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Coffee Culture: Design Inspiration Balancing Social Connection and Independence in Modern Workplaces

by

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ABSTRACT

Positive interaction with others and employee themselves in the workplace can increase work engagement and satisfaction. However, the staff does not have enough flexibility to control their schedule or enough belongings to their coworkers and companies, which make them commit their time, talent, skills, and ambition to their team and companies hard. As a new modern workplace layout type, activity-based workplace (ABW) shows the trend of employee office interaction development. It allows employees to choose the most suitable workstation based on their activities, offering more flexibility to set up their own work life. However, there are some worries preventing people to recognize those potential benefits, such as easily slacking off in the concentration room and lack of icebreakers to meet with more people in the breakout area. Thus, finding a solution to keep the balance between social connection and independence is significant to enhance work engagement for both employees and their companies.

Coffee culture describes a social atmosphere or a series of related social behaviors that take coffee as a social lubricant. In modern office spaces, no matter in what kind of workplace and activities, coffee is the most must-have daily thing for the office people. Having a cup of coffee at work can bring a refreshed and clear mind and help down social barriers allowing employees to have chances to interact with each other at work. This paper describes the trend of work engagement and the positive connection within the popular coffee culture, modern workplace social connection and independence. Hope it can bring some inspiration for readers to pay more attention to the poor work engagement and create a more harmonious and efficient work environment.

Keywords

Work Engagement Independence Social Connection Coffee Culture Modern Workplace

Introduction

Work engagement refers to a positive attitude and behaviors of people at work that leads to positive work performance.

Employees with a higher level of work engagement tend to be enthusiastic, enjoyable and energetic to their work.

They are satisfied with their work environment and believe that they can grow and thrive in such an environment, and

finally, achieve their career goals. However, it seems like it is still just an expectation for most company and its

employees. This article points out current poor work engagement problems and the trend of modern workplace layout,

more than that, introduces how coffee culture plays an essential role in boosting work engagement.

1.Poor Independence and Social Connections in the Workplace

High work engagement is a combination of reasonable independence and social interaction. However, on the one hand,

as Lipman in a *Forbes* article figures out, only 24% of employees feel connected to their coworkers and 79 % of

respondents consider top engagement condition is their relationship with co-workers ^[1]. On the other hand, a survey

from hundreds of Rescue Time blog users, 51.5% said they are interrupted frequently throughout the day by small talk

like “Hey! Can I ask you a quick question?”, which is a constant threat to their focus. ^[2]. “Interruptions can eat up 28

billion wasted hours a year, at a loss of almost \$1 trillion to the U.S. economy.” said by Jonathan Spira, a noted author,

an expert in the field of Information Overload ^[3].

According to Gallup’s State of the Global Workplace report, only 15% of employees worldwide are engaged in their

jobs and employee disengagement costs the United States upwards of \$550 billion a year in lost productivity ^[4]. From

the above figures, it means plenty of staff do not have strong enough flexibility to complete their schedule or

belongings to their coworkers and companies, which strongly committed their time, talent, skills and ambition to their

team and companies.

2. Modern Workspace Trend ---Activity-based Workplace (ABW)

In recent years there has been a shift from solitary desks, cubicles and desktop computers to a more flexible, agile approach to working. These days, as long as you have your laptop and reliable WiFi, you can work from almost anywhere, and there has been a shift towards encouraging a more collaborative working style. Traditional 9 to 5 working schedules have been replaced by flexible or remote working, isolated cubicles are changing to open-plan, collaborative spaces, and there is a much bigger focus on employee engagement and wellbeing.

Without forcing employees to undertake all their work at an assigned desk, activity-based workplace (ABW) encourages people to physically locate themselves where it is most suitable for them to complete their work ^[5]. It provides the staff with more flexibility to set up their own work schedule and opportunities to interact more with other staff, not just ones in the same department, which could greatly improve their engagement to work.

2.1 Features to the activity-based workplace (ABW)

Basically, there are four typical kinds of areas in the ABW, private space for concentrating on the work, semi-open collaboration area for 2-3 three people's informal meeting, formal meeting room and breakout space ^[6]. ABW is not equal to open space or private mobile room. It depends on each company or department's daily activity and work mode.

