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SANDOW Design Group Roundtable Series

ThinkLab Connects with *Interior Design* Giants of Design on Corporate Trends

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WORKING TOWARDS WHAT'S NEXT



In March 2020, many white-collar workers left their workplaces and set up shop at home. In April 2021, 72% were still working remotely, according to Gallup data. It's July 2021 at time of publishing, and the latest statistics from an average of top 10 US metros show 68% have yet to return to the office, according to Kastle Systems' weekly occupancy report.

The flurry of conversations around the “future of the workplace” has been dizzying at times. What's next? What role does the physical office play in the ecosystem of “work”? For the better part of nearly a year and a half, there have been more questions than answers.

ThinkLab sat down with panelists from *Interior Design Giants of Design* to hear the stories behind the data and get their take on the future of the corporate sector. We wanted to know: What do they think will stick? What's changed in their process? And how will all these factors impact the world of workplace design?



KEY PLAYERS



The event was sponsored by LINAK which was given exclusive access to the event and collaborated on the topics of discussion.

SPONSOR ATTENDEES

Kim Moran, A&D Business Development Consultant
Jordan Scott, Country Manager, Canada

FACILITATOR

Meredith Campbell, Research & Content Development, ThinkLab

GIANTS OF DESIGN PANELISTS

Panelists were hand-selected to represent a cross section of perspectives on the industry's current obstacles and initiatives.

They were asked to make **ONE BOLD PREDICTION** about what the future of corporate design might look like in 3–5 years. Here are their backgrounds and insights:



Marc Adelman

Principal, Workplace Practice Leader,
Stantec

BOLD PREDICTION

“Clients are thinking about how they can leverage technology and make it more effective. In a hybrid working model, how can we ensure that people who are working from home have the same experience as someone working in the office? We’re starting to see a lot of investigation into that whole concept and simplifying the process.”



Jessica Collins

Senior Project Interior Designer, HOK

BOLD PREDICTION

“I think one of the best outcomes of the pandemic is that it forced us to place our own ways of working under a microscope. It really highlighted the things that were no longer serving us and maybe hadn't been for a long time. As we return to the office, we're examining what is most beneficial for our people - not just from an economic standpoint but from a mental and physical well-being standpoint. What can we do to best support each other, our teams, and our clients?”





Mark Hiron

Design Principal, CannonDesign

BOLD PREDICTION

“The mindset of quality: quality of life and making choices that are going to be more valuable to people — whether it’s about productivity, a connection to nature, or a better sense of balance. Companies are thinking about their culture and individuals at the same time, and really allowing for that engagement to happen in a meaningful way. Making sure the experience is positive in both physical and digital settings is an exciting problem to solve.”



Christopher Keller

Principal and Design Leader, Interiors,
Stantec

BOLD PREDICTION

“I’m seeing increased creativity at the leadership level. There is an open-mindedness to the different cycles of work and thus different spaces that they may require. It’s refreshing to see space and policies supporting employees doing their best work by providing them with choice. At the same time, employees are becoming savvier to what they expect from their employer. There’s an awakening to what they believe in and will subscribe to in a workplace culture.”



Julia Leahy

Design Director, Principal,
IA Interior Architects

BOLD PREDICTION

“We’ve been working on these hypothetical scenarios for return to the workplace for the past year ,and now they are finally starting to become a reality for our clients. We’re designing spaces that will be flexible and support ebbs and flows. There is an optimism, energy, and enthusiasm around returning to the office — like a brightening and coming back to life.”

ECONOMICS *11.*

HERE'S WHY:

The *Interior Design* Giants of Design corporate sector fees were down 17% in 2020 over 2019. They are forecast to be down 1% in 2021 over 2020. And the Giants are a combined 82% “confident” to “extremely confident” in that prediction.

The corporate sector of the *Interior Design* Giants of Design is the largest sector by fees. The sector was down by 17% compared to the Giants' combined average drop of 6% across all sectors. And the corporate Giants predict a change of -1% year over year, compared to -6% for Giants with all sectors combined. And just as different sectors of design were affected unevenly by COVID-19, recovery across the country is also taking place unevenly, resulting in microeconomies that vary widely.

