WORKSPACE

2026 Advisory Board

Commercial Real Estate

6 February 2026

www.workspaceexhibition.com

Table of contents

2026 Advisory Board Members

Allon van den Bergh
Managing Director,
AIS Interiors

Elliot Lewis
Real Estate Strategy and Operations,
The World Bank Group

Ewout Holst
Executive Director, MEA Solutions
Development, JLL

Iain Hird
Strategic Projects, Group COO Office,
Emirates NBD

Irina Budnik
Workplace Services Manager,
MENA turkey Africa, Google

Joyce Jarjoura
Studio Director,
Gensler

Rayas Ali
Founder & Managing Director,
Motif Interiors

Samer Mahdi
Director of Corporate Real Estate,
Baker Hughes

Sarah French
Middle East Head of Corporate Real Estate,
Office Management and Travel, PwC

Savas Cizmeci
EMEA Project management Lead,
Microsoft

Marina
Chairwoman of the Advisory Board
Founder and Managing Director,
Intelier

Introduction

WORKSPACE Advisory Board key insights report

The first Advisory Board provided feedback on industry challenges and actionable recommendations for WORKSPACE 2026. Each section below captures what was discussed, the current trends, required changes and key priorities.

Space planning and availability

The discussion focused on the ongoing challenge of balancing workspace efficiency with evolving attendance patterns and leadership expectations. Many organisations are under pressure to optimise costs by reducing their physical footprint, yet still provide enough space to support collaboration, well-being, and future growth.

Key discussion points

End users often request smaller spaces to show operational efficiency, while leadership teams expect higher office attendance as part of their return-to-office strategies. This mismatch creates tension in planning and often highlights a lack of available, high-quality space in several regions.

Current scenario

Most companies begin projects with conservative space allocations to manage costs. Over time, as their needs grow, they expand incrementally - resulting in fragmented layouts. Although designs are intended to be flexible, they frequently become static due to high costs and practical constraints associated with reconfiguration.

Immediate actions

- Align space planning with realistic headcount forecasts and hybrid attendance patterns.
- Implement modular design solutions that allow reconfiguration without major capital investment.

Future focus

Organisations should adopt regular workspace optimisation reviews -every 6 to 12 months -using real occupancy data and organisational changes to guide adjustments.

Key improvement areas

- Stronger collaboration between Corporate Real Estate (CRE), HR and leadership on space requirements.
- Greater investment in reconfigurable furniture and adaptable infrastructure.
- Clear communication about the trade-offs between cost efficiency and workplace performance.

Conclusion

Workspaces should be viewed as adaptable infrastructure – not fixed assets. Accurately sized and thoughtfully designed environments enable businesses to evolve efficiently while maintaining productivity and employee satisfaction.

Hybrid work implementation

The group discussed how hybrid work continues to evolve as an ongoing organisational transformation rather than a settled practice. Leadership expectations, cultural factors, and the complexity of business operations make it difficult to establish a single, permanent approach.

Key discussion points

Advisors agreed that "hybrid" is not a fixed policy but a shifting balance between remote and in-office work. Many organisations are still unsure how to embed flexibility without undermining collaboration or accountability. Leadership teams often push for greater office attendance, while employees value autonomy and choice – creating strategic tension that impacts planning and workplace design.

Current scenario

Across the GCC region, leadership still prioritises visible presence in the office as a sign of engagement and performance. However, dynamic business conditions and regional volatility make fixed attendance models unrealistic. As a result, Corporate Real Estate (CRE) teams often find themselves reacting to policy changes instead of helping shape hybrid strategies in advance.

Immediate actions

- Replace rigid attendance policies with adaptable workspace strategies that accommodate multiple work patterns
- Reposition CRE as a strategic partner in conversations about productivity, performance, and talent retention

Future focus

Develop regionally relevant hybrid frameworks tailored to the GCC context - accounting for cultural expectations, industry dynamics, and leadership preferences. These frameworks should emphasise choice, flexibility, and measurable value to the organisation.

Key improvement areas

- Use data to demonstrate how workspace design directly supports measurable business outcomes
- Apply flexible zoning principles to enable different work modes - focus, collaboration, and hybrid meetings – within the same footprint
- Encourage leadership to communicate how workplace design enhances resilience, culture, and overall organisational performance

Conclusion

Hybrid work is a continuous process of adaptation, not a one-time policy update. For companies to stay agile, CRE must shift from a reactive executor to a proactive strategist—leveraging data and workplace insights to align spatial planning with core business priorities.

Employee productivity and office value

The discussion centered on how modern workplaces must justify their continued relevance by driving measurable productivity and engagement. As remote work technologies mature, the physical office must offer distinct advantages that digital tools alone cannot replicate.

Key discussion points

Advisors emphasised that the workplace should deliver clear productivity benefits beyond what employees experience working remotely. While organisations are heavily investing in digital transformation, there’s a growing risk that physical environments receive insufficient funding to support collaboration, innovation, and well-being. The challenge lies in ensuring that offices are designed and positioned as essential tools for performance rather than optional facilities.

