



The Science Behind the Way We Work

New Office Space: Harnessing Place Identity at Work

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“People’s brains do not function in a vacuum but are constantly in transaction with the context that surrounds them.”

1. Introduction: Reimagining the way we work

Reimagining the way we work is vital to meet the emerging challenges to both our work and our workplace wellbeing. Changes in the tools we use in our daily jobs, with a growing emphasis on digital technology and skills, as well as the dramatic upheaval of the pandemic, have offered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to rethink the nature of our work.

Reimagining our work, however, is as much about how we work as where we work. The physical space surrounding us can have a sizeable impact on the quality of our performance as it provides a setting that can facilitate (or hamper) certain habits and behaviours over others.

In continuity with the above and in line with the [New HR Strategy](#) the Commission strives to provide its staff with office space that could be, on the one hand, more conducive of collaborative spaces and, on the other hand, compatible with the needs

of hybrid and remote working. Hence, a number of teams and DGs across the Commission are moving to new office spaces.

2. The Challenge: Adapting to a new environment. Trade-offs and struggles

Moving to the new office space often implies a trade-off between a setting designed for collaboration and personal space. As people take over a growing amount of their core work from home, the office becomes more a place for collaborative endeavours, social connection, and serendipitous encounters with co-workers (Fayard et al. 2022). Because of this, the amount of space that people have allocated for themselves shrinks. This transformation has an immediate impact on staff’s personal space as traditional cubicles and assigned offices are replaced by large open spaces with no assigned desks.

The stocktaking exercise conducted by the flex-team aimed at monitoring the various DGs’ adjustment process to the new office provides a nice window into their struggles and impressions. One of the issues that emerged was a feeling that the space felt somewhat impersonal, making it more difficult for staff to “attune” to the new office. In light of that, the questions and challenges to address

to ensure a full usage and enjoyment of the office space are the following:

- What is the impact of office spaces on employees' performance and wellbeing?
- How can we make employees feel emotionally closer to their office space?
- What can leaders do in order to sustain and facilitate this process?

Interestingly, scientific research has brought to light insightful evidence that can help us better illuminate the issues above.

3. The Science: How we identify with the space we inhabit

People's brains do not function in a vacuum but are constantly in transaction with the context that surrounds them. Rather than being aseptic computational devices, they are biological outcomes shaped over evolutionary time to become highly sensitive to the environment that surrounds them. Therefore, the space around us influences the way we think and behave. Of course, this is also true in the workplace.

3.1. Identity-Based Motivation Theory: Your identity is shaped by the context you inhabit

According to the Identity-Based Motivation Theory (Oyserman & Horowitz 2022), people's identity is not a stable construct but is negotiated in an ongoing dynamic process with the surrounding context. People incorporate multiple identities (e.g. friends, managers, partners, etc.) that can become salient depending on the context they are in. Importantly, the identity that is most salient at a given moment will dramatically influence what we pay attention to and how we act.

3.2. Ambient belonging: Identifying with the space we live in

Psychologist Sapna Cheryan has investigated the effect of features and objects of a physical setting that communicate to a person a sense of fit and continuity with who they are, a phenomenon she called **"ambient belonging"**. Ambient belonging establishes a harmonious link between a person's self-image and their surrounding environment that can impact their attitudes and intentions. In an experiment run at Stanford University (Cheryan et al. 2009) researchers found that women were more likely to express interest in computer science if the classroom decor did not reinforce stereotypes associated with the field such as Star Trek posters, science fiction books, and stacked soda cans. When the room was decorated with objects such as nature posters, neutral books, and water bottles, women's interest in majoring in computer science was significantly higher than when the room was not decorated with stereotypical items. This effect was not detected in male participants.

