact.

① Source:
www.hbr.org

Brace for Impact

In an uncertain context, the goal should always be to get rid of uncertainty as fast as possible. While there is comfort in planning, there are also higher chances of (larger) failure when we do not strive to quickly determine if the path is right.

Hence, experimenting in the workplace needs to be about finding out if we can generate results, learnings, and validations. Agile prescribes to always look for the fastest way to deliver findings. Agile is in many ways a codified version of "learning by doing" and gives clear, practical guidelines to achieve this.

Striving to uncover results and impact fast vs. planning and accumulating risk as you plan is at the heart of training an experimental mindset.

② Source:
www.scaledagileframework.com

The Office Experimentation Quandary

Fast? In real estate? Come on.

True, that may sound daunting. If what you are looking at is a global portfolio, or even just a building, or even just a floor, still, the notion of "trying out stuff" seems very unrealistic and impractical. Too many dependencies. Too many complexities. Real estate and workplace management are not startups!

However, this has happened before, and there are existing answers to that dilemma. ②

Scaled Agile Framework (SAF) offers a clear, proven path for implementing Agile in an enterprise context. But even without having your organization going full SAFe mode, you can still lean on an Agile mindset in your own area. Remember – the whole point of Agile is to start wherever you can, not to plan for the whole thing in advance!

Break It Down

In discussions with CRE and workplace managers at Locatee, we often hear something along the lines of, "I can't really do anything without having people in the office". While this is indeed a limitation, it also comes from the mindset that without the whole picture, the whole plan, we cannot be successful.

That is a fallacy. There are always things we can do and try, be it on a smaller scale, or for smaller impact. If there is only 10% to 20% average occupancy in the week, there is surely a day or two in the week where the occupancy is closer to 50% or even higher.

And even on low attendance days, the people using the office are still giving useful indications as to what the office is being used for. Not having the full picture, not having the perfect setting – the fallacy is that our perspective was never really complete. Our data shows that even before Covid-19, the offices were rarely occupied above 60% on average in any region or industry in the world, and with that, the setting was never perfect either.

Again, the smaller scale or sample size is only an issue if you think about the action first. But if instead, you are clear on the impact you're trying to achieve, the progress you would like to see, then the setting doesn't necessarily matter.
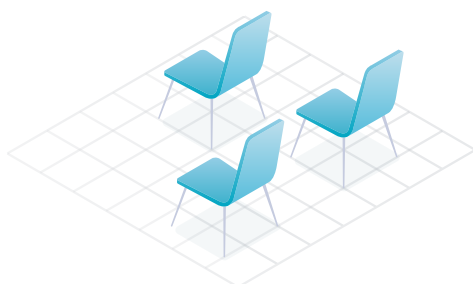
For instance – what metric would tell you that there is progress towards your objective? Is it the % of peak occupancy each week? Is it the average? Or is it something else – could it be around figuring out whether unassigned seating would work for you? Could you want to find out if there is a difference between zone occupancy and team attendance patterns? Or could you want to zoom in on specific team patterns?

Break It Down (Continued)

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Based on what it is that you consider as progress towards achieving your objectives, you can then start breaking it down into possible actions that you assume could demonstrate that progress. And in doing that, you may want to prioritize anything that is the simplest to implement first, with faster time to uncovering results.

For example – you may consider that a wide improvement of A/V equipment and other hybrid meeting enabling equipment, would lead to a better experience in the office and possibly better attendance. Instead of ordering and installing equipment across a whole department, floor or building and looking at attendance numbers… Could you simply focus on one asset, assume that making improvements would make it the most used asset on the floor/in the building, and possibly observing whether the it is indeed used in majority for hybrid meetings (maybe comparing with another comparable asset in the building)?


Dancing With Experiments

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Because any such experiments will take time to get done and lead to results, you don't have to start one and wait for it to complete. Depending on the resources available, you could then launch another experiment, leading to a completely different set of expected results, which would give you other learnings to build upon when strategizing your bigger picture workplace.

