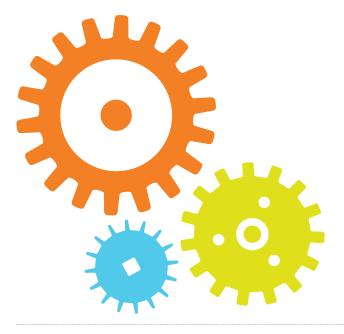# Organic Workspace®:
The New Platform for Business Transformation

Design of space must evolve to an adaptable, organic approach

Design projects are often an educated guess about the future. Whether it's an office, higher education, healthcare, or hospitality environment, the space is planned with assumptions about what activities and technology might look like five to eight years ahead. Often, due to the cost of reconfiguration, the resulting space remains unchanged for a long while. These costs create pressure to "get it right" the first time. After all, nobody wants to build the case for an expensive reconfiguration of space two years after a project is completed. This conventional approach to developing space can be described using a "machine" metaphor.

Interiors designed using the machine metaphor have spaces and furnishings that are static, but well crafted to work together in a predetermined manner, like the internal parts of a mechanical watch. These spaces work well until change is required. They are costly and difficult to change because each part was so closely designed to work with the others. There is no flexibility "built in" to the system. While the machine metaphor can still be a successful way of organizing space for some organizations, it is less successful for those that need to respond quickly and efficiently to frequent change.
At Haworth, we suggest an "organic" metaphor as a process for creating, managing, and maintaining space. The organic metaphor is that of a living thing, with internal systems that adapt in response to environmental changes.

THE FINANCIAL INCENTIVES OF AN ORGANIC WORKSPACE APPROACH ARE COMPELLING

- $ **Reduce the cost of change by 75 percent** [1]
- $ **First cost construction savings of 20 percent** [2]
- $ **Ongoing HVAC energy savings of up to 35 percent** [3]

Organizations that embrace the "people centric" organic metaphor are structured using flexible functions (departments, work groups) and spaces that change in response to business requirements. They incorporate feedback from market and customer needs. This adaptability is provided through the planning model, design process, and the individual spaces, policies, and technology used to keep these elements aligned with business goals. An organic design process consumes less client and designer time because the planning model offers greater choice and flexibility instead of a rigid solution that attempts to anticipate every need ahead of time. Over time, such an approach can reduce the cost of re-aligning the workforce and space to support evolving business objectives.

The machine metaphor uses a "space centric" approach to planning that emphasizes efficient workflow and minimizes cost—as opposed to design for human performance.

1 Haworth, Inc., 2010   3 Turner Construction
2 Megerson and Phelps, 2012

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Organic Workspace anticipates the need for change

In any organization, objectives are set in response to existing external conditions and customer needs. But these objectives change over time in response to changing external demands.

An organic system is designed to embrace change, ensuring that the physical space, technology, and policy remain in alignment with the goals of the organization.
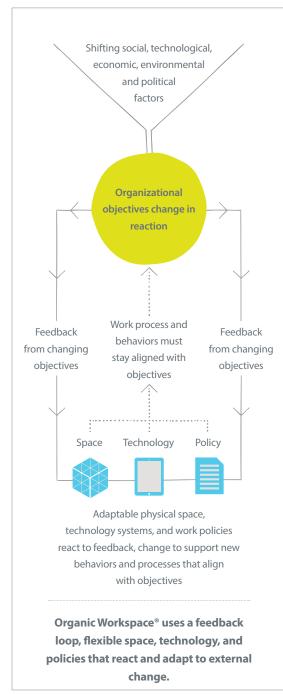
With Organic Workspace, shifting objectives can trigger change in the physical workspace, technology, and HR programs and policies. Information collected about space use, employee engagement, and other measures form a feedback loop that can tell managers when change to these elements is required.

Like a living organism, Organic Workspace gracefully adapts to change over time

The organic metaphor has implications for creating, changing, and maintaining top performance of the space over time. Haworth offers practical suggestions that use the organic metaphor to: **Create** a space that is aligned with the organization's strategy, **Evolve** the space as it "senses" the need for change, and **Sustain** the improvements over time and in alignment with the organizational culture.

