



## Workspace Design and the Pursuit of Happiness

Happiness and meaningful work lead to more engaged, higher-performing, and healthier employees. Haworth's findings from our global research program show how office design may foster more meaningful work experiences and happier employees.

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## Happiness Should Be Connected to Work and Workspace

People work for many reasons—compensation, social connections, status. However, the most important drivers of knowledge work today might be the pleasurable personal experience of creativity and problem solving, and finding meaning in one’s work.<sup>1</sup> Happiness and a sense of meaning in work are largely intrinsic—that is, coming mostly from within the individual. Some people bring a sense of meaning to their work, and some organizations create cultures that foster happiness and meaning in the employee work experience. However, to date, the role of the design of the physical office space that surrounds people at work has been largely unconsidered. Haworth’s ongoing global research program explores the connection between office design and happiness and a meaningful work experience.

## Productivity, Engagement, and the Changing Workspace

Having productivity as the ultimate purpose of office space was a hallmark of early hierarchical organizations, and probably drove the Baby Boomer<sup>2</sup> mindset of bringing the “work only” version of themselves into the office. During this era, work products were largely created by individuals, and work outcomes were somewhat more tangible than today—and easier to measure.

With recent flatter organizational models and new generations of employees, this view of work and workplace is shifting. The now dominant Millennial workforce famously blends their work and personal life, bringing a more holistic version of themselves into the office. The need for belonging, connection, and contributing to a greater good, and a sense of meaning in work,<sup>3</sup> is important to this highly collaborative generation. Even beyond Millennials, as people age they desire more meaning in their work and personal lives. Organizations are also embracing “employee engagement” as the new mantra. Engagement is certainly not a bad thing for employees. It does have a definite upside for organizations. The evolving intent of workspace is to foster engaged employees who are more likely to stay (avoiding replacement costs) and may work harder (improved productivity). It could be argued that engagement is really just a more palatable way of re-framing the need to control costs and enhance productivity.

Many organizations encourage engagement through investment in mobile technologies, work/life balance, and related policy efforts. According to the 2017 World Happiness Report, activities that increase social capital—such as support people receive from fellow workers—are connected to happiness and higher engagement. Although some past attempts to encourage engagement may have missed the mark, Friday afternoon beer kegs remain popular.



## Happiness Is an Emerging Global Aspiration

An emerging global movement places happiness and a meaningful life and work as goals, rather than traditional measures of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or productivity.<sup>4</sup> We see this movement in The World Happiness Report’s call to action. This call to action for employers and workplaces seeks incentivizing employers to provide work environments and conditions that promote well-being.<sup>5</sup> A happy work life is an enduring state that includes aspects such as lower frustration, improved contentment, relaxation, and sense of well-being. Such a state is logically related to “side benefits,” such as reduced stress, lowered physical and mental health risks, and increased engagement and performance.

“Happiness is connected to the basic goals of any business organization, such as productivity and retention—the difference is that there is also a direct benefit to the quality of employees’ lives.”

– Dr. Michael O’Neill, Haworth, Inc.



