

# The workspace experience: interview with Kursty Groves

With the rise of co-working, design-forward spaces are tantalising businesses with their plants, neon slogans, break-out spaces -- some of which more closely represent living rooms (billiard rooms, even, with their pool, fußball and ping pong tables) than they do the typical office. Workplace consultant, author and 'Space Coach', Kursty Groves explains more.

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Tidy house, tidy mind. A familiar phrase truer for some than for others. Some people, after all, are more at ease amongst their hoardings, finding it tricky to relax when everything's too clean. For others, whether a spring clean; the ancient art of feng shui; Marie Kondo's mindful decluttering; or — the focus of this piece — the workplace revolution, we're making very specific decisions to give our spaces neat and chic edits (cleanliness is next to godliness... but let's park the aphorisms for now, shall we?). Whatever the case, we've been buying into how the spaces we occupy contribute to our mood, wellbeing, motivation and focus.

## **The changing face of workspace**

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So what makes anyone's workspace more effective than another? Why do some playful offices inspire us, whereas others are tolerated with a smirk by occupying staff? Would an office overhaul really improve employee engagement and output?

To answer this and to get to the bottom of office design psychology and its considerations, Maddy Ness spoke with workplace consultant, author and 'Space Coach', Kursty Groves, about why it matters and the importance of not only what the space looks like, but how it interacts with the team using it, and vice-versa. As she puts it, 'rather than just space, the entire experience.'

## **Making your workplace a playground, still?**

In 2007 Kursty's work helping organisations and their people unlock their creativity reached a turning point: she already knew that workplace environments could be both enablers and hamperers of creativity, but this was the year when Google, Proctor & Gamble, and even the Royal Mail, were starting to experiment with spaces that encourage innovation. Famously, Google had begun to incorporate slides into their workspaces, wackifying the workplace for their teams of innovators. Seemingly, with good success. On the other hand, there were companies such as Philips Design who had a subtler approach with a focus on longevity and sustainability. The future of work movement was gathering momentum.

As collective opinion towards strip lighting, carpet tiles and ceiling tiles was shifting, Kursty went on a tour of the world, looking into companies' efforts at enabling creativity. She witnessed the growing interest in innovation across industries and the increasing awareness that space could be a solution. "Hiring great people and putting them in a sub-standard work environment," Kursty quotes from Franklin Becker's Workplace By Design, "is like buying a Ferrari and driving it on sand." Yes! People spend all this time and money trying to attract and get amazing people, then they shoehorn them into rows of desks. The air-conditioning doesn't work. The loos are blocked.'

## **Dedicate time to thinking and planning**

Before making ambitious changes to your workspace, Kursty is emphatic that you get these basics right, that the space isn't (only) a manifestation of the

brand, but a platform for you to do the work. The obvious workplace amenities — accessible toilets, kitchens, stationery access, lighting, air quality and temperature — can't be overlooked to incorporate an ice skating rink, say, instead of a corridor. And often the buildings dictate your space, too: for the main part, office design occupies established buildings. It's about taking the space you use into consideration when you plan how you're going to use it. It sounds obvious, but it's easy to wed yourself to a big innovation, because Google did it, and overlook your company's fundamental needs within the space, even though, as Kursty puts it, 'people are adaptive, and they can *make do*.' The Ferrari can drive on sand, even if it's not ideal.

So, you're optimising: you respect the sanctity of the basics, now can you put a slide in? 'When it comes to creativity and innovation, you need lots of different types of spaces to enable the different activity, thought processes and interactions that people need to go through in order to create,' Kursty advises. (No slide just yet.)

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Even sceptics of workplace futurism will recognise the complaint of 'I can't get anything done here, I'm going to the office/a cafe/home'. What Kursty helps people do is to incorporate different types of workspace designed to complement different working moods. This doesn't necessarily mean you need more space, however. It's about how you use the space.

## **Cost Vs motivation**

'Companies have realised that real estate is getting really expensive and people aren't spending all day at their desks. That mobile technology means people are better able to move around. Collaboration is becoming much more important.

'In the last decade there has been a big shift towards taking away ownership of space, so, taking away desks and introducing hotdesking. Unfortunately, the sentiment behind this was often cost-saving.' But this is changing.

'What we're starting to see more of now is that companies genuinely want to

attract and retain talent; enable collaboration; and they appreciate that people want to get their heads down and concentrate. They're starting to view the environment as a place where people plug into the culture and each other. And where they can have access to tools and information that they couldn't if they worked from home.'

## **The rise of the remote workforce**

Remote work is empowering, and an important enabler for innovation, but Kursty also cites how it can have its own distractions and can be lonely. People are making the workplace more attractive so that people want to be there. Companies are seeing how they need to offer spaces people *want* to travel to for work, no matter their industry or function. 'Innovation is key across sectors, regardless of whether in banking, aerospace, law firms, governments: typically conservative companies have been thinking differently about work processes.'

