



Workplace Design and the Pursuit of Happiness

Happiness and meaningful work lead to more engaged, higher-performing, and healthier employees. Haworth's findings from our global research program show how office design may foster more meaningful work experiences and happier employees.

Happiness Should Be Connected to Work and Workspace

People work for many reasons—compensation, social connections, status. However, the most important drivers of knowledge work today might be the pleasurable personal experience of creativity and problem solving, and finding meaning in one’s work.¹ Happiness and a sense of meaning in work are largely intrinsic—that is, coming mostly from within the individual. Some people bring a sense of meaning to their work, and some organizations create cultures that foster happiness and meaning in the employee work experience. However, to date, the role of the design of the physical office space that surrounds people at work has been largely unconsidered. Haworth’s ongoing global research program explores the connection between office design and happiness and a meaningful work experience.

Productivity, Engagement, and the Changing Workspace

Having productivity as the ultimate purpose of office space was a hallmark of early hierarchical organizations, and probably drove the Baby Boomer² mindset of bringing the “work only” version of themselves into the office. During this era, work products were largely created by individuals, and work outcomes were somewhat more tangible than today—and easier to measure.

With recent flatter organizational models and new generations of employees, this view of work and workplace is shifting. The now dominant Millennial workforce famously blends their work and personal life, bringing a more holistic version of themselves into the office. The need for belonging, connection, and contributing to a greater good, and a sense of meaning in work,³ is important to this highly collaborative generation. Even beyond Millennials, as people age they desire more meaning in their work and personal lives. Organizations are also embracing “employee engagement” as the new mantra. Engagement is certainly not a bad thing for employees. It does have a definite upside for organizations. The evolving intent of workspace is to foster engaged employees who are more likely to stay (avoiding replacement costs) and may work harder (improved productivity). It could be argued that

engagement is really just a more palatable way of re-framing the need to control costs and enhance productivity.

Many organizations encourage engagement through investment in mobile technologies, work/life balance, and related policy efforts. Some past attempts to encourage engagement have missed the mark. According to the 2017 World Happiness Report, activities that increase social capital—such as support people receive from fellow workers—are connected to happiness and higher engagement. This may be why the Friday afternoon beer keg remains popular.



Happiness Is an Emerging Global Aspiration

An emerging global movement places happiness and a meaningful life and work as goals, rather than traditional measures of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or productivity.⁴ We see this movement in The World Happiness Report’s call to action. This call to action for employers and workplaces seeks incentivizing employers to provide work environments and conditions that promote well-being.⁵ A happy work life is an enduring state that includes aspects such as lower frustration, improved contentment, relaxation, and sense of well-being. Such a state is logically related to “side benefits,” such as reduced stress, lowered physical and mental health risks, and increased engagement and performance.

“Happiness is connected to the basic goals of any business organization, such as productivity and retention—the difference is that there is also a direct benefit to the quality of employees’ lives.”

– Dr. Michael O’Neill, Haworth, Inc.