Organic Workspace allows continual tuning to ensure that the workforce can achieve desired outcomes. For instance, assuring proper configuration and features can increase work group effectiveness by up to 12 percent and quality of work group processes by up to 31 percent. [4]

– Dr. Michael O'Neill

Shifting social, technological, economic, environmental and political factors

Organizational objectives change in reaction

Feedback from changing objectives

Work process and behaviors must stay aligned with objectives

Feedback from changing objectives

Space   Technology   Policy

Adaptable physical space, technology systems, and work policies react to feedback, change to support new behaviors and processes that align with objectives

Organic Workspace® uses a feedback loop, flexible space, technology, and policies that react and adapt to external change.

4 O'Neill, 2007

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Create a space that "builds in" adaptability to change

Tactics to achieve flexibility can start with high level workspace strategy, through sub-architectural elements, planning and furnishings, and even work policy:

Build flexibility into your workspace strategy and reduce costs by offering co-working hubs and other "third spaces" to employees, lease terms that provide ease of changing footprint, and financing options for components of the space.

"Rather than enabling business agility and employee engagement, corporate office buildings have become obsolete containers that trap organizations into maintaining old behaviors, waste money and carbon, and zap employee energy and creativity."

– Despina Katsikakis, Chairman of DEGW Group

Adopt work policies that provide flex work time and support work in off-site locations, as well as training on how to most effectively use new planning models and spaces.
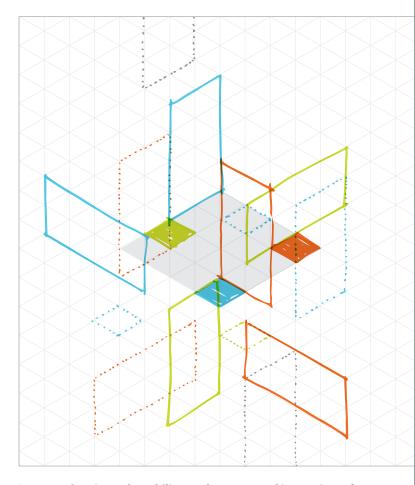
Engage employees in developing the right workspace strategy (and help them manage change), which can include their input into the planning process and review of initial design configurations.

Use a planning model that offers greater variety of workspace types and overall flexibility – not a rigid solution that tries to anticipate every unique need.

Integrate flexible building systems, such as raised access floor systems, to allow routing of underfloor HVAC, power, and data.

Accommodate changes to how space is partitioned, by using demountable walls and furniture systems instead of drywall or other traditional solutions.

Select furnishings that work together and can be reconfigured, supporting "mix and match" as planning needs evolve.
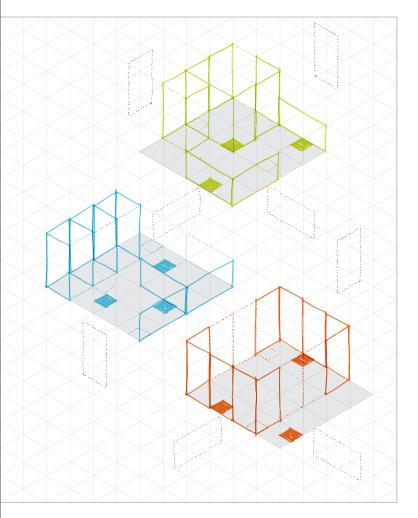

In space planning, adaptability can be supported in a variety of ways, ranging from broad elements like real estate and workplace strategy, and work policy, to building systems, architectural components, and furnishings.

"Space is a 'conversation,' a never-ending dialogue between the user and the environment, where ongoing evolution or transformation is much more important and valuable than an 'infinite final' design."

– Studio TILT, a design practice based in London, England

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Evolve the space as it "senses" the need for change

The investment in Organic Workspace is truly realized when the time comes to change the space. The "machine metaphor" space must attempt to absorb change within its rigid framework—while Organic Workspace gracefully accommodates change through some of the following tactics:

Optimize your investment between internal and external resources for managing the reconfiguration of sub-architectural elements and furnishings. The best approach might be a mix of both, since (with the proper training) internal facilities teams can react quickly to the need for change.