2.2 Unrecognized Benefits to Activity-based Workplace (ABW)

2.2.1 More chance to interact with all kinds of staff

Since the staff has no assigned workstations and they can change the space with the change of their activity, it allows staff to interact with others more, not just ones in the same department. More, it stimulates social work processes, knowledge sharing, and learning. However, lack of sufficient interaction triggers would be the possible problem for the development of ABW space. No need to face unnecessary social communication could bring high work efficiency, but also could make people feel disconnected from their organization's community. Some employees who are not outgoing possibly would feel difficulty to establish a social network and get depressed. Thus, employees should be helped feel others' kindness and encourage to share their own inside thoughts and creativity with people from all kinds of departments, enabling cross-functional collaboration better and decision-making more efficient ^[7]. Nice interaction could make employees feel encouraged and accompanied and even could help break the ice and lead to nice face-to-face communication, which will be a good start to establish a long-lasting friendship and partnership and boost the sense of belonging.

2.2.2 More Freedom and Flexibility

One specific space cannot satisfy all kinds of personalities and all the activities. ABW manages to remove unnecessary rules and procedures, relieving the pressure of rigid working hours and fixed workspace to offer staff a more dynamic working environment ^[8]. Staff can optimize their work time in an efficient way and they do not need to sit in one place for a whole day which also avoids a sedentary lifestyle. However, too flexible and relaxed work environment would be easier for employees to slack off and lack motivation which would slow down the work efficiency ^[9]. Hence, it's will be significant for staff to be reminded and encouraged properly by others to immerse themselves in the work and pursue a higher quality work life from time to time. Sometimes, the encouragement and influence of the partners and the competitors will be much more useful than the employers.

3.Coffee Culture and Modern Workplace

3.1 Coffee Culture's Potential

Coffee culture describes a social atmosphere or a series of related social behaviors that take coffee as a social lubricant ^[10]. Providing people with not only just a place to sit and enjoy a drink, but the coffee shops also offered a welcoming platform for socializing, discussion, collaboration, and innovation. People would love to gather around the coffee maker and talked about their project ideas, their personal lives, daily events of the companies and more.

One study even found that coffee beverage consumption among millennials had increased from 19% to 41% between 2008 and 2016. Recent data from SAP Concur found that their staff was holding a staggering 10,000 meetings per month in Starbucks, and according to the 2017 Leesman Index, 82% of respondents said that tea, coffee, and refreshment facilities were a highly important factor in their physical environment. Surprisingly, a recent survey among 12,000 South African employees from the office furniture consulting firm Inspiration Office found that the highest priority for employees' expectations of the workplace was quality coffee. The vast majority (95%) of respondents placed premium coffee in front of other options like safety, friendly environment, comfortable lighting, and comfortable seating, probably since coffee quality is the most likely and most convenient option to improve ^[11]. The availability of coffee options in the workplace plays an important role in improving employee engagement and productivity.

3.2 Connection between Coffee Culture and Work Engagement

Great coffee culture is about discovering possibilities, sharing values and finding a point where work and life can keep balance and where everyone can find something in common. There is a figure showing that the typical worker has

about 4 cups of coffee^[12]. No matter what kind of workplace and activities, coffee is the most must-have daily thing for the office people. There are some benefits that contributed to the balance between independence and social connection brought by coffee culture.

3.2.1 More Flexibility and Creativity

With an increasing trend to move towards more flexible and self-dominated modern workplace layouts and remote working, positive coffee culture contributed to the employees' creativity, especially on collaborative projects. People have more flexibility to the work time, location, socializing chances and potential socializing targets.

3.2.2 Enhance Productivity

A survey found that 83% of people consider a nice cup of coffee vital to their overall happiness at work because a great cup of coffee could cheer up a whole working day and diving into tasks fueled by caffeine^[13]. Coffee also could enhance people's focus and memory. More than that, Adjunct Assistant Professor Vasu Unnava pointed out that drinking a moderate amount of caffeinated coffee before a group activity could improve team member's work-related participation during the group activity and improve the evaluation to others^[14]. And a new survey from UC Davis found that besides caffeine, the act of consuming coffee together possibly could also lead to better work performance, but it still needs further confirmation. Anyway, coffee culture has a great impact on improving work productivity^[15].

