

The Workplace Revolution

We all appreciate that the place we work, has a significant effect on productivity, and therefore profit. It affects staff morale and wellbeing, as well as communication, procedures and the logistics of running a business.

The dawn of the computer began tumultuous changes in how and where we work. As manual processes became computerised, so the amount of floor space needed began to reduce. Cabling for data transfer needed to be accommodated out of sight, either under raised floors, across the ceiling void, or around the perimeter of the floor. Computers generated large amounts of heat which required cooling, and the use of VDU screens required new forms of lighting.

The 1970's and 1980's saw the evolution of open plan offices, but not a great deal has fundamentally changed in the last 20 years – so far.

Another revolution is taking place in the workplace with the development of mobile technology. The place of work is no longer the office or factory, it is now the coffee shop, bus, train or hotel. Meetings can take place over the internet, whilst still being able to see your meeting partners. We are therefore beginning to see new trends developing, such as smaller head offices, short term 'team based' offices lettings, and global production processes with manufacturing overseas, and customer services and distribution in this country.

It is noticeable that only a small proportion of companies actually take premises which matched their original criteria. The most common reason for this, in our experience, is that companies compare their future needs with their existing premises, which may have ceased to have been appropriate from their business some years ago.

When we begin advising a company wishing to find new premises, we start by getting to know the business, and to establish the key criteria.

Some examples of how the criteria have changed in recent years are as follows:

1. Location: The decision of where to locate revolves around where the key members of staff live, which is particularly important in Oxfordshire, where there is virtually no unemployment. We have seen decisions changed at the very last minute, because key staff were not consulted at an early stage. There have been several recent examples of businesses moving from established locations for this reason, reducing commuting time, thereby increasing productivity and happiness of the staff. Most of the

Oxfordshire towns and some rural areas have high quality accommodation with broadband coverage, served by the good regional A-road and motorway network.

2. Cost: Relocation is expensive, and therefore if the move is only for 3-5 years, then careful thought needs to be given about what is cost effective. If cost is the principle reason for relocating then there may be opportunities to renegotiate the rental, in a market where some rentals are falling. We are advising clients on lease renewal negotiations where this is happening, and substantial costs could be saved.
3. Size: Companies usually estimate their future needs based upon their current occupancy ratio. Again, this is not always accurate, as building configurations change. Furthermore, technological developments such as flat screens (enabling rectangular rather than L shaped desks), scanning of documents (saving storage space), smaller server rooms, and the use of multi-purpose rooms (such as meeting room and occasional office for field based staff), have all saved floor space requirements.
4. Specification: I have already touched on the effect of technology, and that the rate of change will only increase. Fundamentally, however, the basic characteristics are unlikely to change. The office will still need a roof, four walls and a floor, and there will still be the need to control the temperature and lighting levels, and despite the possible advancement of wireless technology, there will still be the need to distribute data cabled around the building. There will be obsolescence due to energy useage, as certification takes place this year, and fuel prices are set to increase.

This does not, of course, mean that older buildings will become redundant. There are many examples of refurbished buildings which combine their character with new technology. Three very different examples which we have recently been involved with are Cherry Barns in Harwell, which is a converted Listed barn with origins in Thirteenth Century, Littlemore House, Oxford which was originally a Victorian hospital, and Barclay House, which is a Twentieth Century three storey building with M & S on the ground floor and offices above. All three buildings have been extensively refurbished to meet current office requirements, whilst retaining their character. We are also involved with new developments which embrace the latest technology, such as Norton Business Park in Chipping Norton, which will include energy saving measures in the design.

The greatest change in criteria will be in the context of time. There has been a divergence between those businesses able to take a long term view and purchase buildings to take advantage of attractive financial packages, and those requiring flexibility. Furthermore, within companies there will be the need to take premises on different terms; the head office may be taken on a 5 or 10 year term, whereas there could be separate project based offices on 1 or 2 year tenancies.

The Oxfordshire economy enjoys a selection of good quality business premises, spread around the country, allowing the decentralisation of the workplace. Meeson Williams are involved with new developments in locations such as Chipping Norton, Wroxton, Kingham, Faringdon, Long Hanborough and Carterton, bringing new modern accommodation to these regions of the county. Threats exist to the future availability of new development, including the removal of vacant Rate relief and high build costs, which is likely to slow down speculative development, and cannot be good for the local economy which will rely on good quality accommodation on flexible terms.

For more details please contact David Williams, Director, Meeson Williams Limited. 01865 349011 or 07768 985949 david@meesonwilliams.com