

The University of Manchester

From Tradition to Innovation: Changing Attitudes to Work and Workspace at The University of Manchester

Summary

Since 2019, AWA has supported the leadership team at the Faculty of Science and Engineering at the University of Manchester in their journey to new ways of working and workplace design.

We supported them as a trusted advisor for all aspects of the journey, providing change management and communications advice, pilot support (development, design, monitoring and analysis), user engagement and space configuration, management training and cultural advice.

Post pandemic, we further supported the transition to hybrid working for professional services staff.

Background

In September 2022, the Manchester University Engineering Campus opened its doors to students, researchers, academics, and professional services staff providing a modern workplace experience to enhance collaboration and enable the faculty's leading-edge teaching and research.

The campus is one of the largest, leading edge academic buildings in Europe and contains research and teaching facilities, laboratories, and a student hub.

To make the building work and deliver the volume of leading-edge laboratory space required by the faculty, the project team needed to optimise the use of general 'office' space.

To make it happen, the working ways and traditions of academics and professional services staff had to change. A modern more egalitarian culture was desired as well as adjacency to the laboratory space for those that needed it. AWA were appointed to guide the transition to more modern ways of working.

MECD is one of the largest leading edge academic buildings in Europe. Early in the design process it became clear that to make it work would require a change in the way office space was designed and occupied.



Our approach

Initially, AWA undertook a three-month leadership engagement programme to gain an understanding of the different attitudes and points of view associated with the project. This included one-to-one meetings between AWA and 30 senior leaders including the University President and Vice-Chancellor and the Vice-President and Dean of the Faculty of Science and Engineering.

A Vision workshop followed, which was attended by senior leaders such as the Director of Faculty operations and the heads of the schools for science and engineering. An open dialogue was facilitated in which differing attitudes and opinions were aired and path forward was developed.

It became clear that space was being used as a badge of status for academics. The greater the gravitas of the academic the bigger the personal office. This was true across the world, not just in Manchester. So, change in an academic setting was going to be challenging. Their model of the world and workplace, steeped in history and tradition, would need to evolve.

A 12-month pilot programme was implemented to experiment with an open plan design that would adapt to the constant evolution of academic life and fulfil the various needs of the faculty staff and research groups.

Optimising the workplace

At an early stage in the design and planning process, it became clear to the project team that given the constraints on the shape of the building and the need to maximise the amount of leading-edge laboratory space, there would need to be innovation in ways of working to optimise the remaining office space to support work.

The architects had modelled lots of very small private offices, but this was impractical and would have fallen short of providing the facilities staff desired.

An alternative, more open plan approach was modelled dividing the available floor space into modules, which could then be designed by each

department for their needs. This model was designed and well suited for continual change.

In order to test this model, AWA engaged with faculty members and learned how individual requirements varied significantly between academics, support staff, post-doctoral research associates and postgraduate students.

AWA concluded that to address the concerns of the occupying communities, build understanding and trust, faculty staff needed to be engaged in a process to design their future workplace. The idea of using an experimental pilot involving as many people as possible was born.

To build trust within the various communities, reduce the fear of change and test the various settings and components to be used in MECD, AWA designed a highly transparent, open book pilot as a tool for engagement with a naturally curious community.



The Pilot Office

The workplace experience design project began with a three-phase iterative pilot programme to learn how different communities could best use the space over the course of a whole academic year.

Approximately 200 staff participating in the pilot were surveyed on how they worked and their different needs during term time and outside of term time. A selection of representatives from those groups were then invited to a series of workshops where they were encouraged to further discuss different communities' ways of working and to contribute ideas about how a pilot office could be designed. AWA then worked closely with the MECD's internal architects to deliver this bespoke environment.

The pilot office was approximately 350sqm including shared amenities such as the kitchen area, reception, and toilets, and was occupied by up to 50 people at a time. These participating staff members tested the suitability of the office over the course of three months and contributed to regular open feedback sessions to help the project team understand and resolve any issues they might be facing, as well as enable discussions between individuals holding sometimes conflicting views regarding the suitability of the space and ways of working.