If you started with an equipment improvement on one floor, could you try something around seating on another? If you were interested in flexible seating but hadn't made the jump until now, could you approach one team in one specific zone of the building, and try to experiment flexible seating only with them?

Start From Data to Get to Data

Experimenting is hard and uncomfortable. It's even more difficult when one doesn't have much insight and visibility on "performance" in the first place. This is something we observe keenly in the market. Many "starters" in organizations where there is a growing importance for workplace experience management (for example, new hires with a newly created position and mission) seek Locatee, as they intuitively understand the crucial need to have data and baselines, in order for them to demonstrate the results and impact of their actions.

As we uncovered in a study commissioned by Locatee and conducted by Forrester Consulting, "Data readiness creates visibility to identify gaps limiting progress. High-readiness firms have more visibility and connectivity across their locations, allowing them to identify gaps that are limiting progress faster than low-readiness firms". ③
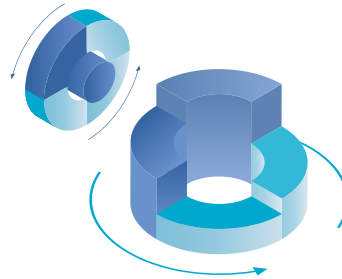
In more established organizations where there may be less tangible growth for the workplace lead function, but expectations are still high, there is often a sense of "legacy". They feel that they were already doing with what we have – whether it's a not-too-old manual study from external consultancies, or badge swipe data that tells us more or less about occupancy – and could still get away with that.

To some extent, that might be true. But you may lack the granularity your experiments require. You need to ask yourself whether whatever action you will take, you will be able to actually see the impact it has and find out if it constitutes progress and validation of your orientation.

For example, badge swipe data could tell you about building floor occupancy, so it could help validate activities that encourage office attendance. But that data is on a large scale, and your experiment would have to mirror the scale of the data in order to be conclusive. You wouldn't be able to break it down to a smaller scale.

③ Source:
www.locatee.com

Progress as the Safest Measure of Future Success

While it may sound obvious, it really isn't. At the end of the day, being able to demonstrate progress is the safest way to ensure success towards larger goals.

And to demonstrate progress, there is no other to do this than to start tracking progress. Any experiment must be contingent to an ability to track the impact it makes and the progress it has enabled.

An example of this: booking systems ④. At the start of the pandemic, booking systems became the most urgent implementation and investment. The reason: booking systems could limit the number of people coming into the office (Covid-19 restrictions); it was also considered that booking systems could be a source of utilization data fit for other purposes.

Where did this fail?

Ⓐ Functionalities of booking systems could have been experimented with a much smaller scale version. We at Locatee did that with an excel spreadsheet. It allowed us to understand the limitations of booking: people don't do what they say they'll do. No-shows and unregistered attendance were the norm. A customer who had just implemented an unassigned seating concept observed that the booking system was "gamed" in order for employees to revert to assigned seating, by reserving the same desk continuously. Experimenting with desk-booking for just one team would probably have uncovered that issue earlier than after rolling it out across a whole site.

Progress as the Safest Measure of Future Success (Continued)

B In order to mitigate this limitation, companies that did invest in such systems fell into the "sunk cost fallacy". We already invested in it, so we should try to make it work. That led to initiatives trying to train employees to be compliant, or create a "check-in" functionality. In the case of one of our customers, this meant turning to Locatee in order to verify the accuracy of the booking data (which lead to discovering critical discrepancies from 10% inaccuracy to some floors showing 20 times more people attending than bookings).

These examples could have been avoided by experimenting and by checking the relevancy of the data available to verify the impact. In the end, you can't improve what you do not measure ④, which is why data and identifying progress must be at the heart of any strategy. Armed with insight and a culture of innovation, you will have a leg up on a vast majority of your peers. ⑤

④ ⑤ Sources:
www.hbr.org
www.youtube.com

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