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WORKPLACE  
TRENDS  
IN A VUCA  
WORLD  
WORKPLACE  
TRENDS

INNOVATIONS 2 SOLUTIONS

  
QUALITY OF LIFE SERVICES

# Workplace Trends in a VUCA World

*Thomas Stat, Founder, partner, consultant at Eleven Consulting Group,  
trusted advisor, business strategist, design thinker*



Few experiences and settings are wrought with as much convergence and divergence of opinion and range of perspective as the workplace. Function and process, organization and mission, culture and brand, space and environment all collide in the workplace, to either support or inhibit the quality of work or the quality of the work/life experience.

In an effort to understand, change and evolve a perspective on the workplace, those responsible for the workplace (from company leadership, management and HR specialists, to facilities and real estate professionals) look to trends to inform or affirm their approaches. Appreciating history and understanding momentum and trajectory are thought to be valuable in getting a glimpse of the future. And we all stand to gain from a look at the future that trends promise.

Trends are an interesting and devoutly human phenomenon. Independent of industry and organization type, most businesses, governments and institutions have been forever fascinated and even obsessed with how trends and the inherent forces of history and momentum predict and even shape our future. Polls, predictive markets and endless research initiatives endlessly seek to understand historic and current behaviors, in order to gain some insight and understanding into what the future might hold. Human survival and the distinctly human need and capacity to know what's ahead are deeply embedded into our DNA.

But the future is a place and time that we never quite get to experience. More importantly, despite our best efforts to understand and prepare ourselves for the future, almost all of the major events that have changed our world, leaders that have shaped our existence and products and services that have transformed our lives have been beyond our perspective, outside of our predictive curves and, in essence, outside of any predicted trend. Still, we remain fascinated with futurists, trend spotters and soothsayers of all kinds.

While it may be true, as Edmund Burke once said, "Those who don't know history are destined to repeat it," it may be far more valuable and relevant to embrace Albert Einstein's definition of insanity; "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

The long history of surprises, the unexpected and the unintended seem to suggest a very different approach to how we might best prepare for the future.

Insight and inspiration can come from the most unexpected places. In the late 90's, the United States Army War College coined an amazingly deep and prophetic acronym and along with it, one of the most useful and valuable strategic frameworks ever developed. "VUCA" advanced chaos theory to a state where assessment AND response were inextricably connected. VUCA was used to define and reflect the **V**olatility, **U**ncertainty, **C**omplexity and **A**mbiguity of reality and the general conditions and situations inherent in that reality. While conceived within the lexicon of military vocabulary, VUCA has been subsequently applied to new ways of assessing the present and, more importantly, the logical, strategic and leadership responses that emerge from understanding VUCA's core components:

**Volatility** – a focus on the nature and dynamics of change, the speed and forces of change and those things that act as catalysts, accelerators and inhibitors.

**Uncertainty** – awareness of the issues of risk, a lack of predictability, the probabilities for surprise and the overall awareness, understanding and even enlightened perspective on governing issues and events.

**Complexity** – an understanding of the multitude of interconnected forces in which our reality exists, the inherent chaos that is typically present, the human tendency toward overt organization and explicit disorganization, the applicable laws of entropy and chaos that pervade our organizations, culture and world.

**Ambiguity** – how sensation and perception are often confused, how bias, judgment and prevailing paradigms often conspire to cloud our thinking, defocus reality, create multiple truths and generally create confusion around cause and effect.





Few experiences and settings are as wrought with “VUCA-nature” as much as our work environments. In these work environments, the functional mandates of efficiency and productivity are assumed to drive outcomes. Organizational realities are imposed to counter-intuitive and support motivation, learning and the quality of results. Cultural qualities and virtues are expected to focus and guide behaviors. Spatial qualities are intended to support the quality of work and the quality of work/life experience.

Few companies get all of these elements right, if there is a “right.” Most operate out of the playbook of what others have done, what others are doing and what they believe achieves the results they intend. When prevailing trends and predictive understanding fail to support or enable the greater mission, it is precisely around the intersection of core elements of VUCA, with a respect for a more human-centric, “design-thinking” approach to workplace. When seen through the more realistic lens of VUCA and the generative lens of human-centered design, companies can move off the intoxicating and comforting trend line of compliance and conformity, and begin to define and design workplace experiences that completely respect human nature, thoroughly align with their culture, sustain productive behaviors and fully support the business mission. Rather than adhere to the trend, conform to and further define the norm and expect new and different results, companies and their “leaders” have an opportunity to actually lead and to make their future, rather than adapt to the trends or repeat the known and unknown mistakes inherent in the trends.

By way of example, the following are some often counter-intuitive perspectives and questions on today’s workplaces:

**Hoteling, Telecommuting and Virtual Work Environments** – In a reasonable effort to maximize real estate efficiency, shrink energy costs and reduce unproductive commute time, have we intentionally or unintentionally neglected the value of “place,” the powerful benefit of face-to-face collaboration and the fostering of actual communities and conversation?

