



Why smart offices get better attendance (Ep. 54)

[00:07 Weston Morris]

Welcome to the Digital Workplace Deep Dive podcast. I'm your host, Weston Morris.

[00:15 Weston Morris]

I've got two great guests with me here today: Simon Wilson, who oversees our experience management evolution here at Unisys, and Stacey Harder, who covers all things related to communication and collaboration in our offerings.

[00:28 Weston Morris]

So, what are we going to talk about today? Well, Simon and Stacey, I've been looking at a series of articles about return-to-office. We're just seeing it in the news—it's a thing that's happening. It seems like it's accelerating, but I'm noticing several articles talking about some challenges.

[00:44 Weston Morris]

For example, there's this article here in Forbes. It asks the question, well, no, it starts with why. But it says, "Why return-to-the-office mandates will backfire." The article goes on to talk about all the offices that were closed during the pandemic. There's not enough space for people. People can't find a place to work. Technology is out of date. What are you seeing in this space?

[01:10 Stacy Harder]

I know that I've been seeing several articles, and CNBC had a podcast on it too recently. They're really highlighting some of the major issues that employees feel they'll run into. For example, how about those with disabilities?

[01:33 Stacy Harder]

During the pandemic, we were all home. We kitted out our home offices with all the latest tech, gadgets, multiple displays, and comfy chairs, but those people with accessibility issues or disabilities were really able to embrace work at that period of time because they were equipped with what they needed to get the job done.

[01:58 Stacy Harder]



Now they're concerned about what it's going to be like when they have to go back into the office. Are they going to have those tools and the software applications that they need to really be able to be productive in the office rather than just staying at home and feeling comfortable there? That's been a big take I've been reading about.

[02:20 Simon Wilson]

During the pandemic, we were all taught that work is a thing you do, not a place you go to. What we need now is collaboration—that's the thing you do with people. And I think that's driving a lot of return-to-office initiatives.

[02:37 Simon Wilson]

From an employee perspective, there is a lot of reluctance to return. We have gotten used to our gaming chairs, having pot plants, and all of those things. We're very spoiled at home. Trying to return to the office, having the same levels of privacy, being able just to disappear and put the washing on—those things are really hurting when you go back to the office.

[02:59 Simon Wilson]

So I guess the challenge for us, whether that's in IT or the rest of the business, is how do we create, manage and understand spaces that people really want to go to? Not that they're made to go to, not that they're forced to go to, but places that people actually want to go to as a destination. I think that's really important.

[03:17 Weston Morris]

So when I see all these negative articles and people fighting return-to-office or complaining about it, it seems like it's not being implemented very well. Is there an answer? Is there something that enterprises can do?

[03:34 Weston Morris]

I will say when I talk to both of you, I'm convinced we've got something very appropriate that enterprises should be thinking about. Frankly, it's not a topic that's new for this podcast. We've been talking about employee experience for the last three years on this podcast.

[03:45 Weston Morris]

So, in this area here, I'd like to dig into that, thinking about specifically the return-to-office experience. Can we measure it? What's good? What's bad? How can it be improved, and



how can you actually get the value out of it if it's a policy you have? Stacy, you've been looking a lot at the technologies and the processes. What do you see as things that enterprises should be thinking about?

[04:11 Stacy Harder]

Well, enterprises should really be thinking about that your workspace or place can be anywhere. If you think about Amazon, for example, Amazon is asking and requiring people to go back five days a week.

[04:27 Stacy Harder]

I know most of those employees aren't knowledge workers who will be going to find a desk because that's another issue of trying to find a space—hoteling if you have all of these people coming back into a limited location.

[04:41 Stacy Harder]

But what about those people who are also being required to go to the closest what they consider office? It could be a warehouse. Are the warehouses fitted for someone to go and actually sit and do a job rather than box merchandise that needs to be shipped out?

