Interior Design in the Workplace

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The workplace is where people collaborate, solve problems, and thrive. While many factors go into these actions of productivity, few people consider how their surroundings may be affecting them. Nonetheless, the interior design of a workplace can either inhibit employees from reaching their full potential or contribute to their success. Quality and intentional interior design is shown to boost employees’ productivity and well-being, improve collaboration and community, and attract and retain talent. With these positive effects on the productivity of employees in the workplace, business managers would do well to make the layout of their office space a bigger priority.

Interior design is defined by The Council for Interior Design Qualification (CIDQ) as “the analysis, planning, design, documentation, and management of interior non-structural/non-seismic construction and alteration projects.” In more simple terms, interior designers manage all aspects of the design of the inside of a building. However, interior design is much deeper than one might expect. It applies the theories of human behavior color design and the principles of art to give interiors a purpose, as later referenced in the CIDQ’s full definition. If implemented correctly, these theories can provide positive benefits to all those who spend time inside the designed building and experience its features. Inside workplaces, interior design can have a large influence on employee behavior and be used to boost productivity and well-being.
The Best Design Boosts Productivity and Well-being

The environment surrounding workers can enable or inhibit the way they work. In a traditional office, cubicles create a disconnect between employees, and closed offices increase the separation between executives and entry-level employees. The redesign of the office in the twenty-first century incorporates an open office design to eliminate these gaps and increase collaboration. These open plans often achieve increased collaboration but inhibit individual productivity and privacy. Herman Miller, a leading office and home furnishing manufacturer, conducted a case study when designing a new office space for Harry’s, a shaving and grooming products brand. The research concluded that a variety of spaces increases productivity. Herman Miller found that 70% of employees felt productive in the new space, compared to 29% before the move.2

Knoll, a manufacturer of designer furniture, backed up Herman Miller’s data by adding research that shows the type of spaces needed to reach optimal productivity. Some of those spaces include primary workspaces, team meeting areas, community spaces, and refuge spaces. This idea of multiple spaces of differing complexity is related to the design theory of “prospect and refuge”. This theory is deeply researched and suggests that people prefer large, open spaces with unobstructed views, but that have areas to retreat to safety in.3 A great example of this is an open office space with large glass windows, small community areas breaking up the space, and individual refuge rooms on the edges (see Figure 1).

Designing an interior with multiple workspace types increases productivity by enabling employees to find quiet spaces and providing them with a fresh environment to feel productive in. When employees have these opportunities to become productive, they have a better sense of well-being. Well-being, the feeling of being happy and comfortable, comes from a variety of features in a space including access to nature, views, natural light, and diverse spaces. Most importantly, including community workspaces in an office enables teams to collaborate and build their team relationships, creating a sense of community among its members.

Excellent Design Facilitates Community and Collaboration

Collaboration enables teams to accomplish hard tasks together, giving them all a sense of belonging and thus creating a tightly knit community. An interior space, if designed correctly, can make this collaboration easier.

In a white paper published by Herman Miller entitled, “Can Office Design Build Community,” Herman Miller presents results from creating multiple workspace types for collaboration to help build a better sense of community. As seen in Figure 2 below, after the office redesign of Tavistock, employees felt that their workspace gave them a larger sense of community, that they were proud to bring visitors to the office, and that they had an enjoyable environment.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Before Redesign</th>
<th>After Redesign</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My workplace gives me a sense of community</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m proud to bring visitors to my workplace</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have an enjoyable work environment</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Inside Skullcandy’s headquarters, located in Park City, Utah, there is a half-pipe skateboard ramp, skater-punk atmosphere, anechoic chamber, scooters to ride around, and mountain bike storage. Evan Cindrich, principle and head interior designer at EDA Architects said the following about designing the Skullcandy space: “When we designed Skullcandy’s offices, we kept in mind the company’s culture. We looked at the demographics and interests of current employees to measure future employee’s expected interests. With this knowledge, we were able to design a space that represented the current employees and set Skullcandy apart from the competition to future applicants.”

In Herman Miller’s case study on Tavistock, their “motivating factor for the new office had been improving the company’s ability to attract—and keep—talented employees”. After the redesign, Tavistock’s employee turnover rate decreased by 16%. With pay leveling out around the country and job duties becoming increasingly similar, the aspects highlighting jobs over others is its office spaces and what they include. An interior designer’s job even includes deciding with the company if they want to add something like a Coca-Cola Freestyle machine into the kitchen and how to design the kitchen to include it. This kind of intentional set-up can play an important role in attracting and retaining talent.

First-rate Design Attracts and Retains Talent

Over time, the workforce has become more skilled and is in a position to demand more from their future employers. The perks of a good workplace have also changed drastically. Recently, Knoll researched themes of talent and shared five insights. The second finding on that list was “[t]he most sought-after talent … is often the most demanding, noting their numerous employment alternatives, each with superior amenities, and that they feel they deserve more than they already have.” Designing a space that includes these highly demanded amenities can help attract talent.

A study by Steelcase, a US-based office furniture company, found that the best ways to enable office collaboration through design are to facilitate movement, encourage equal participation, and create an ambient connection to the space. Some of the ways they suggest achieving this are to use light scaled furniture, provide collaboration tools, and build a welcoming environment. When employees feel this way, they are more likely to work at the company longer and are even more attracted to the company when applying in the first place.

Inside Skullcandy’s headquarters, located in Park City, Utah, features a half-pipe skateboard ramp.

Office Interior Design Matters

The spaces people spend their time in are significant. While people generally spend much of their time in their home, time spent in the workplace is usually a close second. Why should people care less about how their office is set up than their home? A well-designed interior at the workplace can help promote employee productivity and support their well-being, build a sense of community and improve team collaboration, and attract and retain talent.

Despite the numerous benefits, most businesses don’t prioritize office space design as much as they should. Design is only sought after when a space outgrows its capacity or intended purposes. This attitude needs to change. I challenge all business owners to evaluate their current office and ask themselves these questions:

- Is my office space attractive to new and current employees?
- Does my office space encourage collaboration?
- Is my office space boosting employee productivity?

If you answered no to any of these questions, it’s time to consider an office remodel.