Assignment 3: Workplace Design

Cognitive and Social Psychology of User-Centered Design (2022)

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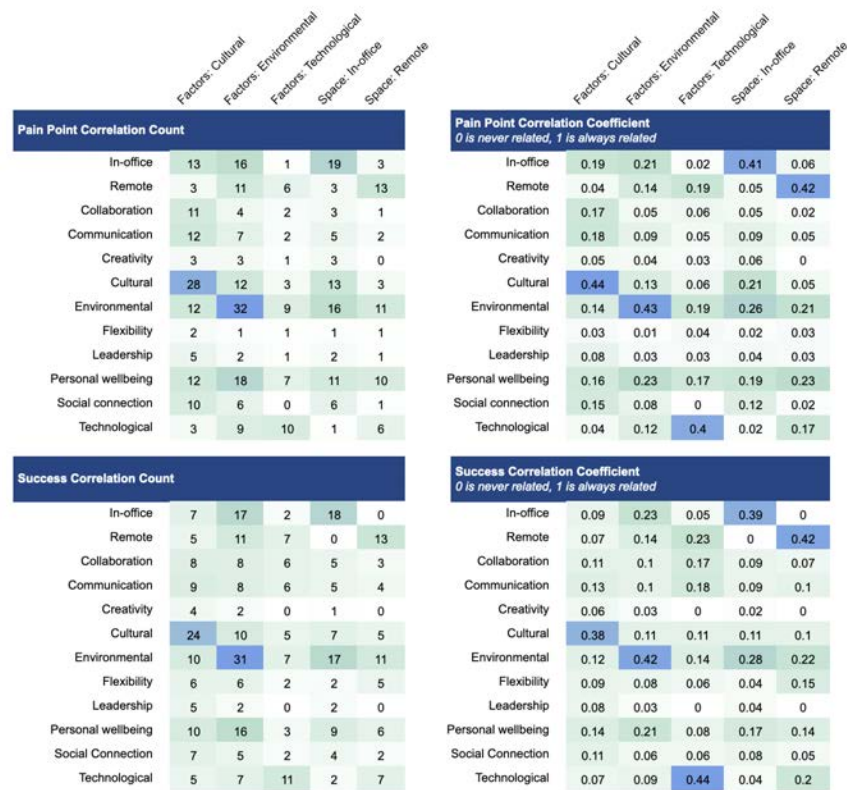ashleykolodziej@brandeis.edu

03/22/2022

Introduction

Employees in Boston University's Marketing & Communications department worked remotely for nearly two years during COVID-19. Shortly beforehand, a renovation to accommodate significant growth in Interactive Design was completed. Leaders requested employees to return to the office as soon as possible to promote collaboration and provide social connection support. Afterwards, they received feedback that this will increase employee turnover, particularly in Interactive Design. This paper identifies factors impacting employee experience based on data gathered from contextual interviews and observations and recommendations to improve.

Methodology & findings

Five contextual interviews were conducted with members of varying ages, disciplines, and roles within Marketing & Communications. Additionally, three individuals were observed during one of the department's first in-person meetings, where work environments and norms naturally occurred in conversation. Quotes were organized by key theme, factor, space, sentiment, and type of employee group, and then coded in ATLAS.ti to identify possible correlations.

Figure 1: Correlations of major themes to factors and spaces in the workplace

Pain Point Correlation Count

	Factors: Cultural	Factors: Environmental	Factors: Technological	Space: In-office	Space: Remote
In-office	13	16	1	19	3
Remote	3	11	6	3	13
Collaboration	11	4	2	3	1
Communication	12	7	2	5	2
Creativity	3	3	1	3	0
Cultural	28	12	3	13	3
Environmental	12	32	9	16	11
Flexibility	2	1	1	1	1
Leadership	5	2	1	2	1
Personal wellbeing	12	18	7	11	10
Social connection	10	6	0	6	1
Technological	3	9	10	1	6

