What Makes a Great Workplace?
Learning From The Best Place To Work Companies
How do you define a great workplace? How can you create one? What makes a workplace great?

These questions have been the subject of numerous studies and awards programs. *Fortune* magazine has been identifying and publishing 100 Best Companies to Work For since 1998 with the assistance of the Great Place to Work® Institute in San Francisco which has also created a similar ranking for small and medium-sized companies in collaboration with *HR Magazine*. Among those items considered in both national rankings are the “evaluation of the policies and culture of each organization and the opinion of the company employees.” Over the years, studies have proven that good workplace practices can definitely help to improve a company’s bottom line.

Kahler Slater, an interdisciplinary design enterprise that creates transformational experiences and environments for visionary clients throughout the country, was selected in 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010 as a Best Place to Work (BPTW) by *HR Magazine* and the Great Place to Work® Institute. As designers of work environments and excellent employee experiences, we set out to study the characteristics or attributes of the physical workplace of Best Place to Work award winners. We hypothesized that Best Places to Work attend to their physical environments (through well designed workplaces) with as equal an emphasis as they attend to the experience of culture and HR policies. We believed that there were certain positive workplace attributes that could be studied that would be common to these Best Place to Work companies. This data, then, would be valuable for all companies desiring to benchmark themselves against the best in class.

This paper describes fourteen (14) attributes of a great physical workplace (i.e., a well-designed workplace) and focuses on those areas where an employee’s ability to act is impacted by the design of the physical environment. The list is not exhaustive, however, it is a compilation from many sources and our professional experiences as facility managers and workplace designers. We have built our study around the theory that great workplaces are the result of careful attention to the entire environment - social, cultural and physical. Our thesis was confirmed through the results of our research study and these findings are presented in this paper.
DEFINING A WELL-DESIGNED WORKPLACE
A well-designed workplace means different things to different organizations. The definition is dependent on the business, its objectives and its culture. One company may have a clear need for distraction free work 90% of each day, which may result in an office comprised of almost entirely private offices. In contrast, a company whose chief business requires teamwork and extensive collaboration may desire more open work areas. The definition then, of a well-designed, workplace is subjective and relative.

THE PHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES OF A WELL-DESIGNED WORKPLACE
The work of today is drastically different than the work processes supporting the industrial revolution. Today’s products – knowledge and creativity, require a different environment in which they are to be “produced;” nurtured and shared. “Historically the white collar office reflected the mechanistic mind-set of the factory with work designed as a linear series of individual tasks.” New work processes can be better described as a network, often collaborative and non-linear, where “fewer and fewer workers create physical things. Knowledge is the product of the contemporary office and information is the primary raw material. A knowledge worker is a person whose primary function is analyzing, creating, deciding, collaborating and acting on information.” How does a workplace support this process of creating knowledge? Stan Kaczmarczk, Director of the Innovative Workplace Division of the US General Services Administration, contends that “your workplace should not be considered simply overhead, but an everyday tool to support work practices and organization’s culture. The space should be capable of adapting to fit the mission, rather than the mission fitting the space.”

For our purposes, we have defined a well-designed workplace as one that supports a company’s strategic business initiatives, allows employees to perform their work efficiently and productively, reflects and embodies the values and culture of the company, and is environmentally healthy. This is the essence of the physical attributes that our study attempts to measure.
Based on our experience in workplace design, along with our research and review of current literature regarding workplace design, productivity, and employee morale, we established a list of 14 physical attributes associated with a well-designed workplace. We focused on those issues that may have the most significant impact on the knowledge workers previously described. As business leaders, the challenge is to accommodate the needs of employees and the ever-changing needs of business. Adapting to new technologies, supporting health, and reducing stress while keeping a close eye on costs, offers an unheralded challenge. Value creation metrics such as productivity can be harder to measure in a knowledge-based environment, and facility management metrics have often been relegated to real estate costs and savings, rather than driving performance and productivity.

