Corgan, JLL and Steelcase Share Insights about Creating Community at Work

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Work has changed more in the past five years than in generations. Yet many workplaces have been unable to adapt and meet people's new needs. Fostering a sense of community is crucial to creating resilient and adaptable workplaces.

Corgan President Lindsay Wilson and JLL Senior Vice President Jayme Schutt joined Chris Congdon, Steelcase's Work Better editor in chief and podcast host, for a webinar hosted in the new Steelcase WorkLife Center in Dallas.

Christine Congdon: When we talk to clients around the world, big and small, one theme that comes up constantly is the degree of change they're facing. The ways people work, expectations and new technologies are nonstop. I'd like to get both perspectives on your clients' changes that will also impact the physical workplace. What are some of the big themes you hear from your clients, and are they different for larger, small, or mid-sized companies?

Lindsay Wilson: You said one of our magic words in your question: expectations. This year, we have been discussing the great expectations on the workplace. The pressure on what a workplace is asked to do has never been greater. Leaders have expectations, employees have expectations, and shareholders have expectations. So, getting to the heart of each organization and their goals for their workplace is our priority. The biggest struggles we see are in mid-size companies with multiple locations, not yet deciding exactly how they want to move forward with the purpose of their workplaces. At Corgan, we often help organizations get to those policy solutions as part of our workplace strategy engagement. No matter the size of the organization, uncovering the expectations for the place is key to a successful project.

Jayme Schutt: Like Steelcase, you know we love our stats at JLL, so to start us off: research tells us that more than 85% of employees want to spend at least some time in the office, which proves that the demand for physical workplaces remains strong. However, we're seeing the reasons behind the demand evolving significantly.

Today, the top two reasons for coming to an office are collaboration and camaraderie – both directly related to the topic of community. It's funny to remember a time when office space was based on just a simple math equation: number of employees, times a square footage amount, and we were off to tour office space. Today, our approach to the workplace is far more complex, and thankfully so. I often say to clients "It's about purpose, not pretty" meaning the pretty office will come but we must understand who you are as an organization, and what this real estate should help you accomplish before we can ever talk about space itself.

At JLL, workplace strategy is integrated into every aspect of our client interactions – it's just that important – and because the office is expected to do much more than simply house employees, for the investment in physical space to make sense it's imperative that we understand the vision and mission of an organization up front.

Ultimately, regardless of size, companies are recognizing that their physical workplace plays a crucial role in fostering community, driving collaboration, and supporting their overall business objectives which brings tremendous opportunity to the work we do.

CC: One of the changes we hear about from our customers is the dramatic increase in issues with employee wellbeing, particularly mental health. Physical health is still a key concern, but we're experiencing such a significant increase in anxiety, depression and burnout. It's impacting people's ability to do their jobs well. Organizations are exploring a lot of new policies and programs to help, but it feels like the workplace could do more. I'm curious about what you recommend as you talk with your clients.

JS: There is certainly a wellbeing urgency, but there too is an urgency for companies to make those hard decisions around office and expectation — employees want to understand the baseline of what is expected of them. Think about it like this: if every morning you wake up and have to decide 'should I go into the office, or work from home today?' And for those with an agile work environment, 'where will I sit, where will my team be, did I sign up for a desk?' and so on paper these options seem like a great benefit, but they're exhaustive over time and we're seeing that they're actually leading to decision fatigue, perpetuating anxiety and burnout.

Additionally, balance can also come in the form of location. Simply getting up, going to the office, and then going home can help create balance. As it relates to the workspace, we know that "critical activities" within the office have changed. The office is no longer just for work, but also for building ties with our colleagues.

CC: Lindsay, what do you think about when you think about wellbeing?

LW: It feels like some organizations are just now remembering the fun aspects, not necessarily the planned events, but the little things that happen. A client recently moved to their new headquarters, and their head of HR remarked to me, "Having lunch together is back!" Restoring value in the community created at work is key to overall wellbeing at work. It's critically important that HR leaders have a seat at the project table. We need to understand the programs and policies that are in place and how the workplace can amplify what they are already doing.

CC: Another big change organizations face is AI and its impact on how we all work. Leaders and employees are both optimistic and anxious about AI. One of the biggest questions we are getting asked is how AI is changing the workplace. What do you see concerning AI and what should companies do to prepare?

LW: There's certainly a lot of conversation in the architecture and design industry about the impact of AI. For me this starts with a real test of the culture. Is AI a topic that employees approach with fear of what might happen to them or with curiosity. That says everything about culture, not technology adoption. In terms of integration into projects, we aren't seeing the tools widely adopted yet, but I don't think it is very far in the future where we see AI integration into scene setting for conference rooms and enhanced experiences with acoustics and lighting.

JS: While we haven't seen significant design changes directly related to AI yet, I do believe we'll continue to see an evolution of the hybrid/virtual changes that are happening today – reoriented meeting rooms, greater focus and dollars spent on integrated technology, sensors monitoring space utilization, and so on. For those stepping into AI adoption, I'll offer that communication is key. For example. We're seeing most people sit within three camps within the AI discussion.

There's the "Don't use it, don't care" camp. There are adopters who sit somewhere between interested and integrated, and then there are those who are terrified and believe AI is coming for their job. While AI will undoubtedly change how we work, it's important to remember that its primary role should be to augment and hopefully enhance human capabilities, not replace them. The most successful organizations will be those that find that balance between leveraging the power of AI and nurturing what are still uniquely human skills.

