

The Future of Work podcast is a weekly show where Jacob has in-depth conversations with senior level executives, business leaders, and bestselling authors around the world on the future of work and the future in general. Topics cover everything from AI and automation to the gig economy to big data to the future of learning and everything in between. Each episode explores a new topic and features a special guest.

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Jacob Morgan: Hello, everyone. Welcome to another episode of The Future of Work Podcast. My guest today is Gordon Wright, director of WorkPlace at HOK. Gordon, thanks for joining me.

Gordon Wright: Thank you for having me.

Jacob Morgan: For people that are not familiar with HOK, maybe you can give some background and context around what you guys do, who you are, how big the company is.

Gordon Wright: Yeah. HOK is a global design firm, architecture, interior design planning. [00:00:30] We have about 1,800 employees, and we're in major cities around the world.

Jacob Morgan: Okay. Maybe some background information about you. How did you get involved with WorkPlace, with architecture, with design? Something you always wanted to do?

Gordon Wright: No. I came maybe a bit of a circuitous route, if you can imagine. I came from the corporate side. I actually started in project management [00:01:00] and development many years ago and then went on to the corporate side working as a client and then went to the advisory side. Spent some time with one of the large Big Four advisory organizations in the real estate group, and really was looking for the challenge and where my interests lie in more of the creative side of the real estate business. That led me to pursue work in an opportunity in the world [00:01:30] of design.

Jacob Morgan: Very cool. What's a typical day like in the life of Gordon these days?

Gordon Wright: Oh, I wish there was a typical day. The design industry, like many industry sectors, took a pretty significant hit in the economic downturn 2008 to '12, a period of time we all like to think is in the rear view mirror, but we are incredibly busy right now, many opportunities. [00:02:00] It's a large practice at HOK so a typical day with me is interacting with clients, interacting with my colleagues in the delivery of work. The things probably that I most enjoy are the sort of creative, imaginative part of it, which is really coming up with things we

think the industry wants to hear from us as a world leader on these topics of workplace, and doing writing, speaking, and even conversations like this. This is kind of where [00:02:30] the fun part is. You get to take a breath from the grind, if you will.

Jacob Morgan: Very cool. What are some of the things or buildings or spaces that you or HOK have been involved with that people might be familiar with?

Gordon Wright: Well, there's quite a few. I could go on and on, but to be brief, I think I'll start in the U.S., some interesting spaces there, the recent Atlanta Falcons stadium in Atlanta, Georgia, which recently opened for last year's [00:03:00] NFL season. It's the first retractable roof of its type in the world, I believe. Another one that comes to mind, which I've had a chance to tour recently, is the Crick Institute in London, England, which is a coming together of a variety of disciplines in medical research, which won, and I forget the publication, but it won Lab of the Year for a publication [00:03:30] in 2017. It's quite a spectacular building, close to a million square feet under one roof of research, and the primary objective is around cancer research.

Jacob Morgan: Very cool. You guys did everything from the design, the inception, basically laying out what those things look like and how they operate?

Gordon Wright: Yeah. The building itself and the interiors of the building and then working with the researchers and scientists, investigators to really create [00:04:00] the environment that allowed them to do research in a way that had not been done before, driven by the institute itself and bringing different disciplines together under one roof to work in a very collaborative manner rather than one group off in one building or another part of the world and then come to share research. They're actually conducting research together.

Jacob Morgan: You guys also do work with organizations, with businesses as well, right? Corporate ?

Gordon Wright: Absolutely. That's [00:04:30] the group, the part I should have said. That's the group that I lead, our WorkPlace group, and that is a variety of clients around the world, obviously the banking industry, one of our topics probably today, but working with clients across all sectors. Really, what WorkPlace, what we do is help organizations create design and inhabit workplaces that are healthy, promote wellness, and promote the performance [00:05:00] of their employees.

Jacob Morgan: Can you give people a sense of what the process is like, because most of us have no idea. When a company goes to a firm like HOK and says, "Okay, we want to redesign our space," we have no insight in how that works, what you guys look at, what you consider, the research, anything that's done. Maybe you can walk us through what a process might be like. I don't know, let's say I was running a company, we had 10,000 employees and we wanted to redesign [00:05:30] one

of our spaces somewhere. Can you walk us through what that's like and what you do to come up with what that space should look like?

Gordon Wright:

Sure. Well, the first thing is a ready admission, we don't have all the answers. Really, it starts with an investigation to understand that organization, what its business objectives are, what its employee workplace objectives are and workforce objectives [00:06:00] are. It's really more and more the workforce and the workplace coming together in many of our conversations. It begins with an investigation to understand them.

Once we have that, we then begin to do some interviewing of key groups, leaders, key users. That information is played back, and then that begins to inform the design process. In some ways, it's very data-reliant and driven. Sometimes that's not well known outside [00:06:30] of our industry, but really, design is becoming more and more what ... I'm going to use a term which may be foreign, but it's a combination of the science and the art. The beginning steps are really about the science, collection and making sense of the data about what's going on today and where the organization wants to go.

Then, we get into the design process, more of the artful side of it. We go through a fairly tried-and-true process, but really, again, driven by that unique [00:07:00] organization, their unique requirements. It's not a one-size-fits-all approach. Finally, then we begin to realize space. The space goes into construction. We're there to help make sure it gets implemented and realized in the way it wanted to be, needed to be.

Then finally, we go back once the client has occupied that space and gather more data to both inform ourselves on what worked and what didn't and then to allow us to help the client make the appropriate adjustments. We're now seeing more [00:07:30] and more clients where that adjustment period, if you will, that preoccupancy evaluation, as we term it in the industry, is not just a one-time thing, but it goes back to the blend of art and science, is that we're encouraging our clients to revisit their space on a regular basis to kind of take the temperature and make those tweaks that are required to, again, get the most out of the space, the most out of their employees.

