Mervyn Dinnen 0:06

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Mervyn Dinnen 1:09

On today's episode of The HR Means Business podcast, my guest is Isobel Elton, founder of the Consultancy the Future of the Office. There's so much narrative about how, when, and where people work, but I find very little narrative on designing workspaces where people want to be. This pretty much is what Isabel's business does, and it's a place where innovation, inclusion, and human potential can thrive. Isabelle, welcome to the HR Means Business podcast. Would you like to introduce yourself and the Consultancy the Future of the Office?

Isobel Elton 1:45

Absolutely delighted to be talking to you about the office and the future role of the office. My name is Isobel Elton. My background is in business strategy, in fact, predominantly working with high growth tech firms. Over the years, I had the privilege of working with a variety of organizations, helping them to achieve ambitious goals and growth objectives. What I came to realize is that the workplace is far more than just a physical space. It's a part of that growth journey and getting the right environment and creating that right environment where people can truly be the best version of themselves, and it has enabled businesses to go further in achieving those growth goals and really unleash the power of of the humans that work for them.

Mervyn Dinnen 2:46

So what I mean, in your view, what should a good workplace look like and feel like?

Isobel Elton 2:53

I think before you look at what a workplace should look like, I think what, what I tend to do is, look at the organization itself. Look at the organization's goals. Where is it trying to go? What's it trying to do, and what role would the office play in that growth journey? Then from there, we look at the people and how those people prefer to work. What are their what are the things that make a workplace good for them? And then you design the space based on that. So of course, in today's workplace, what we're looking at is balance. So it's not just a room full of rows of desks and chairs and computers and so on. But it's it provides spaces for collaboration. It provides different quiet zones for deep focus, for example, safe zones where you can can rest and reflect, then looking at the environment itself, things like natural light, greenery, bringing nature into the environment, creating that connection with with nature makes a huge, a world of difference to creating these uplifting and human centric environments.

Mervyn Dinnen 4:17

Now we can't really have a talk about workspaces and offices without mentioning the, I suppose the elephant in the room, RTO mandates, which seems to be all the dialog about where and how we work, seems to focus on RTO mandates. And kind of are they right? Are they wrong? Should it be choice and things like that. How, how can you, or how do you help clients to use, I suppose, not an RTO mandate, but a desire to get people back into a central location. How do you use that as a catalyst for, like, a rethink of the workspace?

Isobel Elton 4:52

Yeah, I think the pandemic was a massive experiment in trust. It showed us that when you trust people, even in very difficult circumstances, they can actually achieve an awful lot and return to office mandates can often feel like an attack on that trust itself, and that can be detrimental to all kinds of things, from engagement to productivity to retention and so on. So rather than forcing people back into a space, almost back into a way of working that is now passed, I think the return to office is an opportunity to rethink what a workplace can be and what role that workplace will play in your business. So I think creating spaces that people want to return to is key you've got to have at the back of your mind. This has got to be better than working from home. This is something that is going to be purposeful and is going to support people in the work that they do. In essence, I think the office should be a destination, not an obligation. So it's about fostering collaboration, sparking creativity, supporting well being. It was, as I mentioned, hybrid work has shown us how much people value flexibility, so why not design workplaces that complement remote work, rather than competing with it?

Mervyn Dinnen 6:31

And how can we, how can we create workspaces that appeal to all generations, would you say, and all levels of experience, kind of trainees onwards?

Isobel Elton 6:41

Well, I think the first thing to do is to listen and listen to the people who are going to work in that space. Each generation has its own unique needs and perspectives, and it's vital that we design spaces that reflect that diversity. Taking an example, younger generations might prefer tech enabled flexible spaces, while more experienced employees might prioritize quiet areas for focus or spaces that encourage mentorship. When we when we're looking at Designing Spaces for for a multitude of generations, it's important to to think about the accessibility needs for people across those generations. So you might find all your older members of staff have a more sensitive to lighting conditions. So getting the lighting correct, getting the acoustics right, is another important environment, but I think it's it's creating a an environment that has multiple that supports multiple ways of working, multiple preferences and and is adaptable as the the dynamic of the workforce continues to shift.

Mervyn Dinnen 8:01

When people approach you and you have, I suppose, your first discussions with them, what is the I suppose, what is the approach that you take? Is it? Does it start from understanding the nature of the work that needs to be done? Does it start from understanding the kind of people they have, the internal relationships they have, whether people want to be in a location full time, whether they want to part time, maybe work from their home, and then work from a fixed, fixed location. How does it start? I suppose the methodology?

Isobel Elton 8:34

I think sometimes we say we start in a different place, so we I think the way I best describe it is, we take the lid off the company. So what is the company all about? Where is it in its journey? What is it trying to achieve? What kind of company does it want to be? And then, yeah, as you say, looking at the goals of the of the company in terms of its office. You know, why do we want people to be in this office? What do we want them to do when they're here, looking at the people themselves, talking to the people themselves, understanding their preferences? You know, even things as simple as, where is an office going to be located? You know, you come across firms who say, Oh, yeah, it's here because the CEO comes into this station and want what needed to be convenient for the CEO. Yeah, it's probably, probably not the best way of looking at it you know? What are all the people doing? Where are they coming from? Where do they need to be? What happens in the rest of their lives? You know, actually, the most interesting people to talk with are the ones who sit in the corner, who don't necessarily come to the table first, but probably have been in the organization awhile; they've got some some interesting insights. You go and go and talk to the person who doesn't, doesn't stand up first, and you'll find all kinds of interesting things that will help in deciding what a modern workplace should look like and how it should perform.