CC: Earlier this year, the Wall Street Journal published an article titled "Even with an Office Glut, Firms Can't Find the Kind of Space They Want." It demonstrated the growing demand for high-quality office spaces that offer exceptional workplace experiences. Jayme, what are you seeing both at a national level and here in Dallas?

JS: There's no question that trophy/AA assets are highly sought after in all markets. As the focus shifts from "return to office" to "in the office," buildings offering diverse amenities and ready-to-use spaces are naturally becoming more attractive.

But if the title is true — an office glut alongside unsatisfied tenants — this proves that physical space alone can't solve all workplace challenges. I was once asked by a client, "If I build it, will they come?" My response was a resounding "No!" While the building, space, and design are crucial, they're only part of the equation. True community in the workplace requires place attachment: people need to understand the space's purpose, see its relevance, and find meaning in it. Only then will they feel connected and contribute to creating the community we're discussing today.

CC: Lindsay, do you see a similar sentiment when we look at some of those smaller mid-size clients?

LW: Yes, and the neighborhood plays a big role in what they are looking for. The neighborhood is an essential part of the network of the workplace. Especially for small and mid-size organizations, they can extend their amenities beyond their space and their building by locating in active neighborhoods with a variety of outdoor, retail, restaurant and fitness opportunities. Beyond that, small companies are really investing in their workplaces.

They are using their workplaces to reflect how much they value their employees."

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LINDSAY WILSON | President, Corgan

At Corgan, we love these smaller projects; each company can really reflect their values and consider every corner of the space.

CC: I would also add that I was looking at the Kastle occupancy data, and it pointed out that the 'Class A' spaces have high attendance and occupancy levels. If you want people to be in the office more often, those spaces seem to be drawing people into the office.

LW: I'm hopeful that when we see more investment in real estate, we will have great owners buying these 'B' buildings in many markets and employing some of the same strategies that have made their 'A' class of buildings so successful – hospitality-focused amenities, spaces meant for hanging out, not passing through.

CC: That's a great segue into my next question. When talking with customers, I often hear concerns about productivity, engagement and the challenge of getting people into the office more frequently. While the focus is typically on performance and business results, our research, along with Gallup's, highlights a strong link between a sense of community and increased engagement, productivity and wellbeing. Some organizations recognize the need for community at work, while others may not have considered it in those terms. How do these insights resonate with your clients when considering the importance of fostering a sense of community?

LW: Some are and some aren't. My opinion on this is that the leadership of an organization drives it. You can cite some very large organizations. JP Morgan Chase would probably be one of the most visible because Jamie Dimon is so clear on the value they put on the physical workplace and in person collaboration and innovation. But then, we see organizations that talk the talk, but the leaders aren't committed to creating community in the office. So, it falls a little bit flat. The value of community in the workplace is still a continuum, but that isn't new.

JS: This topic can be polarizing, depending on the industry and leadership style of an organization. When we begin conversations around a topic like community, we need to understand leadership's mindset and comfortability on the topic before diving into discussions about 'kumbaya' moments in the break room. In full transparency, the leaders we work with prioritize work, which we all understand. This echoes the importance of involving HR team leaders in this process. The responsibility for community falls on workplace champions and leaders dedicated to fostering engagement. The workplace itself can't create engagement; it's the people who must bring it to life.

CC: And the workplace has to help foster that. You don't want the workplace to create barriers.

JS: Correct. Reseach tells us employees with work friendships are more engaged, have greater job satisfaction, and feel a greater connection to the workplace. While we want real estate and workplace design to support all these things, that's only one piece of the puzzle.

CC: One of the things we've introduced to help have this conversation with the organizations is this concept of Community-Based Design. It borrows from concepts from urban planning that have been successful and translates them for the workplace. Think in terms of a great city – you know what it feels like when there's a lively sidewalk and mixed-use spaces. When you think about these kinds of analogies and apply them to the workplace, how do you think about that in terms of approaching your clients?

LW: I love this! Urban planning is fascinating because it starts with a plan that evolves based on community preferences. In contrast, workplace design often follows a "set it and forget it" approach until the lease ends. Organizations should expect to invest in adapting spaces over time. This mindset shift is crucial.

JS: The two words that come to mind here are variety and evolution.

If we think about our office spaces and even our workstations over a broad spectrum of time, there has been very little variety and very little evolution."

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JAYME SCHUTT | Senior Vice President, JLL

Today we've been given permission to re-think the way we do work. We're able to have conversations around community in the workplace and not get a puzzled face in return. Asking the basic questions of "why" and "what if" allows us to take a hard look at if we're doing things because this is the way we've always done them – or does this align with the purpose that we defined at the start.

CC: Such great insight, ladies. Thank you for your feedback and for joining this critical Work Better conversation.

Watch the webinar to hear more from Lindsay and Jayme and see how to reimagine underperforming spaces and give people access to more options that meet their needs at work today.

Jayme Schutt is the senior vice president of workplace strategy at JLL, a global real estate services leader. With over 14 years of commercial and retail interior design experience, and now four years in real estate, Jayme blends workplace strategy with office tenant representation. Her unique perspective allows her to see how space can spark organizational success, enhance the employee experience, and develop flexible spaces that evolve with her clients.

Lindsay Wilson is president of Corgan, a global architecture and design firm. She is also the workplace sector leader for the firm, growing the team to 12 markets over the past 15 years. "At Corgan, we design to inspire, to uplift, to provoke thought and action, to tell a story that connects people with their space," says Lindsay.