Spaces that work

Level: Intermediate +

Time: 90 minutes +

Summary: This lesson is about workspaces and how they affect employees' well-being and work performance. In this lesson, students:
1. study a text about problems associated with typical workspaces and innovations that help to improve them;
2. describe their own workspaces and come up with ways to improve them;
3. research the costs to businesses of absenteeism and health problems in their own countries;
4. read and discuss two interviews on healthy workplaces.

Materials: One copy of the worksheet per student

Group size: Any

Note: This lesson plan is for both pre-experience and in-work business students based on an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* issue 1/2017.

Warmer

Students work in pairs or small groups of three or four and describe their personal workspace to each other. Ask them to concentrate on describing their immediate surroundings – their desk, office, part of the factory floor, treatment room, etc – and *not* the whole building.

Key words

Students read the definitions, then search the article to find the corresponding key words. Divide this task up between students, then get them to share their answers. The clues are given in the order that the words appear in the article and the paragraph numbers provide additional help.

Key:
1. cubicle; 2. aka; 3. neglecting; 4. premises; 5. absenteeism; 6. decor; 7. set-up; 8. fluid; 9. turnaround; 10. subsidized; 11. hot desking; 12. hospitality; 13. operating budgets; 14. emphasized; 15. privilege; 16. hierarchy; 17. demarcation; 18. hive; 19. overhead; 20. mission

Understanding the article

Students match the statements to summarize some of the main points of the article. When you have checked the answers, encourage students to say what they think the statements mean and to give more details or examples.

Key: 1. d; 2. c; 3. e; 4. a; 5. f; 6. b

Expressions

Students rearrange the words to make two expressions from the article. Then they use the expressions to complete the sentences.

Key:
1. old habits die hard
2. on the move

Ask students to tell you what habits are being referred to in the article (*hierarchical workplace design*) and to suggest some other habits that die hard, in their workplaces or in other contexts. Then, ask them to tell you what is being done on the move in the article (*working*). Have they ever worked on the move? What technology is needed to make this possible?

Talking about workspaces

Get the students to work with the people they worked with in task 1. Tell them to ask each other questions about their workspaces, concentrating on aspects that were mentioned in the article. You may want to brainstorm these with the class before they embark on the activity, though there are some examples given in the rubric.

When each student has answered the questions and provided more information about their workspace, the pair or small group should decide on one improvement that would make each workspace a better, healthier, more comfortable, more pleasant place to work in.

Using the framework provided, the students should make notes and then either report back to the class or sit with a new partner and tell them what they have learnt and what suggestions for improvements their group made.

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Research

In pairs or small groups, students research figures about the cost of absenteeism to employers in their country, as well as the cost of stress and mental and physical health problems.

For fun, and also for them to understand what the author is referencing in the first paragraph and penultimate paragraph, students should go to Dilbert.com and read the most recent cartoons about the workplace.

Extra reading

Students read and discuss these two interviews. What points do they agree or disagree with?

Vocabulary record

Here, students should be encouraged to record all of the new and useful vocabulary they have learnt during the lesson, not only in the form presented in the article but also in related forms.

Related topics on onestopenglish

The following *Business Spotlight* lessons are on the related topics of working away from the office (teleworking) and work-related stress.

www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/out-of-office/551863.article

www.onestopenglish.com/business/business-spotlight/calm-and-productive/552630.article

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❶ Warmer

Describe your workspace.

❷ Key words

Read the definitions, then find the key words in the article. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. a small enclosed area in a room, separated from the rest of the room by thin walls or curtains (para 1) _____

2. also known as: used when giving a real name followed by a different name also used (para 1) _____

3. failing to give something the attention it needs (para 1) _____

4. the buildings and land that a business or organization uses (para 1) _____

5. the habit of not being at work when you should be, usually without a good reason (para 3) _____

6. the style of decoration and furniture in a building (para 4) _____

7. the way that something is organized (para 5) _____

8. able to be used in a flexible way (para 5) _____

9. the time that it takes a person or company to complete a process (para 6) _____

10. when a company pays part of the cost so employees can buy things at a cheaper rate (para 7) _____

11. a method of working in which people do not have their own desk in an office but use any desk that is available at a particular time (two words, para 7) _____

12. friendly and generous behaviour towards people (para 8) _____

13. the money you have available to run a business (two words, para 10)_____

14. given particular importance or attention to something (para 11) _____

15. a special benefit that is available only to a particular person or group (para 11) _____

16. a system for organizing people according to their status in a society or organization (para 11) _____

17. the process of establishing borders or limits between areas, groups or things (para 11) _____

18. a place where everyone is very busy (para 12) _____

19. a regular cost involved in operating a business (para 13) _____

20. an important piece of work (para 14) _____

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Spaces that work   by Julian Earwaker

This instalment of our series on the subject of 'survival in the workplace' is about space. The space that we work in can be a deciding factor in employees' well-being and also in their work performance, as Julian Earwaker explains.