One panelist said that 2020 was a great year for them, and 2021 is shaping up to be as well. Another noted that they are seeing uneven recovery in their different offices across the country. How will the corporate sector respond to these outside pressures and V-shaped economic recovery?



This bounce back that you are seeing is pent-up demand, but it's also a reflection of how important design is. People are seeing how valuable design insight and strategy are.

—Mark Hirons
Design Principal, Cannon Design

01

DESIGN PROCESS CHALLENGES



HERE'S WHAT'S CHANGED:

More than 60% of the *Interior Design Giants of Design* in the corporate sector cited “recruiting qualified staff” as their top practice issue.

Additionally, the Giants of Design reduced their overall staff by 20% in 2020. We wanted to know: What’s changed in how they recruit and retain talent?

The panelists shared that their focus is on retaining current staff because of how difficult it is to recruit in this climate. They are focusing their efforts on retention through purposeful 1-on-1s and innovative mentoring sessions.

When it comes to sharing staff across offices, panelists spoke about a notable change: previously, where firms would have implemented production support for a project, they are now sourcing from another location from as high a level as senior designer.

Additionally, prioritizing is more important than ever, according to the group. From a talent standpoint, that means being laser focused on where an individual’s strengths lie and what their aspirations are, rather than just slotting someone into a role out of necessity.



Mentoring is collaboration. People flourish with a support network, and it's especially crucial for those newer to an organization.

— **Julia Leahy**
Design Director, Principal,
IA Interior Architects

Carve out moments that aren't just about the nuts and bolts. Mentoring is finding the moment within the moment by talking through a problem together and staying true to the original design challenge.

— **Christopher Keller**
Principal and Design Leader,
Interiors, Stantec



IMPLICATIONS FOR MANUFACTURERS

As we heard from the panelists, firms are leveraging staff across multiple geographies — and not just production staff. This might affect the strategy for calling on certain firms. Instead of setting a strategy by individual location, perhaps some firms need a national or regional strategy, with events and updates geared toward the overall firm or region, instead of an individual office.

During the pandemic, we heard from many firms that they were cross-pollinating with their other locations more than ever, for both internal and external engagements. Participants at a ThinkLab rep roundtable told us they are having to introduce designers to one another within the same firm. How can you be a cross-pollinator for these firms and create a strategy that's inclusive of multiple locations?

IMPLICATIONS FOR A&D FIRMS



With a focus on retention, the group shared that they treat their 1-on-1s like exit interviews, but they ask the questions now, rather than when talent is about to leave. Questions that aren't typically asked during 1-on-1s might be: "Where do you feel like we should be leveraging your talents more?" or "What's your dream job?"

During the pandemic, time management and efficiency may have improved, but the group pointed out that it's still crucial to find alternate mentoring methods so that employees feel like they are growing and developing. Redlines and markups provide fertile ground for collaboration and learning. Instead of a transactional handoff with notes, use the process to ask questions about your employees' thought process. By asking questions, you are getting people to think about the design issues and solve the problem together.



02

ECOSYSTEM EVOLUTION



HERE'S WHY:

Prior to the pandemic, there was pressure on the project schedule, and valuable parts of the design process were often cut short. Since observational data and historical benchmarking isn't relevant anymore, clients are looking to designers for direction more than ever before. In fact, the conversation has expanded beyond just the physical space.

Value was discussed frequently during the roundtable, and when it came to the evolution of their role in the ecosystem, the group agreed that clients are having to make bigger decisions up front without benchmarking or observational data. Policy, space, and technology are equally important now, and the right questions have to be asked up front to uncover the business goals. More programming early on will be a bigger investment, but the panelists felt like that's where the value of design really differentiates itself. It is no longer a race to the bottom, at least where they are involved. A focus on strategy and business alignment will be important going forward, not just getting as many seats in the space as possible.

Before the pandemic, it often felt like a race to the bottom. How many people can we fit in the space, and how efficient can we be? The focus has shifted. It's a different dialogue. And it's a welcome dialogue, because you are working to create space that best supports people in this new era of work, with efficiency as a backdrop, not a primary driver.