Through our study, we have learned about the ways in which companies designated as Best Places to Work use their physical environment as another catalyst to achieve great company performance. The attributes described here are those that have the biggest positive impact on the physical workplace, and individually and collectively contribute to productivity measurements and bottom-line performance. Understanding these attributes and their impact also can help to create a compelling business case to seek improvements in your own work environment.
Well-designed workplaces are physical environments that allow:

01. Individuals to perform distraction-free work
02. Collaboration and impromptu interaction
03. Undistracted teamwork and meetings
04. Accommodation of personal work styles and workstation personalization
05. Individual control of thermal comfort
06. Access to daylight
07. Control of glare
08. Workspaces allocated by function
09. Clear wayfinding
10. Adjacencies that support work flow
11. Accommodation of changing technology
12. Ergonomic accommodation
13. A professionally-maintained plant program
14. Expression of organizational culture
01. The ability for individuals to perform distraction-free work

According to the Buffalo Organization for Social and Technological Innovation (BOSTI), the average employee spends 50% of his/her time in the workplace doing “heads down” work, so having the type of workspace needed to reduce distractions yields benefits in productivity.

One can argue that the predominance of open office environments is a product of developing efficiency with a focus on reducing costs, and not necessarily with the interests of the user in mind.

Creating a distraction-free workplace can be accomplished by providing any of the following:

• Private offices (walls to ceiling) for all employees, or a high panel workstation with a door
• Standing privacy height partition panels (>60”)
• The ability to control privacy at individual workstations with seated, privacy height partition (<60”), with portable screens, panels or other temporary devices
• White noise
• Ample conference rooms or other non-assigned private spaces (i.e. enclaves, patio, etc.) where those in need of temporary privacy can seek refuge

The majority of survey respondents reported more than 75% of the workplace is comprised of open workstations.

Most respondents (over 50%) rated their BPTW workplaces as beyond acceptable or exceptional in allowing individuals to perform distraction-free work, which is supported in the physical environment by some combination of seated or higher privacy panels, conference rooms, and non-assigned private spaces such as alcoves and enclaves.
02. Spaces that support collaboration and impromptu interaction

In today’s business environment, vast amounts of information needs to be shared, analyzed, distributed and discussed. Workplaces that encourage interaction and collaboration are vital to creating an atmosphere of information sharing and knowledge creation. Interaction and collaboration also can result in learning experiences that advance product time-to-market. Depending on a company’s business goals and culture, teamwork and collaboration can happen in a variety of settings.

More than 70% of respondents rated their BPTW workplaces as better than acceptable or exceptional in supporting impromptu interaction.

This was facilitated by providing ample congregating spaces such as breakrooms, cafés or cafeterias (98%), and coffee stations with room to congregate (83%); ample conference rooms (85%); interaction areas such as central work and supply rooms (83%); wide corridors (78%), alcoves and huddle spaces (68%), outside patio seating (68%); and side chairs at workstations (76%).
03. Spaces that support undistracted teamwork and meetings

Since the 1990’s, organizations have experienced and are becoming increasingly reliant on team and group-based work to meet business objectives. Successful office environments that support this group work help to achieve an organization’s most prevalent performance criteria for serving the customer: high quality, speed-to-market, and added value for the customer⁷.

More than 60% of respondents rated their BPTW workplaces as above acceptable or exceptional in supporting undistracted teamwork and meetings, facilitated in the physical environment by providing various types and sizes of conference rooms, open and informal gathering spaces, dedicated team or project rooms, and mobile furnishings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workplace Spaces That Support Undistracted Teamwork &amp; Meetings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>variety of types &amp; sizes of conference rooms</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>open and informal gathering spaces</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dedicated team or project rooms</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>easily moved, mobile tables</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mobile worksurfaces that accommodate a small meeting</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other, unspecified</td>
<td>5%</td>
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</table>
04. Accommodation of personal work styles and workstation personalization

The ability to configure one’s workspace in a personalized manner, positively impacts their ability to perform their job efficiently, productively, and to their fullest potential.

This can be something as simple as the ability to position a monitor or telephone on either the left or right side of the occupant’s workstation. It also can mean the ability to personally make adjustments to one’s workspace to accommodate the occupant’s physical stature, personal preference, and ergonomic or environmental conditions, thereby reaping the benefits of a well-designed workspace. Elements that can accommodate individual work styles or preferences include:

- Task lighting
- Height adjustable work surfaces
- Ergonomical chair with adjustable back
- “Handed” workstation choices (right or left)
- Mobile furnishings (i.e. pedestals, side chairs, wheeled tables)
- Desktop organizing tools
- A standard accessories program

Most respondents felt their BPTW workplaces were acceptable or better in terms of adaptability and flexibility to meet personal styles, which is supported in the physical environment with a variety of the above elements. Over 55% accomplished this with mobile furnishings and 39% offered height adjustable work surfaces.

