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Journal of Corporate Real Estate

# From user feedback to design decisions: how workplace design practice interprets user evidence

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to investigate why validated post-occupancy evaluation (POE) tools remain marginal in workplace design practice despite their widespread availability and the growing emphasis on evidence-based workplace decision-making. While previous research has identified barriers to POE adoption, less is known about how workplace practitioners collect, interpret and translate user-related information into workplace design decisions.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Sixteen semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with workplace designers, architects and workplace consultants operating primarily in Germany. Interviews explored project workflows, methods for understanding user needs, questionnaire use and approaches to translating user feedback into design decisions. Data were analysed using an inductive qualitative coding process.

**Findings** – Workspace design operates through interpretive and narrative forms of reasoning rather than standardised evaluation. Workshops and conversations dominated user engagement, while questionnaires served communicative rather than analytical purposes. The study identifies an "interpretation gap": the absence of frameworks that help practitioners translate evaluation outputs into concrete spatial decisions, causing user feedback to remain disconnected from design action despite practitioners' genuine interest in evidence.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study draws on a qualitative sample of 16 practitioners, providing analytical rather than statistical generalisation. Future research should test these patterns in larger samples and develop methods that better support the translation of user feedback into spatial design decisions.

**Practical implications** – The findings suggest that improving workplace evaluation practice requires more than increasing the availability of measurement tools. Future POE approaches should focus on interpretive

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usability by providing mechanisms that connect user feedback to workplace planning and design decisions. In addition, organisations commissioning workplace projects may strengthen organisational learning by embedding POE within project governance and ensuring that evaluation findings inform subsequent workplace strategies and project briefs.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes to workplace design and corporate real estate research by introducing the concept of the interpretation gap, describing the disconnect between evaluation outputs and workplace design action. While previous research has documented the limited uptake of POE tools and identified barriers to their adoption, this study explains why evaluation data often fails to influence design decisions even when it is available. By linking theories of reflective practice and design cognition with empirical evidence from workplace professionals, the study offers a new perspective on the relationship between workplace evaluation and design practice.

**Keywords** Post-occupancy evaluation, Interpretive practice, Tacit knowledge, Qualitative methods, Evidence-based design, Workplace design, Corporate real estate

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Office environments play a central role in shaping how people experience their daily work, influencing comfort and productivity (Arata *et al.*, 2024; Göçer *et al.*, 2019). Over the past few decades, a range of post-occupancy evaluation (POE) instruments and user satisfaction questionnaires have been developed to capture how users perceive and experience their workspaces (Kim and de Dear, 2013; Preiser, 1995). A recent systematic review identified more than sixty such tools in circulation, yet found that only a small number are empirically validated or widely adopted, while most are tailored informally to individual project needs (Davalos Quevedo *et al.*, 2025). Despite this apparent abundance of tools, their use in professional workspace design practice remains sporadic and inconsistent.

Research has shown that POE is rarely embedded in architectural projects, and is often reduced to a one-time assessment or skipped altogether (Bordass and Leaman, 2005; Cohen *et al.*, 2001). The literature attributes this to practical barriers: time pressure, limited budgets, fragmented responsibilities and uncertainty about which tools to use (Hay *et al.*, 2018). But these barriers alone do not fully explain the gap. Even in projects where evaluation data exists, it rarely influences what actually gets designed.

The present study addresses a more fundamental question: what happens when user feedback is available? Several studies have noted that even where evaluation data is collected, its influence on subsequent design decisions remains limited and difficult to trace (Bordass and Leaman, 2005; Lolli *et al.*, 2022). This suggests that the challenge may not lie solely in generating data, but in how that evidence is understood and translated into design action, what this study defines as the interpretation gap. Through 16 expert interviews with workspace designers, architects and consultants working in Germany and The Netherlands, this study examines how design processes are structured, how user needs are explored, and how user-related information is interpreted and translated into spatial decisions. The aim is not to evaluate practitioners against a normative standard, but to understand the interpretive logic that shapes how they engage with user information, and to consider what this means for POE research, tool development and professional education.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### *2.1 Post-occupancy evaluation: tools, barriers and the evidence-to-practice gap*

POE encompasses a broad range of methods designed to assess how built environments are experienced and used by their users after handover (Preiser, 1995; Vischer, 2008). Despite repeated calls to institutionalise POE as part of standard architectural practice, its application

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remains marginal (Bordass and Leaman, 2005; Cohen *et al.*, 2001). The Probe studies of occupied buildings in the UK established early evidence of this pattern, demonstrating that user feedback rarely reached design teams in actionable form even in well-regarded projects (Leaman and Bordass, 2001). Later reviews confirmed the same dynamic: POE is widely valued in principle but struggles to become embedded in practice (Hay *et al.*, 2018; Lolli *et al.*, 2022).

The literature has offered several explanations. Time pressure, limited budgets, fragmented project responsibilities and uncertainty about which instruments to use have all been identified as practical barriers to adoption (Bordass and Leaman, 2005; Hay *et al.*, 2018). Organisational factors support these: POE sits outside typical design contracts, and clients rarely commission it as a standalone activity. Because POE grew historically out of facility management and building performance monitoring, it has tended to be treated as an operational (and optional) tool rather than a design resource, making it difficult to integrate into architectural workflows driven by iteration, negotiation and conceptual development (Preiser, 1995; Vischer, 2008).