1 DeNeve, Jan-Emmanuel, and Ward, 2017.

2 Bursch and Kelly, 2014.

3 Grant and Berry, 2011; Grant, Christianson, and Price, 2007; Shu, 2015.

4 Weiner, 2008.

5 DeNeve, Jan-Emmanuel, and Ward, 2017.

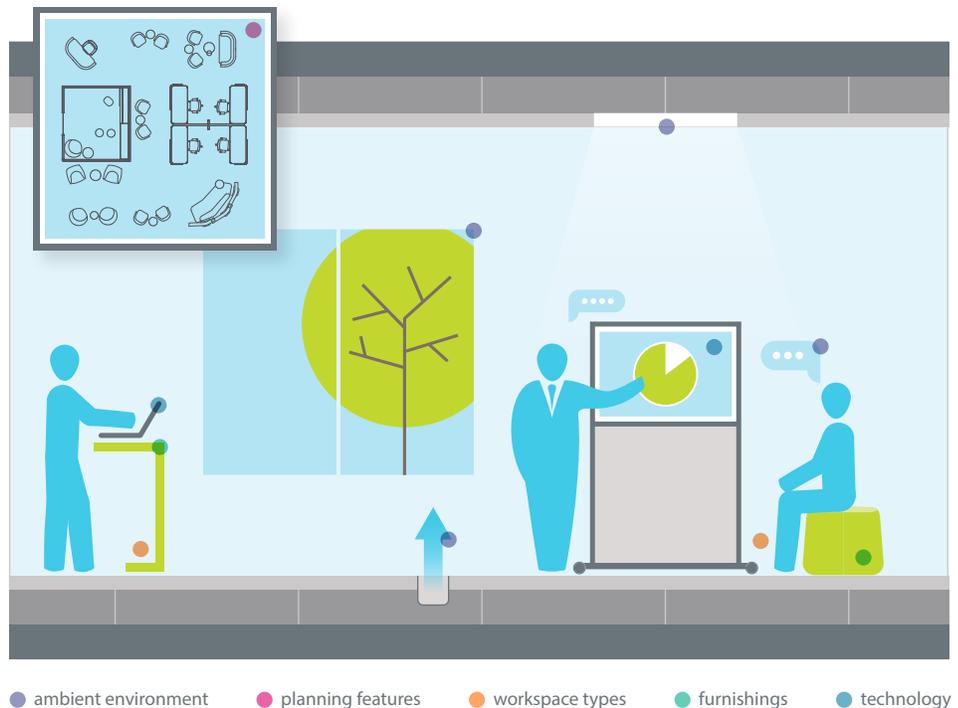
## Connecting Workspace Design and Happiness

Anticipating this call to action to provide for well-being in the workplace, Haworth started a global program studying how design of workspace can be leveraged for happiness and meaningful work. The program ran until 2017 and involved over 2,000 office workers. Worksites of participating organizations included a mix of (non-Haworth) business headquarters and Haworth sales and administrative facilities.



This research design is the most effective possible (short of a laboratory experiment), using pre- and post-move survey measures and a control group to provide the strongest protection from threats to the validity of the results. The analysis uses multiple regression statistics to identify a broad array of features: ambient environment (noise, acoustics, lighting, air quality, etc.), planning features, workspace types, furnishings, and technology that impact the outcome measures of meaningful work, frustration, happiness, well-being, and contentment.

In these analyses, potential affects of generational affiliation and job level are controlled. Thus, the insights from this research can apply to the broader global population regardless of age or job level.



### Happiness Is Directly Related to Work Experience

Our broad measure of happiness includes frustration levels, contentment, feeling relaxed, happiness at work, and the sense that work is meaningful. The analysis shows that two work experiences directly influence happiness: 1) design features that make employees feel valued, and 2) the ability to achieve focus at work. The next step was to determine which environmental features, if any, have an impact on employee ratings of being valued, and ability to focus.



### Five Features Contribute to Feeling Valued

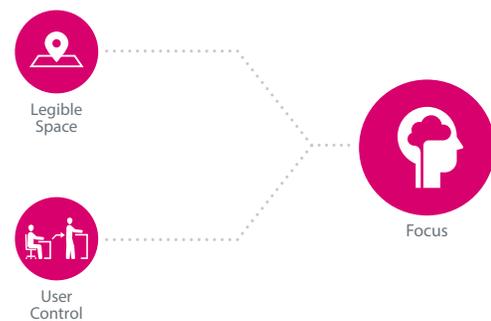
The analysis further reveals that five features of office design affect employees' ratings of how the space makes them feel valued. These include: the rated overall "legibility" of the office space (the ability to see and find others, understand the layout of the space, degree to which workspaces and furnishings convey their intended use), user control over the primary workspace (adjustability of primary workspace features), having the right technology in the individual workspace, access to daylight from the workspace, and adequate storage in the workspace. These features cue employees that they are valued.

