

Designing the New Workplace Experience with Jeremy Myerson (Transcript)

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Chris Congdon: In 2019, our guest today was working on a book about the history of the office, and then 2020 came along and everything changed, including his research and ideas about where the office goes from here. Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host, Chris Congdon, and I'm here with our producer Rebecca Charbausk.

Rebecca Charbauski: Hi Chris.

CC: Hey Rebecca. Can you tell everyone about our guest today?

RC: Yes, Jeremy Myerson is a researcher, author and activist in Workplace Design, and he's the guy who was working on that book and had to pretty much start over. He is director at Worktech Academy, and if you aren't familiar with Worktech, it's really this global online platform and a member network where people who think deeply about the future of work and the future of the workplace can connect and learn from one another. He's also a visiting fellow at the University of Oxford, and he's published several books on workplace design, including his latest, which you mentioned Unworking, the reinvention of the modern Office.

CC: So those of us who are interested in how the workplace impacts people, Jeremy is the kind of guy who just collects a lot of knowledge and does a lot of deep thinking about this, and he really has some interesting new ways to think about designing offices for what's happening today.

RC: And we want to ask our audience, if you like this podcast, we'd really appreciate if you would rate it and review it, which helps other people find it. Absolutely.

CC: Jeremy is joining us from the UK today. Jeremy Myerson, welcome to Work Better.
Jeremy Myerson: Good to be here.

CC: Thank you so much. So we've read a lot of your work. You've been out kind of in the world on the topic of work for a long time. You've been very prolific, written a number of books, and not that long ago you were commissioned to write a book about the history of the office in the past 100 years, but then the pandemic came along and it has a way of changing things. You titled it unworking, which I thought was kind of an unusual topic when you're talking about work in the workplace. So talk about that title a little bit and what is it that we need to unwork?

JM: So we came upon the title Unworking because we realized the book was all about relearning. It was about unworking old habits, unworking old assumptions, challenging the basis on which we'd planned offices and organized work in the past. So this idea of relearning was really important.

CC: Let's talk a little bit about some of those assumptions that we want to wipe cleaner, at least rethink a little bit. For example, some of the things that we're approaching people who are approaching designing workplaces, you said that that needs to be more of a live issue today, that maybe it's happening in real time. Can you explain what that actually is looking like now?

JM: I remember once asking for some images from an architectural practice and they said, we can't photograph it now. The people have moved in, hilarious because what are offices if not for people? And in the past, architects and designers tried to create a kind of ideal setting for work. And of course that doesn't exist now. Architects and designers are working in real time with data that's being collected in smart buildings, and this is one of the legacies of the pandemic. They're beginning to base their decisions around form and adjacency and finish and detail and color. They're basing it on real-time information of how people use space because buildings are collecting intelligence. So when we talk in the book about the design process changing, I think that's a very important stepping stone to a new workplace, which I would describe as constantly in a state of beta. It never reaches that frozen moment of perfection. It's always being adapted, it's always being changed. So the workplace itself is becoming a dynamic restless entity.

CC: Yeah, I remember for years, facilities, people running around in frustration because people would move the furniture and configure it in whatever way worked best for them. And then eventually we started catching on and saying, Hey, maybe we should encourage this kind of behavior and create these workplaces that are a lot more dynamic to use your word, and more living and breathing. So we're in a time right now, as you know, and you've written about where there is a little bit of a tug of war going on where a lot of organizations are encouraging people to be in the office and trying to decide, do I have a mandate or do I just try and encourage people to come back? And some of the things that you've been thinking about are about these ideas of what's going to attract people into the office, in particular the experience that employees have. And I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you think that experience needs to be like going forward.

