Human
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THE TECH LAB

EMCOR UK x Vpod

CONCEIVED AND
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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. For our second hacktable, we had attendees working with DEI, coaching, recruitment, and IT.
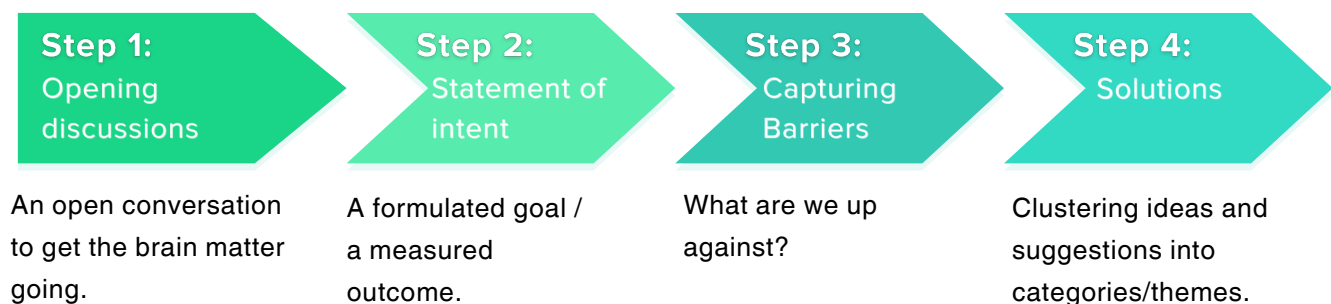
INTENT

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

Step 1:
Opening discussions

Step 2:
Statement of intent

Step 3:
Capturing Barriers

Step 4:
Solutions

An open conversation to get the brain matter going.

A formulated goal / a measured outcome.

What are we up against?

Clustering ideas and suggestions into categories/themes.

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THE 'TABLE'

This time around, the session was conducted online, fitting the topic of discussion quite well. With this group especially, the conversation quickly fell on DEI (Diversity, Equity & Inclusivity), accessibility, and the inclusivity that remote work offers.

Here are some key points:

1. **"Can't" or "won't"?** It is always POSSIBLE to accommodate people - the resources are out there and their effectiveness is proven - you just have to want to; employers have to care.

2. **Energy**: If you don't know what does and doesn't energise you, then you'll be stuck in unproductive patterns.

3. **Pro-remote**: Having to get expensive train tickets or go through a long commute for a single meeting that could have easily been done online is old-fashioned and impractical for everyone.

4. **Con remote**: It's a lot easier to cancel a Teams meeting last minute than an actual in-person meeting. You might already have transportation sorted and you know other people have likely done the same, whereas a Teams meeting feels like less commitment.

5. **Building**: If the physical office isn't working out, look at the building itself before blaming workers.

6. **Skills**: Great people managers will thrive no matter where the team is based.

LET'S DISCUSS
"Hybrid inclusivity"

- A lot of people have been barred from many careers because of the demand to be onsite; a commute to the office can be a big hurdle for many people, and the conversation here especially examined the impact for disabled people, who might be excluded from spaces that cannot / will not accommodate their needs.

- E.g., for a wheelchair user to have equal access to the office, the building needs ramps, a proper-sized desk, and elevators operating at all times. Additionally, people might struggle in the office due to mental health or fear of discrimination.

- The shift to hybrid has resulted in a positive impact for DEI.

- How do you create an environment where people can thrive? When they can bring their whole selves to work, which is a lot easier when they have full control of their physical environment.

- There is no one-size-fits-all ideal work structure or method. Hybrid and remote work promotes different working ideals and work-life balance where previously excluded individuals can have careers on more equal footing.

- Top performers overwhelmingly work for companies that offer the most privacy, control over their environment, and freedom from interruption.

- The simplest way to find out what works for people is to ask: "how do you work best?"

"Pre-pandemic ideals"

- Covid had a large impact on people getting comfortable with working from home and proving that this type of work structure can function; yet, many companies these days want to return to the office.

- While hybrid does have its drawbacks, as discussed in the previous white paper, the insistence on RTO isn't always based on knowledge or needs.

  - **Pre-pandemic working:** things need to be improved.
  - **Pandemic working:** we all work in the same way, trying to find peace in a forced system.
  - **Post-pandemic:** people trying to look at how things should be in the future. Some seem stuck with the idea that everyone needs to be back in the office. Others realise that remote can work very well.

- Organisations want to know: "How do we create that parity now that everyone is working differently again?"

- People in leadership might believe that the culture was better pre-pandemic. Instead of staying up to date with tech and improvements, they prefer to stick to what they know.

- For some managers, being face-to-face with employees is the only managing style they know, and they are either scared or unwilling to experiment with their structure to accommodate their employees.

