

# Space: How Your Work Environment Matters

By Rebecca Thair, July 2014



Have you ever watched a film or seen pictures in a magazine of all these modern, multi-million pound offices for super-creative agencies, where employees seem relaxed, stress (and possibly work-) free as they shun all stereotypical office attire, and then returned to your own workplace

and thought, yeah that'd be nice but how much are they actually getting done? How seriously is everyone taking their job? How committed are they? Nice for those who can afford it...

But realistically, why shouldn't a workplace be a fun environment? Why stick to the expected and traditional design for a space; surely conforming to type will always see the same results. As Einstein said, "*the definition of insanity is to carry on doing the same thing and expect a different result*". If survival of the fittest and evolution is happening with people, why shouldn't the same principles of development and change be applied to the environments in which we work?

Nowadays buzzwords like 'innovation', 'creativity' and 'engagement' are key factors that employers' desire in their businesses and in achieving these ideals, companies such as Google, Aardman, DreamWorks and Innocent are leading the pack. Companies understand that in order to really make the most of your employees and their potential, working them to the bone, packed in like sardines in a plain office space is just wasting talent. The office environment is one of the powerful levers for engagement because it affects every occupant of the space, whether consciously or not, and would be a waste not to utilise. To be innovative, the place you work in must inspire. To be engaged, the space you spend 8 hours a day must be inviting. To encourage employees to give their all to the business, give something back to them; make employees enjoy going to work every day, and everyone benefits.

We must also consider that a key issue in today's businesses is retention; how do we keep employees on a more long-term basis? Losing talent costs businesses in terms of both time and money, recruiting new people, settling them in and getting them up to speed on a new job. Companies which make going to work a pleasure in the positive space they create, have far higher retention rates and appeal to the new talent in the marketplace.

From my own research, and in particular, the aid of "I Wish I worked There" by Kursty Groves\*, I have looked into the most fascinating and innovative workplaces to see just how they maximise their employees potential, to look in turn what can be done to improve offices in general. The ideas don't just have to apply to companies directly in a creative field; innovation applies to all, and even for those with less of a financial stretch to accommodate drastic changes and architecturally prolific new buildings, there are many small, even costless, changes which anyone can make.

\*"I Wish I Worked There" by Groves, Kursty w. Knight, Will (Italy; The Oak Studios Ltd., 2010)

## Google:



If we first consider Google's *Googleplex*, the suit-free environment in Los Angeles, renowned as a company for being flexible and innovative, their space really epitomises this whilst being both fun and efficient.

The building itself maximises its use of natural light, avoiding the need for horrible,

flickering florescent tubes, by having the workplaces around the perimeter of the glass walled building, using the unnaturally lit centre space for meetings and communal areas. This first step saves on energy costs, and makes the space more open and less claustrophobic. In addition, whiteboards are located everywhere in the building - corridors included - so that ideas can be recorded whenever inspiration strikes. The building design also ensures that no Googler is ever more than 150ft away from sustenance, by placing micro-kitchens everywhere, and providing workers with free, healthy food.

Google also understands that being fun can be efficient too, and so have slides to transport you down floors whilst saving time in running down stairs to a meeting. They also encourage collaboration with regular communal areas where people can play games, eat, drink and essentially meet others in an informal environment to see what ideas can be sparked. A key part of innovation is letting it occur naturally - a brilliant idea is more likely to be sparked when new connections occur naturally and the environment evokes inspiration.

Furthermore, google is flexible with their time, knowing that when people have a healthy work-life balance, their energies are more effective at work, as well as their focus. Googlers are allowed to spend 20% of their work time on personal interests, and have a range of activities available on the campus from hairdressers and masseurs to swimming pools and bicycles. Encouraging people to partake in other activities on site means they stay longer to meet new people and generate ideas spontaneously, as well as being in a relaxed, stress-free environment. Also by showing that Google cares about its employees' welfare and interests by allowing them time out for this, Googlers are likely to be more responsive and invested in work the rest of their time, appreciating being treated with care and respect.

## Innocent:

Moving on to consider a UK based company, Innocent have a notoriously fun personality and bring about that uniqueness in their workplace. They have an open plan office which really encourages that mixing of people, and creates a highly energised environment with the multiple conversations and work sectors in one open

area, as well as having desk shuffles every 6 months to keep the environment fresh, stimulating and to really add value to and encourage relationship building. The décor itself is eclectic and British with picnic tables and grass floors promoting the fun and friendly atmosphere, but as with Google, having unusual décor doesn't mean spending the earth; you can find original and interesting furniture and items on ebay or charity shops for a steal.



## Aardman and DreamWorks:

Aardman puts all the workers in one building, regardless of department, and has 'helter-skelter' corridors and floors meaning that people from all areas and specialties might bump into each other and spark a brainwave. DreamWorks also has this strong emphasis on 'community' through regular entire crew gatherings where everyone, regardless of level or progress, shares what they are currently working on.

These successful companies all understand the value in creating a more experimental space, particularly when it comes to collaboration, employee happiness and a stimulating space. By making the workplace more 'fun', there is less fear of sharing an idea, of blurting that thought, of speaking to someone completely new. But how can smaller companies achieve this without spending a fortune on new bespoke offices?



#### •Desk Reshuffle:

Innocent's idea is clever, simple and FREE. People often get too comfortable in a routine, sitting in the same place and speaking to the same people and it closes off their mind to new possibilities. Take a seat somewhere new. Move the furniture around every few months. Keep things fresh and the vibe will stay alive as new ideas flourish.

#### •Flexibility:

If you want to make the most of your employees, be flexible to their needs and they'll respond positively back. If someone's reading long reports, let them sit outside to do so. If someone has plans for the weekend, let them leave early - they'll be motivated to work harder the hours when they are there, and be more willing to be flexible back when you ask them for a favour or overtime.



#### •The Little Things:

Take an interest in employees in a tangible way - make an effort to ask questions if you see them reading a book, or listening to an album. If you know what motivates them, small gestures can be effective for them to be incredibly responsive to. For example, put on someone's favourite radio station for a bit, or buy their favourite type of tea for the cupboard.

#### •Revolutionise the Space:

Allow the space to be stimulating - paint the walls with blackboard paint so people can chalk up ideas any time, or doodle when they need a break. This example encourages people to break the rules (as we were all raised not to draw on the walls) and facilitates outside-the-box and innovative thinking.

#### •Playful Environment:

For those with the space or a little money to invest, how about a pool table for lunch breaks - people can release some stress, be entertained by others and generally get to interact more. Allowing dogs in the office is also becoming more popular (depending on people's allergies) as people find pets good at reducing stress, fun to play with, a conversation starter, and a reason to go out for fresh air and exercise on breaks.

Of course there is far more that you could do but sometimes those first few small steps can make the biggest difference. Remember a happy worker will be a more efficient and effective worker, in which case the workplace must reflect these desired outcomes. Whilst slides between floors, or trampolines built into the ground and swimming pools may be out of reach of the average company's budget, there are plenty of low-cost or even free options to make your environment more stimulating and promote creativity, collaboration and innovation. So take a look around at your office and employees: what can you do to put a smile on their face and make them *want* to come to work tomorrow?