

**Features****Hot desks, cool chairs and a warm welcome; Business performance; Sponsored Supplement**

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A better workplace can earn dividends by increasing staff productivity, explains CLARE GASCOIGNE

What is a building for?" asks Andrew Harrison, director of research at DEGW, a design consultancy that studied the impact of office layout on business performance for the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment.

"Buildings," he says, "are about HR (human resources): how you want people to work and what kind of behaviours you want to encourage."

Our office environment can have an enormous effect on our performance. According to research by the Hay Group, an HR consultancy, the happier people are in their work environment, the more effort they're prepared to make and this, they say, can improve the bottom line by up to 30%. Our working space can also affect our health, causing a rise in days lost through sickness. Encouraging people to make healthy choices is the new corporate paternalism, ranging from giving staff financial incentives to cycle to work to loading vending machines with nutritious products.

Offices can affect staff retention, too. According to research by Knoll, which makes office furniture, the workplace is responsible for up to 24% of employees' job satisfaction. With demographics pointing to a future shortage of skills and to strong competition for talented staff, it could pay companies to improve their offices.

But few employers are getting to grips with the changing nature of work. "Offices grew out of factories, so were organised along factory lines. People were supervised in a strict hierarchy," says Jeremy Myerson, professor of design studies at the Royal College of Art and co-author of *Space to Work*, an analysis of office design. "Now computers do a lot of the process work and we do 'knowledge' work. That requires you to think and talk to other people -the office has to facilitate social interaction."

Today's increasingly mobile workforce uses the office differently to previous generations. "The workplace is becoming more transient; we may not use it every day," says Mark Chatterton, a director of PC World Business. "It has to be more flexible. But offices are about creating communities."

The quality of its premises says much about the company and the way it treats its staff. In a survey by *Management Today* magazine, 94% of respondents said their place of work showed whether they were valued by their employer or not.

And an office can help or hinder work: does its layout facilitate communication between people? Does it shriek "hierarchy" or suggest a flatter corporate structure? Are there private spaces for staff who want to take a break or is it more of a goldfish bowl?

"Small businesses often think it's going to cost a fortune but small changes can have a big effect -put some coffee on in reception, so visitors are greeted by the smell," says Myerson. "The one thing you shouldn't skimp on, though, is chairs. If you buy cheap chairs, people will go sick."

Lighting is another critical area. Providing adequate windows in the workplace has been linked to 15% reductions in absenteeism. Plenty of reflected light (bounced off ceilings or walls) helps to create a uniform background, but staff may also need individual lighting on their desks.

The key to keeping workers content is giving them the ability to control their local environment; being able to open a window, pull down a blind or adjust a light can all make a difference.

Spatial layouts also need to reflect the culture of the company. "When we started our research, the assumption was that if you distilled all the literature, you could come up with the perfect office," says Harrison. "But this is not a case of one size fits all. Offices are dependent on the business culture, on what the organisation is trying to do and on the tasks they have."

An open-plan layout may not suit all companies. Solicitors usually need greater privacy than software designers. An added difficulty is that most of us need more than one type of space in order to carry out different tasks. The environment needed to write a lengthy report, for example, is different to that needed for brainstorming. This can prove tricky for cash-strapped small firms, but mobile technology can transform public areas, such as hotel lobbies and airports, into working areas.

"There are three categories of space," says Harrison. "These are public access, such as cafes; privileged, with some degree of boundary control, such as business-class facilities at an airport; and private, which could be in an office or at home. We are using less private space. More activities are taking place in public or privileged space."

However, staff who use public areas, taking advantage of the wireless internet access hot spots that many now provide, should bear in mind the security implications of such technology and make sure they follow the right protocols.

Locating your office close to a welcoming cafe may also mean that you don't have to provide special areas for when your staff just need a break.

Creating flexibility in offices is another priority. "A lot more people are mobile and might need to plug in a laptop and use a desk in an office only occasionally," says Guy Crabb, marketing director at ODB Group, an office design company. "We have seen a rise in benching (long desks with network access for several people), which is effective and space-efficient."