Pain Point Correlation Coefficient
0 is never related, 1 is always related

	Factors: Cultural	Factors: Environmental	Factors: Technological	Space: In-office	Space: Remote
In-office	0.19	0.21	0.02	0.41	0.06
Remote	0.04	0.14	0.19	0.05	0.42
Collaboration	0.17	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.02
Communication	0.18	0.09	0.05	0.09	0.05
Creativity	0.05	0.04	0.03	0.06	0
Cultural	0.44	0.13	0.06	0.21	0.05
Environmental	0.14	0.43	0.19	0.26	0.21
Flexibility	0.03	0.01	0.04	0.02	0.03
Leadership	0.08	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.03
Personal wellbeing	0.16	0.23	0.17	0.19	0.23
Social connection	0.15	0.08	0	0.12	0.02
Technological	0.04	0.12	0.4	0.02	0.17

Success Correlation Count

	Factors: Cultural	Factors: Environmental	Factors: Technological	Space: In-office	Space: Remote
In-office	7	17	2	18	0
Remote	5	11	7	0	13
Collaboration	8	8	6	5	3
Communication	9	8	6	5	4
Creativity	4	2	0	1	0
Cultural	24	10	5	7	5
Environmental	10	31	7	17	11
Flexibility	6	6	2	2	5
Leadership	5	2	0	2	0
Personal wellbeing	10	16	3	9	6
Social Connection	7	5	2	4	2
Technological	5	7	11	2	7

Success Correlation Coefficient
0 is never related, 1 is always related

	Factors: Cultural	Factors: Environmental	Factors: Technological	Space: In-office	Space: Remote
In-office	0.09	0.23	0.05	0.39	0
Remote	0.07	0.14	0.23	0	0.42
Collaboration	0.11	0.1	0.17	0.09	0.07
Communication	0.13	0.1	0.18	0.09	0.1
Creativity	0.06	0.03	0	0.02	0
Cultural	0.38	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.1
Environmental	0.12	0.42	0.14	0.28	0.22
Flexibility	0.09	0.08	0.06	0.04	0.15
Leadership	0.08	0.03	0	0.04	0
Personal wellbeing	0.14	0.21	0.08	0.17	0.14
Social Connection	0.11	0.06	0.06	0.08	0.05
Technological	0.07	0.09	0.44	0.04	0.2

In Figure 1, pain points and successes across a number of prominent themes are compared with factors to see possible correlations. Using the minimum 0.25 benchmark for a weak relationship (Bobbitt, 2020), these interviews did not establish a relationship between leadership's top concerns, social connection and collaboration, and remote or in-office work, either in pain points or successes. This aligns with interviewee behavior—nearly all interviewees, even when redirected to focus on physical environment, returned to social and cultural factors in responses.

Regarding in-office space, the strongest pain point correlation is with culture, though it does not meet the criteria to draw a relationship. It is worth noting that correlations of both pain points and successes in various factors and spaces are relatively even.

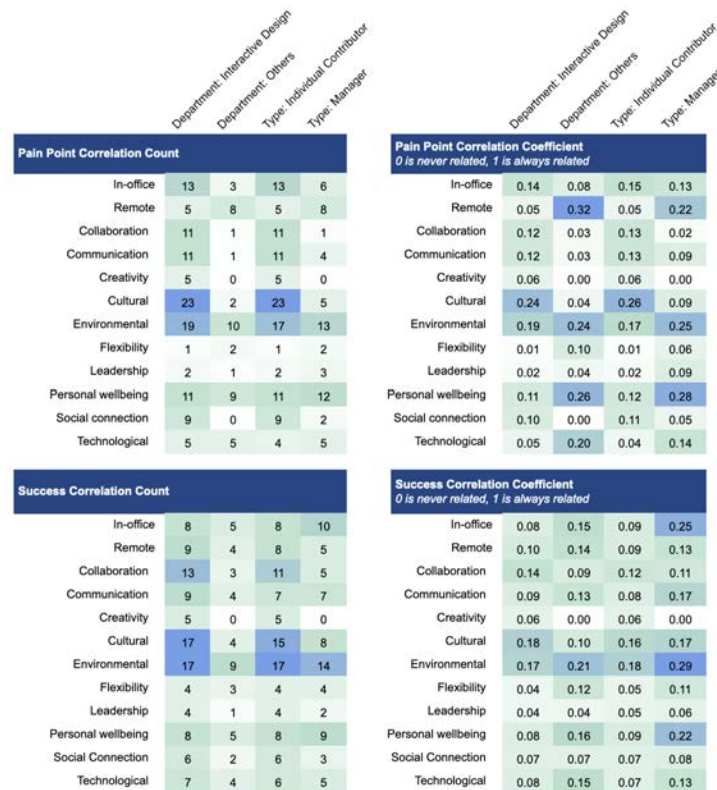Figure 2: Correlations of major themes to groups of employees in the workplace