[04:59 Stacy Harder]

Within seamless collaboration where I sit, we're taking a look at how we can provide valuable analytics and insights to our clients about their holistic environment. How can we give the employee an experience that will benefit them and encourage them and want them to go back in?

[05:18 Stacy Harder]

Through technology and applications, we help them with the software and be notified when other people are going into the office, such as other team members, so they're like, "OK, now I want to go in." How can we help them find the appropriate space? How can we help them book an appropriate meeting room or collaboration space when they need it?

[05:40 Stacy Harder]

Do they need a car park space or an EV charging station for folks who have EV vehicles and are concerned about being able to plug them in or also trying to help clients understand occupancy constraints?

[05:59 Stacy Harder]



Hot desking—are there enough desks? Are there only 100 desks for 300 people that are coming in? How do you really work that? Do things need to be moved around? Do you need to allocate additional space on a different floor?

[06:13 Stacy Harder]

What about information kiosks or digital signage? How can we help the employees understand where they have to go? What's important? What's going on in the company? How do we make everyone feel part of that company culture?

[06:26 Stacy Harder]

We're really trying to take a look at all of that through hardware, software, new technologies, and IoT sensors. How can we really help companies understand what they need to do to help their clients embrace going back in?

[06:43 Simon Wilson]

It's not even about being in the office, it's about getting to the office in the first place. The journey kind of starts there. So like you said, booking a car park space, booking maybe an EV charger, booking a desk because many companies sold off much of their office space during the pandemic. They just didn't think it was going to be needed. Now they need it.

[07:03 Simon Wilson]

So actually, if you go to the office on a Tuesday or Wednesday or Thursday in the UK, the offices are packed, the trains are packed. Go on a Monday or a Friday—it's relatively empty. The journey to actually get to work, that's the first thing.

[07:17 Simon Wilson]

And if you were to ask employees what they really want—if you had utopia, if money was no object and you could design your own perfect office, what would it look like? It would probably be a glass skyscraper filled with plants. Completely filled with plants, the aroma of coffee percolating everywhere, comfy seats, TV, signage, relaxed spaces.

[07:43 Simon Wilson]

We don't need to get into the cliches of a pool table or foosball. I think there is a limit, but certainly you can make a more welcoming space that feels less formal than an office. Because if the intention is to drive up collaboration, I think collaboration is a mindset as well.



[07:58 Simon Wilson]

You have to create an environment that fosters collaboration and gets people to want to be together at the same time. I think that's really important.

[08:09 Weston Morris]

I agree, and it also goes right in line with your mental health—how do you mentally feel when you're at the office? If, as you said, it's comfortable, it's engaging, it's not so distracting, but you could have the sound masking that just goes with the flow.

[08:28 Stacy Harder]

It helps you focus when you need to focus or are in an area where you need to be collaborative. There's something else that's playing or something else that catches your eye. It's that breathable feeling—I feel comfortable here to get the job done rather than the angst that some office spaces can end up making you feel.

[08:48 Simon Wilson]

I think the word that we're kind of missing here is the vibe. I remember the office being a place of real energy and noise, everybody on calls. Lots of atmosphere, lots of collaboration, lots of people just standing up, just talking, lots of water cooler moments. Maybe what we need is more water coolers. That would be a start.

[09:11 Weston Morris]

You know, Simon, it occurs to me you kind of crossed over here. We've been talking about the technology or the equipment that needs to be, or the services that need to be, in the environment, in the office space, but now you've hit on something else that we often talk about—experience. The feeling.

[09:28 Weston Morris]

The experience that people have here, and I know that's your area, that's why I brought it up so we could talk about it a little bit more. And I know you're doing some advances with XLAs, going beyond the device and the people to the environment. Do you see that as being maybe a secret weapon that can be used in making sure we've got a great return-to-office experience?

