Effect of Place on Employee Engagement

The extent to which an employee invests in his or her work and organization has caught the attention of many employers. Research indicates that employees who check in to work each day, and do so physically, emotionally, and mentally are, generally, more satisfied, and more innovative and higher performers than those who do not. Companies are beginning to implement policies and strategies to address the drivers of engagement and promote engagement in the workplace in order to reap these benefits. Space allocation and workplace design can be manipulated and utilized to encourage employee engagement. The following will define employee engagement and its drivers and will discuss effect of place on these drivers.

Defining Employee Engagement

Employee engagement has received attention from academic researchers dating back to the 1960's. Goffman (1961) offered an early definition of "engagement" that operationalizes it as investment of attention and physical effort in a particular role. Kahn situated this term within the workplace defining personal work engagement as a situation in which workers feel psychologically safe, are given the resources to dedicate themselves to work in a meaningful way, and are able to focus on the work at hand (Katz & Kahn, 1966). Moreover, the more a worker gives of him or herself to work, the more innovative and satisfying the work becomes (Kahn, 1992). More recently, definitions have come to include concepts related to dedication (Shaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez, & Bakker, 2002; Shaufeli & Bakker, 2004), positive attitudes, and motivation to contribute to the success of the business (Cook, 2012; Fleming & Asplund, 2007; Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004; Saks, 2006).

Taken as a whole, definitions of employee engagement suggest that an employee's involvement, physical and psychological, with his or her work and workplace is paramount. Engaged employees are more likely than disengaged employees to propose innovative ideas for improving business practices and solving problems (Krueger & Killham, 2006; Steelcase, 2016). Invested employees are also more motivated to help their employers achieve organizational goals and to take initiative to contribute to organizational success (Steelcase, 2016). In spite of the prudence of conversations around employee engagement and the benefits to companies of supporting employee engagement, relatively few in the American workforce (29-34%) identify themselves as engaged in the workplace (Gallup, 2006; Steelcase, 2016). Such low levels of engagement translates to an estimated $500 billion in lost productivity yearly (Gallup, 2015).

Drivers of Employee Engagement

In order to implement strategies for increasing employee engagement, employers must identify what drives employee engagement. Employee welfare, empowerment, growth, and interpersonal relationships are all predictors of engagement (Mani, 2011). Interestingly, these drivers can all be influenced by manipulating and designing the workspace to create an environment conducive to employee engagement.

The physical workspace is related to engagement, motivation, satisfaction, and performance. When the workspace is designed and designated in a way that creates a supportive environment for employees to invest in their work and in their company, it demonstrates a respect for the employees (Sodexo, 2015). Feelings of respect can then trigger those drivers of engagement, particularly employee growth and empowerment, leading to increased innovation and productivity.

Arguably one of the most prominent drivers of employee engagement is empowerment. This driver is targeted in design through control and flexibility. Employees who report more satisfaction with their work environment tend to be more engaged. More, those who are given more control

over their work experience report more engagement and more satisfaction than those without control (Steelcase, 2016). Technological progress has altered the way space is allocated and used in the work environment. Employees can have the choice to work outside the office, or inside the office (at a desk, in a lounge, conference room, etc.) (Hok, 2013). Most often, engaged employees are not relegated to work at one particular desk. Rather, they have the freedom and flexibility to choose where and with whom they complete their work based on the task. An environment that supports such flexibility should offer a variety of choices for workspaces with assigned and unassigned desks, café areas, lounge style seating areas, formal conference rooms, and relaxed gathering spaces (Hoskins, 2014). These options and the freedom to move through them give employees the ability to address their own needs for privacy, concentration, social interaction, and collaboration. In turn, employees were more likely to be happy in their work roles, were higher performers, and believed their company to be more innovative than other companies who did not offer as much flexibility (Gensler, 2013).

While social interaction can drive employee engagement in public workspaces, empowerment can be equally as evident in private spaces. Work requires time spent with colleagues in public or semi-private areas and time spent alone in personal spaces. Allowing an employee the control over personal workspace is empowering. One's sense of space and how one personalizes that space "or controls aspects such as lighting, temperature, or views" is a demonstration of identity. An employee controls how much of his or her identity is revealed through this personalization. Furthermore, personal space within a broader work environment serves to connect the individual to the organizational identity. It situates the part within the whole and creates investment (This idea will be revisited later in this essay) (Sodexo, 2015).

Approaches to Designing for Engagement

Well-Being Approach to Design

One approach to workplace design that focuses on control and flexibility as a driver for employee empowerment, engagement and overall well-being is the well-being approach. This design approach focuses on six dimensions of employee well-being: optimism, mindfulness, authenticity, belonging, meaning and vitality.

The optimism dimension includes design features that promote creativity and innovation such as the flexible workspaces that offer choices discussed previously. Mindfulness addresses a need to be fully engaged. Design that promotes mindfulness creates spaces that allow workers to connect face-to-face in a focused setting. These non-distracting settings apply calming materials, textures, lighting, and colors.

