



# LOOKING WITHIN

SOMETIMES THE ANSWER TO EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT CAN BE AS SIMPLE AS A CHANGE OF COLOUR. KNOWING HOW THE WORKSPACE CAN BE BETTER UTILISED AS A MOTIVATOR CAN MAKE A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE.

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**T**he poor old physical workspace often goes unnoticed by those looking to improve all those important things like staff engagement, well-being and motivation. Instead, the focus turns to changing systems, processes, training programs, and other more traditional human resource initiatives.

Now, absolutely these programs are effective, but spare a thought for the poor employees (and perhaps you are one of them) who have to sit under the same fluorescent lights within the same four grey walls packed into the same lifeless cubicle day after day – and be expected to be bright and

chirpy while doing so. When such a picture is painted, it is not that surprising to learn that the physical environment in which employees sit and work within has a huge impact on their motivation to get out of bed every day and come to work and indeed, work effectively.

The walls are as good as any place to start. Take a moment to have a look at the walls surrounding your desk or office. Specifically, take note of what colour they are. If you're like most people, you probably answered white or grey, as these tend to be the most common office wall colours. Unfortunately, if you do happen to be one of these 'common' people,

## 7 SCIENCE-BASED IDEAS FOR USING THE WORKSPACE TO MOTIVATE EMPLOYEES:

1. Put on some upbeat music.
2. Start to only use red, orange and yellow manila folders.
3. Change screensavers to pictures of the great outdoors.
4. Stick up posters of nature around the office.
5. Put a table tennis table in the staff room.
6. Put a red lamp on your desk.
7. Stare out the window (if you have a nice view).

your walls are not doing your mood or your productivity any favours.

Janetta McCoy from Arizona State University and her colleague Gary Evans from Cornell University researched the impact of colour on employees. Specifically, they examined the behaviour of people working on a problem solving task in different coloured environments.

The researchers found that warm coloured environments (full of reds, oranges, and yellows) actually helped people feel happier and solve problems more creatively than other coloured environments. So if you want happier and more creative employees – and let's face it, who wouldn't? – go and paint the town (or at least your workspace) red.

If you can't get permission to paint a warm-coloured feature wall, do not fear. There are other ways you can bring warm colours into your environment without permanently damaging property. For example, you can make sure that objects surrounding your desk incorporate warm colours, such as an orange lamp, and some red and yellow folders instead of those dull manila ones. Something that we do at our workspace is cover our desks in bright red Contact (yes, the stuff you probably used to cover your school books so they wouldn't get damaged).

Moving on from walls, let's look at an item often found on walls – posters. One such study had a look at the effect of a specific type of poster (landscape posters) and its impact on the stress levels of employees.

Byoung-Suk Kweon from the University of Michigan and his colleagues were interested in how they could help the one in four Americans who report themselves to be "chronically angry". Not such a useful behaviour or feeling to have in the workplace.

To help people overcome these angry and stressed feelings, they investigated whether decorating one's environment with aesthetically pleasing paintings of the natural world would help reduce stress.

The researchers had one group of people sit in an office which was decorated with these types of 'nature' posters. They had to complete a computer-based task and, following the task, reported their level of stress. A second group of people sat in an office that was decorated with 'abstract' paintings. This group was also quizzed on their stress levels after completing the same task as the first group. The researchers found those in the 'nature' posters group reported significantly lower stress levels. This result was especially pronounced for males.

This study is certainly not the only one that has reported that exposure to nature cues is responsible for a drop in stress levels. Certainly, other studies have found images of nature to be responsible for a drop in blood pressure and lower pulse rates.

In contrast, environments that contain ambiguous or abstract images have been shown to lead to an increase in anxiety and aggression levels. So stay away from abstract images and instead, plaster some pictures of trees and rivers up around the office to significantly reduce employees' stress levels.

Personalising one's workspace is something that is fairly common place for many employees. Indeed, it is estimated that in America, between 70 to 90 percent of employees personalise their workspace in some way, shape or form. In Australia, it is also common, although on the flip side, there are also several large organisations who ban this type of activity for fear that it reflects an unprofessional image and distracts employees from doing their job.