Although more than half of the respondents reported their companies as having tightly enforced policies regarding personalization of workstations, nearly a quarter reported their companies as having no personalization policies.
05. Individual control for thermal comfort

Each year, the International Facility Management Association (IFMA) surveys facility managers to determine the most common complaint of building occupants. Not surprisingly, the most common complaint relates to thermal comfort with occupants being either too hot or too cold. According to CNN.com, a Florida-based HVAC contractor estimates that 72 degrees is the optimal mid-range temperature for the open office, whereas a Cornell University study found the optimal mid-range temperature to be 77 degrees. That difference is one example of this problem...

every employee may have different expectations, but share the same thermal conditions.

One temperature does not suit all. Solutions to address this issue are varied and range in cost. While Johnson Controls’ Personal Environmental Modules (PEM) offer the highest range of individual controls, many companies are unwilling or unable to make the investment to retrofit existing buildings to accommodate these ideal solutions. Building envelope issues such as thermal glass, solar shade devices, and building orientation issues are another approach to working through this issue. For facility managers who live with the results of HVAC design and value engineering on a daily basis, this issue remains a major focus for time and investment.

Most respondents (49%) felt their BPTW workplaces were acceptable, while 39% felt they were better than acceptable in providing employees the ability to achieve thermal comfort. These were supported in the physical environment by permitting individual devices to supplement environmental controls, and through small heating cooling zones with accessible thermostats.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thermal Comfort Options</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allow individual devices to supplement environmental control</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small heating/cooling zones with some control at accessible thermostat</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operable windows</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual workstation heating/cooling units</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (unspecified)</td>
<td>2%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
06. Access to daylight

Natural light raises the neurotransmitter in the brain called serotonin, a chemical that has a large impact on mood, disposition and the ability to handle stress. The more serotonin released, the better an individual’s mood, as well as their ability to deal with stress. In the last decade, workplace design has shifted away from designs that were based on status where fully enclosed, perimeter offices obstruct daylight. Offices are now often designed with offices on the interior, or with glazed perimeter offices to enhance the open office work environment with “borrowed” daylight. Considerations regarding the placement of obstructions to view and daylight are now common conversations between workspace occupants and designers. Consideration of the benefits of daylight, the reduction of eyestrain, and the potentially improved personal wellbeing, all point to the importance of daylight as an element for a great workplace.

Most respondents reported their BPTW workplaces as providing direct visual access to natural light to the majority of their employees.
07. Control of glare factors

Along with abundant and desirable daylight, there is a concern that glare causes eyestrain, and is a major cause of headaches. In a Kansas City study conducted by the Institute for Health and Productivity Management aimed at the effects of managing headaches, it was shown that headaches can cause a loss of productivity. When an employee is limited in their ability to complete their work and they fall behind, stress is created.

According to recent insurance industry studies, 27% of workers say their jobs are the greatest cause of stress in their lives, so if additional stress is indirectly attributed to glare and glare can be fixed, it would seem an even more important issue to address.

Most respondents felt their BPTW workplaces were acceptable or better in allowing employees control of excess light or glare, which is supported in the physical environment in the manner displayed here.

### Devices Used to Control Excess Light and Glare

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<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>94%</td>
<td>anti-glare devices for monitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85%</td>
<td>ability to relocate computer equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57%</td>
<td>access to light switches and window shading - with group consensus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45%</td>
<td>individual window shading devices</td>
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What Makes a Great Place to Work?

Historically, office design reinforced the concept that size and privacy of an office were the symbols of status within an organization. The perimeter private offices of the 1950’s encircled open bullpen spaces for clerical and support staff. Hierarchy, department designation, geometry, status, and traditions were valid reasons to arrange work settings. Fast forward to the present day, through the experiments of office landscape and open offices, to a time where there is a better understanding of workers, teamwork, and the variety of work settings needed to create a successful office environment. Today’s well-designed workplace needs to be a highly flexible environment that can be easily altered to match an organization’s rate of change.

Respondents reported that size and type of workspace were designated most often, based on hierarchy or title, and less by function.

