



It's All About Me: The Benefits of Personal Control at Work.

Having some control over the workspace can improve comfort and the ability to get work done and reduce stress. This, in turn, can lead to greater productivity and better health. Having some control also allows people to “own” a workspace, which gives others a sense of who they are.



"The basic nature of work itself is changing," according to researchers Jim Ware and Charles Grantham. "The work that matters is knowledge work—the only true source of innovation and competitive advantage."¹ As the ways we work change and the work itself changes, people look for ways to cope. For most that means "tuning" where they work to the way they work and who they are.

"Research shows that the work environment has a substantial effect on the productivity of workers. Their performance is directly affected by the quality and suitability of the workspace and work tools—such things as a healthy environment, adequate workspace, correct type of workspace, and good communication and information technology tools," says the U.S. government's General Services Administration (GSA), which manages government facilities worldwide.

"It is obvious," the GSA report goes on to say, "that people who are constantly uncomfortable, or have to continually interrupt their work to make themselves comfortable, will be less productive than those who don't have to deal with such distractions."²

The Link Between Workers, Work, and the Workplace

Measuring just a single impact of giving individuals control over their environment, a British study found that "the option for control over lighting in individual workspace may account for higher occupant satisfaction than actual differences in luminance." The same study reported that workers "may be more likely to forgive unsatisfactory features of an environment if they can control other features related to comfort."³

"Numerous research studies have shown that workplace design is a major contributing factor to how satisfied and motivated workers are, how well they perform individually, and how they perform as a group," says Craig DiLoie of the Lighting Controls Association. "While there are many other things that affect satisfaction like job design and company culture, when workers can adjust their offices to their individual styles and job requirements, they tend to be more satisfied and report higher productivity."⁴

According to a Canadian study, "Surveys consistently indicate that building occupants both desire more control over their environment, including lighting, and believe that such control is linked to important health and performance outcomes."⁵ In a study examining workers of different generations, nearly 70 percent said that they would like to have increased personal control over heating and cooling.⁶

Linking control to employee satisfaction, Liberty Mutual researchers found that an office ergonomics training program significantly improved workers' self-reported perceptions of environmental control, satisfaction with the work environment, and the degree to which the environment supported communication with coworkers.

"These trained employees applied the necessary ergonomics skills to enhance their sense of control over their work environments by rearranging their workspaces to support

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their tasks and job demands. Workers' satisfaction regarding the workspace design increased their ability to effectively use the available workstation features to organize and lay out their work materials efficiently and to arrange flexible storage components to minimize distractions and improve privacy.⁷

Looking beyond the field of ergonomics, a Herman Miller, Inc., study asked 500 knowledge workers⁸ to rate 27 attributes of the workstation. The seven workstation attributes that all workers highly value are

- Having an office that is comfortable to work in
- A sufficient amount of work surface area (desks, tables, file tops) in my office
- The option to place a computer in the most suitable location
- The capability to keep all of my important work within arms' reach
- The capability to contain sounds within my office
- The capability to keep out distracting noises from outside my office
- The capability to provide visual privacy⁹

In another study conducted for Herman Miller, Harris Interactive found that "temperature, natural light, and privacy—the items defined as critical to productivity—were also the items all wanted more control over." Researchers said that the most favorable responses were given to things that allow users to control their personal space temperature, lighting, decorating, and advance seating adjustments.¹⁰

One company continually studies the impact of workspace design and changes on its employees. Accenture conducts a quarterly survey of a third of its U.S. workforce to track attributes of the workplace. Larry Scheerer, who launched the survey and leads Central Region Facilities and Services for Accenture, pays particular attention to satisfaction with "self-enablement tools," ranging from access to travel services by computer to being able to use any printer in the office. "Having access to printers ranks ahead of security," he notes.

Scheerer's survey data and earlier individual research studies tell him that people are more satisfied when they have some control over their workspace. People want access to what they need, when they need it, whether it is adjusting the height of a chair or controlling the brightness of lights.¹¹

"This system allows us to closely link things that we do (in facilities) with the survey," he says. The survey asks employees about location, office services, tools and technology, workspace, and administrative support and capabilities. He says that the data allows him to identify which of the 43 primary sites in the U.S. consistently scored highest on the survey. These "best practice" spaces then become models when new sites are built or existing sites are redone.