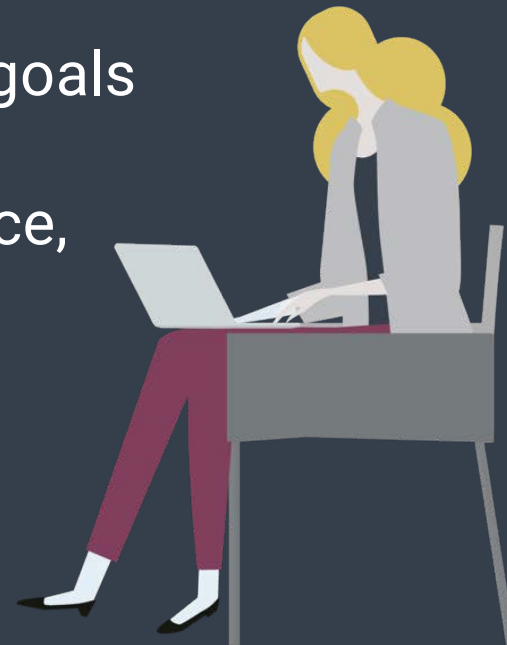
—**Julia Leahy**
Design Director, Principal,
IA Interior Architects



IMPLICATIONS FOR MANUFACTURERS

We heard from the panelists that they want their teams to “understand the goals of the project, and everything we select should tie back to those goals. It’s about being intentional and authentic.” Make sure you ask about the design intent and client goals so that you can help tie your product back to what’s important. One panelist observed, “If we are only selecting a product because it is pretty, we’ve got a problem.” They are focused on connecting it back to the larger project goals. Tell the story of not just *what* your product did in a case study, but also *how* it linked to the design intent.

Consider curating products by project goals versus features/benefits. For instance, wellness, experience, well-being, balance, and comfort are all words that kept popping up in the discussion.



IMPLICATIONS FOR A&D FIRMS



Slow down to go fast. With a focus on the iterative parts of the design process, the group suggested that charettes are important for a few reasons. First, they bring all team members together around a shared goal. It can be easy to forget the “why” of the project when you are in the weeds with production and deadlines. Second, charettes provide an undercover mentoring opportunity because everyone feels like they have an equal part in the process.

The panelists shared that technology platforms like Conceptboard and Miro have been useful tools for facilitating a virtual charrette. And while it was hard at first, several felt they’ve become just as effective as working in-person.



03

SOURCING PRODUCTS



Bespoke environments with an emphasis on hospitality, access to outdoor spaces, and integrated and immersive technology are all on the clients' workplace wish lists. How the space supports flexibility, user comfort, and well-being is top of mind.

HERE'S WHY:

Our panelists predicted that we'll be seeing less "seas of workstations" and more "palettes of places." Alcove settings, booths, and team tables will all be in high demand. Open collaborative areas will have pods with shielding and sound-absorbing materials; it won't be about physical separation so much as "mental separation" between tasks. The office will feel and act more like a coworking space with an emphasis on the individual's choices and work preferences.

Flexibility will get bigger — at the infrastructure level rather than just moving around individual workstations or training tables. Every space should be as multi-use as possible to allow for future changes. The panelists suggested piloting different applications in baby steps to start testing out different approaches.

We used to talk about choice in terms of tweaks to the individual workspace. Now we are physically implementing it on a larger scale. It's less about building walls, and it's more about creating a variety of environments within a space to support different work styles.

—**Jessica Collins**
Senior Project Interior Designer,
HOK



IMPLICATIONS FOR MANUFACTURERS

If the workplace will look more like a coworking space, as the panelists predict, the emphasis on working away from your individual workstation and choice in posture will impact product design. Alcoves, pods, and worktables were furniture pieces mentioned by the panelists.

Our panelists also mentioned a rise in bespoke interiors that are influenced by hospitality. Employees want a reason to go into the office and for it to feel like a destination when they do. With product imagery and product application, keep coworking and hospitality in mind to speak to this trend. The panelists have also seen an uptick in requests for outdoor space. Employees are asking for the same degree of choice and flexibility to work outside or inside.



IMPLICATIONS FOR A&D FIRMS



As part of creating bespoke environments and the emphasis on workplace experience, the group agreed on how important styling is. This is an often-overlooked element, but the consensus was that styling was key to bringing life to the space and making sure it looks “finished.”

