



Set the Bar High

Workplaces that fulfill the need for achievement



Achievement is a fundamental human need that affects performance, productivity, innovation, and retention at work.

The drive for achievement can contribute to economic growth.

Challenge is a prerequisite for a feeling of achievement; the right tools and support can ignite human potential and equip people to impact business results.

Workplace design can impact achievement. When people have a choice of settings outfitted with furnishings and tools to support their work, both individuals and the organization can succeed.

On receiving the United States government's Congressional Medal for Distinguished Civilian Achievement for discovering the vaccine for polio, Jonas Salk said, "The reward for work well done is the opportunity to do more."

That's achievement in a nutshell—overcoming difficulty through hard work for the pleasure of mastery and growth. It's the reason why people learn new languages or train to climb Mt. Everest, and it's why people crave challenging projects at work.

When organizations acknowledge the need for achievement and provide the leadership practices, places, and tools people need to set goals and reach them, people tend to be more productive and innovative, and stay with their jobs longer—all of which helps an organization attain its goals.¹

The pursuit of achievement can lead to economic growth.

The need to achieve is one of six fundamental human needs, which also include security, autonomy, belonging, status, and purpose.¹ While it's important for organizations to meet all six fundamental human needs (and it's impossible to fulfill one without addressing the others), achievement may be of particular interest to organizations because of its potential to drive work forward, and, ultimately, spur financial growth.

Research conducted by psychological theorist David McClelland and documented in his seminal work *The Achieving Society* shows that the desire for achievement contributed to economic growth in many societies, including ancient Greece, England, and the United States. Given this relationship, it's fair to assume that when people aim to achieve at work—and the workplace supports their endeavors—organizations may experience financial gains.

From our exploration of achievement, we know that it is connected with stimulation at work and opportunities to grow,

learn, and develop. In addition, academics and researchers typically view it as a fundamental personality trait that can be cultivated and developed—development that is related to a person's ability to delay gratification and be persistent. Finally, the motivation to achieve is strongest when goals are challenging yet attainable.²

When it comes to achievement, degree and type of difficulty count.

Not all work challenges are created equal. They can be negative, taking the form of dysfunctional project teams and impossible deadlines, or positive, as in an assignment that requires the cultivation of a new skill. It's the job of leadership to keep negative challenges to a minimum and to offer positive tasks that help workers fulfill their need to achieve. The right level of challenge is one that is possible, given the person's skills, but pushes them to reach beyond their comfort zone. The more difficult the positive challenge is, the bigger that sense of achievement a person experiences when they are able to meet it.



Organizations can equip groups for achievement by providing a purposeful variety of settings with tools to help people brainstorm, refine ideas, and work together to solve problems, and overcome challenging tasks.

Feeling supported is critical. When a person first encounters a challenging project, they may see it as an impossible task rather than an opportunity for growth. The level of support organizations provide can play a major role in changing this perspective. *The Harvard Business Review* found that the top motivator of performance is a sense of progress: “On days when workers have the sense they’re making headway in their jobs, or when they receive support that helps them overcome obstacles, their emotions are most positive and their drive to succeed is at its peak.”³

People need more than money to feel motivated at work.

While across cultures people may define achievement differently, at work, people—no matter where they live—aren’t motivated by money alone.¹ All people seek fair pay, but financial incentives beyond that are less effective than you might think. Research sponsored by the Federal Reserve Bank of the United States and carried out by economists found that intrinsic motivators (doing something for the love or challenge of it) lead to better business results for knowledge work than things like bonuses.⁴

Other research shows that for tasks involving even rudimentary cognitive skills, bigger rewards actually lead to poorer performance.⁴ One researcher set up a small problem that required thinking creatively. He told one group it would receive money if it was in the top 25 percent of fastest times. He didn’t offer any reward to the second group. It took the first group an average of three and a half minutes longer than the second group to solve the problem.

Organizations that want to fulfill the need for achievement need to recognize that all six fundamental human needs are linked; each can affect the others in ways good and bad. Consider the likelihood of experiencing achievement without some autonomy, or the freedom to choose what works best for you. Organizations can fulfill this need by offering flexible work schedules and locations. Not only does this indicate that management trusts employees to know when and how they work best, but it empowers them to do their jobs more effectively. In one study of global companies, 83 percent said their flexibility policies increased productivity and 61 percent said they led to an increase in profits.⁵



People thrive when they are given the freedom to make choices about where and when they work. This sense of autonomy is closely related to the need for achievement. When organizations fulfill both of these needs, people and businesses see positive results.