Pain Point Correlation Count

	Department: Interactive Design	Department: Others	Type: Individual Contributor	Type: Manager
In-office	13	3	13	6
Remote	5	8	5	8
Collaboration	11	1	11	1
Communication	11	1	11	4
Creativity	5	0	5	0
Cultural	23	2	23	5
Environmental	19	10	17	13
Flexibility	1	2	1	2
Leadership	2	1	2	3
Personal wellbeing	11	9	11	12
Social connection	9	0	9	2
Technological	5	5	4	5

Pain Point Correlation Coefficient
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	Department: Interactive Design	Department: Others	Type: Individual Contributor	Type: Manager
In-office	0.14	0.08	0.15	0.13
Remote	0.05	0.32	0.05	0.22
Collaboration	0.12	0.03	0.13	0.02
Communication	0.12	0.03	0.13	0.09
Creativity	0.06	0.00	0.06	0.00
Cultural	0.24	0.04	0.26	0.09
Environmental	0.19	0.24	0.17	0.25
Flexibility	0.01	0.10	0.01	0.06
Leadership	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.09
Personal wellbeing	0.11	0.26	0.12	0.28
Social connection	0.10	0.00	0.11	0.05
Technological	0.05	0.20	0.04	0.14

Success Correlation Count

	Department: Interactive Design	Department: Others	Type: Individual Contributor	Type: Manager
In-office	8	5	8	10
Remote	9	4	8	5
Collaboration	13	3	11	5
Communication	9	4	7	7
Creativity	5	0	5	0
Cultural	17	4	15	8
Environmental	17	9	17	14
Flexibility	4	3	4	4
Leadership	4	1	4	2
Personal wellbeing	8	5	8	9
Social Connection	6	2	6	3
Technological	7	4	6	5

Success Correlation Coefficient
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	Department: Interactive Design	Department: Others	Type: Individual Contributor	Type: Manager
In-office	0.08	0.15	0.09	0.25
Remote	0.10	0.14	0.09	0.13
Collaboration	0.14	0.09	0.12	0.11
Communication	0.09	0.13	0.08	0.17
Creativity	0.06	0.00	0.06	0.00
Cultural	0.18	0.10	0.16	0.17
Environmental	0.17	0.21	0.18	0.29
Flexibility	0.04	0.12	0.05	0.11
Leadership	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.06
Personal wellbeing	0.08	0.16	0.09	0.22
Social Connection	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.08
Technological	0.08	0.15	0.07	0.13

Figure 2, which correlates themes with employee groups, shows a few emerging trends. Significant, but weak, are the correlations between pain points of remote work and departments other than Interactive Design, as well as cultural pain points and individual contributors. Managers are weakly correlated with success sentiments with regards to environmental factors and in-office work.

Surprisingly, themes of autonomy and flexibility—two arguments typically associated with the call for remote work—did not come up as often as calls for improved culture and norms.

Factors which impact findings

Jacob Morgan (2015) suggests ideal employee experience is "a place where people want to show up instead of assuming that people need to show up," and comprises three factors: physical, cultural, and technological environments. A related concept, Self-Determination Theory, describes personal wellbeing as the satisfaction of an individual's autonomy, competence, and relatedness to others (Peters et al., 2018). This section explores how the office environment changed over time, impacting factors related to Self-Determination Theory and the results we see today.

Physical environment

Pre-renovation, the physical environment of the second floor of Marketing & Communications was very open. A dedicated room for non-work activities called Team Room, below, was used for weekly informal gatherings and daily group lunches.