So how do facility professionals develop strategies to meet real estate cost containment objectives during space allocations? BOSTI reports that on the average, 75% of a person’s time in the workplace is spent within their own workspace. When the emphasis is placed on addressing “effective human performance,” rather than status or efficient use of real estate, the workplace becomes a tool for higher performance, not just a fixed cost of doing business. Understanding function and business goals also point to the fact that a “one-size-fits-all” approach no longer works to support business goals.

It would seem a logical correlation then, that workspaces should be designed to be efficient and productive (i.e. designed for the function performed within) and that by discarding symbolic status and hierarchy as drivers for space allocation, the workplace improves.

### Determining the Allocation of Workspaces in the Workplace

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Method</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>61%</td>
<td>by hierarchy or title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54%</td>
<td>by function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15%</td>
<td>by availability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12%</td>
<td>in some other way</td>
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</table>
09. Clear wayfinding

While creating spatial hierarchy in office planning, one can think of a workplace as a series of well thought-out navigation routes within the workplace, as well as good directional signage and the creation of landmarks and intersections. In his New Yorker Magazine article, Designs for Working, Malcolm Gladwell compared the work of Jane Jacobs in The Death and Life of Great American Cities with workplace design. The Jacobs concept proposes that “when a neighborhood is oriented toward the street, when sidewalks are used for socializing and play and commerce, the users of that street are transformed by the resulting stimulation: they form relationships and casual contacts they would never have otherwise.”

Applying this thought to the design of workplace wayfinding (the paths and streets of the office neighborhood) points to the need to use wayfinding to create opportunities to support interaction with the network of nodes and intersections. According to Gladwell, “Innovation - the heart of the knowledge economy - is fundamentally social.”

Proper wayfinding and clear spatial hierarchy makes it easier and faster to find people and departments, saving time and increasing efficiencies. It can be a catalyst for encouraging interaction among employees by creating intersections or “waysides” along main navigation routes within the facility.

Appropriate wayfinding design also can enhance security by steering people away from secure areas. Characteristics that support the creation of appropriate navigation and encourage casual contact include consideration of traffic patterns and navigation routes in terms of their impact on encouraging impromptu collaboration as part of the design.

The majority of respondents felt their BPTW workplaces were better than acceptable in terms of wayfinding, which is supported by the physical environment by individual and group identification signage, and low partitions.
10. Adjacencies to support workflow

Good adjacency planning allows for quick face-to-face connectivity with the people with whom employees need to interact frequently. It also provides ready access to the physical resources needed to perform one’s job, which can increase efficiency and productivity.

In an environment where “knowledge work process demands a high level of interaction and individual autonomy,” the planning of the workspace must be flexible to respond to the changing work of occupants as teams, and as individuals.

To meet these objectives, the design of the workplace must consider whether:

- Departments that interact with each other are located reasonably nearby (these are typically long-term adjacencies)
- People within departments that frequently work together are grouped together (i.e. several people working together on a specific project - these could be short-term adjacencies)

Most respondents felt their BPTW workplaces were better than acceptable in planning and meeting functional adjacencies of co-workers. These adjacencies are evidenced through thorough planning and space forecasting.
11. Accommodations for the changing demands of technology

It is not unusual for the churn rate (i.e. relocation of individuals) to be 40% in a corporate workplace\(^a\). In an office with 1,000 occupants, this means that as many as 400 employees could move to a new location within the workplace during the course of a year (or 200 people moving twice, etc.) Although churn is often necessary, it can be disruptive and cause downtime, which reduces productivity. The faster a move can occur, the better. If new cables have to be pulled or even if people from the IT group have to physically make changes other than plugging and unplugging a desktop device, the move will take longer and cost more. Flexibility and adaptability of technology allows for quick changes to be made at the workspace by the occupant, saving both time and money.

A well-designed workplace will accommodate today’s technology, and anticipate how tomorrow’s may be different.

Coordination between IT and Facility Management is not only desirable, it is essential in planning for the future. Current accommodations to maintain flexibility include:

- Access to power and data, etc., above the work surface
- Conference rooms, training rooms, team project rooms with plug and play capabilities and cable management for quick changes
- Wireless technology

The majority of respondents felt their BPTW workplaces were better than acceptable in accommodating new technology, which is supported by the physical environment.
12. Ergonomic accommodations

Ergonomics is an important workplace issue particularly as the diversity and demographics of the workplace is rapidly changing. Ergonomically poor seating can cause back pain. Incorrect desk heights in relation to monitors and keyboards can result in eyestrain and carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS). Back pain, eye strain, and CTS over a long period can result in an increase in worker’s compensation cases, leading to additional company costs related to healthcare and lost time. They also can lead to increased levels of employee stress associated with an individual’s inability to work at their peak performance.