1 In one of Scott Adams's popular Dilbert cartoons, the character Wally's office cubicle has been redesigned as an "operational habitat". The new workspace is completely empty, with Wally's possessions located in a "personal storage unit", aka the rubbish bin … Studies show that 90 per cent of business leaders understand that the quality of the physical workplace affects the attitudes, motivation and productivity of employees. Yet, according to design firm Gensler's 2016 "US Workplace Survey", only one in four employees works in an optimal physical environment. Some 40 per cent of workers believe that companies sacrifice design to save costs. Around the world, people are neglecting workplace design, says John Alker, campaign and policy director of the UK Green Building Council. "The relationship between people and the building in which they are working is vital," he writes in the *Guardian*, adding that businesses should "use their physical premises for competitive gain".

Representing values and cultures

2 The working environment represents an organization's values and culture through its functions, individual and team working spaces, and general design. Building and space costs are usually far below employee costs, yet many organizations remain behind the curve when it comes to the essentials of good design.

3 Back in the 1920s and early 1930s, experiments at Western Electric's Hawthorne Works factory in Chicago showed that changes to lighting led to increased productivity and lower absenteeism.

Researchers discovered that lighting wasn't the main factor, however – it was consultation and giving employees choices that mattered most.

4 Lighting, of course, has an impact on employee satisfaction and motivation. So do other physical factors such as air conditioning and heating, noise levels, decor, cleanliness, living plants, access to shared spaces, meeting rooms and quiet spaces. Shared resources such as photocopiers and printers, food and drink, seating, desk space, layout and technology all matter. But most workplace designers agree that giving workers personalization, control and flexibility is what's most important.

5 Writing for Flexibility.co.uk, Tim Oldman, co-founder of the Leesman Index, a leading working environment survey, recommends mixed-use workspaces: "desks to work at for individuals that like to work in that set-up but space that is more open and fluid for team working". In both its Amsterdam and London offices, Leesman uses "shared co-worker spaces" and "membership rather than an allocated desk".

6 The *Harvard Business Review* reports on the 2015 move of US marketing company Yodle from its crowded New York headquarters into new premises. The design here allows for collaborative and interactive working, as well as quiet space to focus on fast-turnaround projects. It also features a large stair, functioning as seating for large gatherings and as an informal meeting space. This feature has become one of the most popular and most used parts of the building.

7 SCC, Europe's largest independent IT group, is currently investing in catering facilities for staff to buy food in subsidized cafés or to make their own in employee kitchens. Designed in a modern corporate style, the cafés can be used as informal meeting spaces. Staff also benefit from promotional events, such as perfume sales, where small businesses visit SCC to show their products and sell to staff at discounted rates. SCC already

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provides both individual desk space and hot desking.

The high cost of unhappy workers

8 Today, 15 per cent of the UK workforce is self-employed. According to Emergent Research, "independent workers" will account for 40 per cent of the US workforce by 2021. Writing in the *LSE Business Review*, Jeremy Myerson, co-founder of the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design in London, suggests that the workplace is seeing "a move from facilities management to hospitality".

9 If the idea of workplace wellness and hospitality sounds unrealistic, employers should consider the costs of an unhappy, poorly motivated and unproductive workforce. The World Green Building Council estimates that absenteeism costs US employers between $2,074 and $2,502 per employee annually. Stress and mental health problems cost UK employers £30 billion every year. In Australia, combined sickness and absenteeism costs businesses $7 billion annually.

10 With staff costs making up as much as 90 per cent of operating budgets for some organizations, any small increase in productivity, or decrease in ill health or absenteeism rates, can have a significant impact on profits – even if this calls for an increase in workspace costs.

The changing nature of work

11 Historically, workplace design has emphasized status and privilege. The working environment represented hierarchy, departmental demarcation and inflexible thinking. For some, old habits die hard: according to Gensler's 2016 "UK Workplace Survey", access to private working space is available to 89 per cent of British executives but to only 23 per cent of those working at lower levels.

12 However, the nature of work is changing fast. Technology enables homeworking and working on the move, changing the office from "place of work" to "base for work". Experts suggest that the future workplace is likely to be a form of flexible "hive" for workers to visit, meet, report, plan and depart from. This means that organizations must recognize the advantages in designing their working environments around the people who use them.

13 While Wally and his frustrated Dilbert colleagues remain trapped in their cubicles, business leaders should listen to Stan Kaczmarczyk, director of the Innovative Workplaces Division of GSA's Integrated Technology Services. "Your workplace should not be considered simply an overhead but an everyday tool to support work practices and an organization's culture," Kaczmarczyk said at the World Workplace Conference in the US in 2003.

14 "The space should be capable of adapting to fit the mission, rather than the mission fitting the space," he commented.

JULIAN EARWAKER is a freelance journalist and author.