Mervyn Dinnen 10:19

And is there a I suppose, depending on the different business sectors, are there kind of, in your experience from advising organizations, are there very different kind of spaces so that maybe one organization will have two or three very different spaces for its people, because people are doing different things?

Isobel Elton 10:40

Oh, yeah, absolutely. And that's how it how it should be. It's not the offices, and certainly no longer a one size fits all. We have different teams who work in different ways. Of course, you know, make make the space for that team work for them. You might have a product team, for example, who are working with physical products. Maybe they have to put things through tests. Maybe they have to showcase those products, creating an environment where they can work with with those, whether they be components, whether they be products, whether they creating a space that enables those people to work in the best possible way, adds a lot of value to them across industries. You know, we see, you know, we often talk about tech industries, of course, being and being at the forefront of the future of work. But many other industries are also looking at, how do they work going forward the law in legal industry, for example, law firms who have worked in a very traditional way, probably for almost hundreds of years, but you look at the up and coming lawyers, the up and the law students who are studying today, they're not looking for the wood paneled officers with book cases lined with books. They've got every legal case available to them at the touch of a button. That's not what they need today. And I think, you know, helping firms through that journey of what does, what does an office need to be for us going forward is, is, you know, and that's, that's, I suppose, the the bread and butter of that strategy work.

Mervyn Dinnen 12:39

And when you're consulting with organizations as to I suppose the best design is it very much a generational thing, because obviously, from you know, the example you've just given, rings true with me. I I've probably said on previous podcasts here, I started life in professional services. I trained as an accountant once upon a time, many moons ago, and there were obviously very, very structured offices in the work we did and everything, whereas I can imagine nowadays that it's a totally different kind of environment.

Isobel Elton 13:15

Yeah, well, I think the world of work has certainly changed a lot over the last even over the last 10 years. And of course, the office has to keep up with that and almost surpass where we are. So so, yeah, I think that there is a, there's certainly a changing dynamic. I don't think it's necessarily purely generational. You know, there are a lot of older people who who've been in work a long time, but see the benefits of working in a new way, collaborating in a new way, exchanging knowledge in a new way, and but it's keeping the office alive, keeping the office at the forefront of these changing work, work dynamic. And, you know, stay, staying ahead of the future of work.

Mervyn Dinnen 14:13

Yes, the I was reading about the concept of a workspace as more of a private club kind of thing where, obviously, you've got many different rooms in which different things happen, is that, is that something you find companies wanting to to mirror?

Isobel Elton 14:31

Yeah, well, I absolutely love the idea to start. I think, you know, the private club has a sense of exclusivity. It has a sense of belonging. It has a sense of purpose. You know, I'm a member of this club, and I associate with that membership, and doing that with the workplace, or even the company, you know, the company itself ends up with this sense of belonging. And you're creating this you. This sense of being together, all working together for towards one common goal, whatever that may be, it creates an environment. It creates a sense of a place where people feel valued, feel valued. It becomes a space where people want to spend time. And then, of course, you know, if we translate that into the workplace, it means designing spaces that are functional but also inspiring, that are tailored to the people who use them. Means things like beautifully designed spaces we talk a lot about hotelification, bringing some of the the design, bringing some of the design features from hotels into the workplace, wellness spaces, spaces to run curated events, bringing people together, making the workplace place really feel special, and a destination that people genuinely look forward to going to and being a part of.

Mervyn Dinnen 16:14

And in terms of, I suppose, neurodiverse employees and workers, what would you say the principles of office design to for an inclusive workforce of, I suppose all neurodiverse gender and ages for example?

Isobel Elton 16:34

I mean, neurodiversity is is fascinating. About 15% of the workforce is neurodiverse, but in some industries, tech, for example, it can be as high as 50, I actually saw a figure recently, 53%. And of course, that unique way of thinking and processing information and creating solutions is highly sought after in the tech industry. So you can see why it makes sense. As I said, with signing any space, it starts with listening to the people who'll use it. Every individual is different, and our environments need to reflect that. Some principles, reducing sensory overload, of course, is key. It means using things like adjustable lighting, both in terms of intensity and temperature, soundproofing and acoustics management is again, absolutely key. You know, you can imagine, if you have people working in an environment with hard floors, glass everywhere, harsh, bright lighting, of course, that can be over stimulating and can be counterproductive. So being being aware of the acoustics and lighting is key also the use of calming colors. So you know, if you would avoid using things like bright reds, bright yellows, which can can be over stimulating for some people, then bringing some some nature into that environment. So biophilia, using plants, using materials like wood, water features can can help as well. And then having a variety of different spaces, so giving people quiet zones where they need to focus, collaborative areas when they need to and want to come together, and having flexible layouts where you can can adapt to whatever work that we're doing today. And when we design in this way, of course, it doesn't only benefit the neurodiverse people. It benefits everyone who works in the space. And I think that's the key. Is designing for everyone, not designing for for the one size fits all, model, which typically becomes one size fits none.