Legibility and access to daylight have the largest impact on feeling valued. This is logical since these two features are part of the overall ambient work environment, affecting everyone regardless of location or type of space used. For instance, legibility can be expressed in the design of space, ranging from the large-scale planning and layout of plan configuration and landmarks, down to the furnishings that people interact with and touch. Access to daylight is also part of the ambient environment, experienced through the large-scale space plan, since daylight can be experienced at any location within the building. The other features (adjustability, technology, and storage) are experienced primarily, although not exclusively, within the individual workspace.



### Legibility and User Control Help Ability to Focus

Two of the above features that influence feelings of being valued also influence workers' ability to focus. These include: the rated overall legibility of the office space and user control over the primary workspace. Note that both these features also act as cues to employees that they are valued. Legibility conserves resources that can be used for focus, and control over primary workspace can provide people with enough autonomy over how they can best focus in that space.



### The Power of Happiness Is in Design

On the surface, the notion of designing for “happiness” sounds trivial. But there are broader trends driving the move towards happiness as a new metric for success in work and life, even replacing economic metrics such as GDP for entire countries. When compared to the narrower focus of engagement as a business metric related to employee retention costs, a broader organizational goal such as happiness provides benefits to both employer and employee. Our research shows specific workplace design features can support a higher aspiration, that of happiness.



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## Contributor



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*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](http://www.haworth.com).*

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## The Emerging Need for Legibility in Workplace Design

Dr. Michael O'Neill

### Workplace Design for Generation Y is Now a Dominant Force

In the past five years or so, we have seen the traditional office—dominated by cubicles lined up in orderly rows—begin to fade away. We are leaving this Baby Boomer era of office design behind and are well on our way into the work world of Generation Y. Part of this change is due to how rapidly technology has untethered us from traditional office space. But change has also been driven by the preferred work style of Generation Y, which is much more collaborative and motivated by the need for social connection. At the office, they demand choice over the location of their work and a variety of options in spaces to use. They prefer diversity and excitement in the look and feel of their workspace. In response, companies are adding an increasing diversity of individual and interactive venues for work, ranging from rooftop gardens, intimate lounge areas, and cafés to game rooms and meditation centers.

This generation intentionally blends their personal and professional personas at work, and thus desires spaces that offer a mix of residential warmth and theme-park excitement. This has led to an office design philosophy that celebrates openness, surprise, variety, and complexity—mixed with a homey vibe—but often results in ambiguity throughout the overall space, and in the intended use of specific work spaces.

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The planning approach for the future will need to emphasize the “legibility” of space. Legible offices offer planning configurations that are easy to understand, easy to navigate, and where the spaces’ intended uses are clear and obvious.

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### We Need A “Bigger Idea” in Design to Accommodate the Needs of All Generations

Around the end of this decade, four generations will be sharing the same office environment. The majority will be Generation Y, but significant numbers of Boomers and Gen Xers will also be at work. Generation Z, the kids of Gen Xers—will be entering the professional workforce at this time. In the light of this generational mix, the complex and ambiguous office space focused on Generation Y needs to be reconsidered.

Membership in Generation Z starts with people born in 2000, and the oldest are now in high school. Members of this generation are still being born. This generation will have several defining characteristics: they are being raised to highly value stability, order, and predictability in their lives; they will struggle to manage interpersonal work relationships as adults; and they are almost congenitally distracted. While some may assume this group will simply be an extension of Generation Y, nothing could be further from the truth.

Because of mass layoffs and rampant divorce, many Gen Xers’ parents grew up as “latchkey kids” in the recessionary 70s, and later some were labeled “slackers” because entry level office jobs were scarce after college. Today as parents, these Gen Xers are determined not to have their own children relive the chaos they experienced in their early lives. They are raising close families, they value clarity, order and certainty, and they are almost congenitally distracted. They are heroic multi-taskers, glued to their Smartphones and tablets—and guess what? They’re terrible at it. So picture them at work in the Generation Y office space, seeking structure, consistency, and order—and refuge from distraction—and instead encountering complexity, ambiguity, and noise and visual chaos. This type of space will play to their weaknesses, not their strengths. The visual confusion and overwhelming choices will simply add to their distraction and make it harder to get their work done.

