



Human  
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# THE TECH LAB

CONCEIVED AND  
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EMCOR<sup>UK</sup>

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***Hack • table***

[noun]

A combination of a round-table discussion and a hackathon

# INTRODUCTION

A new concept; the Hack-table, combines a traditional round table discussion with a short hackathon. Each Hack-table looks back over the previous 3 months, with the invitees discussing topics that cause work-life issues, generate interest, and build intrigue in the work within the workplace.

Starting off the session, the lucky invitees introduce themselves, their working roles, and their beliefs on what makes a workplace great. This is a true meeting of minds from the world of workplace, covering occupiers, design, freelancers, FM, workplace strategy, furniture, relocation, and proptech.

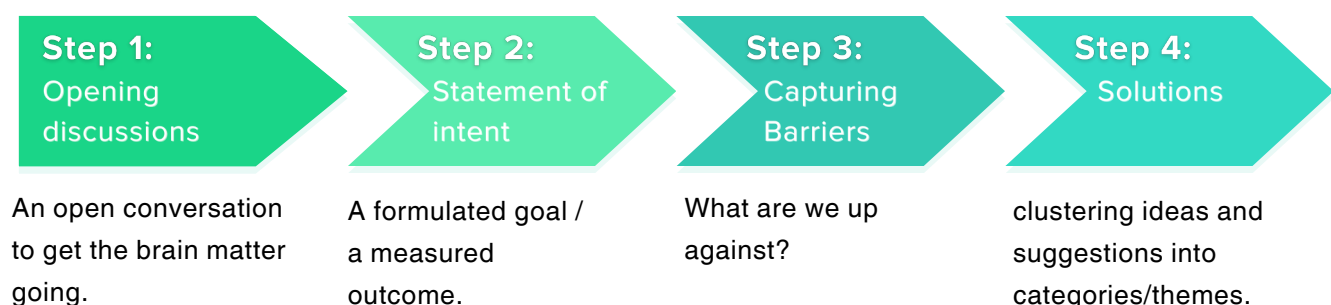
## INTENT

These sessions aim to take problem statements and "hack" a solution from various lenses – to find solutions together and show the power of communication, transparency, and diverse thinking. With this approach, we aim to break down siloes and drive the workplace conversation forward.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Explore a critical issue or new opportunity.
- Be energetic, creative, and collaborative.
- Have a conducive environment.
- Believe in yourselves and the process.
- Be bold, hold your nerve, and have determination.
- Chatham house rules – throughout this write-up identities and stories have been protected.

## THE PROCESS





## THE 'TABLE'

To get started, we discussed topics the group felt had impacted the structure and conversations in the workplace since the start of 2023. This disconnect between thought and beliefs across groups became a theme throughout the session.

Here are some key points:

1. **Click Bait:** Many organisations confidently talk about how important the workplace experience and well-being is, and yet, behind the scenes, they rarely practice what they preach.
2. **Communication:** Organisations say one thing but mean another. Often, they might not even know what they mean because they lack a common language and have too many departmental siloes.
3. **Collaboration:** The biggest risk to the future of the office experience is the assumption that we all must design for collaboration - remember that many people still require focus spaces in the office as well as everywhere else.
4. **Data:** Emotions continue to drive behaviour and decision-making, rather than quality data. Emotions are important and certainly shouldn't be ignored, but they should be understood through the use of data.
5. **Mentoring:** The group has a shared concern for the inclusion of young people coming into the workforce. There's a lack of role models, situational coaching, and mentorship.
6. **Expectations:** When designing a space, it's important to consider new generations entering with already-established ideas of how they want to work. It's often the younger team members who want to go work in person, so consider the social aspect of the office; the community, and belonging.
7. **The Pinterest Effect:** Too many organisations focus on 'sexy' furniture solutions, hoping to engineer culture and serendipity through scenery and settings – by its nature, serendipity cannot be engineered.
8. **Stakeholders:** There's a disconnect between what the employer wants and what the employee *needs*, causing confusion, frustration, and mistrust. Designers seem to dislike FM – but why? They create spaces that FM will have to manage. Engagement with the end managers is as important as engaging with the end users.
9. **Evolution:** We should always be rethinking the workplace; all the time. We shouldn't be looking for an end state.
10. The housing crisis is **financial**, the workplace crisis is **existential**.

