

Workplace Diversity

Supporting Workstyles

by: Pam Brenner



When most people see the words “workplace diversity” they visualize people with a mixture of ages, genders, ethnic backgrounds and body size. And, in most workplaces when desiring a “big picture perspective” it is considered wise to seek out a diverse population for their opinions, perspectives and expertise. In fact, a recent Fortune Magazine article examining minorities in the workforce noted that among large firms the commitment to diversity has never been stronger.



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Supporting Workstyles, continued

Interestingly, the dictionary defines diversity as “the condition of being different.” With that in mind, a more inclusive concept of workplace diversity can include unique workstyles, experiences and behaviors. The following two scenarios explore some of these differences.

Workstyle Scenario A



After several minutes of socializing, Lois explained she needed help organizing content for the corporate web site. After a brief overview everyone jumped in with ideas, suggestions and opinions. Like an old married couple they finished each other's sentences, referred to previous personal jokes and teased each other incessantly. Amidst all of this banter, Lois kept the discussion on track; got the help she needed and finished the meeting on time.

Workstyle Scenario B



In the conference room two doors down, Isaac finalized the meeting agenda and wrote it on the white board in the front of the room. Prior to the meeting he sent out a preparatory package of reading materials so everyone could “hit the ground running” when they got together. He started the meeting on time, read over the agenda, reviewed goals and

objectives and asked everyone for their participation. Isaac watched the clock, kept everyone on the subject, got what he needed, and ended the meeting on time.

As these two scenarios demonstrate, people have unique work styles. Because neither one is necessarily more correct than the other, there is often no “exact right way” to work by ourselves or with others. Much of how we work appears to depend on the task at hand, individual preference and corporate culture.

Is Your Workspace Working?

Please answer **YES** or **NO** to the following questions.
Have you ever ...

1. Wished you could find a quiet place at work so you could concentrate and think?
2. Came in early or stayed late so you would not have any interruptions?
3. Overheard a conversation at work that was none of your business?
4. Thought someone overheard your private conversation?
5. Crawled under a desk, table or other surface in order to plug in your technology?
6. Stacked things on the floor, on a nearby chair, on an overhead binder because there was no room on your desk?
7. Stored a sweater, fan or heater at work because you knew you'd eventually be too hot or too cold?
8. Brought in an extra light from home so you could see or blocked out an existing light because it was too bright?
9. Had a stiff neck, tired eyes, sore back, painful wrist, or needed your shoulders rubbed while at work?
10. Had trouble turning off your work related brain while driving home from work, playing with your child or pet, making dinner or trying to fall asleep?

See the last page for results.

Supporting Workstyles, continued

Survey Says: More Choice

Steelcase Workplace Surveys support a broad perspective of diversity in the workplace. Accordingly, some people are “filers” and organize documents in appropriate folders, drawers or cabinets. Everything is clearly labeled and may even be color-coded. Other people are “pilers” and stack items on any available flat surface including desks, counters and even the floor. Respondents indicate working in a variety of postures (sitting, standing, leaning, and reclining), having flexible work hours (early, late, lunch hours, weekends etc.) and working in a variety of locations (home, traveling, client and vendor offices).

According to Harlan Cleveland, director of the World Future Society and author of numerous books on leadership, this trend towards freedom and choice will continue. As quoted in a recent article, “The opportunity for individuals to make choices is increasingly driving every aspect of work and life. A move towards more-decentralized networks is good news for individual creativity and productivity, but to maximize employee morale, executive leaders will have to enjoy complexity and constant change.”



Workplace and Workstyle: In Practice

Unlike the anticipated vacation, complexity and constant change are not usually considered “enjoyable.” Especially as these two concepts often bump into organizational infrastructures and physical workplaces not originally created to support workstyle diversity. Participants at a Steelcase seminar were asked what prevented them from tailoring their work environment to be more supportive of their work process. Interestingly, the majority (67%) indicated things were either too hard to move or that the organization had rules and regulations prohibiting them from configuring their workspace. So how can the workplace be leveraged to elevate and support the flexible nature of individual and group work?

One way to address this question is to think about workstyles in three very general categories. The first is called pre-defined and includes tasks that are considered predictable in nature. This may include processing tasks such as mail handling and telemarketing. For many people these tasks can be performed in the same posture for long

periods of time. Therefore, it is important that flexibility and ergonomics be integrated into the workplace design. This should include creating opportunities for people to get up, stretch and move around. The second category refers to tasks that have more variety and include moderate, expected interaction and interruption. These tasks, by their very nature, allow for more change, flexibility and freedom. Consider appropriate levels of privacy for these tasks, as people will need to concentrate and get specific work done—while still being accessible to others. Positions in this area may include systems analysts and account or project managers. Lastly, there is unpredictable work that seems to have no obvious pattern of repetition. Often these tasks rely on experience, expertise, informal networks and intuition. The best way to support unpredictable work in the workplace is by encouraging the use of a variety of workspaces (private and collaborative, formal and informal) and a corporate culture that encourages and demonstrates trust.

Supporting Workstyles, continued

In Conclusion

Innovative and future oriented organizations agree that diversity in the workplace includes being open to behavioral variety. This means celebration (not just acceptance) of unique work styles. Powerful, invisible and often neglected—workstyle diversity—can enhance organizational cultures willing to embrace the broadest definition of the word. These workplaces and their talent will be most effective when tasks are understood, individual work style preferences are met and when organizational cultures are supported. As employers create enjoyable and productive workplaces they will discover ways to stimulate their best people, while attracting a gifted set of individuals drawn to organizations that celebrate diversity of all types.

Note: For more information on Steelcase Workplace Surveys go to Steelcase.com> type workplace survey into the search field and hit the go button.



The Super Scientific Evaluation:

If you answered YES to ALL or MOST ...

It appears you and your workspace are both in need of some serious life support. In fact, you should be commended for showing up to work every day! But don't give up and don't stay home—your co-workers need you—and you need them. In fact, believe it or not, those we work with often enhance some of our best ideas. As soon as you put down this article, contact someone in your facilities, maintenance or human resource department about getting your workspace evaluated. You need help.

If you answered YES to SOME ...

With a few tweaks (here and there) your workspace could be better enhanced to support your own unique workstyle. Perhaps you need a quiet place to have a conversation or just think (all by yourself). If that's the case, odds are good you're not the only one who needs to get away. It may be time to convert that old storage room or empty executive office into a private enclave. Too hot, cold, can't see or just plain sore? Call building maintenance and ask about the lighting and temperature and/or seek out someone to provide an ergonomic evaluation. Who knows, it might be time for a new chair.

If you answered YES to NONE ...

WOW. Sounds like either you work at the most amazing and thoughtful place on this planet OR you are perhaps, maybe just maybe not exactly telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth. In either case, don't give up your day job.