Jacob Morgan:

When you say that you guys look at data, what sort of data do you guys look [00:08:00] at? Because I visit a bunch of different corporate headquarters in different parts of the world when I give talks there, and I'm always amazed how different the spaces are. You visit a company like an Airbnb or you visit a company like a Capital One or a Swiss Re, and the spaces are very, very different. I'm always in there thinking, how did they come up with this? Do they look at how employees work, what sort of work they're doing? Are there focus groups? Are they looking at traffic patterns? [00:08:30] Do you sort of match the space to the values of the company? Can you give a sense of what you actually look at when trying to come up with this design?

Gordon Wright: Yeah. There's a variety of data sources, and it doesn't mean every project or every organization is going to use all of those, but we look at ... I'll give you a few, and I'll provide a brief explanation. We look at utilization data, how space is being utilized, how employees are occupying the space. We sometimes look at badge data, how [00:09:00] employees go in and out of a space. Again, that goes back to utilization, but also goes to patterns of behavior within the building. We also do focus groups to understand the organization, its leaders, the goals, and how the real estate organization is a part of the bigger company goals and how space can support or perhaps is not supporting the larger company goals.

There's a variety of data sources we look at. Many are of the traditional what I'm going to call real estate metrics or real estate [00:09:30] data, but more and more this is being driven by cultural and social activities inside the organization versus just the traditional real estate metrics.

Jacob Morgan: Interesting. Well, the utilization data aspect I know that a lot of people look at, and I've heard stories of some companies that use sensors on desks to kind of monitor activity. I've heard the companies use cameras where they kind [00:10:00] of monitor people walking down a certain space or whatnot. I don't know if you guys do that, but those are the stories that I've heard. You also mentioned you kind of look at cultural aspects, the sociological aspect. It's kind of like not just data, but more like soft? Would you call it soft data? Or kind of like human qualities?

Gordon Wright: It's actually, it's both. We do collect some hard data. There's data about [00:10:30] how many people are in a space. That's pretty hard data. You can say at this moment in time there was X number of people in this defined space, but I think more and more ... You alluded to some of the ways space is collected. We're beginning to see more technology use in the collection of the data, sensors, et cetera, and obviously sometimes we can run into legal issues around that, but I think many organizations are sorting through that.

The other side, the sociological side, the psychological [00:11:00] side, if you will, of the space, of being in a space, the use of the space is really coming to the forefront. That's where those one-on-one conversations or group conversations about, firstly, what the organization is trying to achieve as an organization, and secondly, what they're trying to use their space for, how it's used, how it supports the goals of the organization is becoming more and more a part of our conversation with our clients.

Jacob Morgan: What are some of the main [00:11:30] workplace trends that you're paying attention to as far as kind of the design goes? I know obviously one of them, one of the big ones we've seen is this debate around open versus closed spaces. Maybe you can give us a sense of when you think of workplace trends in your field, what are you paying attention to?

Gordon Wright: Well, I could go on and you would probably have to tell me to be quiet, but I'll give you a few off the top of my head that I think are on a lot of people's minds now. [00:12:00] The first one I'd point to is the employee experience. Many organizations have begun to realize to get people in the office, to want to be there, they have to provide an experience that's engaging, I got to go to this space. There's other options. We have alternative spaces in our world today. I don't have to go to the office. How do we create a space that is engaging and creates a positive experience to get people into the office? I'd say that's a top-of- [00:12:30] mind one right now.

Jacob Morgan: I love that you use the word employee experience, because that is 90% of the title of my recent book, so I ... Bonus points for that.

Gordon Wright: Sure. I have not read your book yet, but I will. That's a big one for us right now, because even in a beautiful space, you can have a poor experience. We've looked at other industries like the airlines experience, more of us crammed in. What happens when you cram more people in a space? There's some [00:13:00] analogies that can be derived from other industries.

Another area which kind of comes to that analogy is the notion of an ecosystem of choices. We're human beings. We're mobile. We're the most mobile thing inside of space. To give somebody a desk and a chair is no longer a good solution and kind of goes back to this notion of experience. If I only have one choice or there is no choice in my workplace, it's probably not going to be a great experience. [00:13:30] I think that leads to agility. We're trying to create spaces that provide, as I said before, choice, but also promote agility so that I can work anytime, anywhere in the office just like I can from my home office or from a coffee shop or another third space. These are all tied together, but, again, they all have their little individual nuances, if you will.

I could go on and on. I think that the [00:14:00] big drivers several years ago were cost of space, and cost hasn't gone away. It's not as if suddenly everybody has pockets of money that they're dying to spend, but I think now there's much more of an awareness with our clients and within the design industry that the space has to be an attractor not only for the talent to come to the organization, but to come into the space itself.

Jacob Morgan: I also really like that you mentioned the blending of work and life, because I think that's definitely [00:14:30] a huge trend. Our physical spaces are starting to feel a little bit more like home because I think work-life balance is being replaced by this notion of work-life integration. A lot of companies are ... They're not companies anymore. They're gyms, they're caterers, they're financial planners. They're offering all sorts of services, and it's no longer just a place where you do work. It's kind of a place where you spend a good portion of your life nowadays. That I definitely see that as a big trend [00:15:00] as well, so I'm glad that you mentioned that.

The other thing that I was curious about is are you at all looking at things like artificial intelligence and automation and how that might impact the utilization of space or maybe integrating technology into space? Then the other one that I was going to ask you about is the gig economy and contingent labor and if that impacts how you guys think of space?

