



Purpose at Work

Create workplaces that improve communication and foster connection.



Key Insights

- **Purpose—the sense that one’s actions have meaningful effects and contribute to others’ well-being—is a fundamental human need.**
- **Research shows that fostering a sense of purpose at work pays large dividends to individuals as well as the organizations that employ them.**
- **Forward-thinking organizations and their design partners are creating workplaces that support this need by encouraging communication, connection, and empowered action.**

Purpose is one of six fundamental human needs that motivate us at work. Purpose drives us—as individuals and as organizations of individuals—toward improvement and fulfillment, and, ultimately, toward a more prosperous future. Human beings want and need meaningful work, and organizations need purpose-filled employees to solve problems, innovate, and grow.

For people, a sense of purpose at work is critical to personal well-being. Not only do people who report having a strong sense of purpose also report higher levels of happiness and fulfillment, but also a number of recent studies link “possessing a high sense of purpose in life” with improved physical well-being and longer life spans.¹

At the organizational level, purpose plays a significant role in a company's longevity and success. Organizations that place a high value on providing and supporting purpose at work have been shown to be more profitable than those that do not.² And when employees feel a strong connection to organizational purpose, they are more committed and “much more likely to stay.”³



Workplaces that help people stay connected to an organization's purpose—and each other—help improve attraction and retention.

Business leaders looking for ways to improve engagement and results at work are also looking for ways the designed environment can reflect and support a sense of purpose. As psychologist Barry Schwartz writes in *Why We Work*, “If we design workplaces that permit people to find meaning in their work, we will be designing a human nature that values work.”⁴

Make Work Meaningful

Influential thinkers—from ancient Greek philosophers to modern motivational theorists and behavioral scientists—have contended that a sense of purpose is essential to human happiness and fulfillment. In the third century BCE, Aristotle asserted that it is inherent in human nature to want to do what is worth doing—that realizing one's true potential is the ultimate life goal.⁵ In the twenty-first century, motivational researchers like Wharton management professor Adam Grant have shown that “employees who know how their work has a meaningful, positive impact on others are not just happier than those who don't; they are vastly more productive, too.”⁶

Academics and progressive business leaders have been advocating for the value of purpose at work for years. Today,

purpose—as need, motivator, and even promoter of physical well-being—is getting even more attention in the business world as new generations of workers make it clear that they are looking to work as a source of meaning and fulfillment. A 2014 Deloitte core beliefs and culture survey found that “a sense of purpose” was cited by six in 10 Millennials as a reason they chose to work for their current employers.⁷

Other studies show that employees of all generations are seeking meaning and purpose in their work.⁸ New research indicates work experiences that reinforce a sense of “purposeful action” can positively influence worker engagement, job satisfaction, and performance, as well as personal fulfillment.⁹ And organizations concerned with employee health and well-being are taking note of studies like the one asserting that people who demonstrate a sense of purpose in their lives have a 15 percent lower risk of premature death.¹⁰

“Businesses in the twenty-first century need to shift focus from profit maximization to purpose maximization.”

— John Mackey, Co-Founder, Whole Foods Market

Beyond improving worker well-being and job satisfaction, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that paying attention to meaning and purpose at work can positively affect an organization's bottom line. According to the Deloitte study, an emphasis on purpose drives increased business confidence, investment, and long-term success.¹¹ As John Mackey, co-founder of the successful Whole Foods Market, puts it, “Businesses in the twenty-first century need to shift focus from profit maximization to purpose maximization.” In the process, he says, organizations will almost certainly realize business results, “making more money than [they] thought possible.”¹²

Instill Shared Values

What gives work purpose and meaning? Scholars point to two distinct mechanisms:¹³ a good fit between work tasks and personal values (the doctor whose surgical procedure saves a life) and a good fit between work tasks and clearly communicated organizational values (the production line



Organizations can use murals or other physical manifestations of their mission statements to communicate a set of shared values to employees.

worker whose actions are perceived as ensuring that the surgeon will have a high-performing instrument to use).

It is through the second mechanism—creating and communicating a meaningful set of shared values—that an organization can help to imbue individual workers with a motivating and fulfilling sense of purpose.

Value systems provide a clear structure of purpose in which employees are likely to perceive their work to be more meaningful as a consequence of operating in and sharing these values. For example, organizations promoting clear missions or ideologies provide employees with a system of values that can give additional purpose to their work in the organization.¹⁴

Create Intentional Culture

While clearly articulated mission and values statements provide the foundation for purpose at work, they are not sufficient in themselves. Organizational leaders have to consistently align business strategies and decisions with their stated purpose and help employees appreciate what it means for them and their work.

A recent survey of business leaders in 39 industries across the United States found that while 79 percent of them believed that “purpose is central to business success,” only 34 percent indicated that their organization’s purpose is used as “a guidepost for decision-making,” and only 27 percent conducted explicit conversations with work team members about why their work matters and how individual actions connect with organizational purpose and success. As the report summarizes,

Leaders appreciate the myriad of benefits that greater engagement can bring (e.g., higher customer ratings; higher profitability; increased productivity and quality; lower turnover, less absenteeism; and few safety incidents), but don’t prioritize purpose as a means to amplifying this. No wonder engagement is dwindling.¹⁵

As Peter Drucker famously noted, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Recent research highlights the importance of organizational culture as a vehicle for prioritizing purpose. When purpose is embedded in the physical artifacts, rituals, and unspoken rules for behavior of an organization’s unique culture—or “the way we do things here”—individuals are more likely to find their work meaningful and fulfilling—and to feel confident that their organization has a bright future.