This room used soft, moveable furniture to create an informal meeting space, promoting relatedness. A chalkboard wall and informal whiteboard spaces fostered personalization in a shared manner, engaging both autonomy and relatedness. My desk, below, was highly personalized over time, and part of a spacious floor plan where teams intermingled.

During the remodel, all teams were moved to a temporary space. The middle desk under the television is mine, and shows the effects of temporary space in eroding personalization.
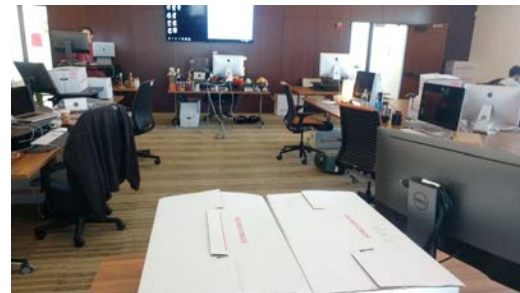
Below, well-lit communal spaces provided opportunity for relatedness using objects which encouraged informal gathering and play, such as couches and a piano.
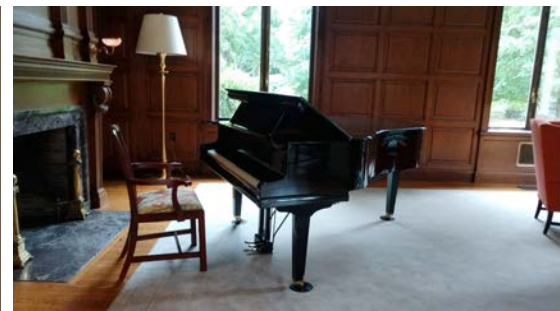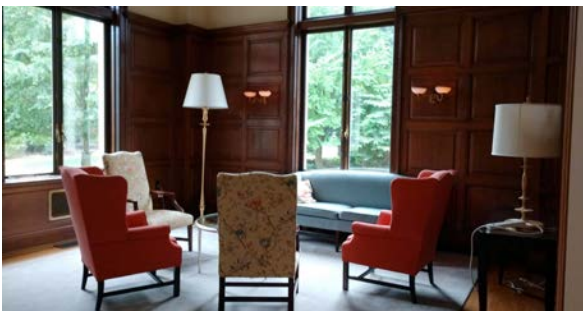
Below is the final space teams returned to, and a [video of the experience walking to the Collaboration Room](), which replaced the Team Room. Note the lack of areas for creating relatedness through shared personalization and informal gatherings.

In mid-March of 2020, shortly after the return to this renovated space, all employees were sent home and once again uprooted to rebuild work spaces. This photo, taken April 2nd, 2020, shows my home office, personalized with student design work I graded but was unable to return.

Cultural environment

Pre-renovation, cultural events were largely driven by the Interactive Design team. Two videos capture the cultural environment pre-renovation: one, a pumpkin carving event for all teams, and the second, an everyday interaction.

During renovation, activities such as pumpkin carving were too messy to hold in the shared temporary space, reducing opportunities to build relatedness and social connection. Humor continued as the large, wall mounted television allowed for customization and playful moments, such as the extra large label a coworker placed above my temporary desk.
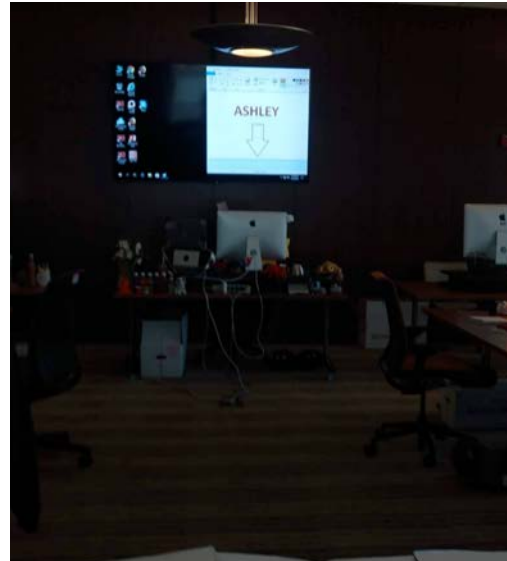
Upon coming back to the renovated office, the former team room no longer existed. Shortly after, before personalization could set in, all employees were sent home to quarantine and Zoom fatigue took over. Non-work socialization activities, including daily group lunches, have not resumed, and this has resulted in the home space becoming more personal and welcoming than the physical and cultural space of the office.

