

## Designing a More Engaging Environment

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## INTRODUCTION

Studies show that most of the top-performing public companies – the Container Store, Google, Zappos, Whole Foods, etc. – are the ones that understand the importance of engaging every stakeholder in the organization, starting with employees. And one of the first steps to this engagement is right under your nose: the workplace environment itself.

It's no secret that the modern business world is changing. Productivity goals are up, the mobile workforce is booming and employees are getting younger by the minute. That's why it's critical today to construct a physical environment that encourages, supports and, most importantly, engages employees.

There's a rich body of literature and studies from various disciplines that demonstrate the impact of the physical environment on the perception, behavior and performance of employees in the workplace. According to recent research, about 20% of an employee's productivity is directly influenced by their workspace. Emotion, fun and a sense of collaboration within work areas are critical to engagement and productivity. If you're experiencing a lack of motivation and innovation within your company, perhaps it's time you turn your workplace into a catalyst for profit and consider a redesign.

## EVERYTHING IS ON THE TABLE

Making the move to a new workspace design and environment requires consideration of many moving parts, but it essentially boils down to budget and aesthetics – and as we all know they often rely on each other. Capital is required for new furniture, room rebuilds, flooring, lighting and paint, just to name a few key elements. But the money you save in the long-run by eliminating unused space, together with productivity gains and a happier, more efficient workforce, tends to even out the score. In the end, a business will more than likely come out on top. International company Citrix is proof: It was able to reduce its real estate costs by about 2.5% when it switched to an open plan office, among other savings.

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The goal is to create more “we” space as opposed to “I” space – locations where employees can engage and interact to work in a relaxing and, more importantly, inspiring atmosphere. It's about creating innovative high-performing flexible workspaces that will serve multiple functions while still being functional and engaging.

As you explore all the options to transform your workplace into a space that will engage your talent and better support your key business initiatives, you should consider and embrace the following concepts:

- **Engaging Environment.** The workplace must engage and inspire existing talent, as well as attract new talent. Studies indicate corporate environment is a key factor when making a career decision. In fact, it has become a competitive advantage for those companies that understand this all-important concept.
- **Real Estate Utilization.** Making the most of your real estate not only allows you to more effectively support your office and the type of work your employees do, studies also show that spatial comfort affects productivity just as much as workspace size and configuration. A well-thought-out space plan can boost innovation, collaboration and overall productivity.
- **Brand Alignment.** The arrangement and design of all your spaces should leverage your organizational culture, management style, mission and company's brand personality. A high-tech company's corporate environment should look and feel much different than the environment at a bank.
- **Employee Well-Being.** Looking at the big picture, well-being goes far beyond exercise and a healthy diet. It's also about the quality of the most important parts of life, which includes the workplace. As such, it's important for companies wishing to engage their employees to create an atmosphere that supports personal well-being.

## **LAYOUT ISSUES**

The first step when planning an office redesign is to determine a layout: open plan versus traditional enclosed. An open plan office functions without most walls and cubicles and organizes different groups of workstations for employee use. Traditional workspaces have the cubicles and offices all put together in an orderly fashion, but can use low cubicle walls and relaxation/conversation stations throughout the office to foster engagement and interactivity. A combination of the two is also possible, with part of the floor having cubicles and offices and the other having group areas and a movable work environment.

Using a balanced approach in providing both collaboration and concentration spaces within the workplace is very important. The ability to choose where and how to work is a motivating and inspirational force. Formal and informal meeting rooms, work lounges and other group-oriented and collaborative spaces draw employees in and facilitate brainstorming, spontaneous interaction and problem-solving.

Keeping conference rooms in one location on the floor is a good idea. A cluster of places to meet creates a more interactive and inspiring area without disrupting the flow of the rest of the floor. Inside the rooms, ensure everything is functional and inspiring. Utilize projectors, whiteboard walls and large pads of paper on the table. Comfortable seating is essential.

If you welcome visitors and clients to the office frequently, keep the entryway and foyer in mind as you craft your redesign plans. This space is the initial introduction to the company and should be welcoming, interactive and a sound representation of your brand. Adding a back-lit logo in the reception area or an accent wall painted in your company logo color not only adds interest and excitement to the space, it also serves to reinforce your company brand in the design.