JM: Well, the first thing the companies have got to think about is the idea of experience real estate. People in corporate organizations never saw themselves as part of the hospitality or the entertainment business. And in the past, work was a place or it was a process. And I think a lot of designers were obsessed with the process. What does this team do? What do they need? Let's break down their job tasks. Who do they need to be adjacent to? They're good questions, but it misses out an entire dimension of human behavior, which is how you perceive things and how you feel about things. And people have revised their idea of what makes people productive. What makes people productive is high levels of comfort and high levels of satisfaction and motivation, and that is entirely to do with how they're experiencing their environment. So the baseline is think about experience, and then once you've thought about experience, you can master plan experience in the same way that you can master plan space and use a, journeys are coming into the workplace now. There's a much more rich and diverse array of techniques around designing workspace that are to do with other industries. They've done it in retail for years, they've done it in hospitality for years, and it's now coming into offices. And I think that's a wholly positive effect. The storyboard is going to become more important as an architectural document. Maybe it's not Frederick Taylor. After all, it's Walt Disney who's the godfather of the new workplace.

CC: It's such a good point because we do a lot of thinking about the same thing, particularly when people come into the office, what is the first thing that you see or experience? And for years it was a lobby, often very pristine, often very formal, and now we're thinking about the first thing that people see in our workplace. It's a coffee bar.

JM: Yeah, I think it's inescapable and we make a strong case for it in the book that the office is going to be very much part of the new landscape of work, but it's going to be repurposed. And one of the things we talk about in the book is this idea of super experience.

So if you look at the history of the workplace, the two overriding themes were clarity and optimization of resources and make it very clear and legible what the office is. It's usually a glass box. It's very well lit, you can see right across the office floor. That's been the traditional, in recent times, of a lot of office design. But if you were to say, well, actually clarity of itself, too much of it may not be a good thing. Maybe we should have a little bit more curiosity. There should be some ambiguity. And if we think utilization resources is only up to a point and beyond that we need empathy with the user experience, then you begin to make some very different design decisions. And that's beginning to happen. I'm seeing it in the big practices around the world. They're beginning to design some intrigue, some curiosity offices are not repeating in quite the same way. And there's a lot more what you might call empathic spaces, spaces to escape to smaller spaces, places to focus, and so on and so forth.

CC: And something you've written about a lot you just mentioned a moment ago. So I want to go back to this idea of repetition or the way offices used to be designed, were very much around equality, if you will. Everybody gets the same thing. So you produce rows and rows, rows of the same types of desks or bench type seating. And I'd like to talk a little bit about something that we're seeing emerging as an area that leaders in organizations are recognizing as a new area of focus. And that is really around inclusive design. Thinking about issues ranging not just for people who have disabilities, but thinking about diversity, equity, inclusion on a very broad scale, and I'd love to hear some of your thoughts about where the office might go in a world where we're thinking a little bit more about inclusion as opposed to just repetition of the same thing over and over again.

JM: I was always very frustrated at the slowness with which office real estate caught onto inclusive design in other areas, education, healthcare, retail. They began to find a rationale for bringing in inclusive design. It took an awfully long time in the office sector.

CC: I agree.

JM: But that moment has now arisen, and there's a powerful commercial argument for expanding your workforce to have a more neurodiverse approach and a neurodiverse workforce can yield a lot of benefits in terms of innovation, collaboration, and different perspectives. People are less likely to lock into groupthink, and there are a lot of benefits, organizational benefits to come out of having a much more inclusive approach. And then there's the need to reflect people who are hypersensitive to the environment or hypo sensitive to the environment. Some people desire a lot of stimulation, some people need to avoid stimulation. So suddenly having a universal one size fits all, let's have a series of rectangular glass boxes inside a large rectangular glass box that's not working anymore. What's really exciting about the new wave of offices is that people are thinking about new materials, they're thinking about textiles, they're thinking about things that dampen acoustics. They're thinking about circular spaces as opposed to rectangular ones.

CC: I'm not a fan of rectangles, which I know seems like an odd thing to be against in the office, but I always find when I'm in a rectangular table people are on either side trying to lean back and forth to see down to the end of the table. You always have a hierarchy with a rectangular table. You don't have that when you start getting into more rounded shapes.

JM: And of course meeting a more diverse workforce in terms of age, ability, ethnicity, gender, identity, race, it's complex. And the way to do it is to offer choices to offer a range of settings.

CC: Well, and you've talked a lot about also just the process of co-creating with user groups as opposed to just the expert designer trying to create the one beautiful thing that will stay that way forever, but more including people, these diverse groups of people in the actual design process. Right?