During the trial, with the full agreement of faculty staff, sensors were attached to desks and meeting spaces to provide live data. This provided information on how the space was used during day-to-day operations and complemented the feedback provided by staff.

An overall review was completed at the end of each three-month trial and the findings were incorporated into the next cycle of the pilot scheme.

For every phase, different communities with varying needs would design and test the new environment, providing a greater understanding of how different groups could coexist most effectively in a space 30 times larger than that prototyped in the pilot.

This process brought to light important considerations that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. For example, it was necessary to address concerns regarding how security and student confidentiality could be maintained in an open-plan office. The trial also highlighted unexpected potential benefits of the new workspace to some previously sceptical academics. They reported the open-plan environment helped them to develop better rapport with their PhD students than they had enjoyed while working in a private office.

These three-month cycles of the pilot phase enabled ideas to be tested for each issue that arose. This enabled a widely supported holistic workplace strategy to be established and used as a design brief for the interior architects at the MECD.

As well as testing the technical aspects of the workplace design, the pilot exposed communities to a new more open plan workplace experience at low risk. It allowed them to realistically experience a world that they could only imagine before the pilot.



Enabling hybrid work for professional services

In addition to the workplace experience design project, the Faculty of Science and Engineering's professional support team asked AWA to provide change management assistance relating to the benefits and challenges of hybrid working triggered by pandemic working. The department sought assistance so they could swiftly adapt to the changes in work culture that had evolved during the pandemic and learn how they could implement best practices.

AWA began by initiating a discovery process once again to learn from staff about their experience of working remotely and their attitude towards adopting a hybrid model of employment. Surveys showed that while some staff were anxious about the prospect of returning to the office, others feared hybrid working would hinder communication and limit opportunities to make spontaneous connections. The vast majority however were keen to keep the unforeseen benefits of remote working. Staff felt a greater sense of trust and empowerment from line management and felt more in touch with the senior leadership team and some academic communities.

To address staff concerns and ensure a culture of trust and communication remained, AWA proposed implementing training around the Six Factors of team performance and rolling out Working Together Agreements (WTAs). The process began with a series of workshops with senior management and hybrid work champions. WTAs are designed to help teams discuss important topics such as how often staff should come together, and for what purpose, as well as how they can best communicate with colleagues and support each other's wellbeing, given they are not all in the office at the same time.

Senior staff then discussed ideas with each of their teams to form a variety of WTAs. This process empowered staff to critically assess how they wanted to work and their involvement in drawing up the agreements gave them greater ownership over the culture of their workplace than if it had simply been imposed from above.

Once the Working Together Agreements were in place, the professional support staff began a three-month pilot scheme to test the behaviours they had committed to in their WTA and the agreed hybrid working programme. During those three months, hybrid champions and senior management staff were sent short weekly readings to expand upon to reinforce the importance of the six factors in managing remote and agile teams. Every day for four weeks of the trial, all staff were asked to complete a four-question survey to establish whether the hybrid model was assisting their daily tasks and helping the team to work together more effectively.

At the end of the three months, an overall review process took place, including some feedback focus groups and a survey of all staff members. The review process showed trust and social cohesion in the department had increased in those teams that had successfully implemented WTAs.

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AWA's work with the University of Manchester is a great example of how to bring about lasting change. Working with the university's own experts, using science, pilots and building trust we were able to facilitate a deeply exciting and effective community change journey.

Conclusion

When organisations and whole industries have become used to working in a particular way over many years, with engrained behaviours and attitudes, change is tough. Whole communities become 'addicted' to habits that govern their mental picture of the world.

The world of academia is an extreme example of this with models of working, thinking and allocation of space being linked to status. This is true all over the world.

But the world is changing and where changes to attitudes and culture are needed, a systematic science-based approach is needed in order to move norms.