What the existing literature addresses less directly is what happens when user information is available. Several studies have noted that even where evaluation data is collected, its influence on design decisions remains limited (Bordass and Leaman, 2005; Lolli *et al.*, 2022). Dam-Krogh *et al.* (2024), in a scoping review of POE in office buildings, found that a fundamental disconnect persists between measuring user experience and using those measurements to inform design. Vischer (2008) highlighted an important distinction between user feedback used as an operational management tool and feedback used as a design resource, arguing that the latter requires active interpretive work by design professionals, work for which practitioners receive little preparation. These observations point towards a different kind of problem: not simply whether evaluation is conducted, but whether its outputs can be meaningfully translated into spatial actions and how.

### *2.2 Design as interpretive practice*

Understanding why evaluation data fails to influence design decisions requires attention to how design reasoning actually works. Design is not a process of applying known solutions to predefined problems. Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner characterises design as proceeding through problem framing, iterative sense-making and reflection-in-action, guided by professional judgement rather than formal procedure. Lawson (2005) describes the same dynamic in architectural practice, showing that designers work simultaneously on problem and solution, each shaping the other throughout the process. Cross (2011) adds that designers rely on tacit cognitive skills such as pattern recognition, abductive reasoning and experiential inference, which are difficult to articulate or codify within standard evaluation procedures.

This interpretive model has important implications for how user-related information enters the design process. If design briefs are constructed through negotiation rather than specification, and if decisions emerge from iterative sense-making rather than analytical derivation, then standardised evaluation data may be structurally misaligned with how designers actually work. Hay *et al.* (2018) identified the absence of interpretive frameworks connecting evaluation outputs to design reasoning as a central barrier to POE adoption in architectural practice. Hoelscher *et al.* (2024) similarly argued for integrative frameworks connecting user experience evidence to spatial decision-making. Recent work has explored computational and visualisation approaches to making data more spatially actionable (Luna-Navarro and Overend, 2021; Regodón *et al.*, 2021), but how evaluation outputs are understood within professional design workflows remains underexplored.

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### *2.3 Positioning this study*

Together, these two bodies of literature identify a structural gap between the measurement-oriented logic of evaluation and the interpretive logic of design practice. Previous research has documented limited POE uptake and identified practical barriers; it has also positioned design as an interpretive and tacit practice. What has not been examined empirically is how this tension manifests within contemporary workspace design workflows: how practitioners engage with user information, what functions it serves, and why it so often fails to connect to spatial decisions.

This study addresses that gap. Existing POE research explains how user feedback is collected and communicated, while broader discussions of research-practice gaps and design-use feedback recognise the challenges of translating knowledge into practice. However, less attention has been given to the intermediate interpretive process through which workplace design practitioners make sense of user feedback and transform it into design decisions. We conceptualise this as the interpretation gap, defined as the absence of frameworks that allow practitioners to move from empirical user data to concrete spatial decisions, and examine the professional, educational and structural conditions that produce it. The study thereby contributes to POE research explaining why evaluation data often fails to influence design even when it exists, and to design cognition research by providing empirical evidence from the underexamined domain of workplace design practice.

## 3. Research design and methods

This study investigates how workspace design practitioners understand, evaluate and translate user-related information within architectural design processes, and why validated POE tools struggle to become embedded in everyday practice. Given the exploratory nature of these questions and the focus on professional routines, interpretations and tacit knowledge, a qualitative research design was considered most appropriate. Rather than aiming for prediction or generalisation, the study seeks to capture how practitioners make sense of user input and how this shapes design decisions. The analysis followed an iterative and reflexive process, moving between empirical material, emerging codes and theoretical interpretation.

A qualitative, interpretive approach was adopted to explore the cultural, methodological and organisational logics that shape workspace design practice. The study does not assume that the absence of validated tools in practice reflects a lack of interest in evidence. Instead, it examines how evidence is understood, valued and translated within existing design workflows. Expert interviews were selected as the primary method because they allow access to professional perspectives that are rarely documented in formal procedures or guidelines, and are especially useful when the research focus lies on decision-making processes, implicit knowledge and professional reasoning (Bogner *et al.*, 2009; Flick, 2018).

The study focused primarily on workspace design practice in Germany, while also including one participant from The Netherlands to provide additional contextual perspective. Germany was selected because it represents one of the largest office design markets in Europe, with a well-established professional field of workplace consulting and a distinct organisational culture in which employee participation structures shape how workspace change processes are managed. The Dutch participant was included as a secondary point of reference, given The Netherlands' internationally recognised role in workplace innovation and its strong tradition of activity-based working and flexible office environments. This provided limited but useful contextual variation while maintaining cultural and regulatory proximity.

Sixteen expert practitioners were recruited across both countries through purposive sampling, selected to reflect variation in professional background, organisational context and national setting (see Table 1). Roles spanned architecture, interior design, workspace

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consulting, organisational development and corporate workplace strategy. Professional experience ranged from approximately five to more than twenty years. Participants worked across small and medium-sized design practices, large international architecture firms, consulting agencies, furniture manufacturers with integrated workplace strategy departments and public institutions. Sample size was guided by purposive sufficiency rather than statistical representativeness and recruitment continued until recurring patterns across interviews suggested thematic convergence (Patton, 2002). Thematic convergence was assessed by the first author after each interview by reviewing whether new coding categories continued to emerge; after the fourteenth interview, no substantively new categories were identified, and the final two interviews confirmed the stability of the analytical framework.