Gordon Wright: Yeah. [00:15:30] A simple answer to both is yes. The gig economy is no, and I think now we're beginning to see other terms used for it because the notion that the next generation coming into the workforce and some of them already here, are going to have ... There's research beginning to bear out that they're going to have 30 to 40 jobs. When I entered the workforce, if you told somebody you were going to have more than five or six, they probably thought you were not a very dependable human being. Obviously, that's changed dramatically and those [00:16:00] different behaviors are going to have a change on the workplace and how we design space.

We certainly at HOK don't believe for a minute that we have all the answers on this, but we are absolutely tracking it. We're doing research. We're following the research, the scientific research about this, some of the demographic research about this, and we'll be writing more about it. But absolutely, the new work generations or the new generations entering the workforce and entering the [00:16:30] workplace are going to have a direct impact on what and how we design.

Jacob Morgan: So why does something like contingent labor matter when you think of workspace?

Gordon Wright: Well ...More flexibility.

Jacob Morgan: Okay.

Gordon Wright: We've always planned, and always is a big word, but for the last several decades, we've always planned for people to be in the office and for people to be [00:17:00] with that organization for long periods of time. When you begin to think about contingent workforces that move and are much more nimble in terms of their use of the space and tenure within the space, within the organization, it has a direct impact on what we're going to design because we've been designing for quite a few years now, much of it based around the real estate transaction, how long do we have a lease for.

Therefore, I want to design a space that I don't have to refresh [00:17:30] five times, slight exaggeration, during the duration of the lease, but the leases have now become longer. Many leases are out to 10 years in many parts of the world. It's very difficult to think about a space that you or I would want to work in without changes and updates for 10 years. Having said that, if your workforce is changing much more rapidly than has in the past, it creates some complexity.

Jacob Morgan: Hmm. Yeah, I guess I didn't think about it in that term, but it makes sense. Also, I suppose [00:18:00] who has access to what. A lot of companies, they, I don't know rightfully or not, but they kind of limit access that certain people have, they're contingent or gig workers versus not, and I think the flexibility and agility is, of course, huge.

I guess transitioning to the AI aspect or the technology aspect, what are you guys paying attention to there as far as the impact on workplace?

Gordon Wright: Well, I'll start with the design. Working for a design firm, sometimes we look through that lens, and I don't want to [00:18:30] be just focused there because I'll get to artificial intelligence. Even with the ability to look at space through virtual reality, one of the ways we're beginning to use that tool is to create virtual reality mapping and show that to clients before space is designed. It allows them to have a, I'm going to call it digital experience of that space before the space is three-dimensional. That's a great tool for designers [00:19:00] because they can play with different features, context of a space, and the client, the occupier, has an opportunity to see it before it comes to life in three-D dimension. That's one tool that we're beginning to see have a significant impact on the process and the way we design. A big-

Jacob Morgan: I was going to even ask you about that, if you guys use virtual or augmented reality, so you answered that question. Clearly, you guys do.

Gordon Wright: We do, and it's not [00:19:30] a broad base. We don't use it for everything because today we don't need it for everything. That may change in the future. I think on the part, the other part of the question, more looking at artificial intelligence coming into the workplace, I think it's a little bit to your former question. It's a similar answer. As the workplace adapts to new generations with new needs and new demands, I think the workplace is also going to have to adapt to new technologies.

We certainly see [00:20:00] AI as one of those things that we'll be adapting to. In some parts of the world, we're already beginning to see artificial intelligence have an active role in what I'm going to call the professional workplace. Not just on the manufacturing floor, but actually within the office space. I think probably if we were to have this discussion in 18 to 24 months, I would probably be able to give you very specific examples where we're seeing it in the office workspace.

Jacob Morgan: [00:20:30] How would something like AI and technology impact design? I guess it's sort of like why do you guys need to be paying attention to AI or technology when it comes to space? How would it influence the way that you create something?

Gordon Wright: Well, there's a variety of things I could say, but I'll focus on a couple. The physical space to accommodate technology is one consideration. [00:21:00] I think the other is electronic security. All these devices ... We talk about the

Internet of Things, but as we begin to introduce that, we're creating other areas we need to think about. Other areas is a very non-exact, non-scientific term, but I'll just use that term for now.

I think the other thing about artificial intelligence, that topic is, it's still a bit foreign, still a bit the unknown. We're all reading about [00:21:30] it. We're all hearing about it, and we're seeing automation. We've seen automation in many processes for years, but I still think there's some ... I'll use a somewhat strong word ... trepidation about the notion that there's going to be a robot in my workplace moving about. I think there's a lot of conversation yet to be had about how that's going to impact the professional workplace, an office setting. It doesn't mean it won't. Just there's a lot of questions yet to be answered.

Jacob Morgan: [00:22:00] Are you having those conversations with your clients? Are you having some companies that are coming up to you and they're saying things like, "Hey, you know, we think in the next five, 10 years there's going to be AI in our company. There's going to be maybe robots walking around, and we're concerned about that. What does that mean? What does that look like?" Are people coming to you with those types of concerns?

Gordon Wright: Well, they are, and the more progressive organizations and maybe not ... I don't mean that in a way that one organization's better than the other, but organizations [00:22:30] that maybe because of their business have to start thinking about these new technologies. One simple one we're already beginning to see is cleaning services. Do you do cleaning services with human beings? Or is it something you do with non-disruptive or less disruptive robotic activity? Yes, we're already beginning to see organizations that are looking at this and coming to us and say, "What do we need to think about in the design process to be able to accommodate [00:23:00] these technologies as they become more readily available and more understood?"

