



Planting the seeds of productivity

Employees who have control over the design and layout of their workspace are happier and more productive, according to recent research from the UK. Dr Craig Knight tells Lyndsey Swan how empowering people by letting them personalise their space makes all the difference.

Imagine the impact on a business if staff were 32 percent more productive. Impossible? Not so, according to British researcher Dr Craig Knight who says the answer to becoming nearly a third more productive is really quite simple—if employees are allowed to choose plants and artwork to enrich their workspace, then productivity, mood and wellbeing will all improve.

Sound too easy? Not according to Knight, who was in New Zealand recently to prove his point, one that's backed up by eight years of research at the University of Exeter. A chartered psychologist with a background in office design, he conducted the research as part of his PhD in the psychology of working and living space. He's also the director of PRISM (Psychological Research into Identity and Space Management), a research consultancy based at the University of Exeter.

Knight says historically, there has been no real psychology behind the development of the office space, which has meant pseudo-psychology has filled the void. "There's an awful lot of case studies, but no science," he says, adding that recent trends—like the Lean Office, Six Sigma, 'colour psychology' and clean desk policies—have seen the paring down of office environments to create minimalist internal spaces that are free of 'distractions'.

"Proponents will say minimal office space leads to improvements in productivity as the employee is less likely to be side-tracked from

the task at hand. However, the research we have conducted at PRISM suggests that, in fact, the reverse is true," he says.

"What we found is that when you enrich a space, people's sense of wellbeing shoots up by about 30-40 percent. They're more comfortable and content—it's extraordinary. And their productivity goes up by about 15-17 percent which is an amazing jump and we were really surprised.

"When you empower somebody, their wellbeing goes up a bit more, and productivity goes up by up to 32 percent. It's almost a shame that the figures are that big because they seem unrealistic."

From a business perspective, Knight says the clean desk trend makes a lot of sense. "If you haven't got plants and pictures on the desk, there's nothing to distract you—no gonk, no holiday souvenir, nothing like that. You can just concentrate on the job. You can see entirely where business comes from but, psychologically, you're putting somebody into an impoverished space.

"You've got this big lean space with nothing on it except the job to do. If you did this with any other animal, it doesn't matter whether it's an ant in the lean jam jar or a polar bear in a lean enclosure, they are very unhappy animals.

"We thought, why don't we just see what happens when you enrich a lean space. Why don't we just put pictures and plants on those desks? Then the next stage seemed to be [to say to people]

‘Go into your space and why don’t you put the pictures and plants where you’d like them. It’s your space, put them where you want.’”

Knight says they used pictures and plants because they wanted something that wouldn’t confound their experiments. “If I give you a bigger desk or a bigger chair or change the temperature, you’d expect that to have an effect. But if we say all we’re going to do is put plants around your desk, that shouldn’t have any effect on what you’re doing at all—it’s just this psychological enrichment thing.”

In a paper published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* last year, Knight and his fellow researcher Alexander Haslam say the principles of lean management encourage managers to exert tight control over office space and the people within it. Alternative, design-led approaches, on the other hand, promote the value of offices that are enriched, particularly by plants and art. But both these approaches, they argue, may compromise organisational outcomes by disempowering workers and failing to give them input into the design of their offices.

The research asked people to do a series of tasks in four separate environments. The first was a ‘lean’ office containing only the essentials—a bare desk, a swivel chair, a pencil and paper. The second office was ‘enriched’ with plants and artwork. In the third environment, the ‘empowered’ office, participants were provided with the same plants and artwork but they were able to arrange them however they chose, or not use them at all. A final ‘disempowered’ office gave participants the opportunity to decorate but then the experimenter rearranged the office so it matched the enriched office—a scenario office workers have to cope with all too often, says Knight.

To measure productivity, those participating in the research were given two tasks which they were asked to do as fast and as accurately as they could. In the first, participants were given a pile of memos and asked to sort them into chronological order (information management) and then answer a series of multiple-choice questions based on the information in the memos (information processing). The second task was a vigilance one that measured attention to detail. Participants were given a magazine article and were asked to cross out every lower case letter ‘b’ that they came across.

“We used the lean space as our control and then we asked: ‘Does productivity increase or decrease?’” Knight explains. “What we found is [the empowered workers] were working 32 percent faster but they were not making any more errors.”

The study participants were also asked a series of questions about how they felt about their workspace. Results consistently showed that the more control people had over their office spaces, the happier and more motivated they were in their jobs.

“The reason we think that enriched works better than lean, and empowered is better than enriched, is if you go into a lean space there’s nothing for you to engage with at all,” says Knight. “You go into an enriched space and you go, ‘That’s nice, I like that picture there. That plant’s a bit crap, but I like that.’ So there’s stuff you can engage with. It’s interesting in some part.

“When you go into an empowered space, however, it’s just yours.

The benefits of an empowered workspace

- **Increased productivity**—Controlled experiments in laboratories and workspace found empowering people in their working environments resulted in increases in productivity of up to 32 percent.
- **Accuracy**—In spite of completing their office tasks up to 32 percent faster than workers in lean conditions, the accuracy of the empowered workers did not decrease at all.
- **Increased wellbeing**—In both laboratory and real-life experiments, Prism managed to establish considerable improvements in levels of concentration, comfort and job satisfaction. There was also a reduction in feelings of discomfort and ill health.
- **Increased organisational identity**—Giving people a genuine voice in their workplace resulted in higher levels of organisational identification.

Source: www.prism-identity.com

There’s more there altogether for you to get engaged with so that works best of all ... and it’s as simple as that. The more involved you can get, the better it is. People like to personalise their space.”

He adds that, when it comes to the empowered space, if somebody likes a lean space, a completely flat surface with nothing on it, that’s absolutely fine. “If you choose that, that’s every bit as productive as sitting in your own mini Amazon jungle.”

But how can every worker have the space he or she wants? Knight argues the more valid question is ‘How can one person decide on the space for everybody?’ “They can’t,” he says. What he advocates instead is that people are able to choose as groups. “It’s no good letting people choose as individuals—it’s anarchy. You let people decide as discrete groups, and you also let them decide from a template.”

The worst thing you can do is to impose a system—like a lean office or hot-desking—on people, he says. “It’s a psychological nightmare. If people buy into that space, and maybe vote for it because there may be certain other privileges they get instead, if they’re happy with it, then it’s absolutely fine. It’s all about how it’s managed.”

It seems it’s not enough to have what Knight describes as a “fantastically enriched” workplace like Google’s head office in California or the Red Bull headquarters in London.

“At Googleplex, you can whip down the long corridors on skateboards and scooters. They’ve got tellies with sport on all day, and fridges with beer, and ping-pong and pool tables. You think, isn’t this all a teensy bit laddist? And at Red Bull there’s a fabulous carbon fibre slide you can whip down from the first floor to reception ... but you couldn’t do it in a skirt!”

Rather than imposing a corporate identity on employees, he says, bosses should allow their staff to realise their own identity in their environment. “This provides the optimal solution for productivity.” **et**

Dr Knight’s research was carried out with the help of indoor plant supplier Ambius.