3.3. Ambient belonging on the workplace

A study run by psychologists Craig Knight and Alex Haslam (Knight & Haslam 2010) shows how powerful the implications of ambient belonging on the workplace can be. In their experiment, participants had to complete tasks in four distinct settings: (a) lean bare minimalist office, (b) decorated by the experimenter (with plants and art), (c) self-decorated, or (d) self-decorated and then redecorated by the experimenter. Superior outcomes were found in the decorated-office conditions, meaning that participants were significantly more productive and reported higher levels of wellbeing in decorated offices. Strikingly, in condition (c), where employees could decorate the office themselves, productivity rose by up to 32%! These outcomes were mitigated in condition (d), that is when employees' initial decisions were overridden by the experimenters' choices, suggesting an interesting link between ambient belonging and personal customisation of the surrounding space.

It should be noted that these positive effects were found when decoration and customisation happened not merely at a desk-level, but at an office-level, meaning that these implications are perfectly compatible with an open-plan space with no assigned desks.

3.4. Harnessing place identity

Brandi Pearce from UC Berkeley and Pamela Hinds from Stanford University in collaboration with other colleagues found that higher degrees of place identity (a theoretical construct that is largely aligned with the concept of ambient belonging) correlate with employees' more engagement in their work, more communication with their peers, and a stronger connection to the company. In their paper "What Happened to My Office? The Role of Place Identity at Work" (Pearce et al. 2016) they looked at the ways in which leaders can harness place identity when moving to a new office space. They found that place identity increases when the following behaviours occur:

- i. **Leaders convey the vision behind the new office space beforehand.** Usually, the purpose and vision of the office are shared afterwards with practical guidelines and lists of dos and don'ts. Researchers found that place identity can be increased by conveying the vision before staff moves to the new office space.
- ii. **Leaders show enthusiasm about the new office space.** Leaders' attitudes towards the new space can have a remarkable impact on how employees feel about it. Survey data revealed that when leaders showed enthusiasm about the new space, employees' place identity flourished as compared to when leaders remained neutral or negative towards it.
- iii. **Leaders empower employees to adapt the office space to their needs.** In line with the Knight & Haslam's study from 2010, Pearce and Hinds found that when employees were granted the liberty to personalise the office space with objects or decorations, their place identity increased.

3.5. Leading by doing

Pearce and Hinds' results also remind us of more general lessons about leading by example. When

leaders first-personally display a certain behaviour, attitude, or habit, their example is likely to be followed by the team more effectively. A recent study (Eldor 2021) showed how leaders could sizably increase productivity and service quality by adopting a leading by example strategy. In a similar vein, leaders could ensure that the new office spaces be more easily appreciated and used to their full potential via their own exemplary behaviours.

4. ACTs (Actionable Tips)

The evidence from scientific research reviewed in the paragraphs above allows us to extract some actionable lessons with direct practical relevance for a smooth transition to new office spaces:

- ❖ Customised office spaces convey higher degrees of ambient belonging and place identity.
- ❖ When employees are granted the possibility to decorate and re-arrange their office space their ambient belonging increases.
- ❖ Open-plan offices do not represent a principled obstacle to customisation as ambient belonging can be conveyed at the office-space-level, rather than at a merely personal-desk-level.
- ❖ Leaders can harness and increase place identity if...

- ...they convey the vision behind the new office space beforehand.
- ...they show enthusiasm about the office space.
- ...they encourage workers to adapt the space to their needs.

- ❖ More generally, leaders can have a sizeable impact on employees' attitudes by enacting themselves the change they would want to see in their team.

Tip for tomorrow...

... Decorate your office space with something that represents something meaningful for you or your team.

In a nutshell



“People’s brains do not function in a vacuum but are constantly in transaction with the context that surrounds them”

The Challenge

How is it possible to facilitate people’s attunement to the new office space?

The Science

Identity is (also) shaped through the surrounding physical environment we inhabit.
Place identity can increase employees’ productivity and wellbeing.

The Solution

Harness place identity by allowing employees to decorate their office space.
For leaders: convey the vision of the new office space beforehand, show enthusiasm about the new office space, let people adjust it to their needs.



References

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