Jacob Morgan: That's interesting. It seems like even your space, your business, your industry is changing quite a bit, because I would imagine two decades ago, you were primarily just focused on the physical building as a structure, but now you're thinking about cyber security, you're thinking about AI and automation, you're thinking about the gig economy. It sounds like you yourselves need to be kind of, I suppose, experts or [00:23:30] be at least aware of all these other things that are happening in the world of work that extend just beyond the physical structure itself.

Gordon Wright: Absolutely. I think HOK has been thinking about this for a while. We have a group within HOK of really bright, smart technology folks called Smart Building. Ironical that we put smart in there. But we've been looking at this from the building, science, building environment and I think what we're beginning to see now is that is [00:24:00] on a trajectory of upward growth, of expansion like it's never been. Yes, the buildings are impacted, the space inside the buildings, and mostly the human beings that interact with those buildings and those ... I'll use the term robot for now, those technology-capable devices within the space. Five

years ago, if we would have been having this conversation, we might have been chuckling when we talked about robots and [00:24:30] AI in the space. Now, it's becoming reality.

Jacob Morgan: It's funny that you mention smart buildings. That was another question I was going to ask you about, because we're starting to hear stories about that. I can't remember off the top of my head. I think it's in Denmark. You would probably know. There are a couple famous big corporate smart buildings that have been created. Do you know which one I'm talking about? I think it's in Denmark.

Gordon Wright: Off the top of my head, I don't. [00:25:00] There has been a few of them where the science of technology and science are coming together to really run the building so that it ... These buildings are becoming ecosystems unto themselves. We could talk about net zero buildings, buildings that ... That's been a conversation for several years with some of our clients, that essentially have no environmental waste.

We're now starting to talk with clients who want net [00:25:30] positive buildings. Again, that's more on our architecture side of the business where we're really talking about the infrastructure, the iron and steel and concrete. But the spaces inside that my team, that we interact with with our clients, they're following suit, essentially the same space. In other words, if you're going to create a building that is net zero, you're certainly not going to want to create a polluting interior to that building.

Jacob Morgan: I actually found the building. It was [00:26:00] called The Edge in Amsterdam. As I pulled up the article, the first three sentences of the article are, "It knows where you live. It knows what car you drive. It knows who you're meeting with today and how much sugar you take in your coffee. This is The Edge, and it's quite possibly the smartest office space ever constructed." That's the opening sort of paragraph for this article. This, by the way, was written in 2015, so this is already a couple of years ago, and they talk about apps that help you [00:26:30] find your desks, sensors that are everywhere. The solar panels adjust to move with the sun. It's just some kind of a crazy thing that they've constructed over there. I haven't actually been in there yet. Hopefully, one day.

Are you seeing more of these types of buildings emerge? Can a building really know all these things?

Gordon Wright: Well, yes, [00:27:00] we're seeing more. I think the simple answer is absolutely yes. We're seeing more and more organizations want to engage in this dialogue of what can a building do to collect information that helps our organization, our employees perform better. I think in that lens or in that lane of performance and improving performance is a very positive thing. It can be also a little bit mystifying and maybe even a little scary. As you said, knowing how much sugar I like [00:27:30] in my coffee, what car I drive, what parking spot I like to park in, et cetera, it can also be intimidating.

I think that, going back to a term we talked about earlier, the notion of Internet of Things, and I don't have the numbers in front of me, but there's an incredible explosion of the amount of devices that are connected to the Internet. Excuse me. You may have that number off the top of your head. I don't. But we're starting to see-

Jacob Morgan: 20 billion, I think was the number, and that's on the low end of [00:28:00] what people, what some analyst firms have predicted, I think 20/20. I've heard the numbers go all the way up to 75 billion.

Gordon Wright: Yeah. I was going to say I've heard a high of 75 billion. I'm not sure the timeframe of that. Having said that, in some ways, we are all very personally connected already between our laptop devices, screens, phones, et cetera. We're already as human beings very connected in many parts of the world. I think now we're going to see a jump [00:28:30] in that because all of the devices and the buildings that we occupy are going to get connected whether it's our home, our offices, our factory, et cetera, wherever we work.

I think that's part of what we're talking about here. The buildings are going to be informed by the different data collection points ... and, again, I'll use that as a broad term ... that exist inside the building. More and more, we're seeing infrastructure built that allows that building to collect information from [00:29:00] not only the human behaviors inside the building but all of those devices that human beings are using.

Jacob Morgan: This one I was just reading had 28,000 sensors in it, which is kind of mind-boggling that this one building can have 28,000 sensors in it. Yeah, it's definitely a trend. I know I keep hearing about it all the time from HR people, from people in the workspace, of how the Internet of Things is going to impact buildings and space. [00:29:30] I'm wondering, well, do you think people will ... Is there going to be any pushback on this? Is it a little too Big Brothery, a little bit too ... I don't know. Do I want my building to know all this stuff about me?

Gordon Wright: That's a great question, and I think our industry is one of the industries that has to deal with that. We design space, we design buildings, we design floors of buildings. I think one of the themes that we're beginning to see [00:30:00] comes out of this notion of kind of ubiquitous technology is the notion or the idea of human-centric design. We can't forget that human beings live in and occupy these buildings. Electronic surveillance, all these things would bring up other issues, as you mentioned. They're going to be around and have been around and probably are going to become even more prevalent.

As designers [00:30:30] and strategists around space, we have to think about creating spaces that keep in mind that human beings are the occupants, not the artificial intelligence, not the machines and then all the devices we use, but it's human beings. I think that, again, as a design firm, is something that we want to keep top, excuse me, top of mind when we talk to and work with our clients.