# LET'S DISCUSS

## "Return to the office"

- The impact that the global pandemic has had on the world of work makes itself known in almost all aspects of the workplace: from the increase in remote and hybrid work that has created a 'new normal' and caused a shift in culture, to the heightened focus on collaborative office strategy and design that organisations hope will get people back in the office.
- The most prominent discussion here relates to how organisations can make the office *worth* coming back to – after 2 years of remote work, have workers not earned the right to work from home? And what are the impacts of doing so? What is the purpose of the office?
- Remote and hybrid work has turned out to be a viable way of working for many – of course, some people did in fact work this way even before the pandemic – but does that mean it's definitively The Future of Work and worth all the noise it's creating?
- Companies are struggling with low occupancy in large, expensive offices.
- Spontaneous connection is affecting how relationships are built.
- The back-to-back Teams calls are building a sense of transactional culture.
- Current technology supports virtual collaboration, but it was not specifically created to facilitate connection and belonging across a remote workforce.
- Fact is, we are still to see what a truly hybrid working world may look like.
- Companies are stuck at a standstill, waiting for someone to make the first move on what the future will look like.
- It's important to consider the whole picture for why organisations may want workers back on site. Low office occupancy isn't a good enough reason, neither is the fact that a CEO may prefer to be able to tap somebody on the shoulder.
- The cost of living has increased dramatically, it's hardly a surprise that an individual may want to work remotely if it means saving on transportation, parking, food, and even childcare.
- Organisations 'just' want to get the right people together at the right time.
- Humans are indeed social creatures, but no one can be social all the time – this includes at work. You can design open spaces with hot desks and plan a schedule to promote interaction, but that doesn't mean people will constantly collaborate and innovate – people also need time to just sit down and do their work. Most people need some form of private space, and for some, a lack thereof can impact both mental health and productivity.
- How can we "be" with other people in a space now after years of sitting at home alone, talking through a screen?

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**Ideally, workers should be *invited* back, *not* forced.**

# LET'S DISCUSS

## "Office design"

- You can't do an effective office design without first looking at **culture**. Too often, you see people asking for concepts and designs that they've seen somewhere else without truly considering how those things will fit into the local work culture.
- Design shouldn't just be about how things look, it should be about what people and the organisation need, which is why it's important to collect data to identify exactly what these needs are and how to meet them. While people may tick a box on a survey, they might express something different in an interview.
- The golden triangle of data to be considered:
  - **Desires:** Surveys, what people say.
  - **Intentions:** What's in people's calendars, what rooms are booked etc.
  - **Behaviours:** Sensors, access control, check-ins etc.
- Cookie cutters aren't helpful. If organisations hire experts to simply carry out pre-determined tasks i.e. a survey, the resulting space will never be ideal. It's also a fast way to give workers survey fatigue, answering one survey after the other without seeing significant change.
- The process of designing a workspace includes far too many siloed processes. There is a disconnect between landlords and investors, employers and employees, developers and designers – without clear communication and a proper strategy that allows everyone to use their expertise, the process can quickly lose focus and people might even compete against each other.
- Workplace culture is established from the top – leadership should stand in front and lead by example, but how do you "lead from the front" in a virtual world where people can't always see you?
- If hybrid is truly the future, leadership needs to be rethought. The big question here is; what do you think keeps people at your workplace? Is it the nice plants, the open kitchen, and the cool furniture, or is it the **culture**, the **people**, and their **connections**?

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**Office design alone will not get people back into an office.**



## TIME TO HACK!

After covering many interesting points and common issues in the workplace, the group's next challenge was to identify common themes from our roundtable discussion and choose one or two to focus on for the hack.