1 DeNeve, Jan-Emmanuel, and Ward, 2017.

2 Bursch and Kelly, 2014.

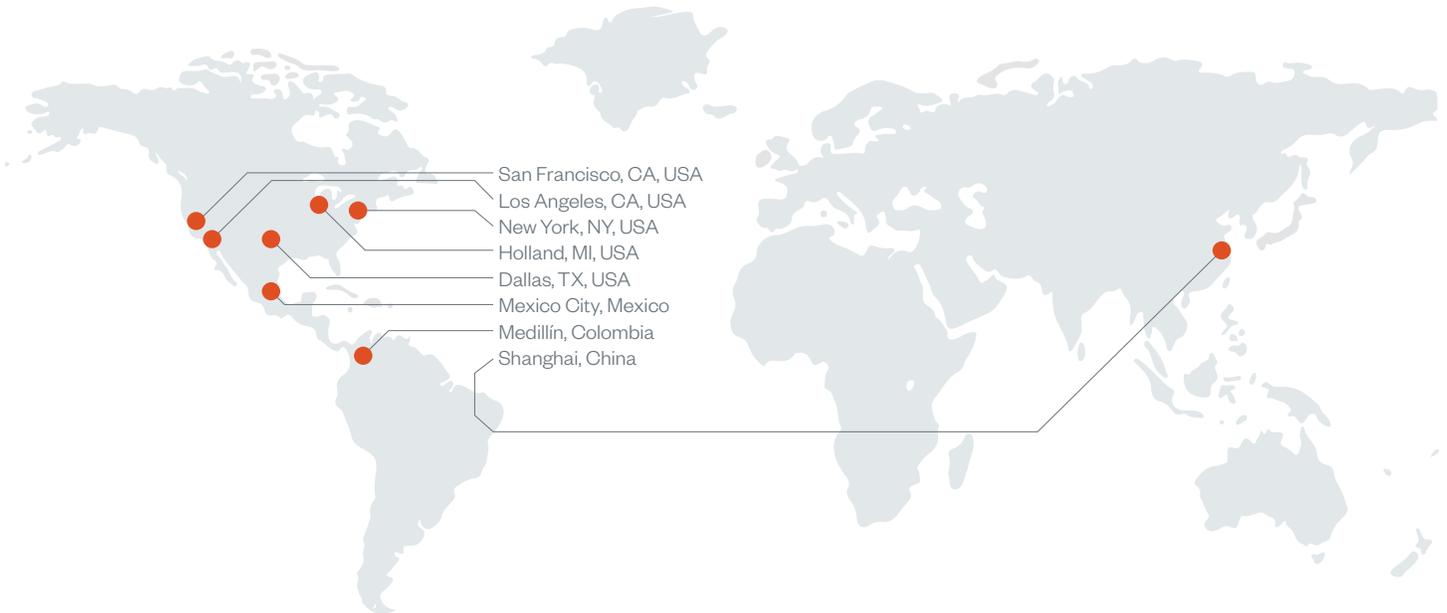
3 Grant and Berry, 2011; Grant, Christianson, and Price, 2007; Shu, 2015.

4 Weiner, 2008.

5 DeNeve, Jan-Emmanuel, and Ward, 2017.

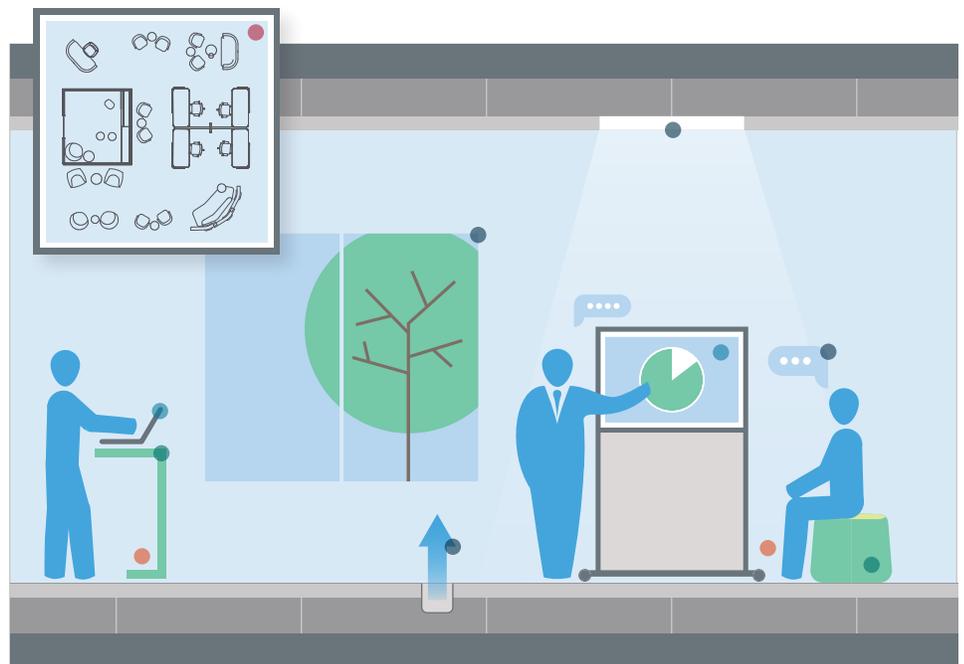
Connecting Workspace Design and Happiness

Anticipating this call to action to provide for well-being in the workplace, Haworth started a global program studying how design of workspace can be leveraged for happiness and meaningful work. The program ran until 2017 and involves over 2,000 office workers. Worksites of participating organizations included a mix of (non-Haworth) business headquarters and Haworth sales and administrative facilities.