JM: Yeah, I think the co-creation piece sits alongside inclusive design. What co-design does, it puts the user of the space into the box seat, and you often get some very different perspectives, but user behavior is a fantastic catalyst for creativity, especially extreme user behavior on the margins. And that's where inclusion comes into play. If you look at somebody who would have trouble walking across a large open plan office, you're going to get a lot more insight into how that office is designed through their particular challenges than you would from a young able-bodied male.

CC: Sure. I was surprised earlier this month, and you might not be surprised to hear this, but we recently conducted some research with leaders in organizations, and we do surveys with employees and then also with leaders every year to take a pulse on where things are going. And one of the things that really surprised me that changed significantly is that leaders got to rank the things that they thought would be most important in the office. And usually that would've been things that you'd kind of traditionally think about like efficiency or flexibility and those kinds of things. But the top three were actually employee wellbeing, diversity, and sustainability. And those three had appeared on the list before, but they were always kind of down in the bottom of the list or the middle. They were important and kind of viewed as a nice thing to have, but now these things are emerging among leaders as some of the most significant things that they need to think about. I found that surprising. I don't know, maybe you're starting to see that already emerging.

JM: I think the gap between what leaders think the office should be and what employees think the office should be is growing. The emergence of diversity, sustainability, wellbeing and so on, is in some respects happening before the pandemic, but the pandemic accelerated focus on those issues. But I think what people at work are experiencing is a sense of relatedness in that they do not see the workplace as hermetically sealed as maybe they did 25, 30 years ago. It's connected to the wider world. So they see their employer as needing to make a contribution towards a more sustainable planet. They see a relationship between their own health and planetary health.

They understand that communal wellbeing is very, very important, looking after your neighbor, whether that neighbor's at work or whether that neighbor's at home. And there's an increasing feeling because some groups got such a raw deal in the pandemic that everyone needs to get a fair crack. Employees inside companies, especially large companies, want to see action on climate. They want to see action on social equity, and they want to see action on mental health because we are living in a stressful time, and companies have got to create environments which support those goals.

CC: So you put together some ideas about different concepts for the office, and I love how you've used alliteration to make them a little bit more memorable. So you talk about a magnet, a matrix, a mutual and a mentor. I was wondering if you could just talk about those concepts a little bit. So for example, what would be like a magnet type of concept for an office?

JM: A magnet office is where you are really using your office real estate as a social hub. You're not going to go there every day of the week, but it's more like some kind of social club. It's buzzy, it's convivial, and that's the magnet.

CC: So then what would a matrix concept be like?

JM: The matrix is different in character. The matrix is really a gateway to digital services. There's a recognition by the organization that a physical office is only part of a digital ecosystem, a physical anchor in a digital network. For example, Accenture in New York has a new office which has a broadcast media studio. So you can make great videos for hybrid meetings and video conferencing, and there's an acceptance that when you're in the physical office, you're going to be interacting with the digital world.

CC: And then let's talk about the mutual and the mentor. What are those all about?

JM: So the mutual office is all about the shared experience. So this is really where issues around sustainability and inclusion and social equity come into view. This is where you make your office much more permeable to the neighborhood, to the local community. It's not automatically sealed, there's a public viewing gallery. There might be a food market on the ground floor of the office. There may be art galleries that the public can come into. There's a porous nature with the city in which the office is based, and there's a much greater respect for an integration with the neighborhood and with local typology. So for example, instead of just having a glass stump, you might create a park that could be used by the community. If you think of Amazon's new development in Virginia where they had walking trails that were going to go up the side of the building, I mean, that's quite a good example. I know that project's been put on hold currently, but the mutual model is all about reciprocal relationships.

And the final is the mentor, which combines two things, a focus on training and development and innovation, these higher value interpersonal tasks where people come together, but it also has a dual focus on mental wellbeing and flourishing. And there are some quite good examples around the world where companies have tried. In the mentor model, it's the company as a counselor. So I'm not saying that these four models are mutually exclusive. I mean most schemes will want to be social as well as sustainable as well as mentoring. I describe them simply to show them as conditions, as particular kinds of models of the things that companies might aspire to develop.

