

*Interview with Dr Peggie Rothe,
Chief Insight and Research Officer, Leesman*



Shelley James: Leesman is the only, and world-leading employee workplace experience assessor.

Dr Peggie Rothe is their Chief Insight and Research Officer, which means that she is in charge of bringing together all that amazing data and then bringing it forward in ways that people can understand and use in their own businesses. Peggie is passionate about the way that great buildings make happy people and then great business.

Why does employee experience matter?

Peggie Rothe: It's commonly said that the employees are an organisation's most important resource. I tend to disagree with that. I don't think that employees are the most important resource. I think the employees *are* the organisation. So if you take the employees out of an organisation, you have nothing left.

So how they experience things is going to be absolutely crucial for the success of that organisation. How I would define employee experience is that it's all the different touch points that an employee has with the organisation.

And how does the office environment affect that?

Peggie Rothe: We know the environment has a big impact on how we feel and behave and interact and so forth. And it's no different in an office workplace. Therefore we can say that it's almost common sense that to have a good office environment, to provide that to your employees is going to be crucial for any organisation to really be successful and thrive.

We've been measuring how employees experience their office environments for about 11 years now. We've collected about 840,000 responses to our standardised Leesman Office survey.

In the average workplace, about 64% of employees say that their environment enables them to work productively. So it's more than half, but that leaves 36% who say that their environment doesn't enable them to work productively.

And inevitably, that's going to have an impact on how they're able to perform.

If the environment doesn't enable them to work productively, then they're not able to work productively.

Shelley James: Is it that it actively stops them or is it just that they feel it could be better?

Peggie Rothe: There are probably different ranges of that. So a proportion of the environments that we have measured are actually providing a really outstanding experience. We have a recognition programme for workplaces that get a certain score. They can be Leesman+ certified. Those workplaces are really working as a catalyst for the organisation.

That productivity number that I mentioned is on average 78% in the Leesman workplaces, which is naturally quite a lot higher already than the 64 in the average workplace.

If an average workplace is an *enabler* workplace, it enables people perhaps to do what they're meant to be doing. But it's a lost opportunity for the organisation to really utilise the environment to really support the employees in how they work and be at their best.



But we do also see workplaces that we would call *obstructor workplaces*. Where essentially pretty much everything that they try to do is in some way obstructed or stopped. It's like driving over one speed bump after the other during your workday.

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We see workplaces from everything that is really not supporting anything that employees do, to workplaces that perhaps may be good at supporting something. But those workplaces are not supporting another kind of activity. So you may be able to do individual work, but there's not really any space for collaboration, or the other way around.

Why do Leesman clients commission those studies?

Peggie Rothe: We work with organisations who have, for example, already decided they're going to do some sort of workplace change: They're planning to refurbish, or they're going to relocate. They do our survey as a pre-assessment in order to get a baseline measurement and to collect information that will help and inform the design process.

They would most often do a post-occupancy survey as well in order to be able to compare and really see what difference the changes had on the employee experience. But we also work with organisations who may do it much earlier. They may be doing this survey to decide whether they need to do something or not.

We also work with organisations who do the measurement as an annual assessment to ensure that the environment is as good now as it was maybe a year ago, and then two years before. Because the experience that we have of our environment constantly changes, even if the environment itself doesn't change.



And therefore it's important to keep measuring and making sure that our environment is still doing what it's meant to be doing. So we have the pleasure of working with a number of organisations that do the measurement once a year in order to make sure that their workplaces are still doing what they're meant to be doing.

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Are there sector differences?

Peggie Rothe: No, not really. Even if we look at the Leesman+ certified workplaces, they come from all different sectors. From all around the world.

So I can't really say that a specific sector generally doing poorly or generally doing well. We get good scores and bad scores within all sectors.

And sometimes we get good scores and not so good scores within the same organisation. They'll have some offices where they have already done some changes and perhaps have a new concept while they may have still some offices where they haven't really done any updates in a long time.

For example, in a pre-assessment, perhaps only 40 or 50% of your employees said that the environment enables them to work productively. And then, post occupancy, you've got 80% saying that they can work productively. That really quantifies what an impact all those efforts have had.

Has a workplace change ever resulted in a negative impact?

Peggie Rothe: It's very rare. It depends on the starting point. If you start with an outstanding workplace already and you're relocating because a lease expired, of course, there could be the risk that you're not able to create the same outstanding experience in the new one.

So sometimes, even if the results don't actually go down, the changes may not bring the improvements that you were expecting.

Are there particular types of change that make the biggest difference?

Peggie Rothe: If we do a comparison between the average office and the outstanding offices, I would say that the variety of different types of space is one thing that we see as a key element.

Quite a lot of new workplaces emphasise creating a multitude of different types of spaces that offer employees the ability to choose where best to perform individual activities. And we do see that when you really nail that variety, that's one key element of creating an outstanding experience.

Otherwise, generally, if we look at the best workplaces, typical of them is that they are open environments, or at least not typically your cellular offices with long corridors and individual offices. So they have variety of spaces, probably including things like phone booths, quiet areas for focused, quiet work, and so forth.

I thought all open plan offices were bad...?

Peggie Rothe: Open plan is a very broad concept. They can be good and they can be bad.