Opinions are divided, however, on hot-desking, where a company saves on costs by providing fewer desks than there are staff. This can be successful when some staff do not routinely work in the office from Monday to Friday, but some companies are finding it unpopular with employees. Much depends on where the majority of an employee's time is spent. A sales rep who is on the road most of the time may not mind, but an employee who works two days from home and three in the office may still feel happier with their own desk in the workplace.

Two important elements should be considered when planning for staff to work remotely, according to Chatterton. The first is to install some degree of access control, to ensure that only employees can log on to the corporate server; this is achieved by giving each remote worker a security fob, which provides a frequently changing access code. The second is to secure the wireless network, again using an access key. "Securing the network is the biggest worry for companies using wireless," says Chatterton.

However, few of us want to work on a laptop all the time -the distance between keyboard and screen can make it uncomfortable. So we need the ability to synchronise desktops and laptops. Although this can be done with cables, a better option is to provide a docking-station interface. An alternative could be a laptop holder, which props up the machine so that the screen can be used with a separate keyboard at the correct distance, to avoid eyestrain and a hunched posture.

As Harrison says, workplace design is not a case of "one size fits all". But here are a few ideas that might make your workplace more effective.

\* You could remove all clocks from the office. Timelessness is one of the few experiences at work to combine complete involvement in the task at hand, peak performance and pleasure, according to Babis **Mainemelis**, assistant professor of organisational behaviour at the London Business School, writing in the *Academy of Management Review*. Employees who experience timelessness will be more motivated and more productive, he says.

\* Providing somewhere for staff to take a nap could be as effective as serving them a coffee, according to Sara C Mednick, a psychologist who conducted research at Harvard University on the benefits of sleep. She found a 30-minute nap enhanced the ability to learn certain tasks -an idea taken up by MetroNaps, a New York company that leases ergonomic pods to tired Americans. After a snooze in the pod, users are woken with a combination of light and vibration.

\* Plants reduce fatigue, headaches, coughing and irritation of the eyes by 30%, according to the EU information campaign *Healthy Plants in the Workplace* ([www.healthygreenatwork.org](http://www.healthygreenatwork.org)). It says a third of all

modern office buildings in Europe have an inadequate indoor climate, resulting in higher rates of illness among staff. Green offices can also be more creative: a study by Roger Ulrich of Texas A&M University found that plants and flowers improved idea generation, creative performance and problem-solving.

\* Most office desks are a standard 72cm high and were originally designed for use with static flat seats, not swivel chairs, according to Back2, a supplier of ergonomic furniture. Moreover, it is healthier to stand for 20% of your working day. Back2 recommends "sit-stand" desks, as used in 70% of offices in Scandinavia.

These allow users to move their work surface up and down to find the most comfortable level to work at.

Deciding how your office should look is partly a decision for the company but may also be as simple as asking your employees for suggestions. Some changes, such as providing lockable storage facilities, may not cost much but can make a big difference to staff satisfaction. And, ultimately, happy staff should make for a happy bottom line.

## WHAT MAKES OFFICES WORK

### Lighting

Natural light is vital. Staff deprived of it in the centre of a building (what designers call 'deep space') are more likely to fall ill

### Desks

Network access points for occasional staff are an efficient use of space.

### Seating

Chairs should be comfortable and adjustable to help posture

### Recycling facilities

A green policy towards waste reflects well on your business

### Outside

### Cafe WiFi

Staff can take a break or work remotely but keep in touch through their laptops

### Personal safety

Security measures such as good lighting around the office give workers a sense of wellbeing

### Cycle racks

Providing a safe place for bicycles shows employees your environmental awareness

### Vending machines

Providing options such as fresh fruit, rather than chocolate bars, makes for a healthier workforce.

### Break-out space

A defined area where staff can switch off from work and socialise is good for morale

### Reception areas

Present your company in a welcoming and professional way, with a tidy seating area and good quality coffee

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