The interviews were conducted by a researcher with professional experience in workspace design and architectural practice. This insider position facilitated access to participants and enabled productive dialogue about professional routines, but also required reflexive awareness of potential assumptions throughout the research process. Shared professional terminology and familiarity with workplace design practice enabled in-depth discussions but also carried a risk that shared professional assumptions might naturalise certain practices rather than subject them to analytical scrutiny. To mitigate this risk, the interviewer used the semi-structured interview guide consistently across interviews, encouraged participants to explain their reasoning in detail rather than relying on shared assumptions and continuously reflected on how prior professional experience may have shaped both the framing of the interview questions and the interpretation of responses during coding and analysis. In addition, emerging themes and interpretations were discussed with the supervisory team to challenge assumptions and strengthen analytical rigour.

This research received ethical approval from the ethics committee of the institution at which the research was conducted. Participation was voluntary and all interviewees provided written informed consent prior to the interviews, including consent for recording and for the use of anonymised quotations in publications. The interviews were semi-structured and typically lasted between 50 and 70 min. They were conducted online and recorded with participants' permission. Automatic transcripts were generated and subsequently checked for accuracy and clarity. Quotations used in this paper were automatically translated from German into English where necessary and reviewed for accuracy by the first author.

The interview guide covered five thematic areas: professional background and role; project structure and workflow; methods used to understand user needs; experiences with questionnaires and POE tools; and the interpretation and translation of user information into spatial decisions. While the guide provided a common structure across all interviews, the format remained flexible, allowing participants to elaborate on issues they considered particularly relevant.

The interview material was analysed using an inductive coding process supported by ATLAS.ti (version 25.0.2). Analysis followed an iterative approach, moving between the empirical material and emerging interpretations in three stages. In the first stage, open coding was applied to identify recurring themes and practices described by participants, including workshop formats, questionnaire use, moments of decision-making and references to intuition or professional judgement. In the second stage, related codes were grouped into broader categories that captured patterns across interviews, such as types of questionnaire use, data interpretation practices, steps in the design process and post-occupancy feedback mechanisms. Codes belonging to similar phenomena were compared across interviews and grouped into higher order categories using constant comparison. These categories were refined by examining similarities, differences and relationships across participants rather than by frequency alone. Coding was conducted by the first author; to strengthen credibility,

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**Table 1.** Interviewee sampling: Participants information, professional background, current role and work sector

| Participant codification | Professional background | Current role | Work sector |
|---|---|---|---|
| P01 | Interior architect | Interior designer, specialized in workspace design | Architecture practice |
| P02 | Architect, workspace consultant | Strategy and change specialist | Workspace consulting and design |
| P03 | Workspace consultant and facilitator | Workspace strategist | Workspace consulting and design |
| P04 | Interior architect | Senior workspace consultant | Workspace consulting and design |
| P05 | Interior architect | Project designer and facilitator | Workspace consulting and design |
| P06 | Architect, environmental psychologist | Evidence-based design specialist, partner at architecture office with strong analytics background | Architecture practice with consulting focus |
| P07 | Interior architect | Head of workspace consulting and transformation | Architecture and interior design company with focus on workspace design and consulting |
| P08 | Interior architect and coach | Workspace transformation advisor | Workspace design company with focus on organisational development |
| P09 | Landscape architect | Senior workspace strategist EMEA | International office furniture company with workspace consulting department |
| P10 | Interior architect | Senior workspace advisor | International office furniture company with workspace consulting department |
| P11 | Economist, architect and consultant | Workspace transformation director | Workspace consulting and design |
| P12 | Architect | Project architect | Architecture practice |
| P13 | Architect and computational designer | Workspace analytics lead | Architecture and design practice with strong focus on workspace analytics |
| P14 | Architect | Workspace specialist | Architect, working at a public institution (university), in charge of new work projects |
| P15 | Architect | Senior workspace strategist | Consulting, design and transformation |
| P16 | Architect | Architect | Architecture practice |

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

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a selection of coded excerpts and emerging interpretations was reviewed with the supervisory team at key stages of the analysis, who challenged emerging framings and suggested alternative interpretations where relevant (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In the third stage, categories were refined and related back to the research questions, with the notion of an interpretation gap between user data and design action becoming the central analytical lens through which the findings were interpreted. The analysis also produced a descriptive mapping of the workspace design process as practitioners described it, structured around nine recurring phases: client trigger and initial contact, strategic alignment, problem framing, user engagement through workshops and interviews, interpretation and synthesis of user input, concept development, design delivery, retrofit and occupation and POE.

For the process mapping presented in Table 2, a project phase was coded as an explicit mention when participants described it as a regular and integral component of their typical project workflow. Phases were coded as implicit, when they were acknowledged but described as occasional, peripheral or outside the participant's usual project scope. This distinction was used descriptively to capture variation in practitioners' accounts rather than to indicate differences in importance.

These phases form the basis of Table 2 in the results section, which maps their presence or absence across the 16 interviews. Throughout the analysis, emerging themes were continuously compared across interviews and interpreted in relation to concepts of tacit knowledge, reflective practice and design interpretation discussed in the literature.