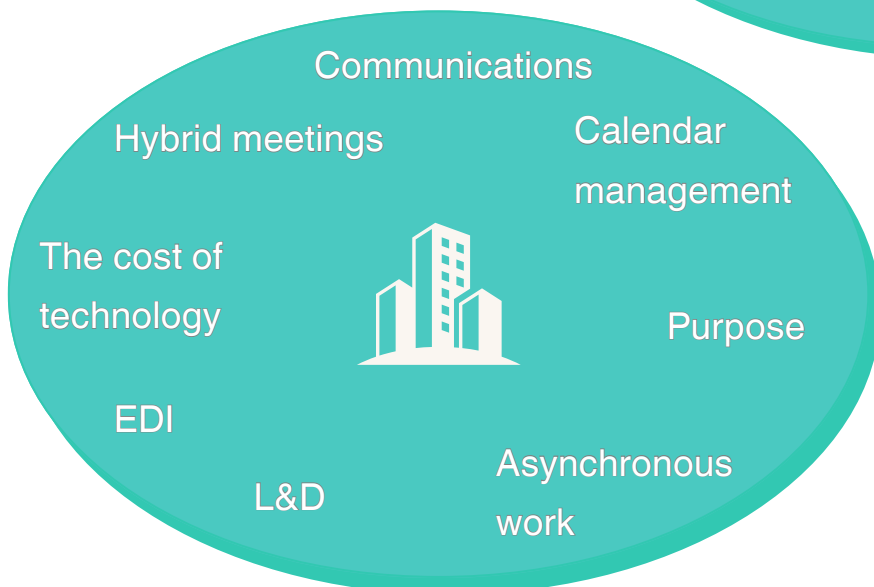
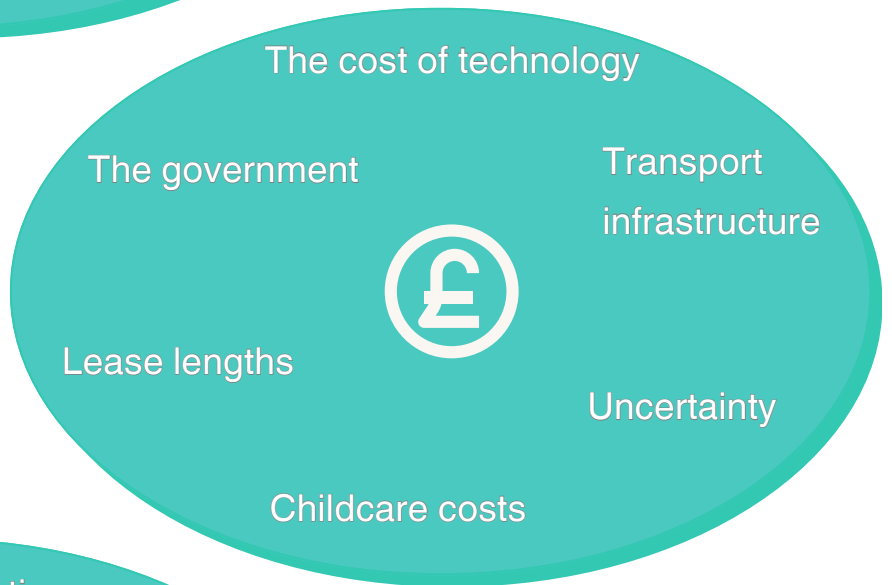
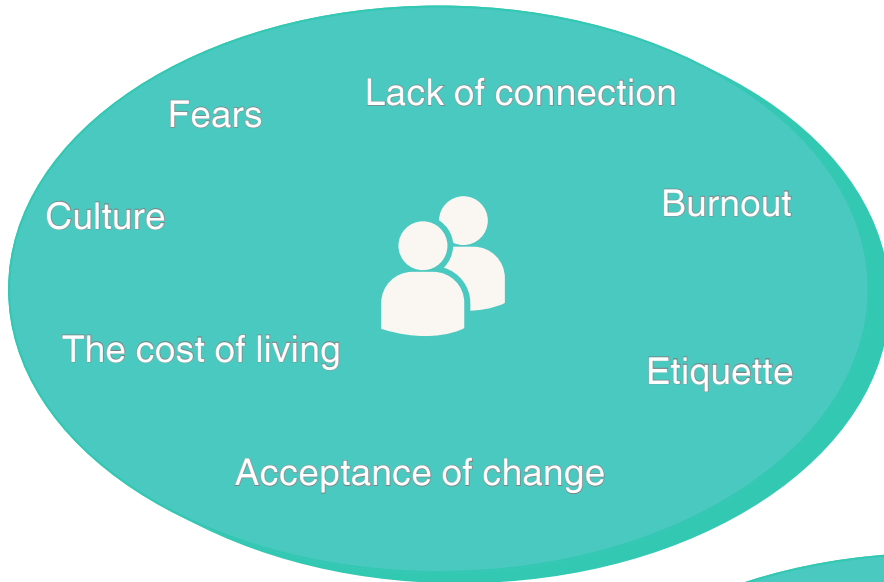
While it would be nice to "hack" the solution for each and every common issue, it's important to try and limit the scope to keep discussions more focused.

## THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

*"What do we want, need, and expect from work; what part does the office play in that, and how do we reimagine the perfect route to transformation?"*

# 3 BARRIERS

What issues are we facing when trying to come up with solutions? What are the things holding us back from making decisions and implementing the necessary changes?