At the same time, many of the youngest Baby Boomers will still be at work, years away from retirement age. And the older of these “aging in place” workers will have struggles of their own, based on physical challenges such as declining vision, hearing, and mobility. Today, they complain because

the workplace is shifting away from their familiar comfort zone, but in five or ten years' time they may have real complaints. They won't see, hear, or perceive as acutely, and the ambiguous and complex Generation Y workspace around them will aggravate the problem.

Thus, legible office space will take on critical importance for many office workers— especially the youngest and oldest. It should be thought of as a universal design principle for the four-generation office of the future.

### Legibility Can Impact Health and Well-being

A workplace that truly supports the well-being of its legible design principles can be applied to all elements of workplace planning, group and individual work spaces, furnishings, and technology. Legible design offers organizations the opportunity to better support the employees of any generation. In fact, research has suggested that good legibility can be a health issue, reducing stress of users, and that should be a criterion for usable habitats for any setting. Poor legibility of floorplan and spaces has been linked to negative health impacts.<sup>1</sup> Legibility is a people-centered approach to design because it puts people's needs first—it is intended to create a positive work experience that makes it easy to locate the type of space needed, and quickly and effectively use each space type.

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Legibility can be “designed in” to the office space by offering a floorplan layout that is easy to understand and learn, landmarks that help people orient themselves, visual access within the space and outside to landmarks, and signage that guides people with information about the intention and use of the space.

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### Five Simple Legibility Design Elements

The floorplan layout of a legible office space is clearly organized. People can easily create a “mental map” of the layout and find any location within the building, even with limited experience within the space (Garling and Evans, 1991; Weisman, 1981). In terms of design, the layout of the office should set up a predictable rhythm that makes it easy for people to learn, or easily guess, how to navigate

