



Centre of attention

The light-filled and airy work environment in the award-winning NZI Centre has proved a big hit with staff. Nigel Carter finds out why.

How much influence does a building have on work productivity? That's the question I set out to answer by visiting the award-winning new NZI Centre in Auckland recently. And I came away impressed—not just by the building, its light futuristic interior or the quality of the fresh air, but by the way it seemed to work for staff, and how pleased they were to be working in it. In fact, I was envious.

You can't help but be wowed by the NZI/IAG building. Even from the outside it is an imposing structure wrapped around the corner of the Fanshawe Street block book-ended by the Vodafone building at the other end.

Inside the five-storey atrium light floods in from the huge expanse of glass curving around the corner, and from the massive skylights in the roof. Stairs hang out over the atrium, bridging the space between the floor plates. To the rear of the building are the working floors, and stacked up the front are meeting spaces. Visitors come and go from the foyer which is a public space and features a cafe accessible to staff and anyone who enters from either of the two entrances on opposite sides of the corner.

Mike Kensington, from IAG's HR organisational development team, says with the five-star rated building, completed late in 2009, the company has been able to bring 750 staff from five different offices around the Auckland CBD together under one roof.

"We're in the top 100 most sustainable organisations in the world, so being sustainable is a fundamental part of what we are and who we are," he says. "A lot of corporates have something they pride themselves on, and for us it's sustainability. When we began the project with Jasmax the architects, we had a bunch of requirements and many of those were in the sustainability space."

These included triple-glazed windows facing the sun, collecting rainwater off the roof for the toilets and recycled water throughout the building. "We have smart lighting so the lighting only comes on when it's needed and the window shades follow the sun."

But one of the aims was also to attract and engage staff, says Kensington. "We wanted to make sure it was a place where people wanted to come to work."

As we talk in the busy cafe, people are constantly arriving at work and most choose to use the stairs rather than the adjacent lifts. Many are casually dressed, although 'suits' are arriving for a board meeting.

"Engagement of staff is critical. If you have productive staff you

get better business results," he explains, adding that the decor, lighting, desks, chairs are all ergonomic, all designed "to make people feel satisfied".

"We know from regular surveys how engaged our people are and that the physical work environment in Auckland scores very highly. When people come in for a job interview, there's that instant sense of 'wow, this is a pretty cool place to work'."

From the atrium you can see people working on each of the open-plan floors. Kensington says the design really promotes a sense that staff can walk anywhere in the building and that there's nowhere they are not allowed to go.

"Everyone is open plan, including executives. It's that sense of one building, one team," he says.

Asked if there have been massive improvements in productivity, he says that implies there was something wrong before. "You do tend to bump into more people—whether it's the chief executive, a senior manager or someone from a call centre—more frequently than you would in our previous premises."

He points to a colleague talking to someone in the cafe. "You might not have seen senior managers very frequently in the old building, but here you do, whether it's walking down the stairs or getting a coffee, it's great."

Although they wanted to create closer collaboration, there was also a need to balance the 'one team, one big happy family' aspect with the fact that the organisation has three main channels to market—NZI, which brokers insurance business; State, which deals directly with customers, and a third channel which partners with banks and the like to provide insurance cover.

Each floor has a different colour theme—for example, orange for State Insurance, blue for NZI, and purple for HR and technology—so although people can move around freely, there is still a sense of identity within the different teams.

Along with informal meeting spaces, called lily pads, that are accessible from each floor or from the stairs, the new building also has dedicated presentation and training rooms. Not only does this provide plenty of space for meetings and presentations, it also allows large numbers to congregate in one space for social gatherings.

Kensington points out that sustainability for IAG is about more than environment and saving paper. A huge amount of what the organisation does is about sustainability of staff, keeping people happy, and achieving a work/home life balance.



Simon Devitt

Informal meeting areas help create closer collaboration. Part of the success of the building has been the bump factor, helped by the stairs, open plan offices and shared spaces.

Staff satisfaction survey

A workplace evaluation entitled 're:work' had pleasing results for IAG and Jasmax. Under 'level of satisfaction', their survey showed:

- 57 percent improvement for look and feel of the workplace
- 23 percent increase for workplace supports creativity and innovation
- 61 percent increase for design aligns with brand and culture
- 24 percent improvement for personal workspace
- 29 percent increase for overall environmental comfort
- 44 percent increase for social workspace
- 16 percent increase for ease of interaction/communication
- 30 percent improvement for ability to locate and access information people and facilities
- 50 percent improvement for quality and quantity of bookable meeting space
- 55 percent improvement for quality and quantity of non-bookable meeting space
- 43 percent increase for collaborative workspaces

Property manager Steven Kelly shows me around a building he is obviously proud of. He points out the open-plan desks divided by partitions that are never more than 1200cm high so you can see everyone in the room, the tea stations at the end of each floor, and the subsidised staff canteen.

The floating floor houses an air conditioning system that floods the building with fresh air. "Up to 150 percent fresh air," Kelly boasts, "at least 50 percent more than a standard office building or the building code requirements." [See box.] He lifts a carpet tile to show me the easy access to the system and to cabling for the computers. The tiles can be rotated so desks and chairs don't run over the air conditioning vents, which can be adjusted so air doesn't blast straight at people.

