

## Office Design

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**David Creelman considers that the office design is related with HR, since you are talking about social and psychological issues.**

**David Creelman**

If you ever want to spark an interesting conversation with an intelligent person ask them about office design. Many people know from their own experience that the office environment has an impact on their effectiveness. They wonder about how much more they could achieve if conditions were ideal.

The first thing you may ask is "What does this have to do with HR?" And indeed, this is the problem with the whole topic. It doesn't fall neatly into any one department except maybe facilities management. But facilities management is typically more concerned with cost and administration rather than the social and physiological impact of the workspace on knowledge workers. My view is that as soon as you are talking about social and psychological issues you are talking about HR. There is a compensation department and a training department, perhaps there should be an office design department as well. Since it is unlikely that you have the budget for that, it would be a good idea to have a least one person develop expertise in this area.

I'm not suggesting that HR start saying, "Let's change the layout of the IT department." This sort of change must be lead by line management. But when the IT manager is struggling with productivity or creativity or retention, HR should be able to talk knowledgably about how office design might help.

There are many different aspects to office design. One of the most important is how office layout affects social interactions. You can read about this topic in *The Social Life of Information* by John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid. The most important idea is that people need to be physically close together to share ideas. A very simple, but very important, example of this is that in call centres, workers should have long phone cords. Now, I'll bet you have never considered long phone cords to be part of HR but they are. When a call centre worker has a long phone cord they can wheel away from their screen to help a co-worker. For this to work best, inexperienced employees should be sitting near ('near' meaning within the length of a long phone cord) an experienced employee. This facilitates a kind of on the job training that is far more effective than most classroom learning.

The other major social aspect is that knowledge workers need to bump into each other in casual circumstances to share ideas. Many high-tech companies have adopted these ideas and designed coffee lounges with whiteboards to encourage unstructured meetings over coffee. When Ron Dembo, who is now CEO of Zerofootprint, launched his previous company Algorithmics he insisted on building a spiral staircase to join all seven floors. Beside the staircase there were places where people could stand and have coffee. It was a battle

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to get that kind of investment since obviously in the early days of a company cash flow is tight, but it created an enormous amount of informal collaboration.

On the psychological side the right kind of working environment can facilitate concentration and creativity. In fact, some would argue that it's not so much psychological and physiological. Leif Edvinsson, famed for his work on intellectual capital, is interested in how certain frequencies of sound relax us. He has even looked at the idea of a sound shower—that will bathe knowledge workers in soothing sounds. The architect Christopher Alexander, one of the greatest thinkers alive today, has argued that the impact of beautiful, living spaces is not just psychological but physical, and essential to our well-being.

In the core HR areas like compensation, training or recruitment I can advise you on some specific things to do. In this new area I'm afraid I can't do much more than intrigue you with possibilities. However, the newness of this area should appeal to HR leaders. We are unlikely to get a competitive advantage from a well-known subject compensation. We are more likely to make a big difference for our companies if we pioneer new topics like office design. It's a subject worthy of your attention.

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**David Creelman** is CEO of Creelman Research providing writing, research and commentary on human capital management.

He works with a variety of academics, think tanks, consultancies and HR vendors in the US, Japan, Canada and China.

Mr. Creelman can be reached at [creelmanresearch@gmail.com](mailto:creelmanresearch@gmail.com)

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