

A psychological perspective

Workspaces should be designed to cater for different personality types and cultures, offering variety, choice and adaptability so that they meet a range of individual and group needs, argues **Nigel Oseland**.

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For some time I have thought that the majority of office floor space looks and feels the same, particularly in the UK. Take a look at any interior design magazine or industry award winners if you don't believe me.

I acknowledge that the more adventurous organisations may have quirkier breakout spaces, themed meetings rooms and a funkier colour palette. But fundamentally the layout of the space follows a familiar pattern. There are a few exceptions but most offices are fully open plan with rows of the ubiquitous bench-desk built around a core of so-called collaboration space and other supporting areas.

The even more adventurous organisations may be experimenting with "new ways of working", reinvented as flexible, agile or activity-based working, but nevertheless a concept that has been around for at least 25 years. Despite this alternative way of working, the design and layout follows the same homogenous pattern.

The design and use of space is fundamentally driven by cost. The office is considered (by many) a cost burden and an overhead, rather than a means of improving business performance or an investment with potentially lucrative returns. So, currently, office design is all about space, it is about efficiency, high density and reducing property costs.

Le Corbusier famously claimed that "the home is a machine for living in", so it follows that "the office is a machine for working in". The primary objective of the office is, and has always been, to facilitate the business of the occupying organisation. And, of course, the key asset of any organisation is its people.

To get the most out of our people, we provide them with the best technology, training, business processes and management. We provide an organisational infrastructure that supports their needs. The workplace is also part of that infrastructure, it's a tool for the job, and should be treated as one. We should consider workspace projects in terms of the return on investment in our people rather than as a cost burden to the business. Therefore, I hope for the sake of our economy that the focus of the future office will shift away from property cost to people investment.

In the future, I believe we will celebrate individual differences, recognise the business benefits of mixed personality types and embrace local culture. We will move away from designing homogenous workspaces for

a heterogeneous workforce to providing a workspace of variety, choice and adaptability which meets a range of individual and group needs. This article focuses on how to provide spaces that meet our psychological needs, in particular providing for different personality types.

DESIGNING FOR INTROVERTS

Many famous and successful people are classic examples of introverts – think Bill Gates, Ghandi, Einstein, Lincoln, JK Rowling, Darwin and Chopin for starters. Susan Cain's recent book on the power of introverts¹ reminded us that the workplace contains similar proportions of both introverts and extroverts. Nevertheless, introverts are often overlooked despite making considerable contributions to business and society.

Extroverts tend to be gregarious, assertive and sociable; they are thrill seekers, require stimulation and can be impulsive. In contrast, introverts tend to be reserved, reflective and quiet, preferring solitary activity and their own company. Extroverts tend to direct their energy outwards to the external world of people, whereas introverts prefer to focus their energy and attention inwards and are more self-contained.

My recent literature review² of business performance research revealed that the most effective teams are those that consist of a healthy mix of introverts and extroverts. While these heterogeneous teams take slightly longer to bond, they ultimately deliver more creative, innovative, considered and successful outputs.

Psychologists know that extroverts prefer stimulating, buzzy, open-plan environments whereas introverts are more productive in low-stimulating, quiet and subtle workspaces. The two personality types also prefer to communicate in different ways. Introverts prefer well-considered, logically presented, detailed written reports. In contrast, extroverts prefer face-to-face interactions; they like to brainstorm, discuss, debate and present big ideas.

My recent online survey of 937 people demonstrated that introverts spend more time in solitary activity, predominantly communicate using email and when they meet prefer enclosed offices and meeting rooms. On the other hand, extroverts spend more time in face-to-face communication and prefer meeting in bars, hotels and huddle rooms.

Yet there is a tendency to create open-plan, noisy, crowded environments that are stimulating and facilitate interaction and collaboration. It is assumed that this is what all organisations require, and Susan Cain argues that we design for an "extrovert ideal", which is more socially acceptable than being introverted. But these environments can be stressful for the introverts; they can cause distraction and poor performance, especially for those involved in complex analysis, detail and logic (the roles that attract introverts).

DESIGNERS' PERCEPTIONS

I have long suspected that architects and interior designers are more extrovert than those in other job functions, and as a consequence design workplaces based on their personal preferences. My survey didn't quite validate my hypothesis, finding that architects and designers are a good mix of introverts and extroverts.

However, I did find that they score higher on the "openness" scale on the Big Five Personality Inventory. This means that architects and designers are more open to new experiences, have a wider range of interests and fascination with novelty, plus they tend to be more creative and artistically sensitive than other disciplines.

