

# Workplace Insights

## Three Big Ideas from “Big Data, Little Data, and the Art of Interpretation”

As in the past, Hixson’s Fall 2019 Thought Leadership Series event hosted a speaker who is working to advance thinking and design in the workplace. The event featured Melissa Marsh, Founder and Executive Director of PLASTARC, a workplace innovation and real estate strategy firm which helps clients leverage the design of their spaces for optimal experience and performance. Marsh presented “Big Data, Little Data, and the Art of Interpretation,” which looked at the ubiquitous nature of data in today’s world and how workplace design can and should be adapting. Drawing on experience gained through work with a range of clients across sectors and geographies, Marsh demonstrated how insights, based on a mixed-method approach of combining big data with first-hand observation, can help corporate leaders and workplace practitioners see past trends of the moment to create spaces that are truly customized to the ways people work. Her presentation revealed three big ideas:

**1. Data is All Around Us.** Data is everywhere in today’s office space. We can capture square feet per person, percentage of collaborative work, satisfaction ratings for event programming, number of hours spent in each space, and many other data points. Today, says Marsh, we’ve become obsessed with data. “In many ways, the availability of data and quantitative information, information at scale, aka ‘big’ data, is particularly compelling. Big data is the information that might come through building systems, through security system or interaction with mobile devices.”

At the same time, there is no neutral condition in architecture. “Everything about our environment is either helping or hindering what we’re trying to do there,” said Marsh. “There’s not an instance in which the architecture isn’t playing a role.” Therefore, we need to identify the things that are impacting the human performance in the workplace, and understand what we can do to create positive impact. According to Marsh, this is when “little data” becomes important: through hearing stories and anecdotes, observing behaviors, and through a designer’s intuition of what is really occurring and how the pace and place of work can be improved.

Marsh says that this convergence of big and little data is a particularly exciting moment in time. “Where we as an industry used to measure buildings by geometric and financial metrics, e.g., cost per square foot, square footage per person, today increasingly we can be just as quantitative about things that formerly would have been described as soft factors.” These underappreciated data sources are key to generating and testing useful hypotheses and developing a rigorous, scientific approach to workplace design. “We make tone-deaf decisions when we interpret the big data without the context or nuance that the small data provides.

**2. Move from Space Management to People Enablement.** Fully leveraging both big and little data sets enables companies to have informed design decisions and improved user satisfaction. “We’re at that moment in time where we see something emerging that hasn’t been visible before,” said Marsh, “...a golden era of architecture and design. Having all of this data – big and little – means that we can now focus on occupant delight by creating buildings that achieve an elevated quality of human experience. We can find ways that we can see people’s perspective of the environment and use that to make more spaces that better suit people’s preferences.”

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Marsh offered another way of looking at people enablement through data. “Think of all the different ways that you’re managing your day-to-day experience. You may be using Lyft for rides, Netflix or Hulu to watch movies and videos, LinkedIn or Facebook to connect with people. All of these are the different ways that you’re managing your life. Increasingly, it’s how you expect your building experience to be managed. What if after you had booked a conference room B on the third floor of a building, the next time that you try to book that room, you get a notification that says something like, ‘sorry this room isn’t available, but because you like it so much, we know that you’ll enjoy a conference room X on level Y?’” Marsh noted that when you can combine building information along with people’s preferences, “you can then guide them towards spatial- and place-making decisions, which will better serve them in the long run. The combination of human factors plus the data behind it allows us to have a different kind of workplace experience than we’ve ever seen before.”

- 3. Use the Data!** It may seem logical that once the data is collected, it should be used or acted upon, but that’s not always the case. “In both transparency of communications and commitment to change, you don’t want to ask any questions that you’re not planning to address,” says Marsh. “We can tell really quickly with an organization survey response rates, whether they have historically responded to people’s opinions or not. An 85 to 100 percent response rate in an organization where there’s active engagement and feedback and that data is used as a mechanism to improve people’s performance is commendable. It helps those taking the surveys feel ownership and that the company is responsible with the data that has been collected from them.”

During 2019, Hixson undertook a company-wide survey of our associates led by global insights firm Leesman. Watch for a future issue of Workplace Insights where we will break down that experience, the findings from the survey, and what steps we have taken post-survey. In the meantime, for more information on Hixson’s Thought Leadership Series, or to see a video of the complete presentation, contact Hixson’s Mike Tragseiler at [513-241-1230](tel:513-241-1230) today!