## 4. Findings and thematic interpretation

The findings are presented across three thematic areas, combining illustrative interview excerpts with limited interpretive synthesis to clarify the meaning and relationships emerging within the data. Broader theoretical interpretation in relation to existing literature and implications for practice are developed in the Discussion section that follows.

### *4.1 Development of the design process with end users*

Table 2 maps the stages of the workspace design process as described by each of the 16 practitioners. It shows which project phases were explicitly part of each practitioner's scope, which were mentioned only implicitly, and which were absent from their typical workflow. The table reveals a consistent pattern across the sample: early phases of client contact, strategic alignment, problem framing and user engagement were present in almost all cases, while retrofit, occupation and POE were frequently absent or only partially described. This asymmetry between front-loaded engagement and back-end evaluation forms the analytical starting point for the findings that follow.

Table 2 shows an asymmetry between the early and late phases of workspace design projects. All 16 practitioners described involvement in client engagement, strategic alignment, problem framing, user engagement activities, interpretation and synthesis and concept development. In contrast, only four participants mentioned any form of POE, and only one described it as an explicit part of their typical project scope.

The initial contact in workspace design projects typically comes through one of three organisational entry points: Facility Management, Human Resources or senior leadership. Each brings a different framing of the problem. Facility Management tends to focus on operational concerns such as space efficiency, utilisation rates and user complaints about acoustics or thermal comfort. HR departments emphasise employee wellbeing, collaboration, reduced sick leave and employer attractiveness. Senior leadership, by contrast, often frames workspace redesign as a strategic intervention intended to signal organisational change, modernisation or cultural transformation. This diversity of entry points matters

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**Table 2.** Presence of design process stages across 16 expert interviews. Each row represents One participant. Filled circles indicate stages explicitly described as part of the participant's typical project scope; half circles indicate stages mentioned implicitly; dashes indicate stages not mentioned or outside typical scope. Columns represent sequential phases from initial client contact through to post-occupancy evaluation. The bottom rows summarise explicit mentions (●) and total mentions (● + ◐) across the sample.

| Interviewee | Client trigger and contact | Strategic alignment | Problem framing | User engagement (workshops) | Interpretation and synthesis | Concept development | Design delivery | Retrofit/ occupation | Post-Occupancy evaluation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P01 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | ◐ | – |
| P02 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | ◐ | – |
| P03 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | – | – |
| P04 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | ◐ | – |
| P05 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | ◐ | – |
| P06 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | ◐ |
| P07 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | – |
| P08 | • | • | • | • | • | • | ◐ | – | – |
| P09 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | – | – |
| P10 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | ◐ |
| P11 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | ◐ | – |
| P12 | • | • | • | ◐ | • | • | • | – | – |
| P13 | • | • | • | ◐ | • | • | • | – | • |
| P14 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | ◐ |
| P15 | • | • | • | • | • | • | • | ◐ | – |
| P16 | • | • | • | ◐ | • | • | • | • | – |
| Explicit mentions (•) | 16 | 16 | 16 | 13 | 16 | 16 | 15 | 5 | 1 |
| Total mentions | 16 | 16 | 16 | 16 | 16 | 16 | 16 | 11 | 4 |

**Note(s):** Legend: • = explicitly described as part of the participant's typical project scope; ◐ = mentioned implicitly; – = not mentioned or not part of the typical scope

**Source(s):** Authors' own work

because it means that the same spatial project can arrive carrying very different expectations, and the designer's first task is to navigate and reconcile these framings before any design work can begin.

Workspace design projects in this study almost never begin with a clearly defined spatial brief. Across all 16 interviews, practitioners consistently described receiving not a specification but a narrative: a diffuse sense that something in the existing work environment was no longer working. As P11 put it, "they usually come with a story, not a clear problem. My job is to decode what they really want". This pattern is significant because it means that the first act of workspace design is interpretive rather than technical. The designer's task from the outset is to translate organisational uncertainty into a project frame, before any spatial thinking can begin.

Redesign projects are rarely triggered by performance data or structured evaluation of how existing spaces work. Instead, 11 of the 16 practitioners described projects that began with contextual pressures: organisational growth, office relocation, post-merger consolidation of office space or the need to reactivate underused offices following the COVID-19 pandemic.

A further pattern, described by eight participants (P03, P04, P07, P09, P11, P13, P14, P15), was competitive pressure to adopt so-called New Work concepts, driven less by internal analysis than by sector-wide discourse. New Work refers broadly to organisational and spatial transformations linked to flexible working, hybrid arrangements and activity-based environments (Appel-Meulenbroek and Danivska, 2021; Gerdenitsch *et al.*, 2018).

P07 observed that clients frequently arrive wanting to become "more agile" or "more flexible" without having reflected on what these concepts mean for their specific organisation, while P09 observed that references to activity-based working often arise because "everyone else is talking about it". In contrast, structured workplace performance assessments, including POEs, utilisation studies or employee satisfaction surveys, were described as the starting point of a redesign project by only two of 16 practitioners. Most projects were instead initiated by organisational change, office relocation, growth, post-merger consolidation or broader strategic ambitions. This suggests that empirical workplace data plays a relatively limited role in triggering redesign projects.