Soon after joining Accenture, Scheerer conducted a post-occupancy study that was funded by outside organizations, including Herman Miller. He not only wanted to know if the employees thought that a new workspace was an improvement, he also wanted to test the impact of training. The study used three groups, one that had no changes,

a second that moved into a new workspace, and a third that moved into a new workspace and received training on ergonomics and “new rules of behavior” that applied to the new workspace.

Both of the groups that moved into new workspaces reported increased productivity, collaboration, and self-reported job control. But importantly, the group that also received training reported an increase in job control 10 points higher than the untrained group (3 percent versus 13 percent).

Other studies have shown that workers with low job control or reported low levels of work-related social support also are less healthy than workers with job control or social support. “Research from large-scale longitudinal studies shows that those whose jobs allowed them greater decision-making control in doing their work had health that remained largely unchanged over a four-year study...Feelings of job control are clearly important in terms of employees’ long-term health as well as minimizing sick days in the short term.”¹²

Control of workflow and job latitude—the ability to make decisions about how to do their jobs—was studied by Herman Miller researcher Michael O’Neill, Ph.D., at a new call center. He reported that both workflow and the perception of job latitude improved when employees moved from a design with little flexibility to a more open design that fostered communication and more choice in how work flowed.¹³ O’Neill’s studies have linked increased satisfaction among employees with a range of workplace attributes, including

- Arrangement of furnishings and equipment (work surface, storage, chair, computer, etc.) in the workspace
- Lighting in the workspace (overhead and task)
- Acoustic privacy
- Space that supports face-to-face confidential discussions
- Degree to which workspace (whether assigned or unassigned) supports work needs
- Adjustability of workspace to fit needs¹⁴

Another client study conducted by Herman Miller showed a 12 percent improvement in worker self-reported job control after they moved into a new space designed specifically to support their collaborative work.¹⁵ Earlier studies by O’Neill and others have linked job control with health issues, which he notes cross cultural boundaries. “The very nature of these high-demand, high-strain jobs that have low-decision latitude, those jobs impact people at the physiological level,” O’Neill says. “Any human being put in a high-demand situation where there is very little control is going to react the same way.”¹⁶

Perception Affects Privacy

People working in the same office environment can have much different reactions to the amount of privacy that they have. In one study of perceived control among 600 employees, some thought their privacy was adequate, others did not. These responses reflect not only differences in perceptions of their workspace but also in the degree of control they felt they had over their interactions with the environment.¹⁷

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The amount of noise that surrounds a worker can affect perceptions of privacy as well as perceived job control. In a study of 1,000 employees, controlling noise and providing voice privacy was directly linked to enhanced job control. "Interestingly, several of the job-control predictors had to do with noise and conversational privacy. This suggests that when noise levels become more than a person is comfortable with, it can lead to feelings of being 'out of control' including not feeling in control of one's job."¹⁸

Carol Bailis, a vice president in the corporate real estate group at a major financial institution, has seen how people and teams react differently to options. She tries to give people choices in what they have in their workstations, offering different storage options, privacy screens, and accessories. In follow-up work after completing projects, she has found that use of space and furniture is specific to both the people and the situation.

Supervisors in one group were given movable screens, which then sat unused. Screens that could be rolled into position, however, were getting used. Team rooms for a group of traders sat unused, while another financial group highly valued a space where the team could control both formal and informal meeting spaces equipped with marker boards, stand-up tables, and movable walls.

She emphasizes the importance of communication and training so that people understand what they can have, how to use it, and how to change it. "You have to help them be realistic about expectations. They could ask for a lot of things. You have to align what you are discussing with what is possible," Bailis says. "If I don't hear from them (employees), I know that we've made a difference. We keep responding on each project. As people work in the space, we find out what is working and what is not."¹⁹

Making the Workplace Yours

People not only want some control of the workspace, they want their spaces to tell something about who they are to their coworkers. Elements in a space can be a lens through which others perceive cues about the occupant.²⁰ The tidiness of your work surface, the presence and arrangement of family photos, the number of sticky notes, the presence of a clock and even a candy bowl are personality cues from an office occupant to visitors.²¹ In a study of generations at work conducted for Herman Miller, more than 80 percent of people across all generations said that they like to personalize their office to give it their own identity. Half of the people said that they would like to increase their ability to personalize their offices.²²

Workplace control begins with the person taking ownership of the space.

