

SEB WORKPLACE – THE CHOICES WE MAKE



AF STAFFAN ANDRÉ
Head of GRE International
Group Real Estate, Group
Staff, SEB

For me, when creating an office, it is about weighing the advantages and disadvantages of each choice we make. Or how I use to put it: that we understand why we choose, what we choose and why we don't choose, what we don't choose.

When making a choice we all want it to be an educated choice. Therefore we read articles, visit other offices, talk to colleagues and with those, that have gone before us, we hire consultants who give us new insights and more.

But depending on which office you visit, who you talk to, which articles you read or which consultant you choose to hire, you will inevitably receive different information. You can find just as many articles about how good the open plan is for the sharing of information and collaboration, as articles on how the open plan is bad for individual concentration work and that you are disturbed all the time. You have consultants that will argue for activity based workplaces with no assigned desks and consultants that argue for open plan offices with assigned desks.

It would be easy if you had only two different choices to make. However open plan and smaller desks might be a cost saver and weigh more than individual concentration with larger desks and individual rooms. Having tailor-made space might weigh more than cost efficiency of having standard layouts.

All these choices and weighing the pros and cons of each choice is what makes working with offices so much fun. It is not simple. Like a Rubiks cube when you choose to have one cube in one place you also move 11 other cubes. When you decide to move one cube to another side and in a different row you might need to move all the other cubes. And what is the best way to move them and what do I not get when I am done.

I have had the opportunity to visit many offices and meet with my peers. When I think back at all the visits I have done, most offices have the same functions.

But what makes them different is, how they have used different tools (furniture, colours, meeting rooms, open spaces etc) and how they have put these tools together to be able to create different experiences and behaviours.

One company has chosen individual rooms for all their employees, another has open plan but max 16 people in the space, another has huge open floor plates with cubicles, another has a huge open internal staircase, another siloed floors, in one you can see into the office space in the other you cannot. All different choices and all give a different experience and have different benefits and everyone has had to make a choice.

When evaluating the differences, one question should always be asked: "How well did this choice enable the company and the employees to achieve their goals?"

So when judging a choice, you need to know why that choice was made and what the wanted outcome was supposed to be. And then, if you measure the outcome you need facts to prove that the choice brought the wanted results and that the choice was right. A post occupancy survey can help in understanding if the choices made have the wanted results.

THE CHOICES WE MADE – SEB IN FINLAND HEAD OFFICE

The Finland head office for SEB has been developed in the maelstrom of this conflict while weighing what we get and what we don't get, the bad and the good of every choice. We were to move into a new building. We made lots of choices and I will not go through all of them, but I will try to bring up those, that I feel have had the biggest influence on the experience of the space.



The country manager chose to have his workstation right next to this glassed staircase in order to be visible for everyone

BOTTOM UP OR TOP DOWN

One of the choices we had to make was due to the fact that SEB would not be the sole tenant in the new building. How do we occupy the building? Three different concepts were developed. One was called "Welcome UP" and was a top-down concept and the other two were variations of a bottom-up concept. Bottom-up variation 1 was called "welcome" and variation 2 was called "WELCOME!".

In the previous office building we had a top-down concept that was not very customer friendly. We had an intercom on the ground floor with which you called the receptionist, who opened the door to let you enter into the stairwell. A small elevator then took you up to the 6th floor and there again a door bell had to be rung to get in. This was an experience we wanted to change. If the conclusion was bottom-up it would be with the entrance and client meeting areas on the ground floor. But the view was great from the top floor, with a vast view over the roof tops of Helsinki and down to the harbour. So would the conclusion be if top-down. In the end we landed in the bottom up variation 2 "WELCOME!". But even during the construction phase we revisited this question with a worry had we made the right choice. As the building stands now we know that we made the right choice.

OPEN OR CLOSED

Transparency is a key word within SEB as a business and we looked at how we can incorporate this into the building. At the same time, however, as a bank we have high confidentiality and should feel secure. When talking about transparency you can use screening or curtains and as with curtains they also add some aesthetics.

Staff had been used to sitting in closed meeting rooms and the discussion was how much is actually secret?

The conclusion was, that in the customer areas we invested in switchable glass, even though the cost was higher than normal glass, combined with screening or curtains. We saw the advantages and also that the use was seamless. This meant that when the rooms were not used you could see in and the space became more open and transparent. Also the walls around the central staircase were glassed so you when you moved horizontally through the building you could look into the floors and see your colleagues. The country manager chose to have his workstation right next to this glassed staircase in order to be visible for everyone. (See right hand corner of the picture above)

ASSIGNED OR NON-ASSIGNED SEATING

This was the big question in the beginning of the project and we even had an option in the agreement, that we would be able to hire extra space if we would choose an assigned desk policy. The question was also if it should be a rule for everyone or not. Non-assigned seating was – for some departments – not a major issue. We had already been through a pilot project, where 60 employees worked in this type of space and they did not want to go back. But for others, that had not yet tried, there were lively discussions and their reasoning was good: Some departments were only 8 people and needed to sit away from others for compliance issues; other departments had not come as far in digitalization and needed space for papers.

