



A Well-Balanced Feel

Forget the hype, buzzwords and trends. The key to designing an effective workspace lies with a concept as old as life itself: balance.

By Drew Himmelstein



With all the mobile and digital technology available, setting up an office should be easy. Workspace is no longer dictated by having to access a computer mainframe or an unwieldy filing system. Most things that workers need to do their jobs are inside their laptops and smartphones. All people should need is a place to sit, whether together or alone.

But it turns out that what arguably should be simple is anything but. Workers are looking for something more than a desk: they want to spend their days in an inspiring space that contributes to their purpose, facilitates their cognitive and physical well-being, and allows them to concentrate and interact productively with their colleagues. Yet companies that may be considering how to design an up-to-date, effective office space for their employees are confronted with an ever-changing and contradictory range of options.

In fact, a brief dip into office design literature reveals a haphazard view of workers and their needs. Just as one publication extols the virtues of moving to a “free-address” type of work environment that prioritises mobility,¹ another proffers the stability of assigning workers to cubicles.² No sooner are you nodding your head as you read about “the rise of the open office”,³ you are side-lined with warnings of an oncoming “privacy crisis”.⁴ You’ll read about how organisations are making the bold leap from secure desktop computers to laptops, and then another report suggests, “in the year 2020, the largest proportion of Gen X and Gen Y professionals believe that a worker’s most important connected device will be a smartphone [or wearable device].”⁵ In a quest to demonstrate what seems to be the latest thinking around people, technology and workplaces, it becomes clear that there’s not really a needle being moved, but more like a pendulum being swung.

Step back from the conversation, and it just doesn't seem possible that workers and their needs change so much from year to year. Does the person who was a collaboration-driven, open-plan-loving worker a year ago suddenly become an introvert in need of a quiet, studious cubicle?

Scott Doorley, Creative Director at the Stanford d.school and co-author with Scott Witthoft of *Make Space*, a guide for designing to encourage creativity, says no.

"Workers' needs stay consistent," Doorley says. He outlines a collection of workplace requirements that he says stay more or less stable over time: "People need a sense of belonging, they need a private area, they need an area to be host and they need a place to keep their things."

Greg Parsons, Herman Miller's Creative Director for Global Work, concurs. "We realised that it's pointless to always try and predict the next trend, so we turned to something that doesn't change – human experience." Parsons adds, "we're designing for the human operating system."

It turns out that the "human operating system" has some pretty specific requirements when it comes to its work environment. "You wouldn't argue that humans need water or oxygen," says Edward L. Deci, a professor of psychology at the University of Rochester who has studied human motivation in the workplace. "It's not only the body that has needs. So does our psyche."

As a part of developing Living Office, Herman Miller's new approach to human-centred workplaces, Parsons and his team assimilated diverse views on the subject of what motivates people at work. They found that workers need a sense of security, belonging, autonomy, achievement, status and purpose.

According to Deci, it comes down to how humans are wired. In order to navigate the world in a healthy and productive way, he says that people must have a sense of competency in their work, a sense of harmony with other people and a sense of autonomy. "Research shows that when people experience a sense of autonomy in the workplace, they perform better," confirms Deci. "People who are acting autonomously are psychologically healthier."

But can psychological health be achieved in an office environment where there are different types of work that need to be performed by workers with different personalities? It seems harder still when the same workers have different needs at different times: times when they need quiet and concentration, times when they need activity or times when they need focused collaboration. Is it possible to find common ground among all of these seemingly contradictory inputs?

According to Parsons, the answer is balance.

The most effective office spaces support a balanced variety of work environments that also balance the psychological needs of people with the demands of the work being conducted. "A totally open office is ineffective," Parsons says. "We used to have closed offices, and those were ineffective too. What we need is the right mix, and it's not just a question of open versus closed. We need to balance things such as formality and informality, consistency and adaptability, and uniformity and diversity."

With people working on so many different kinds of projects in any single office space, achieving and maintaining that perfect balance can be a challenge. A high-octane sales team firing off sales calls to meet its monthly revenue target is going to need a different workspace from programmers trying to crack a complex coding problem or a consultancy team brainstorming their client's solution over videoconference.

But by combining a diverse mix of workspaces into a single office, it's possible for a company to create balance for all of its workers, according to Parsons. "If you can understand how to balance people and their work, so to know when consistency is called for versus adaptability, or to know when the work requires an open space or an enclosed space, then you can begin to create a balance of places for people to do that work."