So how does this common activity relate to positive benefits for the organisation? And should this behaviour be encouraged or forbidden?

There has actually been a significant amount of research conducted into desk personalisation. In an overview of the research, Meredith Wells from Eastern Kentucky University reported that allowing employees to personalise their workspace has a whole lot of positive benefits.

Firstly, allowing employees to decorate their workspace is an effective way of coping with stress and expressing their emotions (better out than in, as they say).

In addition, decorating one's workspace can help new employees adapt to a new workplace more quickly and in addition, help them become more attached to an organisation. And if that's not enough, personalising workspaces has also been shown to enhance job satisfaction.

So if you want to reap the benefits of these very profitable outcomes, actively encourage employees to decorate and personalise their workspaces and even consider giving them a budget to do so.

It is well publicised that Google boasts having a beach volleyball court, among other sporting facilities at their Californian head office. Certainly, these types of facilities can act as selling points to potential employees. But what effect do they have on employee performance and motivation?

David Blanchette and his colleagues conducted some interesting and enlightening research into the area of physical activity and one's ability to solve problems creatively.

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The researchers divided their participants into three groups. Group 1 did no exercise prior to completing a creativity task (lucky them, some of you might be thinking). Group 2 completed 30 minutes of aerobic exercise, such as walking, bike riding, swimming and running, and following this, completed a creativity task. Like Group 2, the final group participated in 30 minutes of aerobic exercise, however, they had to wait two hours before completing the creativity task.

The researchers found that Groups 2 and 3 performed significantly better on the creativity task than did the no-exercise group. As well as concluding that aerobic exercise enhances creativity, they also pointed out that the positive effects of this activity are somewhat enduring, and certainly last at least up to two hours after completing exercise.

The results of this research suggest that it's not just a tokenistic way of improving morale when a table tennis table gets put in the staff room. Instead, having facilities that encourage physical activity can actually act as a scientifically proven way to increase the thinking abilities of staff, especially if the facilities are encouraged to be used in the morning and around lunchtime.

Now, onto the topic of music. If you are reading this magazine at work, what sounds can you hear? Is it simply the chattering of fellow employees, or is the radio on or CD playing? And what impact is this having on employee behaviour? Much research has looked at the impact of music in a number of contexts, such as consumer and shopping behaviour, but also in the area of behaviours that are relevant for workplaces.

One such study, conducted by Adrian C North from the University of Leicester and his colleagues, examined the impact of music on people's likelihood of helping others.

In this study, one group of people was exposed to upbeat music while another group of people were exposed to 'annoying' music. Following exposure to the music, both groups were then given an opportunity to help a fellow human being. It was found that people who had listened to the upbeat music were significantly more likely to help this person, compared to those who had heard the annoying music.



So at work, give careful consideration to the sounds that employees can hear. And if you want employees to be more altruistic and help each other more readily, then consider playing upbeat music in the background at your workplace.

Despite the fact that many designers will tell you that minimalism makes an office look professional and modern, such a design actually hinders employees' ability to solve problems creatively. One of the keys to creative thinking is being exposed to a large amount of stimulus. Researchers have found that exposure to random stimulus triggers more thoughts in the brain, which improves creative thinking ability. An environment that contains many objects and textures is much more conducive to lateral thinking.

Offices that have exposed pipes, asymmetric lines, and unusual and varied furniture are very effective at driving lateral thinking. If your landlord won't let you rip open the ceiling to expose some pipes, then take a trip to IKEA where you can always find inexpensive, bright and unusual bits and

pieces with which to fill your office space. Your local Vinnies can also be great for hunting down some quirky and interesting treasures.

So please, let this be the last day that you take your office surroundings for granted and assume that they have no impact on employee behaviour. As this article demonstrates, there are plenty of ways that the physical environment is affecting employee behaviour, including their ability to think effectively, be happy, de-stress and help fellow employees.

Start to make some of the changes recommended in this article and watch those all important workplace variables such as satisfaction, creativity, motivation and general well-being start to soar. ■

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