Forging a Uniquely Asian Workplace

Can the Asian workplace embrace experimentation and balance to create a distinct identity?

As Asian companies focus on competitiveness in a global market, they must explore a new, more balanced workplace identity to help them differentiate.

WHAT WE DID
We surveyed a panel-based sample of over 2,000 Asia office workers in 11 industries focused in six major metropolitan areas—Bangalore, Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, and Tokyo—to understand the Asian workplace from the perspective of the worker.

The data collected represents respondents across nine key industries, and a wide distribution of ages and organizational roles. Survey questions explored not only the current state of the workplace—how, and where, employees are working, and how effective those spaces are—but also organizational dynamics, including relationships with teams and managers, and the impact of hierarchy on employee performance and experience. Similar to surveys conducted in the U.S. and U.K., we gathered data using Gensler’s proprietary Workplace Performance Index® (WPI™) survey tool.

THE CONTEXT
Today, Asian countries and companies are laser-focused on global competitiveness, and looking for new ways to aspire to excellence, self-sufficiency, and new product and service development to rival the West. Yet today’s Asian workplaces still tend to adopt a common, Western narrative, resulting in mostly open plan workplaces combining workstations, offices, and conference rooms. This hand-me-down model of workplace design, a paradigm exported from the U.S. as countries quickly modernized and sought Western-style workplaces in an increasingly global business climate, may now be holding Asian companies and employees back. As organizations continue to focus on talent attraction and business innovation, the Asian workplace is increasingly in need of a new, differentiated, and home-grown approach to workplace design.

THE RESULTS
To help companies be more innovative, have happier employees, and create coherent teams, the Asian workplace needs to find a better balance of spaces for focused and collaborative work in line with work style and job requirements. On this, the Asian workplace is similar to those across the world—Gensler’s 10 years of workplace survey investigations in the U.S. and U.K. have proven the importance of a workplace environment that effectively supports the myriad activities of today’s knowledge workers, and in particular, the need to balance individual and group efforts.

This desire for balance fits with cultural themes that unify Asia—from slokas in Sanskrit, to Buddha’s middle path, to the Chinese philosophy of ying and yang, the need for balance is deeply connected to culture and spirituality. For the respondents to our Asia Workplace Survey, the impact of achieving this balance in the workplace is also clear—respondents in balanced workplaces are more satisfied with their jobs, see their companies as more creative and innovative, have better relationships with their managers, and enjoy greater work-life balance.

Equally clear, however, is a desire among our respondents to seek new ways of working that push beyond the boundaries of the traditional, Western workplace design and experience. Unlike the U.S. and U.K., in which a collaborative work environment proved to be a key statistical driver of organizational innovation alongside managerial relationships and meaning in one’s work, in Asia the key driver after meaning and relationships is feeling empowered to experiment with new ways of working. Flexibility in day-to-day job scope, and a lack of hierarchy in how workspaces are assigned, also prove important factors to Asian office workers today.
Manager relationships, feedback, and freedom to work the way one works best are all more highly rated for employees in high-performance/balanced environments.

**WHAT THIS MEANS**

**Balance builds relationships.** Employees in balanced workplaces see their managers in a more positive light, are able to communicate more openly and honestly, better receive feedback, and reported higher work-life balance and job satisfaction. The quality of relationships is also a key factor in creating a culture of creativity and innovation at work.

**Mobility enhances performance.** Employees in balanced workplaces spend an average of 20 percent less time in their primary workplace or office location, consistent across countries and industries. By having the capability and infrastructure to work outside of the office, they may also be able to shorten travel time in Asia’s larger urban centers, increasing their productive working time. Organizations should encourage employees to work from alternative settings, experimenting with not just the how but also the where of their work, while at the same time being sensitive to local culture and expectations.

**Prioritize autonomy and choice.** Employees who can choose their own work settings are 1.5 times more likely to work in a balanced environment, and also report higher scores across performance indicators. Choice in when and where to work, paired with a variety of spaces in which to work, is also a key aspect of empowered mobility and experimentation.

**Experimentation helps innovation.** The central theme of flexibility and the ability to experiment with new ways of working permeated the results of our Asia Workplace Survey. Empowering experimentation, and encouraging employees to take risks in search of new and better ways to work, is of paramount importance.

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"East Asia has the lowest proportion of engaged employees in the world, at 6 percent, which is less than half of the global mean of 13 percent. The regional finding is driven predominantly by results from China, where 6 percent of employees are engaged in their jobs—one of the lowest figures worldwide."

— State of the Global Workplace, Gallup
As architects, designers, planners, and consultants, we partner with our clients on some 3,000 projects every year. These projects can be as small as a wine label or as large as a new urban district. With more than 5,000 professionals networked across 46 locations, we serve our clients as trusted advisors, combining localized expertise with global perspective wherever new opportunities arise. Our work reflects an enduring commitment to sustainability and the belief that design is one of the most powerful strategic tools for securing lasting competitive advantage.

Gensler’s Research Program supports research investigations important to our firm, our clients, and to the ongoing learning and development of Gensler professionals. Research projects are practitioner-led with involvement across the globe. Our teams bring thought leadership to the table as we seek to solve our clients’ and the world’s most pressing challenges by creating high-performance solutions that embrace the business and world context in which we work, enhance the human experience, and deliver game-changing innovation.

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