1 **People thrive when they have space to be themselves.**

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LET'S DISCUSS
"Buildings and culture"

- The idea that "we shape the building around us, and the building shapes us" seems logical, but when people aren't consistently in the same place anymore, how can it still be true?

- During the pandemic, companies had no choice but to speed up the adoption of certain technologies, thereby promoting rapid improvement for work tech at large. Along with workspaces changing, work culture was flipped around and, in some cases, ended up rather confusing.

- How can we create culture without a shared space?

- Having that space is an opportunity to establish the foundation of company culture – we get to know each other more directly; we get more context, and communication in the office is immediate.

- It's difficult to create culture from screen interaction alone, but that doesn't mean that remote workers can't participate at all.

- Some companies use "employee passports" as a fun and inclusive way to get to know each other. This gives everyone a chance to share what they want to share with the workplace, and the opportunity to request accommodations that might help them.

- If employees encounter obstacles that prevent them from performing at their best, it's in everybody's best interest for them to speak out. Vulnerability opens up to trust, and failure is how we learn. Bringing attention to the problem enables the business to find a solution.

- There are certain building standards that need to be met, but sometimes, even these aren't fit for purpose.

  - If a wheelchair user works on the 4th floor in a building where the only disability toilet is located on the 1st floor, going to the bathroom becomes a whole journey. On busy days with back-to-back meetings, how is this person supposed to make it all the way there and back in time?

  - Gender-neutral bathrooms are a very simple accommodation for many LGBT+ individuals; however, it also benefits others. Some disabled people require assistance from a PA when going to the bathroom. If all toilets in the building are gendered, this causes issues in cases where the PA and the disabled employee do not identify with the same gender.

- Implementing accommodations for just one person can help several people in the process.

1 **Everyone has challenges, but if the main challenge for productivity is the building itself, then that needs to be changed.**

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LET'S DISCUSS
"The cost of inclusivity"

- The dominating point of discussion when it comes to DEI sadly seems to be money.

- A lot of organisations still look at inclusivity measures thinking it's too expensive to support disabled employees, when that isn't the case.

- Society has put up these barriers through a standard that everybody should adhere to, even though only few people can do so comfortably.

- Some companies want senior directors to have their own office and give all employees a private desk simply because they have an allocated budget to spend. In these cases, if DEI is considered at all, it'll be implemented to tick boxes without proper consideration. This tells employees that the company doesn't care to prioritise useful accommodations.

- More often than not, the "box ticking" solutions are insufficient, costing much more than if the right people had been consulted in the first place.

- How come workers aren't engaged? Without thinking about the people who use the office, there will be no desire to be there or engage in the culture. Lack of culture makes the company less attractive; employee engagement will decrease, productivity will fall – all impacting the bottom line.

- The building itself represents a small part of the organisational expenses – usually around 10%. Saving on that 10% tells employees and prospects that the business won't invest in the other 90%, which is the people.

- There are programs in place for providing disabled employees with "reasonable adjustments"; however, it can take months, and some workplaces are not willing to wait. A good manager who understands the impact of employees not having what they need will say "it's coming out of our budget right now, but we will get it back from Access To Work once the application goes through".

- Companies will experiment with product and offerings to no end, trying to make profit, but there seems to be a reluctance to experiment with people.

- All businesses have human touchpoints, so if we're not focusing on the people, then **how much money is really being lost?** How much more innovation, creativity, and then experimentation with product and offering could we get if we dared experiment and adapt to the people?

- If companies only focus on money, they're not prioritising productivity or any other human-centricity.

- Just because it isn't immediately measurable in profit, does not mean it's not worth doing.

1 **If you help people make things work, the money will come.**

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TIME TO HACK!