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❸ Understanding the article

Match the sentence halves to make statements about the article.

1. In the early 20th century, in the United States, it was found that changing the ...

2. These days, workplace designers say that allowing workers to personalize and have ...

3. Although the majority of business leaders understand that the physical workplace affects their employees, only ...

4. Some companies now offer hot desking and shared ...

5. Experts suggest that the workplace is moving away from somewhere where employees have to be all day, ...

6. The way people feel about the building they work in is vital to well-being and ...

a. … common spaces.

b. … productivity. The area should be adapted to the work, rather than the work adapted to the area.

c. … control over their workplace is even more important than having good lighting.

d. … light in a factory led to increased productivity and lower absenteeism.

e. … a quarter of employees actually work in an optimal physical environment.

f. … every day, to a place where employees, who may work from home, occasionally meet to report and plan.

❹ Expressions

a. **Use these words to make two expressions from the article. Then find them in the article to check your answers.**

move	the	die	habits	on	hard	old

1. _____ _____ _____ _____

2. _____ _____ _____

b. **Now use the expressions to complete these sentences.**

1. Even though she lost her job, she still gets up at 6am every morning like she used to.

_____

2. Workers no longer need to be stuck in offices. Technology has made it possible for them to work

_____

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5 Talking about workspaces

a. Work with the same students you worked with in task 1. Ask each other questions about your workspaces, referring to aspects that were mentioned in the article such as lighting, hot desking, shared spaces, hierarchical workplace design, etc.

b. As a group, decide on one improvement that would make each of the workspaces a better place to work.

c. Make notes and report back to the class.

Name	Workspace problem	Suggested improvement

6 Research

Read the section of the article entitled 'The high cost of unhappy workers' again. What information can you find for your country on the costs of absenteeism, stress and mental and physical health problems?

Read some of Scott Adams' Dilbert cartoons about the workplace at www.dilbert.com.

7 Extra reading

Read and discuss these two interviews.

INTERVIEW 1

"There is better workplace satisfaction and lower absenteeism in healthy workplaces"

Is the psychological impact of the physical workplace properly understood by organizations?

In general, it is still hugely misunderstood and underestimated. The organizations we work with that are leading in this area have now begun to reap the rewards of their efforts, with happier, healthier, more productive staff and better staff retention, which, of course, has an impact on their bottom line.

How can sustainability and business efficiency best benefit from design?

Many design aspects of "healthy" working environments are also highly compatible with sustainability issues: for example, not overheating or over-lighting a space and having plenty of plants in the space to improve air quality. And it seems intuitively obvious that a healthier workforce will be a more productive, and therefore more profitable, one. Work we've done with organizations certainly shows better workplace satisfaction and lower absenteeism in healthy workplaces, although it is hard to objectively measure the impact on profit.

Which aspects of a healthy/sustainable workplace are most frequently overlooked?

For me, the two biggest wins that are most overlooked are lighting – in terms of both quality (bluer light is better but circadian lighting/access to daylight is best of all) and quantity (the majority of our workplaces are massively over-lit, particularly in perimeter zones) – and integration of nature, which is beneficial to both mental and physical health.

ELINOR HUGGETT is sustainability officer with the UK Green Building Council, which campaigns for a sustainably built environment.

INTERVIEW 2

"Bad design sends the wrong message to staff and causes confusion"

Which aspects of the physical workplace are most frequently neglected?

Well-being in the workplace is the most frequently overlooked: this is the feel-good factor. There are two main aspects. Firstly, enjoyment in your place of work. This is a combination of elements such as natural daylight, seeing a window, plants in the office or mood-enhancing colours. Secondly, creating an office that supports flexible working, collaboration and the sharing of information. We do this by giving employees a choice of breakout areas and amenities like showers, and fun aspects like pool and table tennis, which encourage interaction.

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What happens when an organization gets its design badly wrong?

It sends the wrong message to staff and causes confusion among individuals and the team. It can also have an effect on productivity and the sharing of information. We feel that flexibility and "the way an office works" should be at the very top of the list of considerations when designing a new office.

In a recent blog, you identified the three Ws for perfect office design: workflows, work styles and welfare. How far are these properly understood and used?

They are hardly ever understood. This is why we do an in-depth workplace consultancy to get to know our clients' business, their people and their aspirations, to design a workplace that encourages and inspires every member of their team to perform to their best potential.

Enclosed or open-plan: how does this decision define organizational culture?

In our office, our CEO wanted an open-plan workspace with private spaces so that our team could choose the right environment for the task. This had a massive impact on our culture, as it allowed us as a large business to keep our unique family culture.

PAUL DARE is deputy design director at Oktra, UK workplace design experts.

Vocabulary record: Spaces that work

verb	noun	adjective (+ opposite)	adverb (+ opposite)
neglect			
	collaboration		
		competitive	
			annually