Consider temporary storage of unused furnishings. Since the footprint of the space can flex more readily with an organic model, plan to store unused furniture for reuse in other locations, a sustainable practice that can also increase financial flexibility and reduce costs.

Reconfigure the space as needed—and to test new ideas. An Organic Workspace approach better facilitates change and can be used as a test bed for emerging ideas and planning concepts without the usual time and disruption to employees.

Engage employees in the ongoing workspace change process through regular review of workspace goals and strategy, and by soliciting their feedback on work and space needs.

"Assessing potential suppliers—is a strategic business activity; are they financially stable; are they likely to have a meaningful cost or quality advantage; do they have the right assets and staff; and do they bring future innovations?"

– James Calder, Calder Consultants, Sydney, Australia

A space can evolve as needed when the right resources are available to change the interior components, programs are in place to store furnishings for reuse, and it's surrounded by a culture that involves employees and encourages new ideas in the change process.

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Sustain the improvements over time

Organic Workspace stays in alignment with work and business needs through regular (annual, bi-annual, or quarterly) feedback about the actual use of the space, as well as data that permits insights about how well the space is supporting the desired behaviors and performance. To manage feedback, processes must be set in place to determine the right measures, and use those to gather regular feedback about space use, workforce metrics, group and individual work process, and performance.

Identify spatial performance targets, which could include square footage per person, proportions of assigned versus unassigned space, and proportion of individual to group space.

Define workforce performance metrics, such as: employee engagement scores, wellness measures, performance evaluations.

Create group and individual behavior and performance metrics, and assessments of how well space supports these outcomes. These could include amount and quality of group and social interaction patterns, and measures of individual work process effectiveness, innovation and assessments of degree to which the workspace supports these outcomes.

The Organic Workspace approach sustains high performance when regular feedback is collected on space use, work patterns, and workforce measures such as engagement, wellness, and efficiency. Feedback is invaluable for fine-tuning the design and keeping it aligned with business goals.

"Conventional offices [using the machine metaphor] are like supertankers, if you wish to change course, or even minor adjustments in direction will takes significant effort and time to apply."

-Gerry Taylor, Creative Design Director, Orangebox UK

Organic Workspace offers a high performing and cost effective environment for any organization

Central aspects of Organic Workspace are "people centric" ideas about "well building," flexible interior building layouts and reusability of components, flexible building systems infrastructure, easy technology integration, and the ability to expand or downsize space through physical reconfiguration. Augmenting this flexibility with "third spaces" provides future proofing to office spaces while reducing risk.[5]

It's not only about space, though. Organic Workspace represents a shift towards a human-centric management that is evolving away from the "top down" management models and workspaces of the machine metaphor. The integrated consideration of people, and the spaces, technology, and policies they need to be effective, are what make organic organizations, and their spaces, unique.

This is the first in a series of papers on Organic Workspace. We will continue to refine this concept and explore its meaning and application with our clients and will share the results of that ongoing research. Contact **michael.oneil@haworth.com** and share your requests for future topics.

5 D. Katsikakis, 2014

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Contributors

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Mark Bridgman is an architect based in the UK with 33+ years experience. Mark is part of a global team of Haworth Workplace Design Strategists and has been engaged in projects throughout Europe, UK, North America, and Australia.

Kaj Helstrand holds a master's degree in Interior Design and a bachelor's degree in Communication Design. Based in Asia, Kaj has offered workplace solutions to multinational companies across the globe for 20+ years. He leads the Harmony Services Workplace Strategy & Transformation team for Haworth, covering Asia Pacific, Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

Stefan Kiss is a Senior Workplace Strategist for Haworth, based in Germany, with 20+ years experience in design and workplace consulting. Stefan has extensive experience as a member of global teams. His primary role is to act as an interface between research and clients needs.

Dr. Mike O'Neill holds a B.A. in psychology, an M. Arch, and Ph.D. in Architecture. With 20+ years in the industry, Dr. Mike is based in the US as Haworth's Senior Research Strategist, leading the research group. This group takes a broad global perspective to identify future trends and create research that offers practical insights for workspace strategy, planning, and products.

Haworth research investigates links between workspace design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the user experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments. To learn more about this topic or other research resources Haworth can provide, visit www.haworth.com.

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