

The evolving workplace: The working environment and its impact on business and culture

By [Henke Naudé](#), issued by [Ackermans](#)

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Why workspace design not only reflects - but also drives - culture



Henke Naudé

Much has been made of the rise of the mobile or 'remote' workforce, where employees are allowed to work from home or an environment of their choice on occasion. Increasingly, the workplace is no longer the sole location for work, but a pivotal hub among numerous locations in which work occurs.

There are a number of reasons for this; personal (an employee who needs to manage periodic home or family situations); productivity (a staff member who has an important task to complete with a tight deadline and is seeking to minimize distraction); and even practical (avoiding traffic or a long commute by working from home or another location), among others.

Notwithstanding these special circumstances, there's no denying that an on-site workforce remains the current norm and can play a key role in the success of a business. Henke Naudé, Properties Manager at leading value retailer Ackermans, believes that employers could be deriving increased value from their employees – and vice versa – if more consideration was given to the working environment.

Environment and employee engagement

"Employee wellbeing is integral to performance, and a relatively minor shift in environment can have a major impact on an employee's mindset. Employees who revel in their working environments will be more engaged, happy and ultimately productive," says Naudé.

There is significant data to support this. According to the Harvard Business Review, "Happiness raises nearly every business and educational outcome: increasing sales by 37%, productivity by 31% and task accuracy by 19%, as well as a myriad of health and quality of life improvements."

Another [workplace study](#) by Gensler shows that "providing an optimal work environment is an opportunity to improve business performance, engage employees, and drive innovation and the productive spread of ideas."

Ackermans recently completed the move into their new support centre, which was purposefully built to meet the retailer's – as well as their workforce's – evolving needs. "To effectively drive performance, an environment must advance with changing work, life and economic drivers to stay relevant and tailored to the needs of not only the business, but also the employee," says Naudé.

Marrying values with working environment

"Our purpose is to Bringing Value to Life – not only to our customers, community and stakeholders – but also to our employees. "We believe that workspace design not only reflects culture, but it *also drives culture*, and should therefore be aligned with company values."

Ackermans mapped out the home locations of its 528 employees, to ensure that the location of the new support centre would be most convenient to the majority.

Once the retailer had determined a location that best served its employees, its project team began to plot the design brief. “Our space also needed to reflect our personality, nurture a sense of ‘fun’, while still facilitating business efficacy,” he explains.

The campus and offices were to demonstrate Ackermans’ positioning as a value retailer, but also to reflect their fashion-forward focus. “To take it a step further, we even incorporated our product as part of the design process; giving different floors in our building relevant themes and naming our meeting rooms after fabrics.”

Collaboration versus quiet

Collaboration was a key consideration. “We incorporated a number of spaces that would allow for pop-up meetings and effortless engagements.”

“We ultimately created a space that was light, airy and open to better facilitate teamwork, with the required privacy that enables necessary focus.”

The Gensler study revealed that workplaces designed to enable collaboration without sacrificing employees’ ability to focus were more successful than those designed purely with collaboration in mind. The survey confirmed that *‘the proliferation of new social and mobile technologies has revolutionised how we create, share and communicate. Today’s world is connected like never before, but new connections mean new distractions and for many a compromised ability to focus.’*

Naudé admits that an environment conducive to team as well as individual work was “very important” to the retailer.

“We sought to create a ‘balanced workspace’ that facilitated collaboration without sacrificing focus. This would allow employees to collaborate and share insights with their peers, but also ‘tune out’ when needs be.”

Consider your environment

Company sustainability is not only about profit, but also footprint. Companies seeking genuine longevity need to consider their immediate environment and societal framework in which the business operates, taking these factors into consideration when envisioning their work space. *‘Is there opportunity to support local business? What are the immediate community’s most pressing needs or challenges? How can we empower and add value to our environment?’* are all questions companies should be asking, says Naudé.

For example, Cape Town is facing a severe drought, and so it was important for Ackermans to consider its footprint in terms of water usage. “We designed our building to be as water-efficient as possible, and also make use of a borehole for sanitation and hygiene.”

Naudé believes that just as company culture differs from business to business, there is no one-size-fits-all office ideal. “However, taking these factors into consideration will allow you to create a space that is a genuine reflection of your values, allowing the company’s purpose and culture to better permeate through the organisation.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Henke Naudé is the Properties Manager at Ackermans.

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