

# THROUGH THEIR EYES!

## Change Management Using Occupant Photo Surveys

By Leslie Schneider, with Victoria Mayer

### The Future of Change is Participative

Want to design workplaces that people love?

*“I would recommend the process to the rank and file employee who usually doesn’t get heard on these sorts of things. This is a great visual avenue to get your opinions considered for a major upcoming change.”*

*“I wanted to give my perspective on the office environment. Usually the loudest voice or executive champion’s opinion tends to guide a project’s outcome, and for [our company’s] long term best interest, contributing to a more diverse set of inputs seemed important. I would probably say that I was glad to help and that it was a very easy process so I would recommend others to volunteer.”*

These quotes came from participants in a CameraJournal™ project. Workplace occupants were asked a set of questions that they would answer with photos and related text (“journaling”) to add context and meaning to the photos.

Isilay Civan, a research and strategic innovation specialist for HOK’s consulting group in Chicago, asserts in her [Top 10](#)

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*“I hope that our Company’s leadership will have the information they need to make a more informed decision about what’s best for the majority of the employees as well as the Company. Hopefully, they will obtain some ideas or potential pitfalls that they may not have considered previously.”*

*A CameraJournal™ workplace survey volunteer*

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Trends Influencing Workplace Design that the overarching trend is that *people matter*. “If there is one macro-trend that encompasses all of the trends listed here, it would be the growing emphasis on people. Workplace design and strategy can play a huge role in helping to maximize the comfort and performance of occupants. Engaging with employees on how the workplace can best support them is a great way to start.”

John P. Kotter and Leonard A. Schlesinger wrote an article on change management back in 1979, for Harvard Business Review, titled “Choosing Strategies for Change.” It had such staying power that HBR reprinted it in 2008. The authors state that if the potential resisters are involved in the design and implementation of the change, “participation leads to commitment, not merely compliance.”

But there’s a caveat. The authors go on to say that participation can be enormously time consuming, and for some changes it can simply take too long to involve others. But in 2015, with new options for overcoming logistic obstacles, a building’s occupants can now be easily recruited as data gatherers and contributors to the process of change.

## Through Their Eyes

Many years ago, Gensler developed a workplace research option for “seeing the workplace through the eyes of its occupants.” A set of questions to gather qualitative, personal perspectives from occupants would be answered with photos. In a world before phones with cameras, and indeed before people even carried phones with them, Gensler borrowed a trick from wedding organizers who placed disposable cameras on reception tables so that guests would freely take snap shots of whatever caught their eye.

Similarly, Gensler strategy consultants would work with a group of employee volunteers, asking them a series of questions that they would answer with photos such as, “*This is essential to my productivity.*” Occupants loved being asked for their opinions as part of a big change they knew was coming, so asking for their input had a morale boosting benefit as well.

## Barriers for Collecting Photos with Notes and Data

Now of course, almost everyone has a very convenient camera on their phone. But the process of collecting and matching photos to a specific set of questions (and by a group of volunteers!) is still tedious and doesn’t offer much of an improved process over disposable cameras.

Adding to the challenge, the volunteer is encouraged to record notes about the photo and its intended meaning. So “camera journaling” isn’t just about photos. It’s about managing the data that gives the photos meaning: *who took it, what question was being answered, what about this photo is important to the volunteer, and so forth.*

On the volunteer’s side, the workflow of taking, documenting, downloading from the device, and delivering the

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“I volunteered hoping to help make a difference logistically for our next location by showing what works and what doesn’t work in our current facility.”  
*A CameraJournal™ workplace survey volunteer*

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photos is prone to error or lack of follow-through.

On the project management side, an even greater barrier is coping with the logistics of receiving and organizing photos and notes that get delivered—dare we say—through email? **Victoria Mayer**, Senior Associate and design strategist at Gensler, wouldn’t consider it. “With this archaic process, I wasn’t even going to figure out a work plan for receiving and processing photos from 30 different people.”