After covering several perspectives on inclusivity at 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.
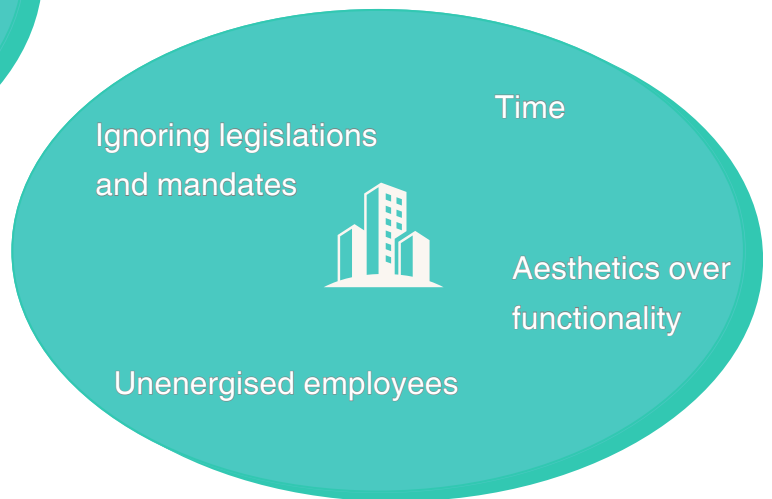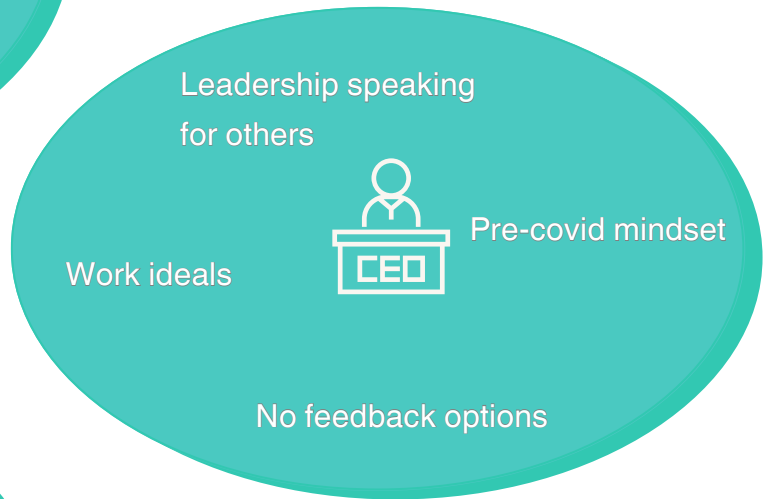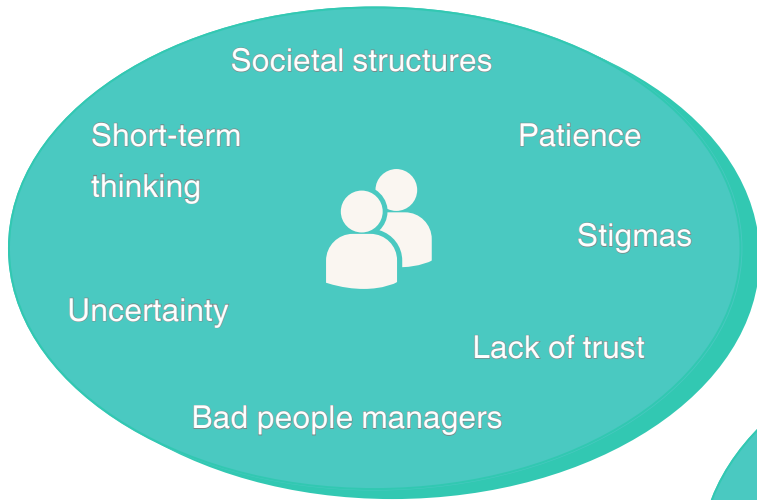
THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

"Inclusive hybrid is good for everybody; how do we move past tick boxes and legislation to focus on change for the better?"

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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?

Lack of experimentation - Lack of awareness - Budgeting - Lack of representation - Lack of care

Societal structures

Short-term thinking

Patience

Stigmas

Uncertainty

Lack of trust

Bad people managers

Leadership speaking for others

Pre-covid mindset

Work ideals

No feedback options

Workplace adjustments = unnecessary costs

Disregarding positive impact

Lack of creativity

Tenders

Aid as the first thing to save money on

Ignoring legislations and mandates

Time

Aesthetics over functionality

Unenergised employees

4 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:

360 FEEDBACK

- Implement feedback loops.
  - Engage in dialogues with employees.
  - "What needs do you have?"

- If managers are open to conversation, they will foster more support and trust. This will also help identify the bad managers who don't adapt and hold the company back.

COACHING

- Leadership training.
  - Teach managers how to do their job remotely.

- Strategy – clarity – vision

- Seeing DEI as more than just "tickboxes".

- Self-awareness - knowing when to ask for a more qualified opinion.

- Learning how to use tech effectively to work alongside design.

EXPERIMENT WITH PEOPLE

- Devolve decision-making.

- Daily / weekly update meetings for hybrid workers.
  - Can be just 10-minute pockets to touch base with everyone and give that sense of togetherness.
  - In-person AND remote can function side-by-side.

- Don't micro-manage: in a trusting and empathetic culture, employees have a better chance of understanding what type of work energises them.
  - GC index – people doing what energises and drives them.

UNDERSTANDING MANDATES

- Mandates help to:
  - Drive parity.
  - Understand well-being.
  - Support human-centricity.

- Seek out lived experiences.

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CONCLUSIONS
Summary and key takeaways

This hack landed on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and improvements were shared from experience, especially for Leadership, Awareness, and Processes.