In the end we landed in a solution where no one has an assigned seat, but certain departments had as many desks as they had employees. The interesting part with



Open collaboration space



1-2 person pods

these departments is that they still move around and change seats in their space on a weekly basis. Believing that sitting next to somebody new gives new insight and builds the team.

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL!

Usually it is simple to create a standard floor and then copy this up and down in the building. Many things then become simple like construction and layout. As part of the project we involved the staff through a workshop. They were given the floor plans to design the space, that they were going to sit in. We could then see that they needed different environments. They might want settings in open collaboration spaces, concentrated work in 1-2 person pods, a number of different sized pods, need for whiteboards or projectors, screens and so on.

Today even when you walk around in the building or look at floor plans you might not realize it, but each department looks slightly different depending on which functions they choose to have in close proximity. It could be subtle differences like in one department there is a phone booth but in another that phone booth has a work desk for concentration work. For one department an open collaboration space can be set up more for sharing of information and discussions and in another more for project work.

LET US NOT FORGET ANYTHING

One important choice we made from the beginning was not to forget anything when it came to design. Sometimes it is easy to create standards for areas which can be seen as not so important, like toilets, changing rooms, locker rooms, coffee points etc. We chose differently, as these spaces were all designed with the use of different materials and colours. The gym, changing rooms and locker rooms should feel like a luxury gym, the toilets should reflect which floor they are on, the coffee points – even though the layout was the same – used different materials and colours so as to allow for different choices.

A NEW WAY OF MEETING CUSTOMERS

One of the biggest changes that we made was to change from a traditional reception desk to a concierge service. This meant that instead of the customer meeting the receptionists first they would actually meet the SEB employee that had invited them. This all started from a site visit that I did to another office and saw that they did not have a traditional reception desk. It was still a receptionist that met me, but the reception desk was gone. This allowed for the space to be planned differently. A traditional reception desk was compared to a concierge setting and from there the business started looking at their whole customer experience. Sitting in the entrance today and seeing clients walking in and meeting their host/hostess as they enter puts a smile on their faces and truly aligns with SEB being the relationship bank and caring for ambition.

MANY OTHER CHOICES

We made many more choices like a central staircase which reduced each floor with 25 square meters. We worried if people would use it or just go out and use the elevators. Today everyone uses the staircase and it has added to the bump factor in the building. We created a side entrance for staff. They were still allowed to use the main entrance of the building and take the elevator up to their floor. But as we created a café by the side entrance with better coffee we see all staff entering through the side entrance.

DID WE JUST MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICES?

No. We can see today that the open plan office does not support all modes of work. High concentration and also sensitive work is not supported 100%. We have the small pods that we can work within, but when someone uses them, they are considered to be avoiding other people. This is different from when you work from home a day. You are then considered to be needing a day of concentration.



Central Staircase



Design adds warmth

We can also see that we probably have a bit too much collaboration space compared to the need and space should be reallocated to workspace. Furthermore, we had the idea that we should fill the ground floor and 1st floor with clients and other partners that we collaborate with. As of yet we have not been able to execute on this and thus the space can at times feel empty.

WHATS NEXT?

Today we are in the process of making choices regarding SEB's new head office in Lithuania and also a new office for our Global Services in Vilnius. Same themes, but different anyway compared to the office in Finland, where the differences and experiences of the similarities allow us to make new choices. Also 3-5 years down the road since Finland we know now that new knowledge, new technology and new solutions available on the market allow for the choices of today.

There are things that we take with us even though they will be adapted and these are: the open staircase which allows for transparency, the use of switchable glass to create more transparency (no curtains), making the floors feel different using different colours and the awareness of furnishing and designing all parts of the building.

The way we work today within SEB will mean that we will develop space that supports agile teams and agile methodologies. A retail branch allows us to interact with the customer in new ways, and an entrepreneurial mindset combined with collaboration with partners and suppliers will allow for space to interact with the public, customers and employees in a new way.

FACT BOX STAFFAN ANDRÉ

Staffan André is Head of Real Estate and FM International with SEB. For SEB's sites outside of Sweden he is responsible for developing a workplace experience, that enables the employees and business to achieve their goals. He participated in the Nordic Workplace Evolution Summit in Copenhagen in December 2018.

FACT BOX SEB

SEB is a leading Nordic financial services group, founded in 1856. Since then we've been guided by a strong belief that entrepreneurial minds and innovative companies are the keys in creating a better world. We are here to help them achieve their aspirations and succeed through good times and bad. We care for ambition.

FACT BOX BUMP FACTOR

Bump factor happens when colleagues run into each other and can collaborate, ask questions etc. It is something that certain companies are working with actively using sociometric tools to get figures to see who meets who and for how long to make sure the right people are meeting each other.