## **ABOUT FURNITURE**

Office furniture can either inhibit or encourage connectivity, productivity and a culture centered around engagement. Traditionally, businesses have designed workplaces with high-walled cubicles from corner to corner. And although they serve their purpose, there's now a push to completely abandon cubicles in favor of more open and flexible furniture that encourages collaboration and engagement. Lower panels with use of glass open up a workspace and accommodate both privacy and collaboration while letting the natural light shine through. No matter what type of workstation is used, it's a must to provide multiple and comfortable seating options for employees so they can alter their working posture throughout the day.

Within the open office setting and collaborative spaces, flexible and easily-moved furniture will facilitate quick transformation of space and accommodate multiple meeting styles. Movable screens and walls, beanbags, adjustable tables and couches are good choices to optimize and support a reconfigurable environment.

## **LIGHTING THE WAY**

Studies indicate that something as fundamental as office lighting can have just as great an impact on the success of your business as hiring the right person. Poor lighting can negatively affect overall performance and engagement in the workplace. In fact, employees may not be putting forth their best effort at work because they aren't motivated or inspired, all because of something that may not be obvious to anyone: poor office lighting.

Office lighting should accomplish more than just the task of providing light. It should be energy- and cost-efficient, controllable and well-integrated. Choosing the right office lighting for your workplace, coupled with optimizing natural light in every workspace, is critically important, whether it be the perfect lamp, the optimal cubicle lighting, or an ultimate high-definition solution.

## **COLOR AND DECOR**

Spaces that are welcoming and have a great aesthetic inspire individuals to come to (and stay at) the office. Mixing materials, colors and textures throughout the space stimulate the imagination and become a motivating force. Neutral colors are boring, boring, boring. That means you should add pop colors, colored accent pieces and lots of visual interest.

In a 2011 study, the University of California found that employee productivity skyrocketed when walls were painted bright colors. Red and yellow lead to faster decision-making abilities. Blue is relaxing and puts people at ease. Green becomes bland and distracting over time. And absolutely stay away from white walls.

Another recent study, this one by the University of Texas, showed that workers in white rooms were more prone to make mistakes – the lack of color starved the employees’ brains of sensation.

Add unique art pieces, decals and storyboards to the walls, and the office will be a powerhouse of productivity spurred by the creativity of the space.

### **ACOUSTICS**

Critics of open plan workspaces often take note of noisy environments. Everyone works differently, and that means some employees operate better in a quiet environment. Be sure to include some quiet zones in the plan, as well as soundproofing or padding for the walls to dampen the din of productive chatting. The use of carpet versus hard surfaces is also helpful.

Take note of where each department is located as well. A loud Call Center should probably be on the other side of the floor from the quiet Accounting Department.

### **LETTING NATURE IN**

Numerous studies have established a link between office settings that have a connection to nature and good health, job satisfaction, productivity and engagement. Consequently, every effort should be made to use natural building materials like bamboo or hardwood, and even to open up outdoor spaces as work areas. A 2013 survey by the Earthing Institute showed that people connecting with real, natural materials like wood and grass felt healthier over time, were able to sleep better and experienced less stress and anxiety.

And don’t forget to let in natural light wherever possible. Use of glass walls serves a dual purpose – increasing natural light and providing accessibility to those who require a private office. The addition of artificial skylights, water sculptures, live plants, or even artwork with views of nature can be added to the workplace to capitalize on this phenomenon. Live plants will help eliminate pollution while increasing oxygen levels. Employees will feel more alert and hence be more productive. A happy and healthy employee equates to a happy and healthy business.

### **STORAGE SPACE**

In all the redesigning excitement, don’t forget about storage space. File cabinets and drawers are still necessary to hold client information and other documents. Well-organized environments are said to enhance employee engagement and productivity. Many companies with open floor plans, like Kraft Foods, use colorful banks of lockers for employees to store their things. Kraft also uses file cabinets as space dividers, allowing the form of the cabinet to become a functional design element.