A company that pays attention to stress-induced conditions of employees also will reap the benefits of high productivity and employee wellness.

With business health care costs continuing to rise, this proactive attention to ergonomics can increase overall profitability by lowering insurance claims and other health care costs.

The majority of respondents felt their BPTW companies were acceptable or better than acceptable in addressing workplace ergonomics, providing ergonomic solutions and instructions in a reactive rather than proactive manner.
13. Professionally maintained plant program

It is widely believed that interior plants can increase workplace productivity, decrease employee stress levels, and improve overall employee health.

Scientific studies performed at Texas A&M, Surrey University in England and Washington State University verify that plants significantly lower workplace stress and enhance worker productivity. In the Texas A&M study, participants working in an environment with plants present were 12% more productive and less stressed than those who worked in an environment without plants. Both women and men demonstrated more innovative thinking, generation of more ideas and original solutions to problems in the office environment that included flowers and plants.

Several conclusive studies were performed regarding health claims in work environments at the Agricultural University in Oslo, Norway. When reviewing 12 of the common symptoms related to poor indoor quality and “sick building syndrome,” there was a 23% lower complaint rate during the period when participants had plants in their offices.

With all of these positive aspects, one could readily assume that a well-designed workplace will include a professionally maintained plant service to provide and maintain plants throughout the workplace.

Not surprisingly, a large majority of respondents (80%) reported having professionally maintained live green plant programs in their BPTW workplaces.
14. Expression of organizational culture

The study also asked companies the following question: “In what ways is the organizational culture of BPTW companies perceived to be reflected in the physical environments?” More than half of respondents felt their BPTW workplaces supported and expressed their culture well. Content analysis of open-ended responses distilled common themes that describe how organizational culture is expressed in the physical environment of BPTW workplaces.

The top themes describing the expression of culture in the BPTW workplaces were openness, color, team/collaborating spaces, and “fun” touches, throughout.

On many visits to BPTW companies, the authors observed visible manifestations of the culture of an organization. For one midwestern manufacturing company, the family culture was reinforced and supported by providing a large enough dining area so that all 400 employees could share meal times and co-mingle when the plant was closed for lunch. Companies engaged in promoting wellness offered bikes for employee use and rewarded employees with on-site car washes. Though the simple acts of offering an accessible hose bib or large dining room does not create a culture, it helps to keep the spirit of the culture visible to everyone.
SUMMARY
The physical workplace can be a critical factor in the success of an organization. It is an important factor in supporting an organization’s business initiatives and it can be proven to be an effective tool to improve performance, rather than being seen only as a cost of doing business. The physical workplace is often the second largest asset of an organization and this asset can be used to effectively attract and retain talent, which is typically the largest and most expensive asset of any organization. In today’s world, the role of the workplace is about:

- Enabling new ways for people to work within an organization
- Valuing the individual
- Implementing new technology
- Shifting or reinforcing culture and change
- Leveraging facilities as assets
- Facilitating faster and more simple change
- Achieving financial objectives - tracking how workplace changes help achieve the organization’s goals
- Expressing a constant brand and culture from all realms of an organization — its people, perception, delivery of products and services and its PLACE.

Being a “Best Place to Work”, whether you are designated so or not, must include attention to the physical, cultural and social aspects of an environment. Our site visits and survey results indicate that organizations who have been acknowledged by the Great Place to Work® Institute are making this total commitment.

Companies that leverage their facility assets by giving thoughtful consideration to what a well-designed workplace means for them, are thinking strategically. They are putting a plan of action into place that is intended to improve their business, they are doing so by utilizing their assets to the fullest potential, and they are being proactive in terms of how to best support their largest, most expensive, and most important asset, their people.
REFERENCES

1. Robert Levering, Milton Moskowitz, “How We Pick the Top 100 Best”, Fortune Magazine January 24, 2005: 97


11. Ibid


13. Ibid


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