

HUMAN CAPITAL

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Thinking about the workspace as a key lever for building human capital can help to position HR professionals as strategic business partners, writes *Dr Suzanne Perillo*

The construction of the first purpose-built office building began in Italy, in 1560. Motivated by the need for a larger space, a desire for increased efficiency, easy supervision and greater worker accessibility, the administration and magistrates of the Medici government were moved into the Uffizi in Florence, in 1581. More than four centuries later, how has our thinking about the space in which we work evolved?

Much continues to be written and espoused about the way people experience and perform work. Typically, the contribution of the physical environment to employee performance does not share the spotlight. Relationships between people at work are obviously important – and so is the quality of the relationship between people and their workspace.

The prospect of a new, or redesigned, workspace provides an opportunity for deepening the connection employees have to their work, each other and their company's vision. Deputy MD of Australian workspace design and manufacturing company Schiavello, Peter Schiavello, notes: "More than ever before, it's critical that organisations attract, inspire and retain capable and progressive people. A custom-built workspace is a vital but often underutilised resource for attracting talented employees and creating conditions that enable them to innovate."

The workspace-performance link

Thinking about employee performance is complex. Jobs can be enlarged and they can be enriched. Monetary and non-monetary motivators can be used to reward and recognise performance. People must be independent and competent at teaming. Formalised workplace training can be used to correct skill deficits. Informal learning sees knowledge grow. Leadership is not the same as management. It is therefore not surprising that designing and configuring high performing workspace is also complex work.

Financial and technological reasons are important reasons for thinking strategically about workspace – but not exclusively so. Poor workspace design has been linked to decreased motivation, lower levels of productivity, feelings of isolation, obstructions to effective teamwork, higher levels of employee stress and turnover, wasted work time, reduced decision making quality, employee turnover and sick building syndrome. When it comes to thinking about what makes workspace effective, issues related to functionality, safety and physical comfort make it to the discussion table. Workstation size, furniture, partitioning, storage, noise, light and ventilation are important considerations. Increasingly, attention is being paid to factors such as informal communication and the ability to switch between individual work and teamwork.

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