Achievement for individuals and groups is closely linked. The most effective workplaces provide a balance of settings where people can shift between focused tasks and collaborative activities.



Achievement is also closely linked to status, or recognition for a job well done. Organizations that reward on results rather than on the amount of time spent on a project free people to spend less time worrying about office politics and more time focusing on meaningful work that brings a sense of accomplishment. People also feel rewarded and empowered to achieve when they are offered educational opportunities. These experiences allow employees to deepen their existing skills or master skills outside their area of expertise.

Achievers need to feel connected to their leaders.

It's difficult for organizational practices to foster achievement if there is a gulf between the leaders who create challenging work and the people assigned to do it. Experts in human need theory see a connection between large gaps and the decline of entire societies.² That's likely true in the workplace, too. Office layouts that inhibit people from connecting with leaders can wreak havoc on everything from efficiency to creativity to employee well-being—all things critical to successfully completing challenging tasks.

Offices with clear lines of sight between managers and employees can help address this concern, because people who

work in spaces where it's easy to see and interact with leaders feel more aligned with the company's mission.⁶ Leaders also feel more connected to the people who work for them, as well as day-to-day business operations. This type of environment gives everyone the confidence that their work is helping the organization meet its business goals.

Workplace design can impact achievement.

While the need to achieve can be realized in any kind of work environment—Steve Jobs created the first Apple computer in his garage and Thomas Wolfe wrote using the top of his refrigerator as a work surface—we believe that certain types of settings can accelerate the fulfillment of achievement.

Herman Miller provides a research-based framework for creating workplaces that fulfill people's needs, support their daily work activities, and help organizations reach their goals. As part of the framework, which we call Living Office, we've identified 10 settings optimized for individual and group work activities. The following settings recognize that achievement for both is closely linked, and provide the tools and support people need to be effective contributors to their groups.

Workshop Settings help people create new ideas together.

Group achievement happens when team members can set goals together, post them in a space, work together to make progress toward reaching these goals, and celebrate success. This can easily happen in a Workshop—a setting that has a mix of digital and analog tools to help groups share information, develop and document ideas, and gain consensus on next steps. Workshops typically offer ample circulation space, so people can move about and rearrange furnishings and tools to suit the task at hand. Teams can literally surround themselves with project materials and enjoy long stretches of concentration. When a team wants to solicit input from its remote members, for example, they can position materials and artifacts in view of the camera, giving everyone a clear sight line to the materials. Bar-height furniture makes eye contact natural between standing and seated participants. Tables are shaped to allow people to see each other, technology, and content clearly, improving team engagement.

In Haven Settings, people can take a break and get inspired.

Peaceful, private Haven Settings nurture individual achievement (and, by extension, group achievement) because they provide separation from the group and a break from stimulation. Time spent working by oneself can aid the creative process, so individuals who have access to Havens are often more effective contributors to the group.

With doors and partitions that keep auditory distractions out, absorptive materials that prevent sound from reverberating inside, and window treatments that afford control of visual distractions, Havens provide temporary shelter for people who need to complete thought-intensive work. Within the setting, people can easily adjust tools and furnishings to suit their needs. Seating offers support for active postures—like sitting up straight while typing—and comfort while reclining during casual conversations. Personal tools and reference materials are within arm's reach so people can access them without disrupting their workflow. Color, materiality, and finishes enhance a sense of respite and help people focus before going off to a group activity.

Ready to prime your workplace for achievement?

No matter how you go about boosting achievement in the workplace, one thing is clear. When an organization's management methods and workplace are designed to help people overcome difficult challenges, people commit to the work, contribute their best through discretionary effort, and help the organization reach its business goals.

To learn more about how Herman Miller's Living Office can create an environment that fulfills the need for achievement and other fundamental human needs, please visit hermanmiller.com/living-office or connect with a Living Office specialist.

1. Herman Miller, "Fundamental Human Needs," company confidential, March 2015.
2. David C. McClelland, *The Achieving Society*, D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1961.
3. "The HBR List: Breakthrough Ideas for 2010," *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2010, <https://hbr.org/2010/01/the-hbr-list-breakthrough-ideas-for-2010/ar/1>
4. Dan Pink, author of *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*, explains in his "The Puzzle of Motivation" TED talk.
5. Shawn Murphy, "How Companies Increase Profits Through Workplace Flexibility," Inc., February 23, 2016, <http://www.inc.com/replacemeplease1456247694.html>.
6. Herman Miller, "Living Office Culture," May 2014, company confidential.