

## Parameters, Not Perimeters for Global Workplace Strategies

### Back In the Day

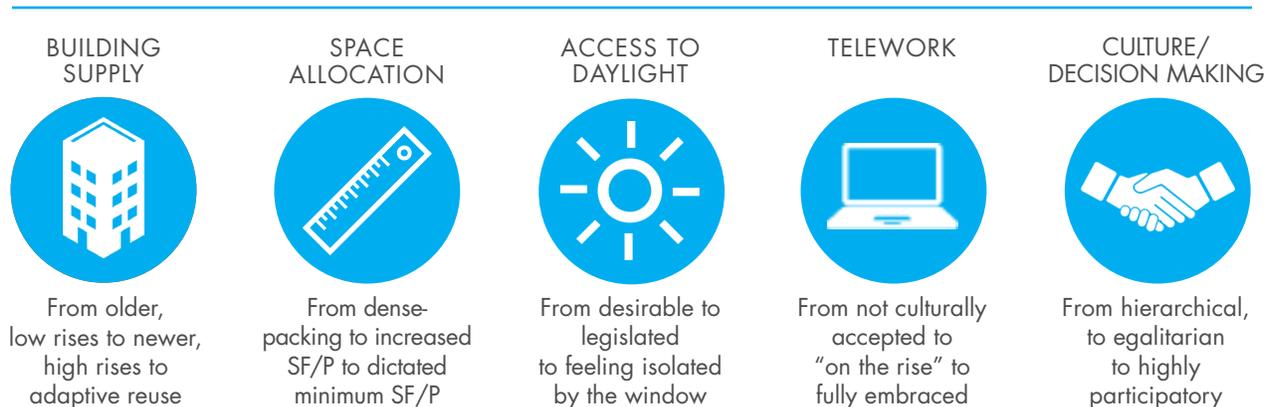
My first encounter with the challenges of creating standards occurred while working for an investment bank in the late 80's. With mergers and acquisitions in full swing, standards were a way of getting control of costs, minimizing inventory and creating a unified identity for the firm. Part of my job was to present options to Branch Managers from a fairly rigid set of specifications within one of three schemes: Blue for the Northeast; Green or the South; Khaki for the West/Southwest. I'd chuckle when a Manager would choose the scheme that matched his tie, but that was a good day; all too often he would "make a call" to the Divisional Officer and I'd be instructed to customize the offering. Thus defeating the program's intent to bring visual continuity to the firm and adding complexity to the project. Working with newly acquired branches was even trickier. Tasked with merging standards of two companies that - prior to acquisition - had been direct competitors, it was hard enough to change signage, let alone impose the culture of one company on another.

Fast forward a few years and I'm in Hong Kong. I'm literally waiting for furniture to arrive on a slow boat to China, only to find out once it got there that people in Asia used cabinets for Fools Cap binders, not the hanging files that had been ordered from North America. And the construction budget had a new (to me) and very important line item called Feng Shui. This meant that we had to add fish tanks and mirrors to the side of the trading floor that didn't face the "good joss" harbor, and move the trading floor from 14 to 13 - after all the M&E drawings had been completed - because the Chinese consider "4" a bad luck number. Quite a learning curve for my first week on the job and there were many more surprises to come.

### When In Rome

For many companies, not much has changed. The other day a friend and former colleague (who happens to be British, and is a Director for a global furniture manufacturer) recounted a meeting in the UK between her client, the (British) Global Sourcing Lead for a North American company, and her (North American) sales colleague: "I was never made more aware of the cultural divide that still exists...The easiest way to explain it is to say that neither person is comfortable in the other's environment and just longs for familiar things from home."

### A WORLD OF DIFFERENCES



*A partial list of planning considerations with examples of the range of differences to be encountered globally*

When in Rome...” may be wise words to travel by, but when it comes to creating global standards something often gets lost in the translation. Despite globalization, most standards programs are still implemented from the perspective of headquarters without sufficiently taking into account that the rest of the country - and the world - simply does not work in the same way. And people resent that because - let’s face it - however well-motivated the business proposition of *creating* standards may be, the process of *implementing* standards implies not only change, but a degree of conformity that can be difficult for people to accept without some consideration of (or concession to) how things work in their world. Reflecting on past experiences, I recall thinking even back in the ‘80’s that a few more options in the Branch program might have meant fewer calls to the Divisional; and in Hong Kong, just a little more research into local customs could have saved a lot of time, money and last minute accommodation. Indicating that in order to get more conscription, one might have to provide more, not less, choice or latitude in the decision making process.

### Parameters Not Perimeters

Eons ago, scientists say, the impact of an ancient asteroid boiled the oceans and created earthquakes and tsunamis worldwide. Trying to accommodate the myriad differences in labor supply and benefits; customary work hours and work styles; building supply, infrastructure and rent rates - just to name a few - into a single standard can also create a roar heard round the world. Moreover, it may be missing the point.

In “Welcome to the Human Era” branding experts, John F. Marshall of Lippincott and Graham Ritchie of Hill Holliday write that “the life expectancy of an S&P 500 company has dropped from 75 years in 1937 to 15 years today, ” meaning that the reality of business today is that companies must stay constantly current. As we’re increasingly seeing business models that stayed the same well into the 20th century now undergoing upheavals every few years, it might then make good business sense, where standards are concerned, to focus more on flexibility and less on uniformity. Using universal parameters to set boundaries instead of mandating one-size-fits-all perimeters can accomplish both by allowing locals more discretion in creating their workplace.

This is not an abdication of standards, but rather a call for greater cohesion among corporations’ global sourcing entities and their increasingly outsourced real estate providers, and a willingness to look at standards from a different perspective. When we look at the reasons standards were created in the first place: to a) save money, b) increase agility and c) convey the image of the brand, then standardization becomes less a matter of physical elements - like those three color schemes from the ‘80’s - but a process by which key financial, operational and cultural objectives are best served. This could mean creating a universal envelope with branding elements that also incorporate local nuances; streamlining the design and purchasing processes with guidelines and pre-approved vendors but allowing local experts to apply them according to local customs and regulations. Ultimately, this should mean finding new metrics such as frequency, time and cost of churn; customer satisfaction scores; and attract and retain statistics. I know this column has talked a lot about metrics this past year, but what better time than the New Year to reexamine how we measure success in creating cohesive, comprehensive, global workplace strategies?



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### ABOUT THE CENTER FOR WORKPLACE INNOVATION

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