[09:49 Simon Wilson]



Well, yes, definitely. So in the world of IT, we all started with this digital experience management stuff because we focused on what we could measure. IT is about tallying. It's about data, and we had a lot of data about the desktops and about the applications and the networks, and we used that to build a picture of what experience looked like for employees.

[10:08 Simon Wilson]

We built XLAs to understand device performance, device health, application performance and health as well. But I don't know about you—for me, my device doesn't make me happy if it works well. It just doesn't ruin my day if it works poorly.

[10:26 Simon Wilson]

As you kind of move up this maturity scale in terms of what experience is about and what employees need, there's almost like a Maslow's hierarchy of experience for employees. If you think about it, it starts with those basic needs. I need a laptop, I need connectivity, I need to be able to use my applications. Of course, it does.

[10:42 Simon Wilson]

But then it moves up into other things. So if I'm a doctor or a nurse, I need to spend more time with my patients. If I'm a research and development engineer, I need time to develop more products. I need more time to do that. So, I think there's a level of experience at that level we're measuring as well, but then it's bigger than that.

[10:58 Simon Wilson]

It is about measuring my environment. It's about the things that I interface with. It's about my desk, my privacy, my space, noise, environment. All of these things actually have a big impact on my experience, and especially those are the things that make me want to go back to the office or at least not have a negative connotation with going back to the office.

[11:21 Simon Wilson]

Actually, I turn it back into a kind of learning experience. While I'm in the car, I'll put Audible on and do some self-reflection and learning. And then when I get to the office, I'm refreshed and ready to do my job because I've got everything around me, all of the tools I need in front of me in terms of my keypad and the things I interact with, but also everything else.

[11:42 Simon Wilson]



One of the funny things from some of the research that we've done is that one of the things that really upsets people is the canteen, because companies aren't capacity managing the canteen properly. By the time you get to the canteen, because you've had a meeting over lunch, it's out of food.

[11:59 Simon Wilson]

Well, in that case I need to get in my car and I need to go and buy something. I've disrupted my day. Experience is also about removing the friction. So that's removing the friction of all that desk booking and stuff up front.

[12:12 Simon Wilson]

So, Stacey, if you're in the office on Tuesday and I'd like to interact with you—without a stalking kind of thing—it'll let me know that you're going to be in the office on Tuesday. I might think about going to the office on Tuesday.

[12:27 Simon Wilson]

Maybe there's AI that could probably help us do that as well to understand how we can actually collaborate and be together and make sure that—one thing we all fear, of course, is that we're going to turn up to an office, we're going to put our headsets on and we're going to be on Teams meetings all day with people that aren't in the office. So, how do you need to make sure technology helps avoid that situation as well?

[12:47 Weston Morris]

Looking back to the articles that we're seeing in the news here, I'm kind of extracting two different reasons, official reasons or even alleged reasons as to why there's return-to-office mandates.

[13:00 Weston Morris]

One of them is more altruistic. It's like what you were just hitting on: improved communication, improved engagement, improved collaboration and that is actually a very awesome thing.

[13:11 Weston Morris]

Then the other might be one where it's just like, "I'm paying for this building. I've got these seats. This is not producing value for me." I want people to be in the office and I want them



to be there, but we'll put that one aside for now because I think that one's kind of a zero-sum game.

[13:32 Weston Morris]

Focusing truly on productivity and everything. That's my reason for returning to the office. That's what I hear you saying, both of you. Stacey, if I put in the appropriate technologies that provide and enable great communication like great meeting rooms, information about the building, letting me be productive, letting me charge my car, schedule, that sort of thing. That's all awesome.

[13:51 Weston Morris]

And then what I hear from you, Simon, is, let's take this latest evolution of your XLAs where we're measuring the experience of the environment to measure the value of the return-to-office program. Are people being more productive? Are they being more collaborative? Is the technology making that happen?

[14:10 Weston Morris]

So, as I take a step back, I'm thinking that's great for everyone that is an information worker that works in an office or a cube, or maybe a bit of hybrid, on the road or whatever. But some statistics say as much as 80% of employees don't fit that mold—they're frontline workers.