Once initial contact is made, most practitioners described an extended phase of strategic alignment before any design work begins. Rather than moving directly from brief to concept, 12 participants described a structured early phase of joint clarification in which designers and organisational stakeholders work together to surface and negotiate project goals. This phase typically involves workshops, steering group meetings and exploratory conversations with leadership, HR, facility management and, less consistently, selected employee representatives. As P15 described, this process can be long and uncertain: "the difficult part is finding out what the client actually wants, it is often trial and error until you arrive at a shared understanding". P13 noted that their practice "always starts with vision and strategy", explicitly separating organisational goal-setting from spatial design. What this phase reveals is that design briefs in workplace projects are not received but constructed, through negotiation rather than specification.

During the problem-framing phase that follows, designers engage with a wide range of organisational actors to develop contextual understanding. These typically include leadership teams, HR or people and culture departments, facility management and corporate real estate representatives. End users, the employees who will actually occupy the redesigned space, are involved selectively and often only through representatives rather than directly. Several participants acknowledged this gap explicitly, noting that end users are rarely consulted comprehensively during design. The design brief itself remains fluid throughout: as P15 explained, project goals shift as new information emerges, meaning that the spatial

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concept and the organisational understanding develop in parallel rather than in sequence. This iterative co-construction of problem and solution was described across interviews, with participants consistently explaining that project goals and spatial concepts evolve together throughout the design process rather than in sequence.

POE is structurally absent from most project workflows. Fourteen of 16 practitioners described the period after handover as marked by disengagement rather than learning: budgets are exhausted, attention moves to the next project and feedback from users reaches practitioners only when problems become urgent enough to generate complaints. As P14 put it, “we usually only hear about issues when people start complaining loudly”. while P10 observed that “after handover, the project is considered finished, even though the space is only starting to be used.” In investor-driven or speculative projects, described by three participants, this absence of post-occupancy follow-up was sometimes an explicit policy, particularly where user satisfaction data might create obligations or conflict with commercial priorities. The result is a structural feedback gap: knowledge about how spaces actually perform in use rarely returns to the practitioners who designed them.

Taken together, these accounts reveal that workspace design projects follow a consistent but evidence-poor structure. Projects are initiated by organisational pressure rather than performance data, shaped through extended negotiation rather than specification and concluded without systematic evaluation of outcomes. The intensive interpretive work of the early phases, translating organisational narratives into spatial concepts, is not matched by any equivalent process of learning from how those concepts perform once occupied. The overall process identified across the interviews is summarised in Table 3.

### *4.2 Methods used to understand users before and after workspace redesign*

Qualitative and relational methods dominate how workspace designers understand user needs. All 16 practitioners described workshops, conversations with decision-makers and informal employee interviews as their primary tools for gathering user-related information. Practitioners consistently explained that workshops generate contextual insight (about organisational culture, informal hierarchies and interpersonal dynamics) that structured questionnaires cannot capture. As P03 put it: “in the first workshop, you already understand most of the politics in the organisation”. The workshop functions less as a data-collection instrument and more as a mechanism for developing the situational awareness that spatial design decisions require.

The information gathered is fundamentally narrative. Practitioners described listening to accounts of daily routines, frustrations and spatial aspirations and translating these immediately into spatial implications. P01 captured this directly: “you hear what people complain about, and you immediately start to see the space in your head.” The implication

**Table 3.** Analytical reconstruction of the typical workspace design process identified across 16 expert interviews (n = 16), showing the five recurring phases described by participants and their descriptions

| Project Process Phases | Project Trigger | Strategic Alignment | Problem Framing | Spatial Translation | Handover and Use |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Phase description | *Diffuse dissatisfaction / strategic ambition / external pressures* | *Vision and strategy workshops / Clarifying organisational goals* | *Understanding work practices / organisational culture / spatial requirements* | *Iterative development of spatial concepts* | *Project considered finished / Limited POE evaluation* |

**Source(s):** Authors’ own work

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for POE is significant: evaluation data often enters the process after key interpretive frames and design directions have already begun to form.

Translating organisational stories into spatial concepts was described by 13 participants as a core professional competency developed through experience rather than formal training. As P12 summarised: "design decisions come from understanding behaviour, not from reading numbers." This translation relies on professional judgement, comparison with previous projects and narrative sense-making, a form of expertise that is difficult to formalise within standard evaluation procedures.

After implementation, structured evaluation is almost entirely absent. Fourteen of 16 practitioners described post-occupancy feedback as informal, reactive and problem-triggered. Structured occupant satisfaction surveys or organised feedback sessions were mentioned as standard project scope by only two participants, P08 and P12, both working in organisations with dedicated analytics capacity. Several participants described this as an industry norm: the project ends at handover, and what happens after is outside the scope of the designer's role.

This reliance on informal methods is reinforced by the near-complete absence of training in empirical evaluation within architectural and interior design education. Fifteen of 16 practitioners reported that participatory methods, workshop facilitation and questionnaire design were not part of their formal training. P01 stated: "in architecture studies, you don't learn anything like that at all. I was taught that the architect stands above everything and ideally doesn't ask people". This educational gap means the professional field lacks a shared methodological language for user evaluation, making it difficult to build consistent standards or cumulative knowledge across projects.