3.2.3 Take a Break from Stressful Work

Proper relaxation is also a key factor to improve the work engagement and job satisfaction. Overworked employees often suffer from chronic stress and get job burnout easily, which is harmful to both mental health and work

productivity ^[16]. Coffee culture is a chance for employees to get a quick and effective break. They can share inner stress with others during a coffee break, sit in the comfy sofa in the breakout area and play with some toys to cheer up and clear their mind.

3.2.4 Possibilities and Icebreakers for Socializing

During the coffee break at work, a routine social gathering for employees, there are a lot of chances to encounter all types of people and share your thoughts, just like what happened in the coffee shop. For example, when the company's junior employees don't have the opportunity to contact senior leaders and express their ideas, the encounter in the coffee area makes this contact and interaction possible. People will not need an excuse to break the ice and even they can just express greetings or wishes to the strangers.

4.New Ways to Apply Coffee Culture to Boost Work Engagement

Based on each company's budget, workplace scale and popularity, there are three ways for different companies to apply coffee culture to boost work engagement. No matter which direction they choose, they can bring something new, cheerful and creative to their unsatisfied employees.

4.1. Incorporate Coffee Culture into Workplace Design

If a company can afford a full office renovation in terms of cost and time, ABW would be the most direct and influential way. Inspired by coffee shops, spaces can be furnished with comfortable seating, shared desks and open plan layouts.

Without separating employees from their workspace or going to the pantry for a cup of coffee, ABW keeps people active and engaged in their space, combining work, entertainment, drinks, and socialization. It could create a coffee

culture from where the work lives, significantly improving productivity, collaboration and problem-solving. Employees will feel less stressful but more dedicated to their work in such a free and energetic environment. Also, everyone's positive attitude could influence others.

4.2 Coffee Machine

Besides the workplace, there is some potential to combine coffee machine's basic function with interaction opportunities. For example, the machine could look like to invite employees to use it with others from the appearance and interface, or it could be creative and interesting enough to attract people to have a nice discussion. It can be regarded as an icebreaker for attracted people to express their greetings and kindness to another one who is also waiting.

4.3 Coffee Cup Accessories

As the cheapest solution, it has the advantage of higher accessibility and circulation. It can be developed as a system to fit into a different situation based on employees' behaviors and habits. Coffee is still available, but these accessories could be included, such as coffee sleeves, lips, and trays, etc.

4.3.1 Indirect Communication, a Type of Interaction for More Flexibility

Compared to direct conversation, indirect communication is always much easier and comfortable for people to begin with, and it can lead to a potential nice conversation. For example, people are always attracted by the warm message boards or creative doodle wall in the shared area and start a nice discussion and interaction. In the breakout area, there is a good chance to feel more kindness from someone you don't know. Also, within the coffee interaction, there are some opportunities to avoid unnecessary embarrassment by expressing your opinion without any words. You may

recall sometimes you need to answer an important phone call but cannot interrupt the meeting just for saying sorry or explanation, or you are struggling with refusing others' quick chat during the deadline-caught time, or you don't want your unfinished meal was taken away by staff when you leave seats for a second. Some messages could be left on your coffee cup, such a natural, and popular media tool.

4.3.2 A Reminder to Avoid Slack-off for Higher Productivity

Combining coffee cup with task to-do lists can be applied to enhancing employees' productivity. Nowadays, to-do list Apps become more and more popular, facing a straightforward outline of your completed and uncompleted tasks could help you feel manageable and stay mentally focused. Concentrate on work for 2-3 hours with a cup of coffee is perfect for higher work productivity.

4.3.3 Toys to Empty Brain for a Quick Break

Playing toys such as block or puzzles could help people relax, reduce stress and balance the work pace. Applying toys to coffee culture is significant to match their relaxing feature, which could offer employees a cheerful and effective environment.

Conclusion

High work engagement is the balance between independence and the social connection of employees, which is ignored by a lot of companies and causes huge losses quietly. Indeed, coffee culture could play a significant role in boosting engagement and there are a lot of ways to apply it. No matter using modern workplace layout, advanced technology or economical and enrich accessories, it brings a more harmonious and enjoyable work environment.

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