Environmental branding and styling are both services that aren't typically included in project fees but are often offered as add-on services. The group questioned if styling and wayfinding should be included in their base fee, since they are key parts of the success of a space. Also, as hospitality makes its influence on workplace design, will these details continue to rise in importance? When it comes to wayfinding, *Interior Design Giants of Design* research indicates that this has been the case for several years, which suggests that this essential component will likely continue.

04

RISE OF THE SAVVY CLIENT



HERE'S HOW:

Interior Design Giants of Design in the corporate sector cite their top client issue as “client’s willingness to pay what it’s worth” (61.5%), and their second greatest business issue as “earning appropriate fees” (65.5%). So, we wanted to know: How are they changing the way they talk about their value or structure their service offering?

Our panelists felt that there was a trend among the C-suite to be more open-minded to change and new approaches to their workplace policies and real estate due to the pandemic. And in general, their clients were evaluating what was and wasn’t working for them. Clients are questioning elements (like the large conference room) that they used to just go along with, and now they are asking “Is this really working for us?” and “Do we really need this?”

Employers are taking a serious look at what their employees are asking for, which is driven by the war for talent. They are looking to their design teams for guidance on how to support their people in terms of both mental and physical well-being. And this is where the group felt that designers could really guide the strategy: helping their clients translate what all of this means for them in their culture, policies, and workplace strategy.



Employees are becoming savvier about what was working for them before the pandemic and what wasn't. I'm working with a client right now who says, "Before I put the sidewalks in, I want to see where people are walking."

—Marc Adelman
Principal, Workplace Practice Leader,
Stantec



IMPLICATIONS FOR MANUFACTURERS

Wellness and well-being are top of mind for designers, and our panelists confirmed that their clients are asking for it, too. A recent ThinkLab survey revealed that 47% of designers say their clients are placing more value on products that contribute to LEED or WELL standards. If your product has a wellness story, or contributes to these standards, make sure to tell that story in a crystal-clear, memorable way. These stories pack an extra punch when they answer the *why* (such as the value of investment) versus the *what* (such as features/benefits). What will this product help you do? Knowing the story behind the product makes it easier for designers to present to their client for approval. Having these products or applications highlighted on digital channels will help them be found more easily by specifiers.

ThinkLab.design
Interior Design Giants of Design
Corporate Roundtable Summary, 2021



IMPLICATIONS FOR A&D FIRMS



When they are enabled to do the necessary research, panelists agreed that framing questions the right way is crucial to getting good information out of focus groups and surveys. For instance, in return-to-workplace surveys — instead of asking “Do you want to work from home?” or “Do you want a seat in the office?” — our panelists suggested you dig in to find out “what you value most about coming into the office.” Questions like the latter uncover the *value* of a workplace setting versus just the *efficiency* of a space.



Designers are creative optimists. If you don't have design problems to solve, then you don't have work. The last year and a half has highlighted how many systemic challenges there are to solve for.

—Mark Hirons
Design Principal, Cannon Design

CONCLUSION.

The panelists were optimistic about the future of the corporate sector and the role of design in the ecosystem. While much is up in the air about what exactly these new ways of working will look like, opportunities abound. They recognized the role that designers play in helping clients evolve during this shift, and they also recognized that A&D firms have to continue to evolve as well. The group acknowledged that hybrid will be a challenge and may be harder to manage.

01

NETWORK OF TALENT: Recruiting is difficult in this climate, and firms are focusing on retaining and developing their existing talent and pooling people resources from other offices, even at the senior level.

02

DESIGNER AS STRATEGIST: Where benchmarking and observational data are no longer present, people are seeing how valuable design insight and strategy are. There's less of a "race to the bottom" and more of a focus on the value of space rather than just the efficiency of space.

03

A PALETTE OF SPACE TYPES: Flexibility and choice will be key going forward. Planning spaces beyond the individual workstation that contribute to well-being and comfort are what clients are asking for.

04

RE-EVALUATING EVERYTHING: Companies are looking critically at what was and wasn't working for them before. They are more open to new ways of working and recognize the need to support their employees' physical and mental health.