### *4.3 Questionnaires, POE tools and the interpretation of user information*

Questionnaires are present in workspace design practice but weakly and inconsistently embedded. Twelve of 16 practitioners described using questionnaires in at least some projects, but the pattern of use varied widely in purpose and format (see Table 4). Only two participants (P08 and P12) described questionnaires as analytical instruments that directly informed spatial decisions. For the remaining ten, the primary function was communicative or symbolic: demonstrating participation, creating buy-in or legitimising decisions already shaped through other means. Four participants (P02, P09, P15, P16) did not use questionnaires at all.

A striking feature of questionnaire use across the sample is that most participants did not report using a validated standardised instrument consistently across projects. Several participants who used questionnaires had developed their own, adapting questions to each project's context, client and time constraints. One practitioner described how their questionnaire was adapted for each client's priorities. While this flexibility was presented as pragmatic responsiveness to organisational diversity, it has a significant structural consequence: questionnaire results are not necessarily comparable across projects, do not readily accumulate into transferable knowledge and cannot always be benchmarked against broader data sets. Each project may offer limited opportunities for cumulative learning from evaluation that POE research has long identified as one of the method's core potential contributions (Bordass and Leaman, 2005; Hay *et al.*, 2018).

The communicative and symbolic use of questionnaires was the most consistently reported pattern. Ten participants described questionnaires as tools for inclusion rather than analysis. P01 articulated this directly: "you don't actually do the questionnaire to create the perfect plan from it. You do it to bring people along". This symbolic function is not without value; employee buy-in is a legitimate goal in organisational change, but it means questionnaire data is collected without the expectation that it will drive design decisions.

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**Table 4.** Questionnaire use across the 16 practitioners

| Participant | Uses questionnaire | Primary function of questionnaire | Notes |
|---|---|---|---|
| P01 | Yes | Communicative/symbolic | Used to create participation; results described as “usually terribly boring” |
| P02 | No | – | Questionnaire not part of standard workflow |
| P03 | Yes | Communicative | Uses own project-specific questionnaires; unaware of validated instruments |
| P04 | Yes | Communicative | Questions chosen by intuition; no formal training in questionnaire design |
| P05 | Yes | Communicative | Participatory function predominates |
| P06 | Yes | Analytical (partial) | Combines qualitative and quantitative data; analytics background |
| P07 | Yes | Communicative | Post-handover evaluation absent; budget/attention gone after handover |
| P08 | Yes | Analytical | Uses structured POE surveys; organisation has dedicated analytics capacity |
| P09 | No | – | Relies entirely on workshops and conversations |
| P10 | Yes | Communicative | Data protection concerns limit post-occupancy feedback |
| P11 | Yes | Communicative | Aware of Leesman but finds it too generic to support design decisions |
| P12 | Yes | Analytical | Uses Leesman regularly; global organisation with analytics infrastructure |
| P13 | Yes | Communicative (partial) | Has analytics capacity but lacks interpretive layer linking data to design |
| P14 | Yes | Communicative | Hears about problems only when complaints become ‘loud’ |
| P15 | No | – | Workshop-based approach; questionnaires not used |
| P16 | No | – | Questionnaires not currently part of firm’s workflow |

**Source(s):** Authors’ own work

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When practitioners attempted to use questionnaire outputs analytically, a consistent frustration emerged: outputs were perceived as too abstract and too disconnected from spatial thinking to be actionable. P11 expressed this pointedly: "I get a graph showing satisfaction with acoustics is 3.2 over ten. And then what?" As P08 summarised: "numbers don't tell you how to redesign a room. They only tell you that something is wrong". Evaluation data tells practitioners that a problem exists, but not where it is, what caused it or what to do about it. The data stops exactly where the designer's interpretive work needs to begin.

This frustration should not be read as indifference to evidence. Several practitioners expressed genuine interest in more structured user insight, provided it could connect meaningfully to design decisions. P13 described the gap precisely: "we have tons of data, but the missing layer is: what does this mean for design? No one teaches that". This resonates with Hay *et al.* (2018) who identified the absence of interpretive frameworks connecting evaluation outputs to design reasoning as a central barrier to POE adoption. Vischer (2008) similarly argued that the usefulness of evaluation data depends not only on its validity but on whether it can be translated into the decisions practitioners actually face.

Awareness of validated academic POE instruments was strikingly low across the sample. Eleven of 16 practitioners had never encountered validated tools such as the BUS Methodology or established questionnaire batteries. Among the five aware of commercial tools, Leesman was most frequently mentioned, yet even familiar users described it as difficult to translate into design decisions. As P11 explained: "Leesman is interesting, but it doesn't help me design. It's too generic". Awareness of validated tools and the capacity to use them analytically are both severely limited within the practitioner population studied, and these limitations are structural rather than individual.

The relationship between user feedback and design decisions is therefore neither direct nor procedural. User information is filtered through a process of professional interpretation in which practitioners translate needs, aspirations and workplace challenges into spatial concepts. Figure 1 summarises this process and illustrates the interpretation gap.

The interviews also suggest that the interpretation gap manifests differently depending on organisational context and analytical capacity. Practitioners working in organisations with dedicated analytics resources, such as P08 and P12, described the regular use of structured POE surveys alongside qualitative methods. Even in these settings, however, they reported difficulty translating evaluation findings into concrete spatial design decisions, suggesting that data availability alone does not close the gap.