I also found that they value daylight, views out and also prefer the bar or hotel, huddle room, brainstorm room and café for generating new ideas, not meeting rooms. They also appear to spend more time on average carrying out quiet, focused work (such as thinking and developing ideas) and less time on their computer than others. So it actually does seem likely that the personality of architects and interior designers affects their perception of what is required in the workplace.

OTHER PERSONALITY FACTORS

Another common personality factor is "neuroticism" as opposed to "emotional stability". This reflects the degree to which a person is calm, collected and self-confident; those less stable have a tendency to be nervous, anxious and insecure. I found that those scoring high on the neuroticism scale have similar workplace requirements to introverts. I also revealed specific workplace requirements depending on how "agreeable" and "conscientious" people are, the remaining two factors on the Big Five Personality Inventory (see tables 1 and 2)³. Herman Miller will be hosting some seminars to explore the survey findings and implications for design.

So we need to provide choice and respect different individual needs if we want to get the most out of all of our people. The biggest challenge for architects, designers and their clients is to provide the right mix of stimulating and calming workspaces that appeal to all personality types, not just to themselves. We need well-designed offices with a choice of interesting work settings, not open-plan, high-density seas of desks with a few token breakout areas. I am in favour of the landscaped or hybrid office, which is not completely open plan but neither is it cellular. If we want to put our people in isolated boxes, then they might as well stay at home as come into the office.

EVOLUTIONARY TRAITS

A relatively new field of psychology is evolutionary psychology⁴. Over time, our bodies have adapted for survival and wellbeing, and evolutionary psychologists believe that innate human behaviour and psychological processes have also evolved over time. The problem is that *Homo sapiens* evolved

Table 1: Big five personality factors, or "OCEAN"

Personality type	Opposite personality type
O Openness (to experience): creative, curious, broad interests imaginative and artistically sensitive	Closed-minded: conventional, down to earth, insensitive, narrow interests and likes the familiar
C Conscientiousness: responsible, hard-working, organised, dependable, self-disciplined and persistent	Undirected: disorganised, impulsive, easily distracted, carefree, lax and unreliable
E Extroversion: sociable, talkative, outgoing, thrill-seeker, risk-taker, optimistic, impulsive	Introversion: reserved, reflective, quiet, cautious, prefers own company, logical, thoughtful
A Agreeableness: cooperative, affectionate, good-natured, helpful, forgiving, caring and trusting	Antagonism: challenging, suspicious, cynical, uncooperative, headstrong and disagreeable
N Neuroticism: nervous, anxious, insecure, stressed, hypertensive and excitable	Emotional stability: calm and collected, self-confident, relaxed, composed and secure

Table 2: Implications of personality factors for performance and collaboration

Implications for task performance	Implications for collaboration
Openness (to experience) vs not open Evidence supports the importance of openness for creative and imaginative tasks but suggests that openness is less important, or even detrimental, when the task is of a more routine nature.	Open people prefer face-to-face meetings, brainstorming, plus stimulating, different and new spaces. Not open people prefer formal, familiar, conforming and traditional spaces.
Conscientiousness vs undirected Should be positively related to team performance across a wide variety of tasks and settings.	Conscientious people prefer planned, formal, well organised, minuted meetings. Undirected people prefer impromptu and informal meetings, idea generation and quick interactions.
Extroversion vs introversion Extroversion is related to team performance when tasks involve imaginative or creative activity but may inhibit performance when tasks call for precise, sequential and logical behaviour.	Extroverts prefer face-to-face and socialising, large social groups plus impromptu, informal, off-site meetings, and stimulating spaces. Introverts prefer written communications, distributed information, small groups, teleconferences and subdued spaces.
Agreeableness vs antagonism Agreeableness may be important for performance in long-term teams with tasks that involve persuasion or other socially related dimensions; when tasks do not require a high degree of social interaction, agreeableness may actually inhibit performance.	Agreeable people prefer large meetings with structure and distributed information to help gain group consensus. Antagonistic people prefer unstructured, face-to-face meetings where they can challenge/derail.
Neuroticism vs emotional stability The level of emotional stability in the team correlates with team performance for a wide range of tasks.	Neurotic people prefer well-planned, formal meetings with advance notice and information; also subdued environments. Stable people are comfortable with large, impromptu or informal meetings.
Source: "The psychology of collaboration space", Herman Miller.	

for about 400,000 years living and surviving on the savannah, whereas we have only worked and survived in large office blocks for 150 years or so. Our natural