[14:32 Weston Morris]

I mean, can we apply this model that we're talking about here, especially measuring experience, to frontline workers? What do you guys think?

[14:43 Stacy Harder]

Absolutely. I 100% agree with that. Because frontline workers need to be able to do their job, just like knowledge workers. However, they do it with different technology and pieces of hardware.

[14:57 Stacy Harder]

If you think about it, 80% of the world's workforce is a frontline worker. What is a frontline worker? It's not only what the pandemic highlighted. It's not only nurses, doctors, and police that use the walkie-talkies or detachable tablets.

[15:19 Stacy Harder]



It could be anywhere—from your teachers to retail workers. Retail workers are an easy one right out of the gate. What do they need to do? They need to engage with customer service, engage with customers. Their hands need to be free.

[15:37 Stacy Harder]

They need devices and technology fit for a purpose that allows them to not only be customer-facing but also be inclusive of a company—to be part of that company culture, and how do you do that?

[15:49 Stacy Harder]

You make sure they have the device, anything from a mobile tablet to a kiosk with the appropriate software that allows them to be inclusive of the company's email. Being able to chat, email, collaborate.

[16:09 Stacy Harder]

But it's all of that, and frontline workers have been missed, historically missed and missed so greatly during the pandemic. And so, we really need to circle back with our clients and address that head-on because the first thing you think about with clients and what clients think about themselves is their knowledge base, their knowledge-worker base.

[16:30 Stacy Harder]

We need to help them understand: OK, we do have frontline workers. Who are they? We can help them identify those resources and then make sure we give them the tools that they need to be able to do their job.

[16:43 Simon Wilson]

I think there's kind of an irony here as well. The frontline workers generally don't get well looked after in terms of tech and all of that. And that's because often they're seen as potentially lower-cost employees compared to the rest of the workforce. But the thing is, these are the guys in front of customers generating the revenue, carrying out the tasks, and creating the reputation for the company that people want to come back and buy from.

[17:08 Simon Wilson]

So actually, it's even more important for them. And there's another irony as well—these guys don't have access to all of the tech and also, they're not living in the tech day-by-day



like the rest of us are in the back office. I sit in front of a laptop pretty much my whole entire life. The guy in a restaurant doesn't do that.

[17:24 Simon Wilson]

So, when there is a problem in the restaurant, how does he get help? I think measuring that experience again, making that frictionless process is even more important.

[17:33 Simon Wilson]

So, one of the things that we do is look at that sensor data, looking at the IoT data, looking at the POS terminal or the milkshake machine or whatever it is. But actually, you're looking at how hard that device is being used. What does its maintenance schedule look like, how can we proactively maintain that or monitor that so that if it does break, we've already raised the ticket, we already have an engineer on the way to fix it.

[17:55 Simon Wilson]

Now, let's not get in the way of these guys actually serving customers because the problem in a restaurant is that when somebody walks out because they've had a bad customer experience, that revenue is lost forever. They're going somewhere else, and if they have a good experience somewhere else, they'll probably stay there and not come back to you. For us back-office guys, if my laptop doesn't work for 20 minutes, it doesn't change my world. It doesn't ruin my day. I'll do something else. Revenue doesn't necessarily walk out of the door.

[18:19 Simon Wilson]

I think we've really got to tackle that from a frontline worker perspective because it's really important from a revenue and customer service perspective.

[18:28 Weston Morris]

You're really making me think about this. I'm just thinking about traveling recently, and probably every part of my trip, I was dependent upon a frontline worker either, as you said, as part of my true customer experience or indirectly, like the gate agent versus the baggage handler versus the flight crew versus the people inspecting the plane—the safety of it, filling it, all of those things.