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On a global level, the Netherlands and Australia are famously ahead of the curve in understanding how people need different spaces for activity-based working: 'essentially, what are the different activities people are doing and how can we build our space around that? Think of a house: you have a room for each activity, so, a bedroom, a bathroom, a kitchen, and so on.' Tailor space to your company's needs, don't cram all uses into one space, and you might find staff output improves drastically. One study outlines that people working in enriched spaces have a 17% increase in productivity.

Amidst the world's growing corporate monopolies; co-working companies with enlightenment as a service cropping up on every street corner; technocrats and their questionable data privacies; even automation and AI in our day-to-day lives, it's easy to feel powerless in the face of future technologies — how

much agency do we have over the everyday? Are we caught up in it or will we be left behind? This is why it's so heartening to hear Kursty's response when asked how important it is that workplace innovation is human-lead: 'Critical, absolutely critical.' It's not about designing a Panopticon that will force our good (read *pressured*) work from us under scrutiny, it's about enabling employees to flourish. Modernising our understanding and approach, in the main, and not seeing this as a euphemism for spending huge amounts of money. One of Kursty's clients found their solutions for less than £1,000 by being clever in their strategy and getting most of what additional furniture they needed from Ikea.

With the basics set and decision-makers' open minds, Kursty then promotes a holistic approach, in regards to the people using it.

## **Putting people first**

'80-90% of the work that I'm doing is helping the organisation to put people more at the centre of the actual process of consultation: understanding what the needs are, co-defining what the new environment needs to be, and making sure it works.

'It isn't making people design their own spaces, it's about giving people a voice. Thinking about how people work, as opposed to making assumptions. When you're trying to envisage a new way of working or make a step-change from the now to the next then you need to understand the way people work now, but there is also a creative leap that needs to happen: that could come from the people themselves — the core team, or somebody externally. The more you can involve people in the process, the better.' That earlier study, outlining 17% productivity increase in enriched spaces? It jumps to 32% when people are involved in designing their own space.

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In places where staff are told the 'exciting news' that the desk to which they are wedded is being replaced with a hot desk 'pod' it's easy to imagine unsettled mumblings from the workforce. The thing is, as Kursty notes, 'it's not that people don't like change. It's that they don't like what they don't

understand.’ So, don’t put a slide in because Google did, really think about what you’re trying to achieve.

Often, businesses think that offering flexible working is the only move they need to make, but it’s more complicated than that. Kursty says that you need to gather insights in both quantitative and qualitative data in order to find the best opportunities for how your company dynamic can improve. With people contributing to the process they can also more readily — and importantly — be inspired by the vision, anchoring it into the company’s identity.

*“If your company is about efficiency and trust, and you put a slide in, it will jar. If it’s about efficiency and fun, a slide might be perfect.”*

## **Define your readiness to improve**

What really impresses Kursty is when companies are aware of the impact of physical space, and how it charts their business. When they see how it brings their values to life. As she puts it, ‘Hearing a brand as you walk through a space.’

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And it’s an end-to-end process. The main mistakes Kursty sees are borne from companies failing to spend time thinking about what they want to achieve. They go only so far to innovate, without looking at every angle. Kursty recommends an antidote of being both ‘ambitious and realistic.’ Who uses the space, what for, what type of creative thinking are you trying to encourage, what company vision are you trying to engender, how are you going to incorporate team insights and how are you going to inspire support in your workforce, thus ‘managing the behavioural change journey’?

## **Behind the scenes of a Space Coach: how does Kursty work and where?**

Waking up at 4.30am on a busy workday, and 5am as standard (!), Kursty starts her day with meditation and stretches before doing a couple of hours of deep work, relishing in the quiet time whilst most are waking up. After spending an hour with her family and sometimes then popping to the gym, she'll head to [The Curtain](#) to connect with her team, manage projects and plan in the members' club's Design Studio. Lunch meetings are then held in the Lido Bar in the summer, or they will be brainstorming sessions in the boardroom. She'll take her calls in the afternoon. Certainly there's a nomadism to Kursty's creative working, even if in one versatile site.

This way of working, lead by autonomous decisions around how best Kursty works, where, and when, how it's beneficial for her and her [Shape Work Life](#) team, is effective: Kursty's written two books and her clients include Silicone Valley tech giants.

## **Detox your space**

Are there starter points for you to think about here, for your company? Perhaps you still don't believe that the impact of space is as important as all this (perhaps you need improved space more than most: has your environment dulled your radar for potential?). Kursty gives a word of caution: 'as Adam Smith talked about the division of labor reducing people to increasingly specialist tasks', so, narrowing their specialism and, so, potential, then you risk losing their enthusiasm for the task. 'People have a helluva lot to give and they can go above and beyond at work. If you reduce them down, however, and, here, through the space they're using, then your relationship with them will become transactional.' Not a petri dish for innovation.

Without considered thinking around your office space, then you'll be sliding down the scale of good workplace culture. Remember: slides aren't always a good thing.

To learn more about Kursty Groves, and the work her company does, visit [Shape Work Life](#).