Jacob Morgan: What about in the news, heard some discussions [00:31:00] about people that are migrating more towards living in cities, in urban areas, the impact that these companies are having on a community. Are you also paying attention to kind of just demographic and living situation and how that might affect space?

Gordon Wright: Absolutely. We have a planning group at HOK that certainly looks at this from urban planning, demographic information standpoint. It's true, there is a trend, a [00:31:30] population trend moving back into urban areas. They're tracking along with a lot of social science organizations, again, what's causing this. Part of it is workforce and job availability, and urban living provides opportunities that perhaps rural living cannot and should not provide. Again, our practice, our planning practice at HOK is very caught up in that because we're working with municipalities, [00:32:00] cities, government agencies, large organizations to help plan both what I'm going to call urban or revitalization of urban space as well as suburban and rural space.

Jacob Morgan: Hmm, interesting. You guys are definitely paying attention to that stuff as well, which is ... I'm personally interested in what's going on there as well. When you kind of compare, I guess, workspaces of the past [00:32:30] versus where we are now, what are some of the big differences that you're seeing as far as how we have to think about space?

Gordon Wright: Well, I think space was always very personal. If you go back to the '80s and even to the '90s, everybody, and depending where you stood in the hierarchy of the organization, you were in a private office or a cube. You had your little walls around you. Maybe even a seat and a door around you. [00:33:00] Space was very personal. We accessorize it the way we want. My employer provided me a chair in the walls or chair in the cube, and I hung my pictures, did the things I wanted to do.

I think space has become much more communal and what we're seeing is the ... Maybe a better way to say it is the workplace has become more communal and space is having to adapt. You had mentioned earlier when we began this discussion [00:33:30] the notion of open plan and some of the pushback on open plan. I think open plan was a 1990s reaction to all of us living in ... Sometimes we joke and we call it the habit trails of cubicles and private offices on a floor. We wanted to interact more and interface with each other more, but that had its own challenges. Not everybody's role in an organization is well-suited to an open plan environment. Open plan environments have [00:34:00] some challenges that perhaps are only good for parts of the population, employee population.

I think even open plan now is sort of a choice that was a moment in time, maybe a few years in time, more than a moment, but now we've gone beyond open plan. Open plan has really become one of the space solutions, if you will, that an organization considers. Now, we begin to look at things like activity-based working, alternative settings like co-working. Maybe it's not within my space, but [00:34:30] I put people, put my team in other places that are not

within my office that allows for communal sharing resources, other amenities that I can't provide in my space.

Jacob Morgan: That was actually a pretty crazy fad, the whole open versus closed. I remember there were so many articles that were written, and even to this day, you can still come across an article that says why open spaces are bad, why open spaces are good, why we need to bring back cubicles. It was just like this whole polarizing [00:35:00] debate, which was ... I'm sure you guys were right smack in the middle of it. It seems today maybe that kind of fizzled out a little bit and people are starting to understand kind of like what you said, is it's about multiple options, not just one or the other.

Gordon Wright: Absolutely. I think what we've all learned, and not just those of us in the design community but our clients as well, is that the best workplaces, the best spaces in an organization to work are those places in [00:35:30] organizations who provide their workforce choice. Choice is the number-one driver of workplace satisfaction in terms of the space. Taking out how much I'm paid, how I feel about my company and the products we make and the things we do, but in terms of the space I occupy that my organization gives me, choice is the number-one indicator of how satisfied I'm going to be, and there's research that bears that out.

When we do these things, we put everybody in a cube, we put everybody in open plan. I think what we've learned from [00:36:00] that is now there's a variety of ways to set a space, to, I'm going to say, curate a space that provides layers of choice for the employees. It may be no difference in cost for the owner, the employer, but allows me to select space that fits my job requirements and supports me performing the best I can in that space rather than saying, well, we're all going to move to this plan or we're all going to go back to offices. Again, not [00:36:30] to be repetitive, but choice has become the top of the conversation.

Jacob Morgan: Do you ever have clients that come to you and say, "Make me a Facebook, make me a Google. We want what Google's doing"? Personally, I hear this a lot, not just in space but also as far as workplace practices, "We want to have the same workplace practices that Google has." I suppose there are probably some dangers of just trying to copy what another company does. I'm curious, well, first if you have clients that come [00:37:00] to you and say, "We want what Google has." If they do that, how do you sort of tell them, "Well, actually, you don't want what Google has because that makes sense for Google. Let's figure out what makes sense for you." How do you have those discussions?

Gordon Wright: That's a great question, and I kind of chuckle as I answer, because I think it was more prevalent a couple of years ago. It's dying down, but obviously, we all want to be associated with success, and some of those organizations you mentioned are at the top of their industry sector. Yes, we're all attracted to the [00:37:30] success. We're all attracted to the novelty of some of the spaces that were designed by some of the Silicon Valley organizations.

I think now what we realize as a design firm, as designers and strategists working with our clients, that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution, and a one-size-fits-all solution is probably that one side doesn't fit all solution if we really want to look at the outcomes. Again, it kind of goes back to an earlier topic in our conversation. How do [00:38:00] we gather information that helps us determine what the right space is, what the right design solutions are for the client and not provide off-the-shelf solutions which probably are destined to fail.

Jacob Morgan: Okay. Well, that's good. I'm sure a lot of people ... It's very tempting to want to copy what Silicon Valley is doing. One question I realize I forgot to ask you when we talked about AI is, as far as your process for design, have you started [00:38:30] relying more heavily on technology, on AI as far as the design process goes?