By contrast, practitioners working in smaller architecture and workplace consulting practices, such as P01 and P04, described relying on workshops, conversations and project-specific questionnaires to understand user needs. In these contexts, user-related information entered the design process mainly through narrative and relational forms of engagement, while the systematic integration of evaluation data into design decisions was largely absent. These contrasting accounts suggest that the role of evaluation data in design decision-making varied depending on the organisational context and analytical capacity of the practitioners involved.

## 5. Discussion

### *5.1 Workspace design as an interpretive practice*

The findings provide empirical support for theoretical accounts of design as an interpretive rather than analytical process. Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner (in which professional practice proceeds through problem framing, iterative sense-making and reflection-in-action) closely fits what the interviewed practitioners described. Cross (2011) and Lawson (2005) similarly characterise expert design cognition as relying on tacit knowledge, pattern recognition and abductive reasoning, none of which map easily onto the

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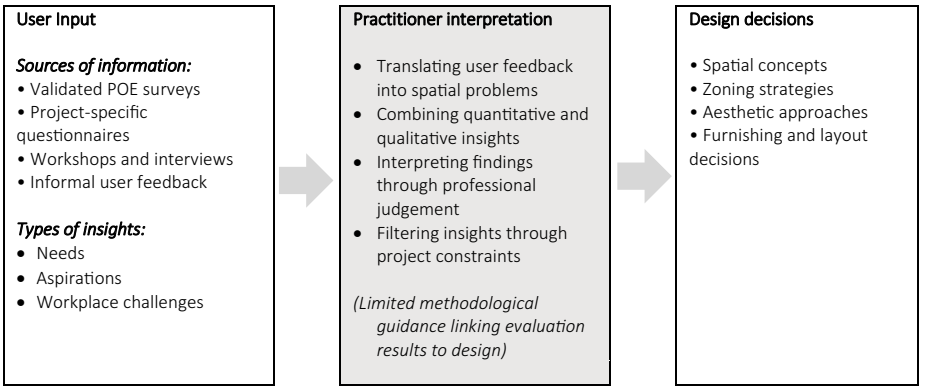


**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of the interpretation gap between post-occupancy evaluation and workspace design practice. The diagram illustrates how different forms of user input enter the workplace design process and are translated into spatial design decisions. User input includes survey instruments, workshops, and informal feedback that provide insights into users' needs, aspirations and workplace challenges. Practitioners interpret this information through professional judgement and project-specific considerations before translating it into spatial concepts, zoning strategies, aesthetic approaches and furnishing decisions

**Source:** Authors' own work

linear logic of measurement-oriented evaluation. The iterative co-construction of problem and solution described by interviewees is consistent with these accounts and helps explain why practitioners rely on contextual interpretation and professional judgement when translating user information into spatial design decisions, rather than on structured evaluation outputs.

The dominance of workshops as the primary method for understanding user needs reflects this interpretive logic directly. Workshops function as mechanisms for developing situational awareness (reading organisational dynamics, surfacing informal hierarchies, building relational trust) rather than as data-collection instruments. Narrative, rather than measurement, is the medium through which user needs enter the design process. This is not a workaround for the absence of data; it is a professional skill genuinely well suited to the conditions under which workspace design operates.

This observation explains why integrating POE into design practice has proven so persistently difficult. Previous studies attributed the limited uptake to practical barriers such as time constraints, budget limitations and fragmented responsibilities (Bordass and Leaman, 2005; Hay *et al.*, 2018). While these barriers were evident in the present study too, the findings suggest they tell only part of the story. Even where user information is available, practitioners continue to rely on interpretive and relational forms of knowledge. The challenge is not only one of access to evidence, but of compatibility between different ways of knowing. POE tools produce standardised, comparable evidence; workspace designers work predominantly through narrative interpretation, contextual understanding and professional judgement. These represent fundamentally different ways of generating and using knowledge.

### *5.2 The interpretation gap*

The central contribution of this study lies in identifying and characterising the interpretation gap: the absence of frameworks that allow practitioners to move from empirical user data to

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concrete spatial decisions. Previous research has documented limited POE uptake and identified structural barriers; it has also theorised design as interpretive practice. What the present study adds is empirical evidence showing how these two dynamics intersect within contemporary workspace design practice, and why evaluation data fails to influence design decisions even when it exists.

The interpretation gap also shares similarities with broader discussions of research-practice gaps and design-use feedback in the built environment, both of which recognise that knowledge generated through evaluation does not automatically inform future design decisions (Bordass and Leaman, 2005; Hay *et al.*, 2018). However, the contribution of the present study is more specific. Rather than focusing on the existence of feedback loops or the implementation of evidence, it draws attention to the interpretive work required to translate user-related information into spatial design decisions. In workspace design, the challenge is not simply whether evaluation data exists or is communicated, but how practitioners make sense of that information and transform it into design concepts through professional judgement and contextual reasoning. While challenges associated with translating evidence into professional practice have been discussed more broadly, the interpretation gap as identified here is shaped by conditions specific to workspace design: the interpretive and iterative nature of architectural reasoning, the absence of pre- or post-occupancy evaluation in standard project contracts and the lack of formal training in user research within design education.

The distinction between questionnaires used for participation and questionnaires used for design guidance is important and underreported in the POE literature. Participation is a legitimate goal in workplace change management, and questionnaires can serve it well. But participation is not the same as evidence-based design. When questionnaires are designed to bring people along rather than to generate actionable insight, they cannot close the interpretation gap, however well administered. This finding extends the argument made by Vischer (2008), who distinguished between occupant feedback as a management tool and occupant feedback as a design resource, arguing that the latter requires active interpretation by design professionals. The present study shows that this interpretive capacity is currently underdeveloped in practice, not because practitioners are uninterested, but because neither their education nor the available tools prepare them for it.

