Workplace Environments & How They Influence Productivity

Keep people happy and enthusiastic so they can do their best work.

By Craig Goodliffe

It's long been known that the physical workspace is one of the most pivotal factors in productivity. Features such as lighting and color have been shown to affect employees' mental state and efficiency, while the physical arrangement of offices and office furniture directly influences how people work and collaborate with their colleagues. As our understanding of the work environment is evolving, so too is how we use the space to enhance productivity.

How the Era of Hybrid Work Has Changed Things

The brick-and-mortar office is one thing that was fundamentally changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the height of the shutdown, many office-based jobs switched to a model that let people work from home. Employees now feel liberated to work on their own terms – in an environment that's more comfortable for them, eliminating their commute and allowing them to emphasize their own productivity.

Nonprofits that embrace remote work models have seen numerous benefits. For one thing, they've greatly expanded their hiring pool. Previously, hiring was restricted to the surrounding geographic area. But if people don't need to go into the office for work, they can live anywhere. Although there must be some considerations – such as tax requirements and time zones – hiring remote employees from other parts of the world opens the door to workers with unique and valuable perspectives and skill sets.

Some nonprofits have had great success creating a hybrid environment that combines remote work with in-office work. Whether this means having employees work from the office on some days and from home on others, or having some people work completely from home and others completely in-office, a hybrid model gives employees the flexibility they need to maximize their performance.

The philosophy behind the hybrid model is that not every employee has the same needs, and it's important for nonprofit leaders to remember this fundamental truth. While one employee may thrive in the clearly defined structure of working in the office five days a week, from 9 to 5, another may feel constricted by such rigidity. Forcing those who prefer an in-office environment to work from home could be just as damaging to their performance as requiring those who don't work as well in the office to come in.

> "Lighting and color affect employees' mental state."

ASK AND LISTEN.

Ask people what they need to feel most productive – and actually act on this feedback. Ask in-office employees what could be done to make the physical space more welcoming and conducive to their best work. Ask remote employees what resources they need to make their home workplace more rewarding, and try to provide those resources within reason.

HAVE SOME TRUST.

It's important to trust your employees to be productive when they choose to take advantage of a remote or hybrid work environment. Many leaders are used to employees working in-office, where they can check on them to ensure they're staying on-task. When you allow people to work from home, you must ease up on that desire to control. Give them the chance to prove themselves trustworthy; then provide the freedom they need.

How the Mental Environment Plays a Role

It's not just the physical space that plays a role in productivity. Mental aspects such as focus and distraction determine how efficient people are in doing their work. Some employees may have a noisy home environment, such as a household of kids, while others are distracted by the hustle and bustle of their co-workers in the office. Finding strategies to keep people on track can make a big difference. Here, for example, are tips to share with others in your organization:

USE LISTS TO KEEP ON TASK.

Creating to-do lists is a valuable tactic to ensure that activities are completed on schedule. At the beginning of

the day (or at the end of the previous day), create a list of everything that needs to be done, and rank it in order of importance. That way, if anything comes up last-minute, you already know what's a priority and what can be delayed in case of an emergency.

Often, it's best to complete tasks that take two minutes or less right away. Of course, there's some leeway with this; if you're in a rhythm, don't break it to do something else. However, if you put aside these quick, easy duties for too long, they could build up by the end of the day and become overwhelming. Complete these brief projects as soon as you get the chance, and then move to the things that require more of your focus.

DELEGATE.

To remain productive, it's crucial to use the skill of delegation. For instance, things like answering phone calls and scheduling appointments are essential, but they can be done just as well by an assistant. Delegating such work frees you to do the things that only you can do.

BLOCK OUT TIME.

Time blocking is a vital time-management skill. You and your team need to set aside certain periods for specific tasks. For instance, employees might designate certain hours for fielding e-mails. When the time is up, they know they need to proceed to the next activity.

Time blocking is effective only when it's honored. Ensure that when employees identify a time for focus, they're not bothered with other demands during that period.

Before people block off time for various tasks, they must figure out *when* they do their best work. Some employees might be most productive as the day begins, some need time to warm up before reaching the height of their productivity, and others experience a "second wind" in the afternoon. Be sure people pinpoint their best work time so they can use it for the day's most critical duties.

DON'T DISCOUNT THE POWER OF BREAKS AND CALMING ACTIVITIES.

Working straight through the entire day can cause people to start feeling overworked and burned out. However, a lunch break and a few bathroom breaks likely won't be enough for most employees. Some might need a bit more downtime throughout the day to do activities such as yoga, meditation, or team-building exercises with their co-workers. Building time for these relaxation periods will boost performance.

> "If you put aside these duties for too long, they become overwhelming."

It's All about the Culture

For people to do their best work, it's important to create a culture that takes into account what they want and need – as workers and as human beings. You'll find a wealth of guidance in articles such as these, available at NonprofitWorld.org:

- **Accomplish More by Climbing the Productivity Pyramid** (Vol. 36, No. 3)
- **Work Going Hybrid? What You Need to Know** (Vol. 39, No. 1)
- **Bring Yourself Fully to Your Nonprofit Role** (Vol. 41, No. 1)
- **Too Much to Do: Four Steps to Effective Delegating** (Vol. 26, No. 1)
- **Employee Feedback is No Longer Optional: Satisfying a Demand for Dialogue** (Vol. 39, No. 1)
- **Are You Offering the Right Perks?** (Vol. 35, No. 1)
- **Moments Matter: A Three-Part Strategy to Leverage Your Time** (Vol. 40, No. 1)
- **Reimagining Your Hiring Practices: A Self-Assessment** (Vol. 36, No. 3)
- **Embrace Mindfulness as a Leadership Practice** (Vol. 36, No. 2)
- **Yes, You CAN Balance Work & Family Roles** (Vol. 31, No. 6)
- **Shape a Culture of Trust: The Foundation of a Successful Workplace** (Vol. 40, No. 2)
- **Beware These Red Flags of a Toxic Hybrid Workplace** (Vol. 39, No. 3)
- **A Path to Stronger Programs, Greater Engagement, *and* Less Burnout?** (Vol. 36, No. 1)
- **The Key to a Productive Workforce** (Vol. 32, No. 2)

CREATE A BALANCE.

Numerous studies show that employees who maintain a good work-life balance are not only happier in their jobs but also more productive. When people take the time they need for themselves, they're more focused when they come to work.

Always Consider People's Needs First

Ultimately, the most important thing to remember is to design workspaces to meet the unique needs of your employees. Whether this means physically changing something about the environment, allowing hybrid or remote work models, or shifting the expectations of scheduling, it's clear that employees whose needs are better met will get more done.

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