The worst case scenario is a massive open plan environment with rows and rows of identical desks and really poor acoustics and poor lighting. There may be a few meeting rooms around, but that's pretty much it.

Compare that to an environment that is nicely designed, with a variety of different spaces and settings. If you're about to collaborate with someone, there's a space for that. And if you need to focus, there's a space for that. And if you need to speak on the phone, there's a space for that. And both of those are open environments. So it really depends on how it's been designed.

What about the impact of light?

Peggie Rothe: It's challenging to pinpoint what is exactly the impact of a single factor such as lighting on the final outcome. But what we can draw from our data is that over 70% of employees say that natural light is important. And 62% say that office lighting is important. And if we look at the satisfaction scores with those two elements, in the average office they sit around 60%.

So 59% are happy with the natural light in their workplace. And 61% are satisfied with the office light.

But if we look at the best workplaces, they have scores around 75% satisfaction. So we do see that good lighting and natural light is a part of a workplace that creates a better experience. To pinpoint what proportion of that is due to lighting is probably impossible. But we do see that the better workplaces also get higher satisfaction scores with natural light and office light.

Can you say what difference that makes to business performance?

Peggie Rothe: It's impossible to control for all the elements that actually impact on that. If we were to have measured how an airline performed in 2020 compared to 2019? The numbers crashing probably didn't have anything to do with the workplace. So it's really difficult to quantify. But good lighting is an important part of an outstanding workplace and an outstanding workplace has an impact on business performance.

What about attracting and retaining employees?

Peggie Rothe: When we go through the results with each of our clients, we look at how different employee groups have perceived their workplace. We typically see that those who are new to an organisation have the best experience and then the experience starts to decrease.

We also typically see that it's more common that younger employees have a better experience of the workplace compared to their older colleagues. If that's not the case, we usually flag that to the organisation to say, your newest employees should be full of energy and on their honeymoon period in a new role within your organisation. If they're not experiencing that your workplace is outstanding, then have a think about how that's really impacting on their first impression.

Have a think how that impacts on your ability to attract new younger talent if the young talent that you have already don't experience your workplace to be good. Certainly the workplace is part of the impact on an employee's experience and an employee's experience is what's going to determine how they perform and if they want to stay.

What about the potential to create a more inclusive workplace for older people, for people with other sorts of learning styles, people who aren't 'neuro-typical'?

Peggie Rothe: I'd draw back to what we talked about variety. A variety of different types of settings does mean that you're giving employees choice depending on their personal preferences, their personal circumstances and so forth.

For a long time we have said that one size or one solution doesn't fit all.

And I think that, really, a way to create an inclusive workplace is to create an environment where the employee can tailor and customise their environment, depending on their needs and preferences and perhaps even your personal mood at the time.

If we think of, for example, noise. Some people are more sensitive to noise than others. But also the same person can be more sensitive at different times. If you're really tired for example. So having a variety of different types of settings and environments really helps every employee craft their own best workplace.

Is the Leesman+ badge something potential employees are looking for when scanning job opportunities?

Peggie Rothe: I hope they would do that because the certification is really based on the people who matter most: the employees themselves. So it's not a certification that is based on an external expert or jury who has said, 'we think this is a good workplace'. It's purely based on the opinions of potentially your future colleagues. So that certification is almost a guarantee to say that your potential future colleagues find the environment really works for the organisation and for them.

If I was looking for a new employer, I would be looking at what sort of an environment is on offer. And I think employees are going to start looking at the possibilities to work flexibly as a result of the pandemic. So I think employees have high expectations. And expectations on the workplace is certainly one of them.

Has the pandemic changed expectations?

We've seen in the 180,000 responses that we've collected over the past year that, on average, the experience working from home has been quite good.



We can say that the average home is better at supporting work, even though it was designed for living, compared to how well the average office supports work, even though that was actually designed for working.

So people have a new benchmark. Now keep in mind it does not apply to everyone. So we do see that more than 20% of employees have reported a fairly poor experience working from home. But nonetheless, on average, it's been fairly good.

And for any organisation who wants employees to still work in an office some part of their time, it's going to be really crucial to create environments that people want to come to.

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Because if the experience that you would have in the office is way poorer than the experience you have working from home, why would you want to go into the office? And we see that very clearly in our data.

For many clients, we've added a question to ask: “post-pandemic”, how many days a week do you see yourself working in the office or remotely? We see a very clear correlation between preference of days working back in the office and your experience of that office. If your experience with that office is poor, then you're more likely to want to stay more at home.

Shelley James: If you're thinking about changing your work, you'll be looking for places which offer you at least as good an environment as you are at home. So it sounds as though employers would do well to make sure that the environment supports them as much as possible.

One final comment?

Peggie Rothe: I really do think that this is a great opportunity now to really revisit and have a think about how does your organisation want to work going forward? Because homeworking or remote working has offered this new opportunity. It's also offered a new expectation from the employees. So the thing I'd really want to add is to encourage every single organisation to take the time now, if you haven't started already, to think about what are you going to have your office workplaces for going forward? And what does that mean? Do you need to change them based on how they're going to be used in the future?

So take the opportunity. The time to act is really now.



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Thank you!