### *5.3 Consequences for organisational learning*

The limited use of POE constrains cumulative learning within workspace design practice. The post-handover pattern documented here is consistent with findings from Leaman and Bordass (2001), who showed that without systematic feedback loops between building performance and design practice, the same problems recur across successive generations of projects. The present study confirms that this pattern persists more than two decades later.

The consequences are compounded by the project-based logic governing the field. Because each project generates its own bespoke questionnaire, results cannot be compared across projects, benchmarks cannot be established and knowledge does not accumulate. Addressing this requires shared evaluation frameworks, consistent measurement instruments and professional norms that position post-occupancy feedback as a standard component of project scope rather than an optional extra.

### *5.4 Implications for future POE tools and research*

The limited uptake of validated POE tools is not a problem of awareness or motivation, though both are low. It is a problem of design relevance. Validated tools are perceived as external to the interpretive and spatial reasoning processes that characterise design practice,

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not because practitioners are hostile to evidence, but because the tools are not designed around how designers actually think, communicate and make decisions. This points to a specific direction for future tool development: rather than improving measurement validity, the priority should be improving interpretive usability, the degree to which evaluation outputs can be connected to spatial reasoning and design action.

One direction concerns the representation of evaluation data. Designers work through visual, relational and scenario-based reasoning and evaluation data needs to meet them in that register. Emerging approaches in workplace analytics explore visualisation techniques that link user feedback directly to spatial layouts, allowing practitioners to see how satisfaction patterns relate to specific workspace configurations. A second direction concerns moving beyond descriptive metrics towards more causal analysis, identifying which spatial attributes contribute most strongly to dissatisfaction so that designers can act on findings rather than merely acknowledge them. Emerging computational approaches, including AI-assisted analytics, may support more causally oriented analysis, though their integration with validated POE frameworks remains methodologically underdeveloped. Beyond these technical developments, future POE tools should be designed around the realities of design practice. Rather than presenting evaluation results as aggregated scores or benchmark values, tools should support interpretation by linking user feedback directly to spatial elements, identifying potential design implications, integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence and enabling comparison between alternative design scenarios. In this way, evaluation outputs become part of the design conversation rather than remaining a separate analytical exercise.

The findings also have implications for organisations commissioning workplace projects. If POE is expected to inform future workplace decisions, it needs to be embedded within project governance rather than treated as an optional add-on. This may include specifying POE activities within project briefs and consultancy contracts, allocating dedicated resources for POE, incorporating follow-up activities into project scopes and establishing processes through which evaluation findings are systematically reviewed and translated into future workplace strategies and design decisions. Without such organisational structures, opportunities for learning across projects are likely to remain limited.

## 6. Conclusion

This study set out to understand why validated POE tools remain marginal in professional workspace design practice, and how practitioners engage with user-related information in their work. The central finding is that the limited uptake of validated POE tools is not explained by practical constraints or a lack of interest in evidence, but by an interpretation gap between empirical user information and spatial design decision-making. Practitioners often lack the frameworks needed to translate user feedback into actionable design knowledge, not because they are indifferent to evidence, but because neither their professional education nor the available tools prepare them for this translation.

The theoretical contribution lies in bringing together the literature on reflective practice and design cognition with empirical evidence from workspace design practice. Building on Schön (1983) and Lawson (2005), the study shows that workspace design operates through interpretive reasoning, narrative sense-making and tacit professional judgement in ways that are structurally misaligned with the measurement-oriented logic of validated POE instruments. This misalignment is reinforced by professional education in which user evaluation receives limited attention, by project workflows that end at handover and by evaluation tools that report what is wrong without indicating what to do about it spatially.

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The interpretation gap is therefore not a failure of individual practitioners but a systemic feature of the field.

These findings call for a reorientation of POE research towards interpretive usability, of architectural education towards user research methods and of professional practice towards systematic post-occupancy feedback as a standard component of project scope.

Beyond professional practice, reducing the interpretation gap has the potential to improve the quality of workplace environments more broadly. More effective translation of user feedback into spatial design decisions may contribute to workplaces that better support employee wellbeing, collaboration and the long-term adaptability of office environments including the comfort and productivity outcomes with which workplace quality is most commonly associated. In this way, improving how user information is interpreted is not only a methodological challenge for designers but also a matter of broader organisational and societal relevance.

This study has several limitations. The sample is confined primarily to Germany, which limits transferability to other national and professional contexts. The 16 practitioners provide analytical depth rather than statistical representativeness. The study also focuses specifically on office and workplace environments. Although POE has been widely applied in other domains, including healthcare, education and residential buildings, these contexts were beyond the scope of the present study and may involve different organisational processes and design practices.

Future research could extend this work through larger comparative studies across different national contexts, quantitative surveys of POE tool awareness and use and design research testing and evaluating new interpretive frameworks in practice.

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**Data availability**

The interview data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality and the conditions of ethical approval under which the research was conducted. Anonymised excerpts are presented within the article in accordance with participants' informed consent. Requests for additional information may be considered by the authors, subject to ethical and confidentiality constraints.

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