Humanizing the Workplace: Using Design Principles to Inspire Workplace Thinking

HUMANIZING THE WORKPLACE: USING DESIGN PRINCIPLES TO INSPIRE WORKPLACE THINKING

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THE VUCA REALITY

No one doubts that business, life and the world at-large have become evermore **Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous.** The concept of "VUCA" emerged out of the U.S. Army War College in the mid 90's and has subsequently fostered a virtual renaissance in how people view the conditions under which decisions are made, plans are strategically conceived, risk is managed, change is fostered and challenges are addressed. It has been applied to organizations from the military and governments to public and private companies, not-for-profits, educational institutions, etc.

In the rapidly changing, information-overloaded, performance-obsessed, multitasked reality of today's workplaces, strategies that leverage the VUCA mindset of conditions, consequences and actions are permeating the boiler room and the boardroom. Leadership, management and newly empowered workers are anticipating challenges, understanding the consequences of actions, appreciating the interdependence of multiple variables, preparing for alternative realities, and owning their own transformation and even disruption.

HELLO, RIGHT BRAIN

In our evolution from an agricultural-based economy to one powered by manufacturing and production to service and information, we are entering what Daniel Pink referred to as the new "conceptual age." In this "conceptual age," business and our work will be largely right-brain based, guided by our ability to empathize, recognize patterns, discern new meaning, create narratives, work together and play. While the left-brain attributes of body strength, attention to detail and a reliance on knowledge will never be rendered obsolete, the "conceptual age" workforce and, more importantly, the emphasis of their work, will be focused on creativity, emotional nuance, human interaction and fulfillment. In the end, whole brain thinking will drive innovation, creating the growth and sustaining the success sought by companies.

In these times of radical transition, change and the tyranny of an abundance of choice, it is increasingly difficult to make the right decisions in creating the right work environments. And even "right" may be in a constant state of change. As George Harrison so cleverly summarized in his song "Any Road," which is based on a conversation between Alice and the Cheshire Cat, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there." And, as the Red Queen tells Alice, "Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

GUIDING THE JOURNEY

When the journey is about humanizing the workplace in meaningful and compelling ways, heading in the right direction has its own special VUCA characteristics. Design principles, acting as a set of guardrails, can help direct and shape the promise and trajectory of approaching the design and maintenance of workspaces by inspiring new thinking, fine-tuning directions and guiding decision-making processes.

Ideally, design principles that drive workplace thinking emerge from the higher purpose and "why" of a company's brand. There are areas common to all companies that may help guide workplace initiatives both large and small. The following set of design principles has both gaps and areas of substantial overlap. They are neither comprehensive nor discrete, as they span spatial, organizational, cultural and experiential elements of the workplace. They represent perspectives and viewpoints that may help guide or at least influence managers and leaders who are charged with humanizing the workplace for today's employees.

Workplace Design Principles

1. Get Serious About Play
2. Mind the New Mindfulness
3. Lose Your Balance
4. Rethink Knowing
5. Recognize Recognition
6. Blur the Organization
7. Create Place, Not Space