Technological environment

A major difference between Interactive Design and other groups in Marketing & Communications was the ease of adoption of remote technology over the COVID-19 time period. After the shock of moving to yet another physical space, this time starkly impersonal, the known space of home and familiar remote technologies were likely a relief to the Interactive Design group. Other groups faced a greater learning curve and disruption in adapting to the new methods. Continue supporting them in their needs through training and following the recommendations below, which offer solutions which can be implemented both physically and remotely.

Looking forward

While findings from interviews suggest that there is no relationship between environment and social connection, historical analysis suggests otherwise. Rather, this should be interpreted as there is no *current* relationship between any type of environment and social connection or collaboration. This sentiment is summed up perfectly by one interviewee:

> "As I get older, I change less and less, and I've noticed that among my coworkers we have generational differences. I'm out of the digital ecosystem. But even so, it's not a requirement to be in the office to (build culture). I can build a relationship over Zoom. There are no people in the office, and even when there

are, you won't build culture through keyboard clicks. Projects alone aren't enough. Open floor plans, free food, etc. do not build culture. Collaboration must be planned for."

Meeting these goals within the limitations of the new space calls for creative use of hybrid work methods to rebuild social habits.

Improving social connection

A common theme was changing physical locations for the purposes of creativity and personal wellbeing. Wishes included getting out of the house, exploring new and exciting spaces via travel, and assistance in taking breaks when highly focused. In-office space could satisfy this, but opportunities for shared personalization and non-work connection points must be reintroduced to fulfill autonomy and relatedness. In *Org Design for Design Orgs,* Merholz & Skinner (2016) suggest dedicating physical space to projects—"war rooms"—allowing teams to immerse themselves in strategy and artifacts as they work. These shared artifacts can provide opportunities for meaningful, directed conversation and satisfy relatedness. Recasting or removing empty cubicles could allow room for improving the physical environment and reintroducing casual gathering spaces. Consider satisfying shared autonomy by allowing customization beyond the cubicle in the new space, such as murals, graffiti, or chalkboard walls.

Improving collaboration

Traditional methods of brainstorming can lead to production blocking, where conversation moves so quickly that by the time a participant is able to speak up, their idea is no longer relevant (Tsipursky, 2021). This sentiment came up in one participant's interview, who noted feeling "bad" at brainstorming in-office led to long term resentment in a former company. Tsipursky suggests an alternative: asynchronous virtual brainstorming, where ideas are generated individually, and social connection is tapped into via synchronous discussion of ideas. Building on Merholz & Skinner's ideas, if physical space is limited, technologies such as Kumospace could be used to build digital analogies of "war rooms" where working meetings can be held, immersed in the artifacts the team has gathered and produced.

Improving culture

Culture is recreated through the rebuilding of routines and spaces of comfort, relaxation, and social gathering which have been lost over time. Meaningful, directed communication better satisfies the need for connectedness than passive interactions (Merholz & Skinner, 2016), such as those shared at the coffee machine. The first steps are to allow the comfort of remote work as employees readjust to social behavior. Using a novel tool such as Kumospace may help satisfy the desire for ever-changing spaces to spark creativity and jumpstart new social routines. From there, incentivizing in-office interaction could be as simple as an invitation to come out for a longer lunch to fulfill

connectedness, or the opportunity to fulfill competence by watching a conference stream together. Activities should be frequent and predictable enough to incentivize changing routines, and can be further developed over time using the Self-Determination Theory framework to create fulfilling in-office experiences which cannot be replicated at home.

Conclusion

Years of change have created shock not unlike transplanting a plant one too many times. Returning to a shared physical space is not sufficient to recreate connections Marketing & Communications once had. To support collaboration and social connection, begin by encouraging small in-person interactions first, such as team lunches or tea and coffee breaks. Then, create environments which incentivize employees to return on their own by introducing meaningful opportunities for collective socialization, personalization, and growth. The return to office will follow.

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