Office space: Is yours helping or hurting your business?

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LEXINGTON, KY - How well do you like your workspace? What don’t you like about it? It may never have occurred to you that psychology plays a role in how satisfied you are with your workspace. In fact, there is an entire field of study dedicated to studying the relationships between people and their environments. Environmental psychologists study the impact that a variety of environments (i.e., residential, work, and recreational environments) have on individuals’ behavior.

An abundance of research on work environments proves that environmental elements such as lighting, temperature, noise and design have a significant effect on important organizational outcomes, including employee productivity and job satisfaction.

Ann W. Dickson, director of the University of Kentucky’s School of Interior Design, explained: “The design of an interior environment is a complex set of factors that research has shown to impact both the physical and emotional health of employees. Beyond the long-known influencing factors of unhealthy air and inappropriate lighting and spatial configurations, current research is demonstrating that design solutions that address how an environment facilitates the varying needs of people at work are a huge factor influencing employee physical and emotional satisfaction. Flexible workspaces that stimulate innovation and creativity are a critical component in connecting employee needs to corporate goals resulting in both increased user satisfaction and enhancing corporate bottom lines.”

When organizations design or redesign workspaces using evidence-based strategies, they experience increased productivity, communication, problem-solving and employee satisfaction — and often simultaneously become more efficient and save money.

These days, most organizations are in the business of creating and sharing knowledge. According to the book The Knowledge-Creating Company, knowledge work is accomplished in four modes: socializing, learning, focusing and collaborating. It’s important that offices support all four of these work modes and that employees are encouraged to use whatever type of space they need at the moment.

Collaboration

In previous decades, work consisted primarily of individual focusing, but today collaboration is the preferred work mode. In fact, 82 percent of white-collar workers report that they need to work with others throughout the workday to get their jobs done. But many workspaces used today were designed over a decade ago and do not support collaborative work processes. Frequently, individual workstations separate people from each other, and (ill-equipped) meeting rooms often have to be reserved in advance.

Techniques for fostering collaboration include scattering frequently used items/equipment (printer, restrooms, coffee) throughout the facility to encourage employee movement, visual contact and communication, and placing large and small meeting spaces with white boards and comfortable seating supporting four to eight people throughout the facility.
Learning and focusing

Other work modes, such as learning and focusing, have different requirements and call for privacy and lack of noise. Noise includes any unwanted sounds, some of which are more annoying than others, such as those that are loud, high-pitched, unpredictable or carry meaning (e.g., a co-worker’s voice or a ringing telephone). We all know that noise can interfere with our performance, particularly when performing tasks requiring close attention or memorization, but it can also put us in a bad mood and make us aggressive. It can also lead to poor health outcomes such as headaches, high blood pressure, ulcers and even mental illness.

For those engaged in learning or focusing, noise should be reduced as much as possible by creating quiet spaces segregated from noisy areas, masking annoying sounds with subtle background sounds (e.g., white noise or the ventilation system), and installing carpeting, drapes and acoustical ceiling tiles to absorb sound.

But most importantly, these employees need privacy to reduce distractions. They need visual privacy to avoid seeing and being seen by others and acoustical privacy to avoid being disturbed by noise.

Other key features of an innovative workplace

If you have created a workspace that has every component listed above, you may think you are finished, but innovative workplaces are so much more. Innovative workplaces are pleasing, inviting places where employees enjoy spending time.

Good lighting is essential. People feel more alert and happier in bright rooms with big windows that allow natural light to flood in. Of course, light also improves vision and makes task performance easier, particularly for older workers. However, if light is too bright, it causes glare — light reflections off walls, desks and other shiny surfaces that can diminish vision and even cause headaches. Therefore, workplaces should have pleasant ambient light coupled with task lighting at each workstation so each employee can adjust the lighting to his/her needs.

But even if an employee has sufficient light, he or she most likely wants a window. Windows provide a lot more than just natural light. They provide a view, information about the time and weather, variation in lighting and sometimes fresh air. Most importantly, they provide exposure to nature.

Human beings have a longstanding preference for natural environments. There is evidence that visiting natural places — or even viewing photographs of them — has a rejuvenating, stress-relieving effect on people. It puts people in a good mood and can even facilitate recovery from illness. Some argue that exposure to nature alleviates mental exhaustion better than sleep does. Thus, nature should be built into every work environment through plants, water elements, stone and natural materials.

And finally, many employees get satisfaction by working someplace “cool” — a place that is unique, fun, comfortable, artsy, colorful and possibly a little bit whimsical. Google’s offices are renowned for their environmental features such as interior climbing walls for exercise; metal igloos reclaimed from Antarctica and used as private workspaces; and darkened relaxation rooms with aquariums, massaging chairs and bathtubs filled with pieces of soft foam. Kentucky businesses also have some interesting features that make them unique and enjoyable. For example, not only is Smiley Pete’s newspaper office in a former 1950s car dealership, but it also projects a hip, musical vibe due to its onsite stage, where several local bands rehearse.

In conclusion, creating an innovative workplace will result in significant improvements in communication, team effectiveness, productivity and employee satisfaction. As explained by Herman Miller, “The strategic investments a company makes in its physical work environment are really investments in people. And people are an organization’s competitive advantage in the global economy of the future.”
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