WORK

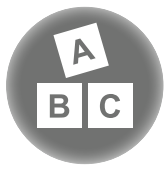Get Serious About Play

Lose Your Balance

Recognize Recognition

Create Place, Not Space

Rethink Knowing

Mind the New Mindfulness

Blur the Organization
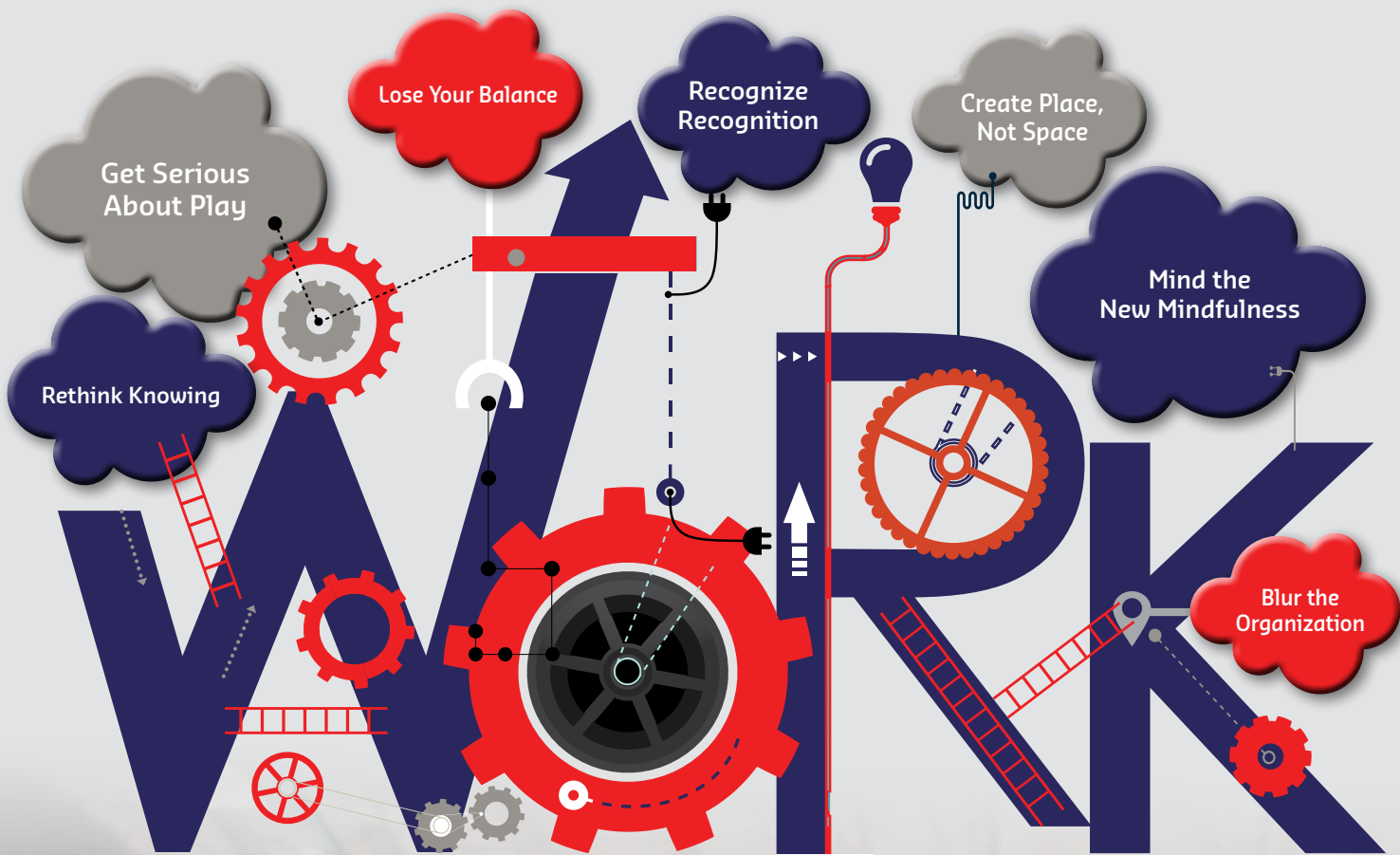
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81% Correlation between **collaboration** & **innovation**[1]

1. Get Serious About Play

Independent of all those inner-office floor-to-floor slides and the proliferation of foosball tables and bocce ball courts, play is actually a pretty important part of workplace behavior. Workplace environments that support and encourage play are critical to business outcomes. And, it is far less about relieving stress or creating some friendly competition as a proxy for winning in business and more about fostering collaboration, promoting teamwork, and establishing an environment where failure is an option. From a very early age, play is how we engage the world, develop skills and learn. At any age, play is the behavioral platform through which people connect, socialize and communicate. Play in any form, from Solitaire to Ping-Pong, teaches us about risk and reward, the power of immediate feedback, and the value of trust and failure. Especially in group play experiences, we learn about the learning, communication and personality styles of our fellow workers, and that understanding not only humanizes the workplace, but nurtures imagination, improves productivity and elevates fulfillment. However you choose to enhance the opportunities and possibilities, get serious about play.

In a survey conducted by BrightHR, psychological well-being experts examined the role of play in the workplace.[2] The graphic to the right highlights some of the findings; the key takeaway is that fun activities at work positively affect a wide range of workplace behaviors and outcomes.

Taken part in fun activity in last 6 months*:

Yes   **No**

Yes		No
55	Motivated to Work Hard	45
57	Productive	51
54	Connected to My Purpose at Work	46
55	Creative	33
50	Collaborative	37
56	Supportive	43
48	Valued	36
60	Trusted	52
58	Committed to My Organization	46
65	Committed to Delivering My Goals	58

Mean scores on a number of different scales.