Current scenario

Advancements in AI and digital platforms have made remote work highly efficient for many individual tasks. This means the office now competes as a performance environment – its value lies in enabling team collaboration, focused work, and spontaneous interactions that foster creativity and culture. However, not all office setups effectively support these high-value activities, which limits their perceived impact.

Immediate actions

- Design offices around specific high-value activities such as collaboration, focus work, and hybrid meetings.
- Prioritise workplaces that clearly outperform home setups - both in productivity and in creating meaningful connections among teams.

Future focus

Organisations should position offices as performance hubs - spaces equipped with integrated technology, diverse settings, and measurable productivity outcomes. This requires intentional design that blends physical and digital work experiences seamlessly.

Key improvement areas

- Develop concrete metrics to evaluate collaboration efficiency and the availability of different work modes
- Empower leadership to communicate the return on investment (ROI) of workplace improvements
- Integrate employee experience data—such as satisfaction, engagement, and performance - into CRE and real estate planning decisions

Conclusion

The modern office must demonstrably enhance performance, not merely provide space. Work environments that deliver a measurable edge over remote work will not only boost productivity but also help organisations attract and retain top talent in competitive markets.

AI and technology integration

The discussion focused on how artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies are reshaping corporate real estate, particularly in the UAE, where adoption is advancing rapidly. While the region leads in AI experimentation, many practical design and workplace applications are still in early stages of maturity.

Key discussion points

Advisors noted that the UAE is ahead of much of the region in applying AI to business operations, yet its use in workplace design and real estate management remains limited. Current implementations focus primarily on cost forecasting and basic analytics, whereas broader space optimisation still relies heavily on human judgment. Data privacy and security were identified as ongoing concerns restricting wider adoption.

Current scenario

Organisations are collecting vast amounts of utilisation data through sensors and workplace analytics platforms. However, these insights are often interpreted manually, limiting scalability and speed. While AI tools can accurately forecast project costs based on region and project type, they are not yet integrated into design processes or day-to-day space planning decisions.

Immediate actions

- Deploy secure, enterprise-grade AI tools for portfolio planning, forecasting, and cost modelling.
- Pilot AI-driven utilisation analytics that translate real-time data into practical spatial recommendations.

Future focus

Over time, CRE teams should embed AI into continuous workplace optimisation cycles using occupancy and behavioral patterns to inform reconfiguration, design decisions, and investment priorities more dynamically.

Key improvement areas

- Develop intuitive, user-friendly AI tools accessible to non-technical CRE professionals.
- Establish secure data environments that safeguard competitive intelligence and employee privacy.
- Encourage collaboration between technology providers and CRE teams to test and refine practical use cases.

Conclusion

AI represents significant untapped potential in corporate real estate decision-making. Secure, context-appropriate applications will give organisations a data-driven edge - enabling faster, smarter responses to business change in rapidly evolving markets.

Regional market dynamics

The discussion examined how demographic growth, urban congestion, and inter-GCC competition are shaping corporate real estate strategies across the region. As cities like Dubai and Riyadh continue to expand rapidly, traditional single-hub workplace models are becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.

Key discussion points

Participants noted that Dubai's growing population and rising congestion levels are challenging the practicality of having a single central office hub. Meanwhile, competitive dynamics between Saudi Arabia and the UAE are influencing both talent mobility and corporate investment decisions. These factors are pushing organisations to rethink where and how they locate their offices to remain accessible and attractive to employees.

Current scenario

Urban mobility has become a critical factor in workplace planning. Long and unpredictable commute times are reducing the appeal of centrally located offices, especially those in congested central business districts (CBDs). Portfolios concentrated in these areas often struggle to balance prestige with practicality, leading to accessibility and retention challenges.

Immediate actions

- Integrate real transport and mobility data into location and portfolio strategies - not only rental rates or brand visibility.
- Explore distributed hub or satellite office models that bring workplaces closer to residential areas or regional centres.

Future focus

The next evolution of workplace portfolios in the GCC will likely involve multi-node networks - a system of interconnected hubs offering flexibility, accessibility, and sustainability. This approach supports different lifestyle patterns and accommodates the diverse structures of each major city.

Key improvement areas

- Closer integration between transport planning and CRE strategy to ensure accessibility and efficiency.
- Development of amenity-rich office hubs designed for extended workdays and convenience.
- Creation and sharing of regional case studies showcasing the success of distributed workplace models.

Conclusion

Workplace strategy in the GCC is at a turning point. Organisations need real solutions for multi-hub portfolios, hybrid work, AI adoption, and productivity. WORKSPACE, MENA's premier event for workplace innovation, is where these solutions are sourced and decisions are made. If your business helps organisations plan, design, optimise, or future-proof their workplaces, exhibiting puts you in front of senior buyers actively seeking new solutions for their projects.

WORKSPACE

If your products shape how we work tomorrow, WORKSPACE offers the platform to be part of that conversation.

Contact us at sales@workspaceexhibition.com.

www.workspaceexhibition.com