### **MORE OPTIONS, MORE ENGAGEMENT**

Also keep in mind that one of the keys to innovation and productivity is making time to play and relax. Employees need to recharge throughout the day. When Kraft Foods redesigned its office space in Illinois, cubicles were ripped out and replaced by treadmills, pool tables, reading nooks and video games. As a result, according to a 2011 company report, more employees want to be in the office than at home, the company eliminated 45% of unused space in the office, productivity increased by as much as 30% and time spent in scheduled meetings decreased.

A similar phenomenon occurred at Steelcase in Michigan. Cubicles and offices were removed, making way for a free-flowing workspace where executives sit among lower-level employees and no one has an assigned desk. The company also redesigned its cafeteria to have a more coffee-shop-like vibe, combining work, food and collaboration space all in one. Allowing employees to choose the way they work instead of forcing them into a “cube farm” cut Steelcase’s required floor space in half and led to 72% of workers choosing to work from their office over their homes.

Red Bull has established a number of inspirational office spaces around the world, challenging architects to re-imagine contemporary working environments when designing a new project. The complex includes a cricket pitch, rooftop bar and informal meeting rooms where employees meet and collaborate.

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Googleplex, Google's headquarters in Mountain View, CA, is a sprawling complex where shuttles are provided to travel between meetings, and the buildings feature massage chairs, relaxation rooms, pool and ping pong tables, a climbing wall and volleyball courts. Fun is part of Google's brand personality, so it's only appropriate the company provides places to have fun.

SAS is #1 on the *CNN Money* "100 Best Companies to Work For" list and has been for the last 14 years. Why? One reason is their attention to creating spaces within the work environment that encourage employee well-being. SAS features a beauty salon and a state-of-the-art, 66,000-square-foot gym.

### COLLABORATIVE SPACES

No matter what type of business you're in, the single most important space in the workplace to fuel employee engagement is its collaborative spaces. They should support a shared sense of purpose, focus on long-term improvement and fuel innovation. They can also provide substantial and meaningful settings in which employees form a deeper connection with the company and their co-workers. And it's not just spaces specifically identified or designed for collaborative work, such as a conference room. It's also about spaces that may potentially be used for casual interactions.

Providing collaborative work spaces that are highly diverse and accommodate – even celebrate – the value of giving employees lots of choice in where, when and how they work will be invaluable. The spaces should be well equipped with anything and everything that inspires and supports innovation and creativity, such as white boards, AV equipment and movable and comfortable furniture.

### YOUR BUSINESS REFLECTED IN YOUR SPACE

While open floor plans and interactivity are all well and good for specific corporate environments, any design should be dependent upon business function. A business handling confidential health information, for example, still needs desks and cabinets, but may be able to enjoy the social benefits of lower cubicle walls. Take stock of what type of work is being done and how your employees engage with their tasks and each other on a daily basis.

Aside from assessing the needs of the business function itself, you should ask yourself three key questions:

1. **Is productivity teamwork-dependent?** When work is assigned, does it go to an individual, or to a project team? Are job tasks only able to be completed by one person from start to finish? If the level of teamwork needed to complete standard daily job functions is low and employees need quiet to work, cubicles may be a better option.
2. **What are current productivity rates?** Do employees seem happy and fulfilled in their current environment? Is work already getting done quickly and efficiently? You may not need a change in that case.
3. **Is private space a requirement?** Are executives handling sensitive information that requires a degree of secrecy? Do clients come to visit and share personal information? Depending on who and what is coming into the office, private spaces may be necessary.

Whether or not you fall into the open-space mold doesn't change the fact that you can still optimize and enhance your space. In the end it's all about using the office as a tool. Include your staff in the redesign every step of the way – they'll have the best input for making the space more useful and interactive, and they'll be even more motivated with their own ideas in play.

These are just some of the ways to enhance your spaces and improve employee engagement. Whether you're working with a small or large budget, adding a small coffee or employee wellness lounge, or building an outdoor play space with a flower and herb garden with hammocks, such enhancements will ultimately prove to be a sound investment.

An office designed around the principles outlined in this chapter can and will increase collaboration, innovation, productivity and engagement. It will also enhance company culture and brand manifestation, which in turn will increase the retention and attraction of top employees, ultimately creating a people-centric business.