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# IDEAS AND SUGGESTIONS

Finding a simple "hack" to solve everything is simply not possible. But here are the key ideas and suggestions that came out of this session:



## TRANSPARENCY

- In all internal and external communications: tell people *truly* why you want them back at the office. "Because the CEO said so" is better than a lie.
- Feedback loops: listen to employees, allow them to feed back on what works and what doesn't.
- Meeting agendas: allow people to properly prepare and determine whether meetings are relevant to them.
- Forget furniture for a moment and just ask clients "what do you WANT from the space?"

## TRAINING

- Help people get back in the swing of things – show them the channels they need to interact and collaborate within the culture of the workplace.
- Prioritise teaching people how to use the necessary tools.
- Teach Teams / Zoom etiquette and how to manage remote working.

## SUPPORT FOR PARENTS TO GET BACK TO WORK

- Parents lack support from the government to get back to work, which is why it's important for organisations to consider how they may be able to help – if parents are forced to stay home or to not work at all, that will be a large talent pool lost.
- Offering childcare support during school holidays is a good start.

## CONSIDERATION FOR CULTURE AND FUNCTION

- Rather than picking from a catalogue because it looks nice, put in the time to get to know the culture and what people need. This cuts out the extra time that would be needed afterward to re-evaluate solutions that were implemented without such considerations.
- Occupancy ≠ productivity: even before the pandemic, most offices did not have 100% occupancy. Make sure to look at the whole picture.

## CITIZENSHIP

- Consider that maybe, what is good for *ME* may not be good for the company (whether that is a CEO wanting everyone back in the office, or a manager who wants to stay completely remote).

# CONCLUSIONS

## Summary and key takeaways

This hack landed on Culture and Leadership and was quick in identifying where improvements for People, Performance, and Productiveness could be achieved.

Picking up on recent issues around the cost-of-living crisis, we zoomed in on the loss of talent due to the cost of childcare and the lack of support / understanding available to parents returning to the workplace.

The call here was to fill in the gaps left in the current system by developing organisational led childcare support, helping people by providing a realistic choice for both employers and employees to work, whilst raising a future generation; a progressive culture that combines being a great parent with being a great employee - it doesn't need to be a binary choice of one or the other.

This discussion led onto changes and differences in how we communicate with each other - how do we explain our wants and needs effectively, especially after so much time spent physically apart. Our concern landed on how 'hybrid working' specifically affects our choices when organising meetings. The group expressed concern that the art of effective communication has been diminished after the sudden need for WFH and putting everything online, with many still opting to organise online meetings several days / weeks into the future, rather than just picking up the phone. Diary management and being able to see when others are free removed the spontaneity of talking to others. The group felt that this has a detrimental effect on driving performance and productiveness at pace.

**\*Synchronous = immediately send / request information with the expectation of it being read and replied to immediately.**

**\*Asynchronous = send / request information with expectation of it being read / provided at the receivers' convenience.**

We started to touch on the fact that simply being a good citizen could resolve a lot of the challenges discussed. But with the day running out, and the conversation already going over our allotted end by 20 minutes, this was where our first Hack-table had to end.

We learned a lot and the conversation and passion displayed by those invited was truly inspiring.

We'll be coming back again in 3 months-time for another Human Tech Lab **Hack-table** where we'll discuss what's been happening in the Q2 of 2023.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the attendees of session one for brilliant insights and ideas - the passion we experienced was amazing and a truly great start to these sessions. For those interested in topics similar to what we have discussed here, we have included the group's recommendations on the following page.

Finally, thank *you* for reading.

Simone and Ian

# ATTENDEES

**Esme Banks Marr** - BVN Architecture

**Jaya Varsani** - Workplace Change

**Kellie Lord-Thomas** - Amnesty International

**Rachel Houghton** - Business Moves Group

**Steve Bow** - Flexiform

*“We’ll go down in history as the first society that wouldn’t save itself because it wasn’t cost-effective”*

Kurt Vonnegut

# RECOMMENDATIONS



**Working It**  
Financial Times

**SHAPE your Work**  
Simone Fenton-Jarvis (Vpod) and  
Ali Khan (SHAPE)

**Workplace geeks**  
Chris Moriarty and Ian Ellison of Audiem



**The Human-Centric Workplace**  
Book by Simone Fenton-Jarvis

**Leisure**  
Poem by W. H. Davies

**Citizens: Why the Key to Fixing  
Everything is All of Us**  
Book by Jon Alexander

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CONCEIVED AND CURATED BY:  
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WITH THANKS TO OUR ATTENDEES FOR YOUR TIME,  
HONESTY AND AMAZING INSIGHTS.