This research design is the most effective possible (short of a laboratory experiment), using pre- and post-move survey measures and a control group to provide the strongest protection from threats to the validity of the results. The analysis uses multiple regression statistics to identify a broad array of features: ambient environment (noise, acoustics, lighting, air quality, etc.), planning features, workspace types, furnishings, and technology that impact the outcome measures of meaningful work, frustration, happiness, well-being, and contentment.

In these analyses, potential affects of generational affiliation and job level are controlled. Thus, the insights from this research can apply to the broader global population regardless of age or job level.



● ambient environment ● planning features ● workspace types ● furnishings ● technology

Happiness Is Directly Related to Work Experience

Our broad measure of happiness includes frustration levels, contentment, feeling relaxed, happiness at work, and the sense that work is meaningful. The analysis shows that two work experiences directly influence happiness: 1) design features that make employees feel valued, and 2) the ability to achieve focus at work. The next step was to determine which environmental features, if any, have an impact on employee ratings of being valued, and ability to focus.

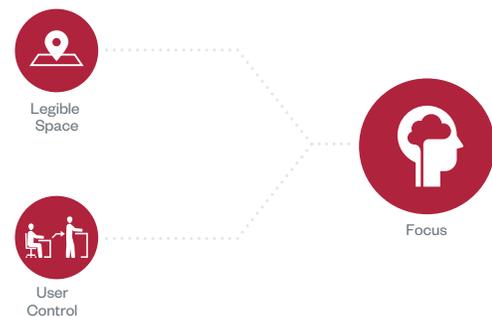
Five Features Contribute to Feeling Valued

The analysis further reveals that five features of office design affect employees' ratings of how the space makes them feel valued. These include: the rated overall "legibility" of the office space (the ability to see and find others, understand the layout of the space, degree to which workspaces and furnishings convey their intended use), user control over the primary workspace (adjustability of primary workspace features), having the right technology in the individual workspace, access to daylight from the workspace, and adequate storage in the workspace. These features cue employees that they are valued.

Legibility and access to daylight have the largest impact on feeling valued. This is logical since these two features are part of the overall ambient work environment, affecting everyone regardless of location or type of space used. For instance, legibility can be expressed in the design of space, ranging from the large-scale planning and layout of plan configuration and landmarks, down to the furnishings that people interact with and touch. Access to daylight is also part of the ambient environment, experienced through the large-scale space plan, since daylight can be experienced at any location within the building. The other features (adjustability, technology, and storage) are experienced primarily, although not exclusively, within the individual workspace.

Legibility and User Control Help Ability to Focus

Two of the above features that influence feelings of being valued also influence workers' ability to focus. These include: the rated overall legibility of the office space and user control over the primary workspace. Note that both these features also act as cues to employees that they are valued. Legibility conserves resources that can be used for focus, and control over primary workspace can provide people with enough autonomy over how they can best focus in that space.



The Power of Happiness Is in Design

On the surface, the notion of designing for “happiness” sounds trivial. But there are broader trends driving the move towards happiness as a new metric for success in work and life, even replacing economic metrics such as GDP for entire countries. When compared to the narrower focus of engagement as a business metric related to employee retention costs, a broader organizational goal such as happiness provides benefits to both employer and employee. Our research shows specific workplace design features support this broader organizational goal of happiness.



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Haworth research investigates links between workspace design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the user experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments. To learn more about this topic or other research resources Haworth can provide, visit www.haworth.com.

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