**Work Processes, Multi-tasking and Focus Diffusion** – In our blind ambition to increase productivity, reduce staff count and improve efficiency, have we ignored the quality, accuracy and consistency of the work actually being produced? In our efforts to do more, achieve more and create more and more visibility around what we do, have we neglected the value of thoughtfulness, comprehensiveness and thoroughness?

**Meetings and Meeting Spaces** - In our efforts to gain group alignment, consensus and transparency, have the number and length of meetings become the new measure of our productivity? Are meetings being used to advance thinking, enhance discourse and broaden perspective, or simply to disseminate information? Are meeting spaces designed to support conversation, inspiration and creativity, or are they based on an antiquated notion of prestige, organizational hierarchy, privacy and two-dimensional information?

**Performance Metrics** - Are the currencies and measurements of success, achievement and performance relics of the time, motion and influence-based industrial age, or do they represent attracting, retaining and growing employees in alignment with the brand, culture and mission of the company?

**Creativity** - Is brainstorming, rough prototyping, testing and validating new thinking actually supported in your organization or cautioned against and avoided? Is failure encouraged or admonished? How are mistakes and those that make them leveraged, celebrated and turned into valuable learning systemically?

**Environments and Spatial Factors** - Do work environments actually support work? Are acoustic, visual privacy and personal space imposed conditions, or are creative interruptions, serendipity and interaction an inherent part of cultural DNA and organizational values? How does your space express antibodies, antidotes or vitamins for creativity and innovation?

**Community, Collaboration, Management and Leadership** - Is the workforce respected, supported and encouraged as an organic community, or is the tone and mood of the organization more firmly rooted in a sense of command and control? How and where does real collaboration, team and community focus express itself? Is the focus and visibility defined around managers, good management and tactical execution, or leaders, good leadership, vision and strategy?

**VUCA-ness** - How and where is the organization anticipating the issues that establish conditions, without falling prey to a limitation on those conditions? How distributed is the consciousness and understanding of conditions, issues, actions and behaviors within the culture and organization? How are independent variables identified, defined and appreciated? Does the organization prepare for unexpected challenges and alternatives to the defined realities? Is the organization focused on problem-solving without an equal or even greater focus on opportunity creation?







**Human-centeredness** – Are workers employees or family members? Is there an underlying or visible sense that the company needs to be defended from the employees? Does the “employee manual” or “employment handbook” define rules and guidelines, or empower challenges and opportunities?

The answers to these challenging questions lie in the keen observation and understanding of human behavior. And perhaps it’s not the answers but the opportunities these questions provoke. Regardless, transforming the work environment and experience will require the willingness to look at workplace, worker and working issues through very different, sometimes more sharply focused, sometimes more distorted, lenses. It will demand the capacity and ability to go beyond the prevailing paradigm and to synthesize new findings, norms and behaviors. And, beyond all else, it will demand leadership and truly leading the creation of bold, new outcomes.

### About the Author, Thomas Stat

Tom is a business and design strategy consultant, innovation thought leader, teacher, speaker and facilitator in the world of design thinking and human-centered design. He recently founded “eleven consulting group” helping companies grow and sustain success through innovation using a diverse team of full-time senior professionals in the behavioral sciences, design, business, brand, organization/corporate culture and communications.

Tom’s work is focused on identifying, developing and bringing “next” to life with a deep respect for the business, cultural and marketplace ecosystems in which “next” thrives.

Tom was an associate partner at IDEO for 12 years, co-leading the Chicago office, helping to shape and guide innovation/design initiatives for clients including Motorola, Chrysler, 3M, Tetra Pak, Scandinavian Airlines System, Starbucks, Kraft, Nestle, NAVTEQ, Whirlpool, P&G, Lilly, McDonalds, AMEX, American Greetings, Grainger, Walgreens, AT&T, Sony, Bayer, and others.

Current collaborations include Children’s Memorial Hospital, Jones Lang LaSalle, Sodexo, Baker Hostetler, Kraft, Lookingglass Theatre, Business Genome Project and JDL/Here, among others.

Tom is an active lecturer at Northwestern’s Kellogg Graduate School of Management & McCormick School of Engineering.

Tom was chairperson of the 2012 Edison Awards and founded Edison Universe, a NFP dedicated to education. He serves on the board of Children’s Memorial Hospital Foundation.

In Feb/2012 at TED in Long Beach, Tom delivered a talk about the universality of human connection as expressed by Shakespeare and Star Trek. In Oct/2012 Tom hosted the Edison Talks at Chicago Ideas Week.

Tom has a multi-disciplined background that includes Aerospace Engineering at Purdue University, a Bachelor of Science in Social Psychology from Boston University, a Bachelor of Fine Arts and a Bachelor of Architecture from the Rhode Island School of Design, and Marketing Management at Stanford University.

Specialties: Innovation, collaboration, organizational strategy, business consulting, project management/direction, relationship development, paradigm busting, account management.



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<http://bit.ly/sodexofacilities>  
[solutions@sodexo.com](mailto:solutions@sodexo.com) | 888 SODEXO 7

2013 Workplace Trends in a VUCA World  
9801 Washingtonian Blvd.  
Gaithersburg, MD 20878  
888 SODEXO 7  
[www.sodexo.com](http://www.sodexo.com)