2. Mind the New Mindfulness

Second only to sleeping, working occupies an enormous amount of our time. As the trend for less and less private space and more and more open seating dominates today's workplace landscape, the need for quiet time and privacy are on the rise. In a noisy, sensory overloaded workplace, it is no surprise that a new focus on mindfulness, yoga and meditation has emerged. Today's powerful computers crunch numbers, apply algorithms and allow us to connect and communicate in epic ways. But despite all the automation around us, nothing has really replaced the value of human intuition, reason, the capacity to recognize patterns, and the ability to synthesize disparate elements of information into new meaning. But these devoutly human abilities require attention and concentration. Just as dead silence can be deadly to the ability to focus, the noise of the crowd can be equally distracting. But the new frontier is noise from within – that inner voice and ongoing dialogue we have with ourselves that diverts our attention and conspires to overwhelm our consciousness. The science of the new mindfulness is simple. Even very short periods of inner quiet can dramatically expand our ability to focus, improve our judgment and allow us to communicate more clearly. It turns out that the wisdom of the crowd is directly correlated with silence of the mind. Whether in a group or in the privacy of one's own cocoon, giving people the space to be quiet in the workplace can enable any organization to profit from mindfulness.

3. Lose Your Balance

Balancing work life and the rest of one's life is an ongoing battle for most people. In a 24/7/365 world, work/life balance is either an impossible dream or a fool's folly. The truth is that our quest for balance is based on the deceit of zero sum game thinking, where there has to be a loser and a winner. Balance is simply an analog for "something's got to give." Rather than trying to achieve some sort of magical balance or golden proportion, the workplace can and should sustain a more holistic version of life, where work and life are less about balance and more about selective curation and respectful integration. Curation is about dynamic prioritization, where choices are made in accordance with ever-changing context. Integration is about creative mixology, where selective attention and multitasking can actually coexist. Workplace is really a life place, where work and life collaborate. If a workplace works for work, it should work for life. Lose the search for work/life balance and embrace cohabitation.

4. Rethink Knowing

Knowledge has traditionally been the competitive advantage and prime driver of the world's most successful companies. As computer power grows and the world becomes cluttered with big data from endless sensors and instruments, what we can know will grow exponentially. But as many people come to realize, more data and information does not always mean more understanding and meaning. In the new conceptual age, the growing gap between knowing and understanding, more than any other change in business, will challenge why, how, when and where we work. As workplaces become environments that encourage and support right-brain thinking, we will have to rethink those environments to inspire optimism, curiosity, empathy and storytelling. Workplaces themselves will take on their own kind of consciousness, where a sense of wonder, a passion for deriving new meaning, and an ability to reframe and convey a new narrative will be both motivated and stimulated. Workplaces will need to animate the unique human ability to shift perspectives, synthesize information and recognize patterns. Rather than conveying comfort in the familiar, workplaces will arouse and enrich what the comedian George Carlin once referred to as a sense of "Vujà Dé" — the ability to imagine entirely new possibilities in the traditional and familiar. As we redefine work, we will reimagine the workplace to redefine and rethink what knowing means and what knowing triggers.

5. Recognize Recognition

Endless studies demonstrate that considering all forms of compensation, all other things being fair and equitable, personal recognition almost always trumps financial gain. Underlying any form of recognition are the metrics used to determine the value and worthiness of any effort, whether individual, group or the entire enterprise. In the "90-day shot clock" of quarterly earnings, a focus on revenue and profitability, as opposed to fulfilling a broader mission, growing brand equity and satisfying customers and end users, what we measure matters. And how a workplace embodies, encourages and expresses those metrics is one of the keys to success.

A workplace's sense of extreme order, tidiness or messiness, the democratization of personal space and location, and the subtle, or not so subtle, traces of hierarchy, can all conspire to inhibit imagination, turn down the flames of growth or the sparks of innovation. If a workplace feels so pristine and precious that no one would dare pepper the environment with Post-it notes, mock up a concept or build a rough

prototype, no one will. People need to be recognized for taking risks and failing as much as they are for more conventional achievement. The workplace has to physically, emotionally and experientially recognize that when people feel afraid to stretch, dare or fail, they will play it safe rather than feeling safe to play.