[18:52 Weston Morris]



And it's just making me realize, yeah, they do not sit in front of a laptop, a traditional information worker office. And in fact, while coming out of the pandemic, the information worker got a bunch of new tools. We probably didn't have cameras, Teams, or things like that before the pandemic. Now, we all do. And so that didn't happen with frontline workers. There's an even bigger gap. There was a gap before the pandemic. Now, there's an even bigger gap, and it's probably worth doing an inventory.

[19:25 Weston Morris]

What are some examples, Stacy, of frontline worker technology that they would be using?

[19:32 Stacy Harder]

So, it's tablets. It's handheld devices, cell phones, sometimes old cell phones, and two-way walkie-talkies. It's digital signage. That is a huge play here. Now, I want to say that going into digital signage is probably a huge leap forward for a lot of frontline workers because, with a lot of digital signage, you have touch screens. So now it's more engaging digital signage. It's allowing them to do more rather than just view. They can interact, do training and different things like that. That's good.

[20:06 Stacy Harder]

Headsets that have Push to Talk. Now, with Teams, you can hit a button and be connected to specific teams. That's a huge leap forward. But I think Simon, to your point, they have been historically left in the dark with technology, and in the last four years, there has been such a huge leap in technology that I think clients really need to take a look at that. We really need to help them understand that if you're still using two-way walkie-talkies, you should be using headsets with Push to Talk.

[20:41 Stacy Harder]

Their hands are free. They're able to engage more. If it has to do with packaging or anything like that, it's going from maybe those old bulky kiosks to maybe a handheld short-wait tiny tablet that they're able to just hook on a belt and be able to walk around. But we really need to bring them forward because the technology is moving at leaps and bounds, and we can really help them excel more in their job and their roles.

[21:10 Weston Morris]

I mean, I can see the Push to Talk, but then you mentioned giving Teams to frontline workers. Help me understand that a little bit better. For example, someone on a



manufacturing line. Why do they need Teams? How is that helping them be more productive?

[21:24 Stacy Harder]

It not only allows them to be able to communicate with each other within a team setting. For example, if they're on a production line, something goes wrong. They can actually go right into the Teams app and they can either see knowledge documents, be connected virtually with someone remote and an SME that can help them fix a problem. They can log issues in there as well.

[21:49 Stacy Harder]

We've seen a lot of great responses to creating knowledge documents and articles related to common issues. We use AI to help rank these articles, so if there's a problem occurring in one location and others around the world are experiencing the same issue, the system automatically moves that article to the top of the list.

[22:12 Stacy Harder]

Instead of someone going over there and going, "OK, I've got this issue with this specific machine; how do I find this knowledge article?" It's like, "Oh, look, this is one of the top ten this week. It's right here, and I can find some resolutions or SMEs to contact for help." Teams allows them to do their job, still be connected to the company culture as well, and then be able to log tickets and do their normal day-to-day tasks.

[22:42 Weston Morris]

I can see there's a whole gap in technology that we really need to backfill for frontline workers. But I'm thinking, Simon, from an experienced measurement perspective, even creating an XLA, do you see the need for or value in creating an XLA just for frontline workers, and if so, what does that look like? What does it measure?

[23:04 Simon Wilson]

Yeah, I think it depends on the frontline worker and what they're actually doing. But I mean, we already create XLAs for different classes or personas within organizations. So yeah, why not a frontline worker? There's going to be so many of them, but as we said before, a frontline worker could be a doctor. It could be a nurse. It could be a conductor on a train. There are so many different aspects of this, but of course, yeah.

[23:27 Simon Wilson]



XLAs are for the technology that they're using, for the systems that they're using. Of course. Why not? I think it's really important because, actually, productivity gains there have a much bigger impact in terms of revenue and customer experience than they will anywhere else. I think it's ultra important to do it there.