CC: I'm so glad that you said that because as you were describing these different concepts, I thought, well, I like all of those ideas. Why can't they exist together? So I'm so glad that you talked about that. And I do think your point is right though that it is a lot more complicated to plan offices when we're thinking about all of these things when you're thinking about diversity as opposed to everything being the same in a very one size fits all kind of approach. So just to wrap up the conversation, Jeremy, I'm just wondering, given how complex all of this, is there any last words of wisdom that you would offer for our listeners as they're thinking about their workplaces or designing for their clients?

JM: Well, I've described a scenario which sounds complex and it sounds difficult and challenging on one level, but on another level, what I'm advocating and what the unworking book champions is very simple indeed. Start with people, the human-centric goals and aims and qualities of the people in the space. And people will say, oh, we've always done that. No, they haven't. We've had technology led offices, we've had real estate led offices. We've got X amount of square foot. We can cra this headcount in. We've even had design led offices. It has to follow this style or this look. What we really haven't had is people led offices. And I think this is what the new era is about.

CC: Before we let you go, Jeremy, we're asking everybody who's on this season. Can you just tell us one story of a person or an experience that you felt like really made an impact on people or the planet?

JM: Well, that's a very interesting question. I'm going to go for a project that I was involved in a number of years ago. It was called Welcoming Workplace, and it was looking at the brain drain of older people from knowledge industries. How do you get older people to stay in the workplace? So we carried out a global study with universities in the UK, Japan, and Australia. We interviewed over 80 older knowledge workers, and we came up with some prototype environments for them to test. And what we discovered was that offices were very good at collaboration. They had lots of open plan spaces and meeting zones, less good at concentration focus spaces, but they still provided desks –

CC: Which is still a bit of an issue –

JM: A big issue. But what they didn't provide was contemplation spaces. This was the kind of twilight zone of workspace design, the missing link, if you like. And we developed a series of experimental contemplation spaces, and they were ahead of their time. They had biophilia, they had water features, they had sit stand desks, they had soundscapes, and no mobile phones or laptops or tablets were allowed. So it was a digital detox.

And this was about 15 years ago. And at the time I thought it was a great study, but it was slightly ahead of its time. But everything we predicted around contemplation space and needing to restore yourself and recover during the working day, it's all come to pass. And since the pandemic, now we have a big focus on biophilia and mindfulness. So in a sense, I would pick that project as making a contribution.

CC: So if that was something that had a genesis in serving maybe an older generation of workers, it certainly sounds like something everybody would benefit from and everybody would desire.

JM: Absolutely. We started looking at a special interest group, if you like, but what we were really developing was inclusive design, all ages, all abilities. Everybody needs to recuperate during the working day.

CC: Well, I think that is an amazing story, and for what it's worth, yesterday I left my cell phone in the car inadvertently, and I started out the day feeling anxious. But as the day went on, I started kind of enjoying the fact that I didn't have my phone pinging at me throughout the day. So maybe there is something to having those moments where we detox just a little bit. So Jeremy, this has just been a delight to speak with you. I've been so grateful for your time, and I'm sure that there are a lot of people out there who have had a chance to see your new book with Philip called Unworking. But if you haven't had a chance to read it, I highly recommend it. I think it's really interesting, but also a very practical book for any of us who are thinking about the workplace right now. So thank you, Jeremy.

JM: It's a pleasure. Great to talk to you.

CC: Thank you for being here with us. Rebecca, can you tell us who we're going to talk to next week?

RC: Next week we're talking to Kara Pecknold. Kara is Vice President of Regenerative Design at frog. Frog is a global creative Consultancy, and we talked to her about a lot of things, but one of the really interesting things she has to tell us about is this work she did on a project in Rwanda that led her into this role where she helps other organizations develop these more circular business models, and she calls it the Next Economy Organization.

CC: Yeah, it's a really interesting conversation. So I hope you'll join us. And if you enjoyed this conversation today, please share the podcast with a friend or colleague or visit us at steelcase.com/research and sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and designs that can be delivered right to your inbox. Thanks again for being here with us, and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.