Unlike the old sea of cubicles or the reactionary open-plan design, Parsons and the Living Office team envision a balanced office with a mix of different work settings that workers and teams can move through as it suits their workday, enabling people choices based on the task at hand or the desired output of the work.

The Herman Miller team designed 10 different work settings – each of which can be optimised for purpose, character and activity – that can be deployed to create a holistic office environment. For example, a Haven is a private space that facilitates focused work or simply provides space to unwind. A Hive is similar to a co-working space that encourages individual work along with casual feedback and collaboration. A Clubhouse offers different types of work areas within close proximity to provide a base for teams working together.

“Sometimes you need rest, sometimes you need socialisation, sometimes you need a little bit of learning and sometimes you need to kick your feet up on a sofa and be left alone,” says Primo Orpilla, Team Lead at architectural firm O+A. O+A has designed offices for many leading technology companies, including Facebook, Yelp and AOL.

O+A uses the term “topology” to describe different intentionally designed settings within a workplace.

“People are very ritualistic and different depending on what the tasks are that day,” Orpilla says. On a given day, one person might start her working day by going to get coffee, another might chat with his colleagues and a third might immediately settle down to focus on a big project. “We want to make sure that you have a space to go for all those rituals that matches your mood during the day,” he adds.

O+A’s offices have large open-plan areas, but they’re supported by many small, flexible meeting rooms, lounges, phone booths, social areas and standing tables for impromptu meetings in the hallway. The old rule of thumb called for one conference room for every 20 workers, but O+A offices have a meeting room for every five to seven workers, Orpilla says. Rather than having to centrally book a conference room that’s always in demand, workers can choose to get together to collaborate on the fly.

This type of dynamic office space is increasingly popular, especially in Silicon Valley, which is known for office campuses with beach volleyball courts and massage rooms. But even in such a seemingly progressive environment, maintaining balance is still important. You can design a space to encourage interaction, but it will fail if people start working from home to find some downtime. An office can have all the ping-pong tables in the world, but if employees still end up heading out to Starbucks for small group meetings, the office isn’t working for them.

Ultimately, workers must buy into the office design, and they must be able to choose how they use it.

“Hypothetically, you could do your work anywhere,” adds Scott Witthoft, co-author of *Make Space*. “One of the things we’ve seen in spaces that we’ve designed is real benefit in creating serendipitous instances where people can run into each other and essentially talk to each other and exchange ideas in the same way as if you were walking on the street.”

It’s this type of spontaneous interaction that Parsons says is invaluable in today’s office.

“In the 50s and 60s, we were basically lining people up and giving them a task. They were an assembly line for information. Work was repetitive and process-driven, and the factory was the model,” Parsons says. “Today, innovation is important, along with new ideas and creativity. The way you manage people is very different. You foster freedom, change and variety.”

From a facilities and maintenance standpoint, it can be appealing for companies to simply install the same set of desks or cubicles across an entire floor that can be bought together and easily maintained. But Parsons argues that it’s actually more efficient to install different types of work environments in a single space.

“We used to have all these individual cubes for everyone in the workplace and 70% were empty. We find that people prefer to move around rather than have a specific space that they’re tethered to,” Parsons says. Spaces that are well utilised are more economical, Parsons argues. “You can spend less by delivering things that people actually want and value,” he adds.

And in competitive fields, flexible, attractive workspaces bolster the bottom line in another way: they attract new staff and boost retention, according to Orpilla.

“People enjoy hanging out in these environments,” Orpilla says.

Ultimately, a balanced workplace fills more needs than a floor of uniform cubicles or open tables ever can. Parsons calls the old monolithic model “great on averages, but poor on specifics.”

That's the mistake that many offices make: they try to find a single design solution for all of their employees and all of their teams. But balance isn't about adding up a set of requirements and finding the best average; it's about creating variety.

"I've seen greater success in having multiple extremes co-mingle rather than trying to hit an appropriate middle ground," Doorley says.

In a way, it's a luxury of the digital age that companies can truly begin to design for humans first, rather than for equipment or hardware. And if biology classes taught us anything, it's that all living things need balance.

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3. Marti Trewe, "Is the open office concept really superior? Maybe, maybe not", *The American Genius*, 5 November 2014.
4. Steelcase, "The Privacy Crisis", *360 Magazine*, Issue 68.
5. Cisco, "Connected World Technology 2014 Report", Cisco Systems, Inc., November 2014.