

Workspace Nudge™: Design to Help People Move, Focus, and Connect

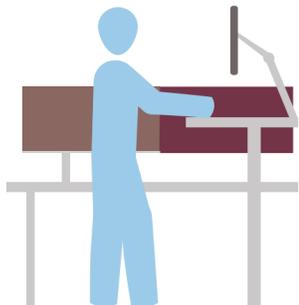
Dr. Michael O'Neill and Beck Johnson | 04.18

Humans are remarkable, complex beings. We have a tremendous capacity to shape our world. To tap into this capacity, the more we understand how we perform our best, the better we can shape our work world to foster our best performance. We also all perform better when we are feeling our healthiest, so how does our workplace environment impact it?

“Simply stated, work environments matter. We know they matter for people’s engagement, satisfaction, turnover intentions, and performance... Work environments matter also for people’s physical and mental health, and well-being.”

- Pfeffer, 2018

Management practices, corporate culture, policy, and—the physical environment all have a profound effect on employees. When looking at the physical environment, at the very least workspaces should do no harm; at their very best, workspaces should promote and support health. Having a physical environment that promotes health could be more cost effective than traditional wellness programs.



“...improving the physical environment will prove to be a more effective and economical path to improving health than trying to force people to adopt behaviors which are in the best interests of their own physical being.”

- Miller, Williams, and O'Neill, 2018

Specific cues within the workspace can “nudge” people into healthier behaviors. These “nudges” rely on choice architecture, as developed through behavioral economics,¹ to promote the healthier choice for employees. But, what kinds of physical, cognitive, and emotional healthy behaviors are important while at work? We’ve narrowed it down to three general tactics: move, focus, and connect.

Move

We are designed to move. We already know static postures can cause harm for our bodies.² Physical environments that promote regular movement as well as support changing postures as needed allow our bodies to function as intended and according to our abilities. Chronic pain is associated with impaired thinking.³ Proper ergonomics can prevent physical injury and discomfort.⁴ When our bodies are comfortable, our brains function well—which is essential for knowledge workers.

- **Highly visible stairs** can nudge people to healthy outcomes in two ways. First, by forming a landmark that improves the [legibility](#) of the space; and, second, offer a visual nudge to take the stairs instead of elevators. Elevators should be placed in convenient but less

1 Thaler and Sunstein, 2009.

2 Bellingar and Johnson, 2016; Johnson 2016.

3 Berryman et al., 2013.

4 Delos, 2015.

prominent locations to reserve priority and ease of access for those with mobility challenges.

- **A height-adjustable table** allows everyone to customize the height to what is most ergonomically comfortable, regardless if seated, standing, or somewhere in-between. Coupled with technology (built-in, or a phone app), workers can vary between positions throughout the day, improving circulation and possibly reducing risk of musculoskeletal injury.
- **Shared storage** in a common location instead of at individual workstations can nudge people to get up and move to retrieve or replace items. Using the surface of the storage elements to support small, impromptu meetings can spur creativity and reinforce social connections with casual interactions away from where individuals may be working.

Focus

While we need to work together to achieve great things, we also need time to ourselves to prepare to work together and achieve our own specific goals.⁵ Trying to complete individual tasks in environments that promote interruptibility can put us under strain and undermine our efforts.⁶ Having work points that insulate us from interruptions allow us to embed and externalize our ideas, allow us to focus—and feel happier about our work.⁷ While we'd all love to be high-performing all hours of the day, our biology says differently. Taking breaks from intense work can restore our cognitive and physical energy to dive back in.⁸

- **Combining a legible workspace with user-adjustable furnishings** will nudge people (especially those who work in distracting open environments) to improved focus on work tasks by letting people spend more energy on their individual work and less energy on finding the best place to do their work or fighting off distractions and interruptions. Improved focus is related to reduced physical stress symptoms and improved sense of well-being.
- **Floorplan simplicity** with fewer choice points and visual access can make wayfinding decisions easier. Floorplan complexity is the single biggest impact on the [legibility](#) of interior space, and illegible space has known negative impacts on stress and health. Lay out furnishings to offer a minimum of main path “intersections” (choice points) coupled with good visibility to landmarks and important locations within the space. When people can move efficiently, it can reduce stress and preserve resources for their actual work.
- **Views to the outside from workspace locations** nudge people to take visual breaks from the close work at hand. Breaks to refocus eyes to a distant object or view or out the window can relieve strain and provide

brief, pleasurable moments to gather thoughts or noodle on ideas.

- **Respite areas** offer space for quiet reflection and relaxation, allowing people to follow a more natural circadian rhythm. It's where individuals can replenish mental, emotional, and physical energy to stave off burn-out and continue performing well afterwards.



Connect

We are social beings. We need each other to thrive. Working together, we often can achieve more⁹ than working alone. And, it can satisfy our need for social connection and positive social capital¹⁰ and increase our internal motivation.¹¹ Spaces that allow for meaningful connection (both formal and informal) signal to employees the value of working together in a variety of ways.

- **Conveniently located small meeting locations**, coupled with “right-sized” individual workspaces, prompt short strolls (or sprints) to coordinate, perhaps on-the-fly, with colleagues face-to-face without disconnecting too much from one’s work or disrupting other employees.
- **Social and interaction spaces** located on main circulation routes or in prominent locations within the building (café, patio, cafeteria) nudge workers to slow down, seek nourishment, and chat with a friend or two (or three), replenishing resources while building social capital. “Sad desk lunches” are less likely with these kinds of spaces.
- **Department/team area design cues** such as carpet or wall colors visually define an area of the building and increase the sense of group identity. This can foster social cohesion (and reduce stress).

Promoting a Workspace Nudge approach to help people move, focus, and connect makes healthier choices easier for all of us. With healthy workforces, organizations can thrive.

5 Nagy et al., 2016; Johnson and Scott, 2017.

6 Johnson, 2017; O’Neill, 2016.

7 O’Neill, 2017.

8 Pink, 2018.

9 Johnson and Scott, 2017.

10 Helliwell, Huang, and Wang, 2017.

11 Gagné and Deci, 2005.

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Contributors

Dr. Michael O'Neill holds a B.A. in psychology, an M. Arch, and Ph.D. in Architecture. With 20+ years in the industry, Michael is based in the US as the Lead for Haworth's Research, Workplace Strategy, and Market Analytics departments. Workplace Research takes a broad global perspective to identify future trends and offer practical insights for workspace strategy, planning, and products.

Beck Johnson holds a B.S. in Scientific and Technical Communication and an M.A. in Communication. With 15+ years of experience in social science research methodologies and as a Research Specialist at Haworth she conducts primary and secondary research addressing workplace issues.

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.