Climate control and efficient lighting are key considerations, and on the double-skinned triple-glazed north face of the building, the blinds track the sun or, if it is overcast, they will raise to increase daylight. There are touch screens on the walls where lighting can be adjusted for particular spaces, so if someone is working nights they can just have lighting on in their area. The same screens have diagrams of the floor layouts so staff can key in a colleague's name to find out where they work.

As we move around we pass people meeting in the lily pad areas, and look down on the glass-sided boardroom, where people are in full view—unless they want to draw the blinds. While there are 180 or more staff on each floor, the rooms are quiet. "We spent a lot of time on acoustics," says Kelly. "I think we achieved it."

"One thing I've found," he says, "is that in our other offices staff always felt they had to book a meeting room and close the door, but just look around—there are people having meetings over there and there. A lot more meetings are casual now."

Throughout the planning and building process, IAG kept staff involved and everyone came through the building before they moved in. A webcam on a building across the road meant staff could watch progress and a countdown clock prepared them for the move.

One interesting aspect of the building that developed from staff input is the roof garden, where people can chill out while taking in a view over the harbour, or have a barbeque, lunch, coffee breaks or social functions. Architect Tim Hooson of Jasmax explains that the idea for a roof garden/outdoor staff area came about late in the project, after the building was already rising from the ground.

Staff kept expressing envy for another company building that had small outdoor decks, but these weren't possible in Fanshawe Street because the building took up the entire land area.

"Fundamentally the only opportunity you've got is the roof, which at that stage was a relatively lightweight steel construction and employees couldn't walk on it," says Hooson.

IAG and the development company agreed it was a good idea, so the answer was straightforward—"effectively continuing the floor structure of the lower floors on to the roof," he says. "It was

a substantial change. The building was well underway. We had to carry the lifts [and] the lift shaft higher, which meant we had to go back to the resource consent, which is a major piece of work. At the same time, [we had to] re-design the roof to allow an outdoor space for people to occupy."

Jasmax also decided a green roof made sense, both for heat protection in summer but more for the filtration of Auckland's downpours, with the earth and hundreds of plants slowing the deluge before it swamps the guttering or drains.

Hooson pays tribute to the IAG team who managed the project. "A lot of organisations have only a property or facility managers' point of view, that property is simply a requirement of the business, not really thinking it has any ability to enhance their strategic position. Our view is that it does. We did a lot of strategic studies with IAG before they had even selected the site, on their different brands, etc."

Previously, he says, meeting rooms were almost the single preserve of the people on the floor and few others would venture into them. He draws a diagram showing how there's a huge gap down the centre of the building, bridged only by the staircases. "We turned it on its head and said what if all the meeting space was here (when you first come in) and all the working space was here (at the back), then anybody could utilise these spaces. You didn't have to go to your space, you could go to someone else's space."

He says they have ended up with three times as much meeting space, with about 30 percent of the total building available as shared amenity. This idea was put to the test radically in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquake, when IAG staff had to respond quickly and continuously to the changing situation. They were able to have impromptu meetings and set up pin boards for planning like a wartime control room.

By hanging the toilets and air conditioning ducts off the rear of the building and the stairs and lifts in the central gap, the working floors were totally unencumbered space, apart from the columns holding up the floor plates. As a result the building is now operating about eight percent over its intended staffing levels. Hooson says that puts natural pressure on the building, but that's much better than an organisation having too much slop.

The building process has broken down barriers between the various business units. "In the operational workshops and business unit workshops we were acting as kind of introducers, bringing groups of people together who hadn't met each other, even though they worked for the same organisation. When they moved in they were not wondering who the people were wandering around."

Those are the big change moves that organisations need to think about, says Hooson. "Change in itself is not fearful. It's the lack of knowledge of the outcomes of change which causes the fear."

Nigel Carter is an Auckland-based freelance journalist.



Simon Devitt

A lot of meetings are more casual now and staff no longer feel they need to book a meeting room and close the door.

A breath of fresh air

One of the most refreshing aspects of the new NZI Centre is, forgive the pun, the fresh air. Unlike most conventional office buildings which force air down from the ceiling, the air in the NZI Centre swirls up from vents in the floor.

Tim Hooson of Jasmax explains how that works. "If you're conditioning from the top, you're bringing the fresh and cool air in where the air is most stale and hot, because hot air rises. The air we generate that has odours and particulates and all that stuff floats upwards and then, when you're bringing the air in from the top, you're driving the cool fresh air down through that layer, deliberately swirling the two together.

"It tends to mean you bring the air in at 8C or 12C degrees overhead so that when it reaches your body it's about 21 degrees. When you bring it in from underfoot, it naturally rises. You only need to bring it in at about 18 degrees so when it reaches your chest or body height it's about 21 degrees. You're bringing the air in appreciably warmer, which means the chillers on [the NZI Centre] are a third the size of normal chillers for a building of this size. That means a dramatic decrease in energy loads, so there's a real win-win.

"You get a far higher indoor quality from a displacement air conditioning system than from a traditional air conditioning system. There's much less potential for drafts, and the other plus is the quality of the air because it's not mixed with stale air. It's already 100 percent fresh."

Noticeable are the plants growing up the walls of the building. Hooson says most plants in office buildings struggle to survive after about four months and need a holiday to revive. Here the plants are enhancing the indoor greenhouse effect. They became an illustrator of the air quality, like a canary in a coalmine.

"If plants can grow it has to be a healthier building. It's a very tangible message to the occupants about the building being green," he says.

—Nigel Carter