6. Blur the Organization

Never underestimate the propensity of large groups of people to organize, add structure and lower the entropy of any system. While this may have as much to do with the genetic makeup and the social and tribal nature of our species, we've also learned or perhaps have been trained to think, that structure, command and control are fundamental to maintaining the order and keeping the peace. This model is now almost ubiquitous, as military command and control has been applied to business, education and even the world of entrepreneurs. Unfortunately, when the business goal is innovation, growth and sustainable success, the siloed, hierarchical, command and control model has proven to be an actual barrier to the very business goals and higher aspirations that exist. Diverse perspectives, cross-disciplined and even cross-organizational thinking are increasingly fundamental to companies imagining "next" as opposed to incremental improvements to the existing offering. Blurring organizational lines and actually allowing people to "cross-pollinate" is actually a tremendous advantage when developing a "what's next" goal. Work environments can easily promote or even eliminate the departmental silos so traditional to command and control thinking. Just when it feels that defenses go up, tear down those walls and feel the blur.
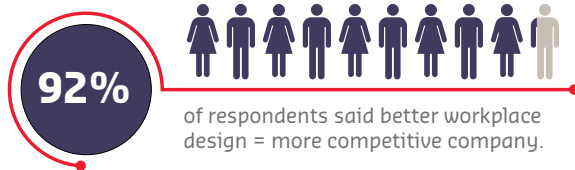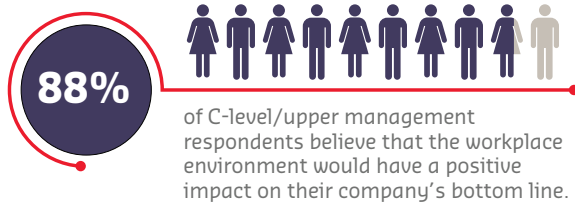
7. Create Place, Not Space

The hottest area of management consulting, including workplace counsel, is around culture and organization. While a company's culture emerges, rather than is designed, and organizational structures seemingly take shape on their own, the new role of leadership is in setting the vision and direction for both. In his book, "Start With Why," Simon Sinek's great insight is that people buy based on why you do it, not what you do. His passionate pursuit of the underlying purpose, cause and beliefs that inspire a company to do what it does, is all about a company's culture. Culture is expressed by a brand, a group of people and the environments in which they work. Workplaces communicate and nurture great, average and bad cultures in an endless variety of ways. On almost every experiential axis — the color and tone of a space, the quality, transparency or opacity of light, the ambient and active sounds and

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even the smell — workplaces scream their personalities and viscerally affect everyone in them. Places, not spaces, can promote or deter collaboration and can foster or inhibit new perspectives and an environment of safe and constructive critique. They can even subtly communicate an emphasis or lack of focus on profitability, process and value. Cultural values and principles should be the primary elements in the alchemy that workplaces inevitably become. It is the infusion of culture, people and the greater "why" that transforms space to place.

Key Findings from the U.S. Workplace Survey[3]

90%
of respondents said better workplace design and layout = better overall employee performance.

88%
of C-level/upper management respondents believe that the workplace environment would have a positive impact on their company's bottom line.

92%
of respondents said better workplace design = more competitive company.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The promise of big data, the magic of algorithms, the attraction of artificial intelligence, and the value of machine automation all suggest less human interactions and even less humans in the workplace. Even as computers near the processing speed, focus and memory capacity of the human brain, our ability to work in teams, empathically understand subtle nuances, reason, assess and imagine the unimaginable, reinforce the need for people in business. In an ever more complex, ambiguous, noisy, competitive and risky world, people remain our greatest asset. For the conceptual age to deliver on its promise of a better world, humans need to develop humanized environments and the technologies that enable them. Fundamental to that development are the business cultures, company organizations and workplace strategies developed by the very humans who benefit from them.

KEY INSIGHTS & IMPLICATIONS

Seven design principles can help guide managers and leaders who are charged with humanizing the workplace and inspiring new thinking.

- **Get Serious About Play:** Workplace environments that support and encourage play are critical to business outcomes.

- **Mind the New Mindfulness:** Even very short periods of inner quiet can expand our ability to focus, improve our judgment and allow us to communicate more clearly.

- **Lose Your Balance:** The workplace can and should sustain a more holistic version of life, where work and life are less about balance and more about respectful integration.

- **Rethink Knowing:** We will have to rethink workplace environments to animate the unique human ability to shift perspectives, synthesize information and recognize patterns.

- **Recognize Recognition:** People need to be recognized for taking risks and failing as much as they are for more conventional achievement.

- **Blur the Organization:** Diverse perspectives, cross-disciplined and even cross-organizational thinking are increasingly fundamental to companies imagining "next."

- **Create Place, Not Space:** Places, not spaces, can promote collaboration and new perspectives. It is the infusion of culture and people that transforms space to place.

LINKING TO SODEXO'S QUALITY OF LIFE DIMENSIONS

- **Physical Environment:** On almost every experiential axis, workplaces communicate and nurture the workplace culture. Design principles help guide the effective design and maintenance of workspaces.

- **Recognition:** The workplace should physically, emotionally and experientially encourage employees to be imaginative and innovative, and they should be rewarded for taking risks.

- **Personal Growth:** Humanizing the workplace involves shifting the organizational culture to focus on creativity, emotional nuance, human interaction and fulfillment.

- **Social Connections:** Through social interactions and experiences, employees learn about the communication and personality styles of co-workers, which nurtures imagination, improves productivity and elevates fulfillment.

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