Many companies want to return to the office without consideration for whom they exclude. We talked about how *good* managers can manage people from anywhere, while *bad* managers don't know how to manage a de-centralised workforce. Or perhaps, the time it takes to make the proper structures is too daunting, preventing them from even attempting.

The traditional work ideal needs to be re-defined, because many marginalised people have social obstacles that prevent them from living up to the CEO's 80-hour work weeks. However, this does not mean that minorities or marginalised people are not valuable employees.

The amount of talent lost due to social, physical, or mental issues, with the many options for workplaces to improve, is counter-productive. Neglecting DEI has greater risks of losses from missed opportunities and creativity in the long run, than simply spending the money it takes to set up helpful accommodations to start with.

The solution is to provide proper coaching that promotes better awareness of inclusivity measures - including schemes like Access To Work. Additionally, it's important to empower employees to give feedback - if people can't speak about their experience and no representative is consulted, you get insufficient solutions. Managers need to know if things aren't working; otherwise, how can it change? And once they know, they need to be able to take action.

Buildings are not what attracts talent, people and culture are, and part of that is showing care for employees - allowing them to reach their potential, even if that means working at home. If the budget is spent on swanky offices while disabled people are told they are "too expensive", you are sacrificing the *human* part of work.

The idea that facilities alone dictate culture, and that physical proximity improves efficiency, prevents companies from adapting. Culture is surely not to be neglected, but things such as employee passports or simply asking employees what they would like to change can still create a strong and, most of all, inclusive culture, even for people working outside of the office.

In the end, it became clear that the main conclusion that we've been circling from the start is that businesses need to care more. We need better awareness of what non-inclusivity causes - not just in the workplace, but in society at large.

We'll continue the discussion on workplace transformation, and, in a few months, we'll be back again with another **hacktable**.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the attendees of session two for your great insights and expertise. This was a wonderful experience, proving that online really can *work*, and we are so proud to share these important points on DEI with the industry.

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

Luis Canto E. Castro - D&I Consultant at Mildon

Gillian Hardy - Coach and Mentor

Michelle Carr - Lead Creative at Habitaction

> *"Inclusion is not a matter of political correctness.*
> *It is the key to growth."*
>
> Jesse Jackson (Activist)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Podcasts

V-podcast
Vpod Solutions
hosted by Simone Fenton-Jarvis

Talking inclusion with...
By Inclusive Employers

reWorked: The Workplace Inclusion Podcast

By EW Group

Reading

Belonging: The Key to Transforming and Maintaining Diversity, Inclusion and Equality at Work

Book by Kathryn Jacob, Sue Unerman and Mark Edwards

The Human Equity Advantage: Beyond Diversity to Talent Optimization

Book by Trevor Wilson

I Am Diversity, Please Include Me

Poem by Charles Bennafield

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WITH THANKS TO OUR ATTENDEES FOR YOUR TIME, HONESTY AND AMAZING INSIGHTS.

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HUMAN TECH LAB WHITE PAPERS

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?

The attendees of our April 2023 hacktable spanned occupiers, design, freelancers, FM, workplace strategy, furniture, relocation, and proptech.

We discussed the complexities of workplace design and the realities of what needs to be considered when companies want to attract people back to the office.

Click here to read.
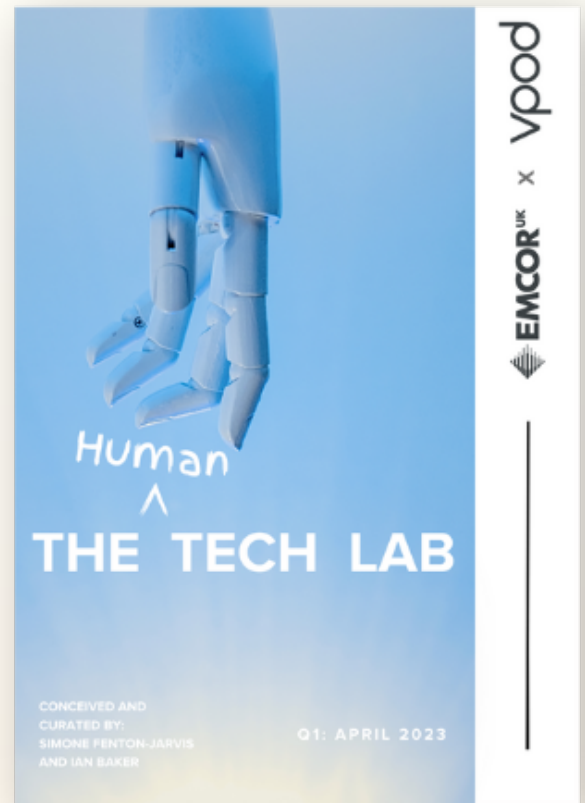
If you like the concept of the Hacktable, have any ideas, or would like to be considered as a future invitee, please contact either Ian or Simone.

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