## A Logistics Breakthrough

Instead, Mayer worked with technology partner **FacilityQuest**, experimenting with a more efficient process for gathering feedback from people in workspaces headed for design changes. A device/phone app presents the questions and uploads the photos and comments to a cloud-based management site. No chance for photos to be separated from the questions that they answer, or from the identity of who took them. And with the transcribing capability of most phones, even typing a caption is unnecessary.

On the receiving end, anyone administering the process can go to a web page to watch the photos and notes as they stream in. Strategists view the photos and data by participant, or see them grouped to answer any one of the questions, such as “*This is the space I try to avoid.*”

The photos are now bits of data, stored with other data, fully searchable, sortable, and reportable.

Efficiencies gained by technology usually come at the perceived loss of the human touch. But in this case, a very familiar bit of technology (a camera on a personal phone) actually contributes hi-touch benefits, offering autonomy and creativity to an extended pool of stakeholders. The same results would not be achieved through in an interview process or by answering multiple choice questions.

For Gensler, and importantly for Mayer, CameraJournal offers her clients a way to reach a wider and more diverse pool of stakeholders when a major real estate change is being considered or planned.

In Mayer's words, "What we have found is that when a real estate event is about to happen there is a great deal of interest in knowing what is going on, and often angst over the potential change. **When people feel like they are in the know, or at least have a voice, it can go a long way to mitigating the collective anxiety.**"

"Use of CameraJournaling as a tool in our workplace strategy toolkit provides the client with another opportunity to gain employee input. **Because this is set up as a voluntary exercise, they are able to have as many or as few participants as they want.**"

### Subjective Data Complements Objective Data

The CameraJournal workplace surveys are always part of a larger suite of Gensler workplace analysis projects.

The images and notes from CameraJournal volunteers often reinforce and illustrate the story that other data points are telling. The perspectives of these volunteers complements the interviews of stakeholders and supplements objective data that records hourly room usage across weeks to get an accurate picture of utilization.

As Mayer points out, "The pictures are submitted independently but it's interesting how often you see similar photos or similar themes. Having a picture with an employee's point of view can help reinforce changes we are recommending to senior leadership. When multiple data points all suggest the same thing it really helps clients understand the big picture."

"A CameraJournal survey study usually validates the trends we see in the other data, but it serves the purpose of illustrating the conclusions in a poignant way that is very persuasive," says Mayer. "A picture is worth a thousand words, and while the overall conclusions are rarely divergent, the individual stories told by the occupants can be quite surprising and dramatic, such as

when we see a photo that points out an enormous pile of boxes in a space that has been 'temporary storage' for way too long."

### Participating in Change

As with any volunteer opportunity pitched to busy professionals, it can be challenging to recruit participants who don't know what they are in for. But once the game gets going, volunteers almost always report that it is easy and rewarding.

*"It was fun. I think the photos were able to really get individual needs and wants portrayed in a way that is better than simply telling someone about them."*

*"I liked going around and taking pictures. It was not that big of a commitment."*

Interestingly, the CameraJournal experience actually helps people be conscious about their workplace in a new way.

*"It was fun to think about what your work habits are like."*

*"Photos were a great way to really personalize my day-to-day experience while in the office."*

*"I really enjoyed being able to share unique places and their importance. For instance one of the questions led me to take a photo of the parking lot, because it is my absolute least favorite spot in the office. I don't think I would have ever thought about the parking lot as a part of the office without the ability of taking photos. Through the use of the photos it also opened up dialogue about the photos that others were taking – **I loved the collaborative process and idea sharing that this created.**"*

And, importantly for change management, being offered a voice in the process is rewarding for those who need to feel heard.

*"It's always good to take an opportunity to have a voice in a decision."*

*"I volunteered because I wanted a voice in the process of potential relocation."*



## The Occupants' Experience of Place

Photo answers to questions about productivity and collaboration offer visibility into a very personal experience of a work day. The CameraJournal questions vary from survey to survey, but common themes persist.

### *This is where I go for inspiration.*

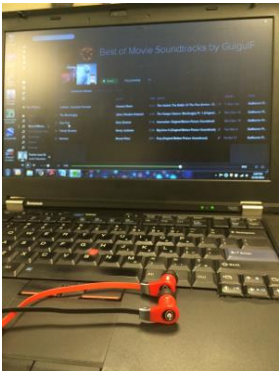


Conference room with view of skyline, especially when it's a clear day!