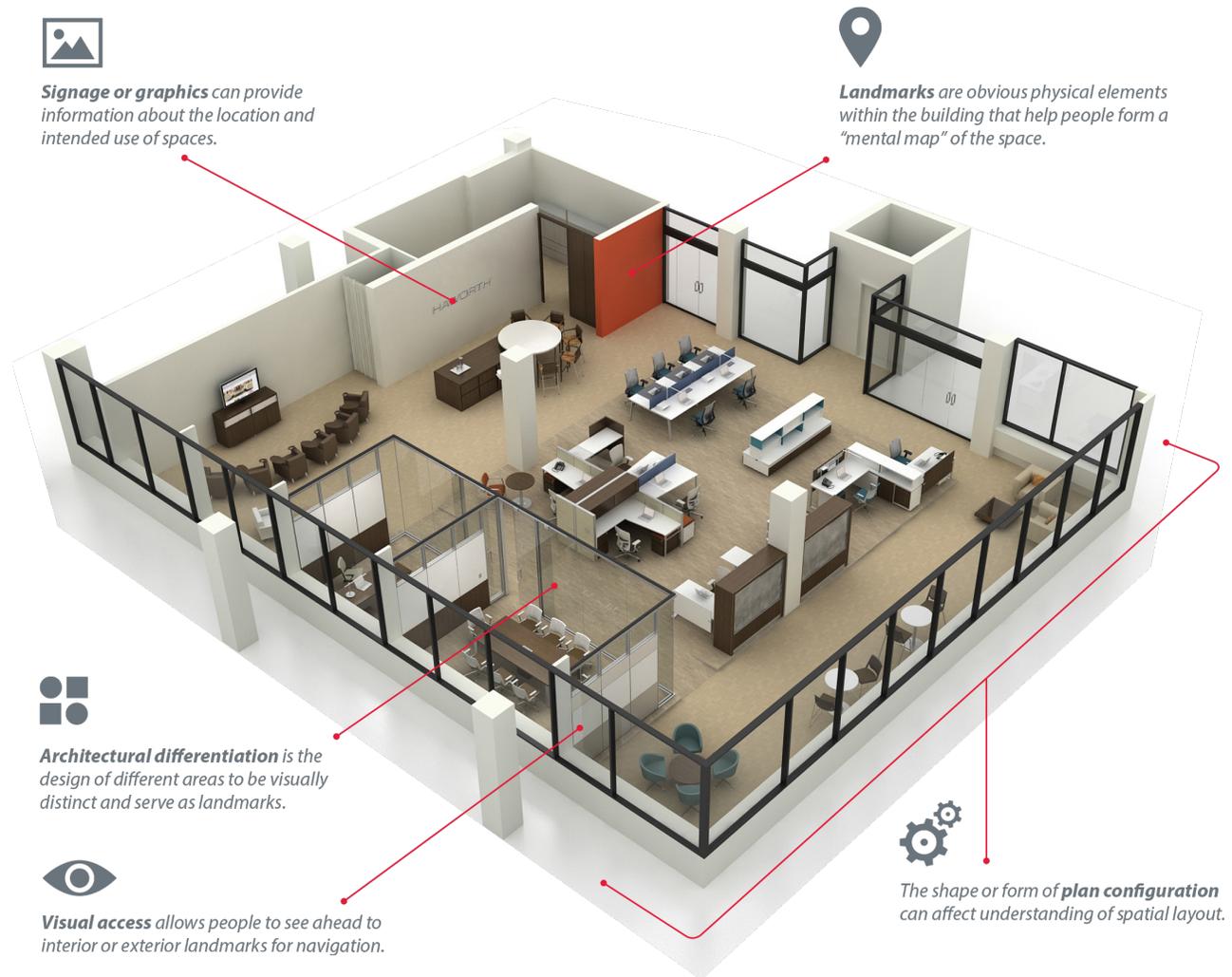
from one location to another, or where a desired space type might be found.

Conversely, a “cube farm,” where the floorplan is laid out with monotonous regularity and every location looks the same, can form a disorienting maze. Complex “illegible” layouts can suppress desirable movement of workers between workspaces, increase wasted time, and reduce overall sense of control in people. If the intended use of a space and its technology is ambiguous (such as café spaces, lounge areas, etc.) people will avoid using them or waste time trying to figure out how to use the space and furnishings.

1. **Landmarks** serve as important physical cues about locations within the building. Landmarks can be outside the facility, such as other buildings or prominent features that can be seen through windows. Significant interior features such as a café, a wall area with a contrasting color or artwork, or other elements can act as landmarks upon which people can anchor themselves in space.
2. **Plan configuration** of the space can affect ease of understanding of space layout. Highly irregular layouts can be confusing, as well as having a high number or density of decision-points (path intersections) within the space.
3. **Visual access** allows people to see ahead to landmarks or other areas for navigation. Having workstations with low horizons, and avoiding architectural elements that may block visual access to the building core, can help to open the space. Visual access outside the space through windows can give people sight lines to elements outside the facility that can act as landmarks for orientation as they move through the space. These landmarks could be manmade or natural features.
4. **Architectural differentiation** is the design of different areas to be visually distinct. These areas can serve as secondary landmarks. This could be as simple as a unified color scheme that identifies an entire department, or a similar look and feel of a large area of space. These areas themselves help people understand their location within the building.
5. **Signage** and graphics can provide information about the location and intended use of spaces, including directions to commonly accessed areas or behavioral expectations.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Evans and Cohen, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> O'Neill, 1999.



**Signage or graphics** can provide information about the location and intended use of spaces.



**Landmarks** are obvious physical elements within the building that help people form a "mental map" of the space.



**Architectural differentiation** is the design of different areas to be visually distinct and serve as landmarks.



**Visual access** allows people to see ahead to interior or exterior landmarks for navigation.



The shape or form of **plan configuration** can affect understanding of spatial layout.

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