Authenticity implies that well-being is linked to the ability for an employee to be him or herself. "Informal home-like" areas are characteristic of design that promotes authenticity. Similarly, informal areas promote belonging – connection to others in the workplace. Informal areas, like lounges and cafes, provide casual settings for colleagues to interact socially and establish relationships.

Meaning gives an employee a sense of purpose within an organization. Design promoting this dimension includes branded spaces that signify the culture or history of the organization and create an "ecosystem" of spaces to give employees choices about how and where to work. One way this is accomplished is through wayfinding (i.e. the use of colors or graphics to convey location or direction within a space). Wayfinding is a dynamic relationship with the workspace (Passini & Arthur, 1992). Different colors or textures can be used to identify team areas or corporate branding. Wayfinding can also be achieved through differing lighting patterns and interior architecture.

Finally, vitality is a dimension of well-being that describes the liveliness or activity or energy level of an individual. Design promoting vitality offers a variety of levels of sensory stimulation so that workers can make choices for themselves. Furniture might be adjustable and encourage movement (Sodexo, 2015). Biophilic design (that which brings natural elements and themes indoors) is also a key feature of designing for this dimension.

According to this approach, design that promotes each of these dimensions of well-being will result in higher levels of engagement and productivity and reduced stress. All of which are beneficial to both employees and their employers.

Organizational Psychology Approach

A second workspace design approach also aims to promote employee engagement but does so more directly. The organizational psychology approach applies design and environmental features that are thought to enhance performance as a function of ability, motivation, and opportunity. Rather than being a driving factor, health and well-being are considered collateral benefits of this approach.

Ten design elements are thought to boost performance: thermal comfort, access to nature, sensory change and variability, color, noise control, crowding, human factors/ergonomics, indoor air quality, choice, and employee engagement. Thermal comfort involves the optimal combination of temperature, airflow, and humidity and can be accommodated by providing access to zoned temperature controls and operable windows and window coverings. The second design element, access to nature, views, and daylight addresses the innate human desire to be close to nature – biophilia. Large open windows and outdoor areas give employees access to natural daylight and views that provide a sensory charge. Sensory change and variability provides sensory stimulation that helps employees stay alert throughout the day. Access to daylight and views to nature; added texture with natural materials; and color or graphic changes in large spaces help to stimulate the senses while keeping distraction at bay. Color as a design element, enhances productivity is some interesting ways. For example, brighter colors increase focus, blues are soothing and improve mental control and creativity, and yellow is associated with alertness and clear decision making. Noise control is an issue in nearly all work environments. However, not all noise is detrimental to productivity (Hok, 2013). Noise over which an employee has an element of control is less distracting to that employee (Kjellberg, Landstrom, Tesarz, Soderberg, & Akerlund, 1996). Designers can control noise by absorbing it with fabrics and carpets, by blocking it with furniture, panels, or partitions, and by covering it. Crowding is a feeling of density in a space that often causes stress in employees. Views to the nature, orienting personal space away from other employees, or using furniture, plants, architectural elements to block the views of other employees can help make a space feel less crowded, ameliorate

feelings of stress, and improve productivity. Human factors and ergonomics are design elements that take into consideration what makes people more comfortable and what supports productivity over time. For example, sitting for long periods is associated with neck, back, and shoulder pain as well as increased mortality (HOK, 2012; Patel, Bernstein, Deka, Spencer Feigelson, Campbell, Gapstur, Colditz, & Thun, 2010).To encourage movement, spaces can be designed with easily and visually accessible stairs and provide adjustable furniture so that employees can move furniture to meet their needs as they change throughout the day. Addressing concerns about Indoor air quality supports good health to boost productivity. Investing in flooring with low particulate counts or hard surface flooring can help keep the air clean reducing respiratory illness in employees. Choice describes design elements that support the control and flexibility discussed previously. Giving employees choices about where, with whom, and when they work – by offering a variety of types of workspaces - allows them to feel in control which decreases stress and frustration (Augustin, 2009). Finally, employee engagement is a design element that looks to increase productivity, innovation, and satisfaction by providing spaces for collaboration, designing workspaces that are open and visible to other employees, and dividing the work floor into neighborhoods (HOK, 2013).

Summary: Flooring Applications and Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is an essential part of managing a successful business. While social and political strategies for engaging employees may be useful, a ground up approach addressing the physical environment has shown to be very effective in boosting engagement. Regardless of the approach, control and flexibility in the workspace is consistently effective in keeping employees engaged and therefore more satisfied, innovative, and productive. Biophilic design features and wayfinding were also relevant to both approaches.

Flooring is an important design feature when considering a design plan to increase employee engagement. Natural fibers or wood can be installed to bring elements of nature into the built workspace. Tiles with natural patterning can

have the same effect. Flooring can also be used to designate team areas/neighborhoods, to lead employees to private or collaborative spaces, or to lead employees to outdoor access points. Different colors, textures, or patterns of flooring can be effective wayfinding tools in the workplace.

Creating workplaces that are engaging for employees requires more planning and more spending on design than a standard workspace. However, these costs can be offset by boosted productivity and satisfaction and lower turnover rates (Knoll Workplace Research, 2015).

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