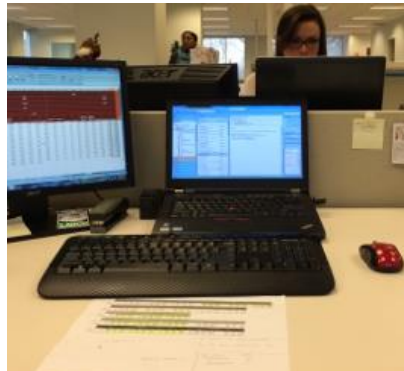


I enjoy working in less traditional spaces. My job can be done from any location.

### *This is essential to my productivity.*



Headphones and music on my computer. It gets so loud at my desk.



An extra monitor, wireless keyboard and mouse, docking station. These allow me to move around the office easier.

### *This is where I go to collaborate.*



Most of the time we have "hall meetings".



Whiteboards are essential.

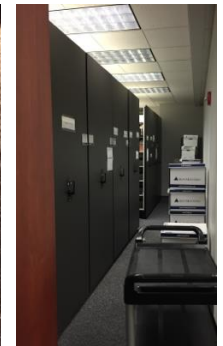
### *This is the space I try to avoid.*



The "break room". It is hot and noisy. Does not have a place to eat or take a break.



The elevators are pretty scary. They make terrible noises, you think you're going to get trapped.



The file room is small, hot and dusty. No air circulation.

## SUMMARY

The future of data gathering and decision making in architectural design and change is becoming more collaborative. While there is a great need for objective data on utilization—and the activities that take place *in* the utilized spaces—the power of place is most deeply seen and felt by those who experience it throughout the day and over time. Details such as why break rooms are inadequate or that elevators are scary or that filing rooms are too hot might be missed by utilization studies or executive interviews.

The resulting subjective data is gathered and managed just like the observational objective data: it resides in a relational database and can be queried, exported, and reported on.

The power of asking for participation creates a high value/low cost team-building payoff as well. Occupants and employees are rarely given the chance to be heard on matters usually relegated to executives and deployed by facilities management. These studies could become an important element of managing the resistance to change in addition to the benefits of the information gleaned. The quotes by participants prove this point: *a majority of volunteers feel privileged to be asked.*

Accessing the “wisdom of the crowd” for workplace design is not a mainstream expectation or activity yet, but the challenges for gathering and interpreting it are being overcome. The future of aggregating personally interpreted data—offered generously and with feeling by workplace occupants—is here now, and the value of these opportunities are for the taking.

Victoria Mayer is on the front line of innovation in design strategy research. And by being unwilling to put up with inefficiency, she has helped to drive a new solution. She sums it up: “As we continue to utilize this tool, we are always looking for ways to streamline the process, maximize engagement and make the deliverable report easy to understand.”

## Leslie Schneider, Director of Partner Marketing, Facility Quest



Leslie helps FacilityQuest create partnerships with the design industry and facilities management. Leslie’s marketing experience comes from working with enterprise clients such as Microsoft, and she is also an owner of a coworking business. Leslie has many years of experience with the technology of database publishing, and she understands the challenges of managing vast volumes of observation data.

## Victoria Mayer, Senior Associate, Gensler



As a workplace strategist, Victoria helps companies evaluate how their real estate fits into their overall business plan, and makes recommendations to align workplace and brand with corporate goals. She specializes in project management for high-end and multi-disciplinary corporate interiors and strategic workplace consulting. IIDA, LEED AP.

## ABOUT FACILITYQUEST

Since 2011, FacilityQuest has helped Gensler and other architecture and facilities companies to understand their facilities utilization. FacilityQuest develops solutions for gathering and reporting on observation data, occupant feedback, tagged photo feedback, badge data, and other ways of measuring and evaluating space usage.

**FacilityQuest**  
Inform your workplace strategy

info@FacilityQuest.com

510-842-6210

www.facilityquest.com