Gordon Wright: I don't think we are on the design process yet, and I'm probably not the expert at HOK to answer this, so I'll caveat my answer with that right up front. Having said that, I think the design technology has changed. We've gone to BIM rather than CAD, et cetera, and I could provide multiple comparisons of technology from 10 years ago [00:39:00] versus design technology being used today, and, again-

Jacob Morgan: [crosstalk 00:39:03] I'd be very curious because I've heard of CAD. I'm not familiar with BIM.

Gordon Wright: I'll just continue that thought then. There are multiple improvements and/or advances in technology that allow for more data-gathering, et cetera in the design process. This is very design-centric. When you kind of turn and look at that and say, well, how does AI, excuse me, [00:39:30] figure into the design process? It's probably not there yet. Again, our Building Smart guys would be better people to pose this question to.

Having said that, knowing what we're doing within the workplace world, we're beginning, as I said earlier, to use technologies that even two years ago were kind of out on the edge, which have not become commonplace. Again, virtual reality, augmented reality, things like that which help us in the design process, [00:40:00] and, again, our steps toward what I'm going to call greater and greater use of technologies that even two to five years ago we wouldn't have been talking about.

Jacob Morgan: What about this notion of chasing perks? I know that this tends to be kind of a common pitfall for a lot of companies, especially if you're in the Bay Area, right? They usually want these kind of maybe overly extravagant spaces [00:40:30] and they want all the latest perks and the coolest stuff in there. Do you sometimes have to ground clients a little bit and say, "Okay, we get it. You want to build a fortress in the sky. Let's take it back one notch and sort of be a little bit more realistic." How do you have those discussions with clients that maybe

sometimes come to you and they have these big, extravagant, "We just want lots of perks and gold ceilings"? [00:41:00] Do you have stuff like that happen?

Gordon Wright:

We do. I say it hesitantly, but, again, we do a variety. HOK is a multidiscipline firm. We do stadiums, we do performance venues, we do hotels, we do offices, we do hospitals, we do research centers, we do laboratories. We're certainly a multidisciplinary firm and practice all around the world. Some [00:41:30] days we kind of chuckle when we share stories of some of the things we do or are asked to do.

I think there's a way to cut through that, though, and it's the almighty currency, the dollar, or whatever currency is prevalent in the country we're talking about. All of these things require money to get done, and many times the cost of construction, the cost of design, is kind of a wakeup call to what can be done. But there's also [inaudible 00:42:00]. [00:42:00] We talked about technology quite a bit in our conversation. I think it's fair to say that there's also advances in the technology which allow us to do things that five years, 10 years ago might not have been economically, financially feasible for the organization which are today.

We still do see those crazy requests, but I think now there's probably ... Again, when we think about the notion of the individual versus the collective, many of these perks [00:42:30] need to be shared. I think that's one way of getting some of these maybe what would have been called far-fetched things done is that how many people will it benefit? How many people will it promote wellness for? How many people will it help in the performance of their job and from an HR perspective keep them engaged and focused and happy with being employed by us? Some of the things that may have been far-fetched, I think when we bring them into the realm of communal, [00:43:00] maybe are a little less far-fetched.

Jacob Morgan:

Not that long ago, I was giving a talk for a company and they told me, I believe it was \$30 million that they just spent on redesigning their space. After the talk, somebody raised their hand and said, "You know, we just spent \$30 million on redesigning our space, and some of the people that helped redesign that, they left the company, they're no longer here, and we had new people join the company. [00:43:30] The new people that joined the company to take over that role, now they want to do other changes, and now we're, you know, people don't like certain things."

How do you deal with that? Because a lot of these companies go through this process of spending years and millions of dollars redesigning a space, only to find that maybe other people on the team don't like it or maybe they're not getting good feedback from employees. Space is one of those things where it's once [00:44:00] you build something, it's kind of there. You can't just ... It's not just like software where you can patch in an update. How do you kind of balance designing a space with, I guess, keeping everyone happy and being up to date on trends so that it can actually last for a while?

Gordon Wright: That's a great question. We get asked this very similar question by our clients, "What happens in three years when we have a change in this role [00:44:30] or somebody else comes in?" I think the simple answer, and it's not easy to do, so don't mistake me for saying it's simple and easy. There's an approach, though, and I think the simple answer is do your homework up front.

We talked a little bit, Jacob, about gathering the information that will inform the design, so really understanding it's on us as designers and strategists to understand the organization we're working with, understand their needs and not design for what [00:45:00] we want to design but design to understand the organization. Yes, aesthetically looks wonderful, comfortable, appealing, but really meets the needs of the organization and its employees.

Then I think it's really important to continue to check back in, not necessarily the design firm, not necessarily HOK, but someone. Hopefully, we are part of the discussion. To check back in with the group that owns that space within the organization to make sure it's doing what [00:45:30] we expected it to do and make small tweaks along the way so that in three years or four years, we're not ripping it all out and starting over.

Jacob Morgan: Nobody wants that to happen. Yet, for some reason I know that people probably struggle with it. I guess the answer is do your homework up front. Is there this notion that you can't make everyone happy all the time? There needs to be some sort of compromise? I also heard a story, for example, of a company [00:46:00] where employees actually said they wanted something. They wanted them to build this loft area. The company said, "Okay. We collected feedback on it. Employees wanted it. We built the loft," and then nobody's using it. How do you deal with that where it's maybe people don't know what they actually want? And if you build something for them, they don't use it. That's probably very upsetting.

Gordon Wright: Yeah. The Field of Dreams, "Build it and they will come," [00:46:30] an old, old movie, which I think I was a kid when that movie came out. Now I'm dating myself. The notion of build it and they will come, I think is a little bit of a dangerous notion in the workspace. The idea we're going to spend money without understanding what we really need just because somebody desires that space is probably a road to a poor result.

