

Working Around the Water Cooler

BY JANET POGUE

Research findings suggest socialization as critical to high performance as “heads-down” work.

Reposted with permission from *Employee Benefit News*, February 2009.

Today, the world of work has changed. Gone are the days when work was a paper-intensive process, compartmentalized among specialists with well-defined, tangible tasks that could be executed individually. In the current knowledge economy, both individuals and teams create organizational value and drive business performance. Business success flows from intangibles such as ideas, information, and expertise. Innovation, financial performance, and employee engagement are today’s key measures of business performance. **Gensler’s 2008 Workplace Survey**, conducted in both the U.S. and U.K., uncovered new insights about work itself—how people work today, the amount of time they spend in specific work modes, and how critical each mode is to job performance.

Gensler’s research identified four primary work modes that employees engage in on the job: focus, collaborate, learn and socialize. This represents a fundamental restructuring of office work, requiring as much emphasis on collaboration, learning and socializing as on focused, heads-down work. Findings show that employees believe they could increase the quality and quantity of their work by an average of 25% if they had improved workplace areas to better support all four work modes.

The survey results also show that not only do top-performing companies—ones that rank as the most profitable, admired, and leading in their industries—have higher-performing work environments, but they also better support all four work modes. In fact, employees at top-performing companies not only spend more time collaborating, learning, and socializing, they consider that time more critical to job success than do their peers at average companies, who remain more focus-work-centered.



Illustrating the work modes in action, Gensler recently completed a workplace redesign of the New York Times headquarters in New York City.

Understanding the Four Work Modes

The four work modes, in greater detail, are:

Focus. For decades, the office environment favored focus work. Today, the ability to concentrate and devote uninterrupted effort to a particular task or project defines the focus work mode. This activity is characterized by thinking, reflecting, analyzing, problem-solving, creating, imagining, reviewing, assessing and producing work. Gensler research shows that workers spend on average 48% of their time in focused work. Studies at MIT and Harvard also show that workers can make leaps in productivity if they are granted protected distraction-free time to get their individual work done. Average companies spend 21% more of their time in focus work than top-performing companies even though they rank it less critical to their job performance.

Collaborate. As work becomes more complex, it requires teams to get projects done. To work with another person or a group to achieve a specific business goal defines the collaborative work mode. This activity is characterized by working with others to plan, strategize, share knowledge and information, problem-solve, develop, innovate, create, and produce as a team. Gensler research shows that workers spend, on average, 32% of their time collaborating. Companies increasingly rely on collaboration and team-based organizational structures to contend with the growing complexity and faster pace of the business environment. Collaboration can also result in increased productivity, innovation, and the ability to respond more creatively to complex organizational challenges. Top companies not only collaborate more than average companies, but consider collaboration more than twice as critical to job success.

Learn. In a knowledge economy, a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce is critical to business growth and success. Learning involves problem-solving, memorization, concept exploration and development, discovery, and reflection, as well as the ability to integrate and apply the knowledge. Gensler finds that workers spend, on average, 6% of their time in learning activities. Compared to average companies, top-performing companies rate learning as 80% more critical to job success and spend 40% more time in this work mode.

Socialize. Socializing plays a critical role in fostering social networks, the infrastructure that moves knowledge through an organization to create innovation. This work mode is characterized by interactions in the workplace that create

common bonds and values, collective identity, collegiality, and productive relationships. In the 21st century workplace, socializing creates and builds social capital, and encourages the trust of colleagues. Gensler research shows that workers spend, on average, 6% of their time in social activities.

Socializing can no longer be considered a time-waster, as top-performing companies socialize 16% more than average companies. Further, they consider it almost three times more critical than average companies, the largest gap among all the work mode comparisons. In post-survey roundtables, clients cite retention, communication, and innovation as critical outcomes of this work mode. The social aspects of work are clearly becoming more critical to organizational performance.



Dress (Your Office) For Success

Gensler's 2008 Workplace Survey shows that work has changed, but the physical workplace has not kept pace. Gensler's research reveals that only 67% of average office space is effective. That means that one-third of U.S. office space is ill-suited for the activities of today's workplace. In this downturn, companies can't afford to carry ineffective, unproductive space on their books. This is an ideal time to shed unused space, re-design unproductive space, or re-purpose space to support work modes. Generally, companies often look simply at reducing the amount of space they occupy to reduce costs. However, if organizations provide work settings that support today's work modes, they can reduce real estate and improve their company's performance at the same time. They can do more with less.

Gensler's 2008 Workplace Survey uncovered new insights about how people work today, the amount of time they spend in specific work modes, and how critical each mode is to job performance.

It is not the quantity of space, but the quality of space that's important. Ninety percent of the workers surveyed agreed that workplace design affects productivity. In fact, employees believe that they could increase the quality and quantity of their work by an average of 25% by improving workplace areas to better support all four modes of work. The physical office environment is a tool, just as technology is a tool, for people to be productive. Companies providing workspaces that are not only functional but effective see higher levels of employee engagement, brand equity, and profit—up to 14 percentage points greater than those with less-effective work environments.

Gensler mapped two measures of employee engagement—workplace and job satisfaction—to understand how the workplace contributes to organizational success. 82% of top-performing companies responded that they were satisfied/highly satisfied with their workplace compared to only 43% of average companies in the same range.

The findings clearly show that top-performing companies provide more effective workspaces that enable employees to spend higher-quality time in the work modes that matter most to their job performance.

The new definition of work presents a dramatic opportunity for companies to leverage workspace improvements and unleash the full potential of their employees for organizational performance.

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