"Workplace control begins with the person taking ownership of the space," says Betty Hase, Workplace Strategist for Herman Miller. "Workers who never take ownership feel like victims of their environment." She says that even in a campsite (temporary space) people begin to make it their own as soon as they connect a computer, hang their coats, and spread out their work.²³

She's found that workers have a greater sense of control when they go through an orientation to their workstations and learn how to adjust chairs ergonomically, use work

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tools, and adjust lights and other items. Hase recalls a customer who had an employee who complained chronically about the workstation when others seemed satisfied with the same space. "He made everyone uncomfortable. When the facilities people checked, they learned that he didn't have enough light. Then they found that he had a task light tucked away underneath an overhead storage unit, but he didn't know where it was or how to use it."

To foster better performance and retention, some companies develop special programs to encourage employees to make their workspace personal. One company allocates funds to employees so that they can purchase uniquely personal items. One person purchased a lounge chair and ottoman, one bought an antique school desk and chairs, another purchased an interesting table lamp, and yet another brought in a mounted deer head.

Giving workers choices can make them more comfortable and feel more in control of their work and workplace. There are a number of things that can provide control; simple things like letter trays, shelving, paper trays, storage bins, storage towers, mobile pedestals and seating, pedestals with cushions on top, mobile and adjustable lighting, personal air control, coat hooks, options to increase privacy, a place to securely store personal belongings, and areas to display personal items.

Workers benefit from tools to organize their work in sequence, separating active work from less active projects, and by setting aside the least active work but being able to find it easily. They can gain by having easy access to electrical and computer connections and portable computer and telephone accessories. Adjustable tools to support technology, such as monitor arms, keyboard trays, and laptop supports, can all make comfort and organization better.

Based on the latest research, more workers are getting more opportunities to have some control over their workspaces. A Herman Miller trends study found that 45 percent of the companies surveyed say that they allow employees to select or choose some features or elements of their workstations. At the same time, 17 percent of the respondents predict that worker control over the designs of their workstations will increase in the next five years.²⁴

Managing in the Future

As work and the workplace continue to change, organizations are looking for ways to get the most out of their investments in people and places. Increasingly, companies are measuring on their facilities and processes, trying to understand what changes have the best benefits.

In addition to the 13 percent improvement in perceived job control noted earlier in the Accenture study, worker reports of discomfort dropped 46 percent, while business process and cycle time reduced 11 percent. Workers who said that the workplace supported collaboration increased by 27 percent.²⁵ Based on the facilities model

established by this study, Accenture has gone on to cut its real estate square footage by 46 percent in six years while increasing the ratio of support staff to total employees from 1:19 to 1:35.

Similarly, Cigna Insurance moved a substantial portion of its workforce into flexible office arrangements that encourage people to “work wherever work occurs.” The company reported

- High satisfaction among both managers and employees
- Fifty percent reduction in employee turnover
- Return on investment of 75 percent over five years
- Six percent gain in worker productivity
- Worker and manager reports of improved communication, time management, and collaboration between team members
- Self-reported improvements in work/life balance
- Substantial reduction in its real estate portfolio²⁶

Control Can Mean Where and When People Work

A broader type of worker control is evidenced by another Accenture study. A global employee survey conducted by Accenture's Human Resources group indicates that there is a direct link to employees' engagement with the company and the company's financial performance. Larry Scheerer explains that engagement is measured by employees' answers to questions about the organization, what they say about staying with the organization, and if they say they are motivated to put out extra effort.

“There are high-level ratings of engagement in Dallas,” he says. That rating has been linked to management support in Dallas for working from home, particularly among the administrative staff, a nontraditional work-from-home position. “Workplace flexibility has to include flexibility about where work is performed,” Scheerer notes.

To offer the work-from-home option to the administrative staff, Accenture created teams and assigned six executives to each administrative team. As a result, collaboration among administrative staff increased as the team members shared responsibilities. Satisfaction of their “customers,” the executives, increased, too, because the executives felt they received more assistance for more hours of the day.

There are other perspectives on the nexus of work, workers, and the workplace that are beyond the scope of this report. Changes in technology, the continuing increase of knowledge work, the increase in cross-generational, cross-cultural workplaces, workforce mobility and decentralization, and the continuing effort to increase equality in the workplace, all have an impact on the future of work.²⁷

Companies that see the workplace as a strategic asset that can be used to optimize performance and improve satisfaction will gain competitive advantages. The advantage begins by giving the workers some control of how they work, how they organize work, how they interact with colleagues, and how they maintain their comfort.

Notes

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