I do believe, as you've said, you're not going to make everybody [00:47:00] happy, but if you do the homework, if you engage the user groups, you engage the owners of the space, the users of the space ... This is not graded on a curve, so to speak. We're not looking if 90% are satisfied [inaudible 00:47:14] space, but we're really looking to satisfy the needs of groups within the organization so that those groups are well-supported in doing their jobs, the performance of their job duties. Really, again, the answer comes down to providing a variety of space, spaces [00:47:30] that can support those different groups within the organization in the performance of their job versus spaces that are so unique to

accommodate a small group, that maybe perhaps there's no value to that space to the rest of the organization.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, fair enough. Okay. I have a couple of questions that people on LinkedIn wanted me to ask you. The first one comes from Saket Maheshwari, and he says, "Can the design of the workplace inspire people to give back more to society [00:48:00] and tackle the most challenging problems of humanity?" Wow. Good luck with that question.

Gordon Wright: Yeah, that's a big question. I am not going to profess that workplace is going to conquer, solve societal problems, but I will say I do believe we're heading in a direction that is much more focused on the collective, moving away from the me, me, me. In the world we live in with ... We could go into all the things. We just [00:48:30] turn on the news or look at our phones and sometimes you want to hide your head. I do think the workplace can be a safe environment, a nurturing, comfortable environment, a well environment that supports the employees in the organization. I don't know if we can turn that outside the organization and conquer the problems, but I think to some degree we can be an oasis inside of all the societal issues.

Jacob Morgan: The next question is from Jordan Dyson, and he says, "I would love to know what [00:49:00] data points are most critical to collect when evaluating the best way to improve flow and maximize efficiency with an open office. I'd also like to know how you get buy-in from non-believers concerning the importance of design and integration of the brand story into the space." Kind of a two-parter there.

Gordon Wright: Yeah. Let's start with the last one. Brand and user experience are [00:49:30] something that design can directly, positively or negatively impact. When we think about a workspace, I think we're finally moving away from the overt stuff, the brand name, the organization name plastered everywhere in corporate colors. I think this is becoming more subtle and much more, again, about the experience of being in a space rather than being constantly reminded of who I work for and then the company motto in gold. [00:50:00] There's usually a need-

Jacob Morgan: Office space typical ...

Gordon Wright: Yeah. It's a little bit like, okay, I have my poster up on the wall that tells me the rules of the road for my organization and our goals. After awhile, it becomes, it just becomes so obvious. I do think that we are moving in a direction and certainly the practice at HOK has a group dedicated to help an organization with something called experience design. How do we create that experience that is a branded [00:50:30] environment, that does bear out the company's goals and its belief system, but it's not so in your face.

I think the first part of the question is a little harder to answer when we get back to what data, what metrics are going to lead to success. Again, I would, rather than try to list them all off because there's a lot of data points and metrics that we can look at, I think it's really, again, understanding yourself, understanding your organization. Before you embark upon [00:51:00] a design project to create a wonderful workspace, workplace, you best understand who's going to use it, the user need, and what the objectives of that group or those groups that are going to occupy it, what are they trying to accomplish. Because, again, many times you can create beautiful space that looks aesthetically appealing, but it doesn't support the requirements of the user, and that can be a big miss.

Jacob Morgan: Well, then just kind of building off his question, [00:51:30] with people that don't like change, have you ever had the situation where maybe you go into a company where there was lots of cubicles and maybe 20% of the people there love their cube. They love personalizing their space. They love putting pictures of their family on the walls. A couple of years later, the space is redesigned and now they hate the company, they hate HOK, they hate their ... they hate everybody that had anything to do with the change. What do you do with those types of people that are like, "Bring [00:52:00] me back my cube"?

Gordon Wright: Yeah. This is not meant to sound cliché, but it may sound a bit cliché. Start early with the education process. Start early with telling that the change is coming. Explain the change, the benefits to the organization, the benefits to the employees, and the benefit to them as a single human being as part of the bigger infrastructure of the organization. Then reinforce that throughout the process, throughout the project. Reinforce [00:52:30] it at move-in and continue to reinforce. Really, reinforcement is not the carrot and stick, but it's incentives. Why would I want to change? What would make me change my behavior? Thinking that out before you put somebody in the new space.

In today's world we call that ... We dump it into the bucket of change management. It's not just communication. It's really a nuanced approach that starts long before we tell the employees, oh, guess what? In six months you're moving into new space, with understanding what [00:53:00] they need, understanding their points of resistance, what makes them resist and beginning to build what I'm going to say, a strategic plan, the change management course, if you will, to get them to understand the benefits to the organization, their team, and to themselves.

Jacob Morgan: I like that answer. All right, next question for you actually comes from an executive at a financial institution. Erika Noriega says, "When financial workplaces emulate tech startups, what are some of the blunders to avoid? [00:53:30] Often, things like regulatory implications and legacy system obstacles affect how deep into innovation teams can go. Any advice for dealing with these obstacles?"

Gordon Wright: I don't know that I have direct advice, and I don't want to sit here and say, "Well, the answer is ..." But I think he's pointed in his question some things that

we deal with regularly when looking at the larger established organizations versus the startup, what [00:54:00] I'm going to call thin tech, which has become a kind of regular used term now. Regulation is a big one. A large organization with multi departments, financial institution, is going to have much more regulatory requirements that can enter into space requiring privacy, separation of job duties, et cetera than a young startup where they have maybe a less nuanced product offering, less nuanced client base.

I think cost pressures [00:54:30] are certainly going to enter into this discussion. A large organization with significant and expensive infrastructure is probably going to be a little less nimble than a startup organization, will have to take that into consideration when they think about the type of space that they put employees into and the type of space they want to create.

