

Familiar Places in New Spaces



Fundamental changes are occurring in the way we work. As we spend more and more time at the office, our workplace behaviors and expectations are changing to more closely mirror the rest of our lives. For companies like Metro Furniture, that connection can lead to inspiration.

Something's changing in the office, and it isn't just the wiring or the walls. It's what we do when we're there. It's the relationships we have with our co-workers. And it's what we expect to get out of a good day's work. Sure, we're spending more time than ever at the office. But that alone may not mean the end of life as we know it. Sometimes, when we don't make time for the important things in life, the important things in life make their way to the workplace.

In his book, "The Great Good Place," sociologist Ray Oldenburg identified three places that Americans need to go in our daily lives. We need home. We need work. And we need a third place - a more elusive locale that is neither home nor work, but rather a place that lets us behave differently than how we do in the other two places. For some, this third place is church. For others, it may be a local café, the bowling alley, or a corner bar. Whatever its form, this third place offers us the chance to connect with peer groups, socialize, and generally recharge from our experiences at home and at work.

Oldenburg's understanding of this spatial trinity is coupled with the realization that third places are disappearing from the American landscape. Overall participation in social groups and civic organizations is down. Involvement in traditional pastimes like sports leagues has waned in the face of ever-harried schedules. Even the local drinking hole has seen attendance drop off, as health concerns and changing ethics make daily imbibing socially unacceptable.

Third places aren't the only parts of our life that are disappearing. We're also spending less time at home, largely because we're spending more time than ever at work. According to a recent poll by the National Sleep Foundation, Americans are suffering from a serious sleep deficit while also cutting back on leisure activities. Work is the only activity to which

more people said they devoted longer hours than they did five years ago.

The disappearance of life outside of work is an alarming proposition, but fortunately something quite different may be happening. The less time that we spend in home places and third places, the more we begin to see vital signs of the rest of life appearing at work. Services, from day care to dry cleaning, are increasingly provided at the office. Visiting the gym has given way to running on your lunch break. Friday evening happy hours have been replaced with departmental social hours, beer and all.

Life Shows Up At Work

While the appearance of home and third place activities at work is interesting in and of itself, more profound is the transfer of home and third place expectations to the workplace. In study after study, sociologists note that Generation X'ers expect work to be the primary source of fulfillment in their lives - an attitude that's mirrored in the media. Fast Company magazine tells workers how to achieve goals at work that were previously reserved for the rest of their life. Television depicts office workers whose entire lives are defined in terms of the relationships and experiences they have in the office. The message is clear: our co-workers are supposed to be our best friends. Drawing from the full palette of life's interactions allows us to be healthy and sane human beings - to be whole persons.

As Malcolm Gladwell noted in a recent New Yorker article, "The reason Americans are content to bowl alone (or, for that matter, not bowl at all) is that, increasingly, they receive all the social support they need - all the serendipitous interactions that serve to make them happy and productive - from nine to five." That alone ought to cheer employers who care about their

workers' welfare. But there's a more direct benefit to supporting all of life's interactions, and the reason for it lies in the changing nature of work itself.

Enlightened companies are discovering that making work more like life actually makes work more productive. Knowledge work isn't factory work. In fact, it's those work processes that most closely resemble an assembly line that are being replaced by new technologies. ERP, sales-force automation and customer-relationship management systems are all tools designed to drive the assembly line out of knowledge work. What's left are the most human of activities: thinking, creating and communicating ideas.

How does work happen in a world where such everyday activities can amount to a competitive advantage? Most of us don't have good models for what that actually looks like, and the conventional workplace doesn't point the way. But human beings have had a whole lot of practice at interacting socially; it's just happened outside of the office. The big secret is this: work is increasingly a composite of very familiar interactions. Those interactions already exist, just in other parts of our life. We first learned how to play with other kids when we were in the sandbox. Now, when the full spectrum of life's interactions is showing up at work, we're finding that many of those learned behaviors are exactly what's needed to make knowledge work happen.

Companies that embrace this new work culture are trying to replicate the rich and varied environments of everyday life inside the office. Acres of desks and conference rooms are giving way to spaces that look like the rest of the world. New spaces support new behaviors, and they look like first and third places. Break rooms are evolving into cafe spaces. "Clubhouses" are replacing conference rooms. The hope is that these new spaces will engender more of the interactions we experience in life. Some firms have even gone so far as to design their offices along the lines of a small town complete with main streets and crossroads where people can meet. In doing so, they draw inspiration from the rest of life in the hopes of inspiring that same behavior.

The Power Of Familiarity

One of the primary things to change is the furniture. Metro, a forward-thinking company based just outside of San Francisco, is at the forefront of this movement. Its products regularly break conventional notions of office furniture, encouraging people to work in ways that are more comfortable, more welcoming and more productive. To do so, the company is drawing on the rich pantheon of spaces that exist in the rest of the world, and creating new work settings that bring the most vivid interaction spaces back into the office.

Some of the company's first interpretations drew upon familiar home settings. The Highboy, for example, is inspired by the kind of counter that often separates the kitchen from the family room. Like its domestic counterpart, the Highboy encourages

impromptu stand-up conversations. Detour lounge chairs create another familiar space, something akin to your living room. Just like a living room, Detour allows the kind of active but informal interactions that keep people connected.

It's important to point out that the feat of creating a living room at work requires a lot more than having Ethan Allen ship to a different address. A modern workplace has unique demands that we can't get away from, be it rigorous product testing or the need to accommodate the ever growing phalanx of high tech gear. The act of bringing life's familiar places to work requires a discerning process of interpretation, adapting strong metaphors but tightening up the lines a bit so things fit in with the look and feel of an office.

One of the greatest examples of this is Bix. Metro's new line of furniture might remind you of a diner that you once used to frequent. Perhaps it was the place that you went to late at night, to meet old friends when you were home from college. And perhaps you remember the booth that three or four of you piled into, to order endless cups of coffee and trade stories, hatch plans and share dreams. Those magical conversations are more than the stuff of nostalgia. They're the kinds of interactions that companies are desperate for, the kinds that don't seem to happen in a conventional conference room. More than just a lounge chair, Bix provides the building blocks for an entirely different sort of setting, one that's familiar to most of us, and sorely needed at work.

No doubt, the movement to make work more comfortable and human-centered is not without its skeptics. It'll probably be some time before enough such spaces exist to provide us with hard quantitative evidence of changed behavior. Nevertheless, our own experience may be a more powerful qualitative indicator. Products like Bix prove themselves in the stories that they elicit: the way our memories of past interactions combine with the experience of entirely new ones. When time spent reviewing a project with co-workers starts to feel more like good friends making plans and sharing stories, Bix has hit its mark.

Work is changing, and it's becoming more like life. That's a good thing for workers, and great thing for business. As the rest of life provides models for work, the places in life - those home places and third places - provide powerful models for companies like Metro. And by understanding what gives those places meaning, by skillfully interpreting those places for the office, the people at Metro are doing more than creating great spaces. They're helping bring life to work. ■