Mervyn Dinnen 19:09

Yeah. No, I get that. I get that. It sounds fascinating, and I think that, as I said at the beginning, there's so much of the narrative around return to specific locations to do work and not enough time spent. You know, how can we encourage people to come back? How can we build spaces people want to come back to? And this sounds like, you know, it's something that I suppose you you can do. When you're I suppose, speaking to a client who says, Look, we need to redesign spaces. Or, you know, where I want to create somewhere where people want to go. What's the kind of process? Is it, you know, understanding the business? Is it understanding the people? Is it understanding the leadership mentality? What does it start with?

Isobel Elton 20:03

So the first thing is, is looking at the business itself. What is this business? What are they trying to do, and where are they trying to go? Looking at the people, of course, is key. You know, we talk a lot about human centric design, and you can only do human centric design if you actually understand the humans who are working in the space to start with. So a lot of engagement. Of course, you know leadership, leadership styles come into into the into the equation. You know, how do you how do you work with your team.

Mervyn Dinnen 20:41

You know, if somebody is listening to this and thinking, we've really got to kind of, you know, we aren't creating spaces people want to go to. We have this issue getting people to come in where they can collaborate and stuff. What? What usually would you say to an organization before, you know, you you start getting involved. What do they need to think about themselves in terms of, kind of, you know, to begin to understand, I suppose, the scale of what, what they need to do?

Isobel Elton 21:12

So if you're asking, if you're starting with, we want people back into the office, the first question is, well, why? You know what, what, what? What do you want them to do when they're there? Are you? Are you asking them to come back because you want to watch what they do, what they do, which you know is, is probably akin to we don't quite trust them. Do you want them in the office because you want them to work together more effectively, okay, do you want them in the office? Because you want to work on culture. Do you want them in the office? You know, to there's many different questions. So I start with asking yourself, you know, why are we doing this? And then, you know, it's then a case of, well, what value do we want to create from that? So, so what is, what are our objectives? And then we start asking, Well, how do we turn the office into a strategic asset? And then, of course, you know, we, we, when engaging with us, we do this exercise of looking at cultural, the culture that's going on. We look at data, you know, how, where, how is the office being used? Where are people coming from? What, you know, what is important in in an office. And then from there we, we, once we've got a good idea of what we're what we're seeking to achieve, we can then start looking at, well, how do we design a space that creates a workplace that is a catalyst to achieving that goal, rather than the workplace being simply a cost some of the pieces that you know, we talked a lot here about workplace design, but I think workplace design goes hand in hand with culture. And obviously, we look a lot at the culture of the organization, and how you build things like trust and transparency and inclusivity into the DNA of the company, and how do you align that across leadership, middle management and employees themselves. So the the culture and the workplace work together to achieve the business goals. It's then, then, not things that you do in isolation. And I think a lot of people haven't necessarily put those pieces together. You know, the workplace is one thing, culture is another, and you have different people looking at each but if you look at the two together, you can get a huge amount of value and really live that culture day to day. I think other things I would add don't just look at aesthetics. It's nice that an office looks nice, but it needs to be purpose driven. It needs to actually achieve something I talked earlier about being an asset and not not simply a cost. So how do you make that happen? What things you need to put in there, in terms of technology and so on. When you're designing offices, you know, don't, don't forget sustainability. You know, there's, it's things like using natural materials, using up cycled materials, using recycled materials, is increasingly important, and it's blending all this together to create this, this environment where humans can achieve the very best that they can achieve themselves. And, you know, we we sometimes talk about the future of work, and the future of work is all about. Out is all about human contribution. It's things that you know, machines can do an awful lot more now than they ever could with with AI and automation and so on. But that human contribution, that creativity, critical thinking, the things that only humans can do is what's going to drive success? That's what drives innovation. That's what drives new products, drives new services, drives customer interactions, and creating an environment physical and cultural that enables that is is absolutely fundamental to business success.

Mervyn Dinnen 25:42

Isobel, it's been a fast, fascinating conversation. If people want to reach out to you, get in touch with you. What's the best way to contact you?

Isobel Elton 25:51

Well, you can go to Future of the office.com, and you can reach us through the website, or you can find me on LinkedIn, you can certainly connect with me and message me there. And yeah, I'd be delighted to talk to anyone who's working on a rethink of the role of the office in their organization for to put it out there. We are primarily focused on the UK, Ireland and Spain, although we have done projects all over the world. So there are offices we've worked on all the way from Melbourne to Toronto and almost everywhere in between. So wherever you are in the world, don't be afraid to reach out.

Mervyn Dinnen 26:38

That sounds global to me. Isobel, thank you so much for your time. It's been a pleasure.

Unknown Speaker 26:45

Thank you, Mervyn, that's absolutely fantastic. I really enjoyed speaking with you today.

Transcribed by https://otter.ai