I think one opportunity to maybe level set or play on the same field is technology. Technology is a leveler, and so the large [00:55:00] established organizations have access to the same technology. Yes, there's more people, so there's a higher cost, but at cost per head it's probably very similar, maybe even less. That's a, what I'm going to say, a level of the playing field where both organizations, including the large organizations, can take advantage of the technologies out there.

Last but not least, I point to talent and geography. I think that advantage that the large organizations have when they're trying to attract [00:55:30] is, yes, they're going to create workplaces and, yes, workplaces are a more expensive item on their balance sheet than perhaps a startup, but they have a national, if not global reputation and global footprint or national footprint that is going to allow them to have different conversations with the talent pool they're trying to attract to come into those workspaces.

Jacob Morgan: Okay. Last question for you before we wrap up is from Sophie [Profitt 00:55:58] and this [00:56:00] is an interesting question. She says, "How do they decide which typologies or types of environments to ensure that they fit the way the organization works?"

Gordon Wright: Well, I think it's a great question, and I think it's akin to some of the topics we've talked about today, Jacob. It really is knowing yourself and for the design team to understand their client, its workforce, and the workforce or the employees. [00:56:30] Let's just talk about human beings for a second that are going to be affected by the change. It's really hard to get a workplace right if you don't understand the culture of the organization, the employee who's going to occupy it, and the needs of that employee. If you don't have those things right, you could design a beautifully, aesthetically pleasing space and have a very dissatisfied, if not disengaged employee.

Jacob Morgan: [00:57:00] Last question for you, just to wrap everything up. When you think of the future workplace, let's say you're looking out 10 years, what do you envision the future workplace being and looking like?

Gordon Wright: I probably will approach this less from a aesthetic and more philosophical, if that's okay. We've certainly seen a workplace evolution since the ... [00:57:30] We talked earlier about cubicles and the sea of cubes and feeling like a hamster in the workplace to going through open office and then activity-based working where my environment was supposed to support me in what I'm doing in my job. Then alternative workplaces, co-working, et cetera.

I think where we're headed, and this is becoming a conversation that's beginning to emerge is the notion of immersive environments, so an environment that's tailored specifically. [00:58:00] It's a curated experience for the employee and the occupier of that space. It's really based on community and less about the individual. Yes, there's opportunities for me within that community or within that choice of space to get what I need, but it's really based on an experience for the group of people that are going to occupy and use that space.

It's function-driven. It's human-centric. Also just as it is [00:58:30] today, it's both assigned and unassigned space. We have this wonderful thing in the furniture systems called a benching. We all sit on a long table and we pull a chair up to it and we all work at it. That's not a great solution for all employees, but it may be, continued for the foreseeable future be a solution for some employees.

I think the notion when we talk about immersive environments, one of the things that's indicative of this coming is that ancillary space is becoming the conversation around furniture, [00:59:00] not desk. Again, that really points to the choice, the variety, that experience that's been created based on the needs of the user rather than something from a blueprint from five years ago or from here's what you need. You have 50 employees. Here's what you need to accommodate those 50 employees.

Jacob Morgan: What advice do you have for people listening to this podcast, let's say managers of companies that are thinking about [00:59:30] changing their workspace? What should they be thinking about? Then, if you have any advice for employees who are not in management or senior-level roles who are maybe unhappy with their workspace and they feel like they have to keep convincing others to see their perspective. Do you have any advice for those two groups?

Gordon Wright: I don't know if it's advice, but having been in this industry and been on both sides, both the client and then on the service provider [01:00:00] side, I'll try to take it from that viewpoint and certainly not take it from a wagging finger perspective. I think from the manager side is pick your partner wisely. Make sure you engage both inside your firm with people that understand what you need to do with space, that it's not just a necessary evil, that it's not just an expense budget item, but it really is a crucial part of creating [01:00:30] a healthy environment where people want to go, people want to be and people feel empowered to do their best work.

Then it comes to externally, is find that right design partner that can speak your language, that's willing to do the homework, to engage with you and your workforce, to understand your organization is unique and it's not a blue-and-white solution that you pick off the shelf and say, "Here you go. I've done 44 of these."

I think on the second part to the employees [01:01:00] is, you know, employee myself, having helped design spaces, having helped create spaces, helped manage space, and sitting in space, be open. Don't be closed-minded. It can be real easy, speak personally to get used to what you have and say, "This is how I like to work. Nothing else will work for me." I think as we look at some of the sociological and psychological studies out there that people who embrace new environments [01:01:30] both in life in general, but also in the workplace, are happier people and maybe we could derive from that, might be more successful and more engaged and pleased with the work that they're doing.

Jacob Morgan: Well, I like it. Gordon, thanks for your time. Where can people go to actually learn more about you, HOK?. I know you guys to do some studies and reports that you keep putting out, so anything that you want to mention for people to connect, please do so.

Gordon Wright: [01:02:00] Sure. Certainly, have a website, hok.com. That's hok.com. Within that, there's a plethora of information. They could go to WorkPlace, which is my group, or they can also look at Thought Leadership, which is some of the work, investigations, research that HOK is doing across a variety, excuse me, of industry sectors.

Jacob Morgan: Well, Gordon, I really appreciate you taking time out of your day to speak with me.

Gordon Wright: Jacob, thank you very much. Fun [01:02:30] conversation.

Jacob Morgan: Yeah, I agree. Thanks, everyone, for tuning in to this week's episode of the podcast. My guest, again, has been Gordon Wright. That's W-R-I-G-H-T. He's the director at WorkPlace at HOK. I will see all you guys next week.