[23:46 Weston Morris]

Do you see even going beyond that? We're talking now about the experience of a specific persona, right? A manufacturing person, a person in retail, or a healthcare provider. We talked earlier about the return-to-office and all this new technology—cameras, sensors, air quality and things like that—that could spill over into the frontline workers' space as well. Do you see any sort of value in creating an XLA to measure not just the experience of the persona but more of an ecosystem or environment?

[24:24 Simon Wilson]

Yeah. For example, in a restaurant, there is a lot of technology. There are lots of processes, lots of systems going on in that restaurant that are affecting experience and productivity. Every single second of every single day that that restaurant is open: holding that stuff together, looking at XLAs, comparing restaurants against other restaurants in terms of understanding the lessons learned.

[24:45 Simon Wilson]

Why is this restaurant doing so well in this space? Why is the tech in this territory, this region, doing so well compared to this one? All of that comparative analytics is useful in terms of lessons learned. Imagine playing that right back in the restaurant: A dashboard inside the restaurant, which shows how all of those systems are working together seamlessly in terms of the flow.

[25:03 Simon Wilson]

And showing how that's actually resulting in the bottom line being improved, looking for those impacts. But I think it's about using that data to predict failure too. I think that's the thing. Predicting when these things are going to break and making sure we're proactive and we do stuff about broken stuff or things that are going to break before they break.

[25:23 Simon Wilson]

Now predictive maintenance, so making sure we maintain devices based on how hard they've been used. Say, a cash teller machine is closer to the heater. Therefore, the



employees tend to sit at that desk more often, away from the door where it's colder. That device probably needs servicing and maintenance more frequently than less-used devices.

[25:45 Simon Wilson]

Using that kind of data and that technology to really understand—it's like plate spinning, keeping all these devices online as long as we can because we understand and predict how they're going to operate and behave and what they need. And this is weird and is a kind of irony.

[26:07 Simon Wilson]

We work in IT. IT is one of the least spoiled areas for this kind of tech. If you look at, say, aircraft maintenance, they've been doing this kind of predictive maintenance using algorithms and tech and data forever. Obviously, there are quite severe implications if things go wrong in that industry.

[26:24 Simon Wilson]

But the lessons learned from that, the theories, the processes completely apply in the restaurant space. Business-critical functions and revenue generating people and processes. I think it is incredibly relevant.

[26:40 Weston Morris]

Well, Simon and Stacey, I think we've accomplished what we set out to do. We started off talking about return-to-office policies not being as super successful as enterprises want either from the enterprise point of view or the end user.

[27:01 Weston Morris]

I think we've hit on a couple of things that the enterprises can take advantage of. It's within their grasp to be able to have an effective return-to-office program both for their information workers and their frontline workers.

[27:10 Weston Morris]

You guys have both identified some technologies that are going to be very useful if they're not in place today—technologies in the smart building, technologies in communication and collaboration, frontline workers, the Push to Talk example you gave, digital signage, smart meeting rooms. Backpinning all of that, as you said, Simon, measuring the experience and even tying the measurements we're getting to your return-to-office policy.



[27:38 Weston Morris]

Why am I doing return-to-office? If it's really about improving productivity, collaboration and engagement, let's measure that. That is doable. I love that.

[27:49 Weston Morris]

I'm thrilled that you guys were able to carve out some time. I know we've been super busy. Thank you, Simon Wilson and Stacy Harder, for joining me on this episode today.

[28:00 Simon Wilson and Stacy Harder]

Thank you very much. Thank you.

[28:02 Weston Morris]

So I want to just say, both [Stacy](#) and [Simon](#) love to talk about these things, whether it's the return-to-office, the smart building, the sustainability in a building, measuring the experience and how XLAs can evolve. Feel free to reach out to them on LinkedIn. We'll put their contacts in the meeting notes, and hopefully this will provide you some tips and suggestions as you implement an effective return-to-office program.

[28:31 Weston Morris]

With that, you've been listening to another episode of the Digital Workplace Deep Dive podcast. I'm your host, Weston Morris. Thanks for listening.