This isn't surprising, given the Deloitte study's findings that "organizations with a strong sense of purpose are more likely to embrace diversity and differing opinions, encourage innovation among employees, and provide the tools and resources for employees to realize their full potential."¹⁶

Design with Purpose

Herman Miller's Living Office¹⁷ is based on an ever-deepening understanding of what makes us human and how that knowledge can be applied to help organizations and their design partners develop and manage workplaces that address fundamental human needs for security, autonomy, belonging, achievement, status, and purpose. Workplaces that fulfill these needs, as well as the needs of the business, help people and organizations prosper.

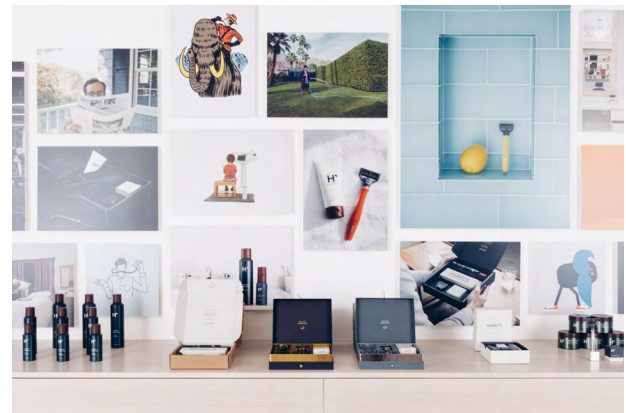
By partnering with a number of forward-thinking organizations that represent a variety of industries, sizes, demographic makeups, and strategic directions, we are documenting and analyzing the ways specific organizations use Living Office as a platform to realize their unique strategic goals. The qualitative and quantitative data we are gathering through this longitudinal study provide insights and ideas for how workplace design can support purpose to enhance individual productivity and well-being, as well as organizational success.

Observation, interviews, surveys, and space-plan evaluations contributed to findings that show these Living Office Research Partners¹⁸ are developing workplaces that foster purpose by designing for communication, connection, and empowered action.

Make Space Communicate

Physical space communicates, whether its message is intentional or not. As one environmental psychologist writes, “Employees spend a lot of time ‘reading’ the messages sent to them by the environments in which they’re asked to work. Physical workplaces cost money—think about all the times you’ve heard the expression ‘putting your money where your mouth is’—so the messages they send carry a lot more weight in workers’ minds than easy-to-generate verbal platitudes.”¹⁹

Environmental symbols affect behavior and response to a surprising extent. Research has found that certain objects (or even pictures of objects) can elicit very specific kinds of behavior. In a series of experiments that exposed one group of participants to environments “seeded” with pictures of business-related objects like briefcases, and another group to environments where these pictures were replaced with images of more neutral artifacts like backpacks, the participants who were “primed” by seeing the business objects demonstrated a more competitive mindset than their counterparts in the more neutrally primed environment. “People are always trying to figure out how to act in any given situation,” one of the researchers explained. “When there aren’t a lot of explicit clues to help define a situation, we are more likely to act based on cues we pick up implicitly.”²⁰



Physical manifestations of products and processes and symbols that express values and brand communicate purpose across the office landscape.

Experience with our Living Office Research Partners suggests that workplaces in which objects, images, graphics, color, tools, and furnishings are carefully curated and purposefully displayed across the landscape can elicit emotion and “speak the unspoken” to help workers feel part of something larger than themselves, and perform work that is, according to Gensler, “more meaningful than just a series of independent tasks and everyday responsibilities.”²¹ They create a narrative experience for people as they move throughout their workdays—a narrative that reinforces an organization’s purpose, so people feel stronger connections with it.

In addition, providing a place and means to display team goals, accomplishments, and work in progress will not only help connect these work groups with the organization's larger purpose, but also serve to inform others passing through the space of the specific ways teams and team members contribute to organizational success.

Connect People with Purpose (and Each Other)

Personal connections to organizational purpose can be forged through representations of company lore—stories of a founder's vision, a defining moment, a legendary success, or an ultimate goal. One of our research partners commissioned brightly colored murals that depict relevant scenes relating to what they do and who they are. "I always take a minute and look at the murals and get relaxed and focused," reports an employee.

While personal connection to the organization's purpose is important, connection to the larger impact of that purpose should also be on display. Individuals need to see how purpose connects them to something larger than themselves, and how their actions make a difference for other people. Another of our research partners displays photographs of projects, materials, and cultural artifacts from the places in the world where their organization does business, providing a daily reminder to staff members of the importance of what they do. Employees and leaders from this company reported a 65-percent increase in the impact of workplace design on organizational culture since implementing their Living Office.

Progressive organizations also use the workplace to encourage connections among their people. According to Gensler, today's design professionals know that well-designed traffic paths should "not only connect workers through the day, but cultivate no-pressure situations where people can comfortably and naturally connect to build work relationships and friendships."²² Many of our Living Office Research Partners have significantly increased the amount of space allocated to circulation and connectivity in order to promote interactions among colleagues and create the kind of transparent environment with open vistas that allow people to observe and learn from each other.

Careful attention to the design and location of communal spaces like cafés and lounges (we call these settings²³ Plazas) that offer food and beverages can serve to bring people together and reinforce shared purpose and values. A centrally located Plaza that can accommodate a large group provides a place for company-wide gatherings and celebrations. Equipped with enticing amenities and inspiring artifacts, these settings serve as the heart of the organization and help to align employees and visitors around purpose, brand, and broad business goals.

A recent survey of "Best Companies to Work For" found that these organizations "intentionally considered the benefits that come from creating a community 'focal point' within their facilities where employees can gather to relax, eat, share information, and celebrate special events."²⁴ Our own research partners have significantly increased allocation of space to these communal areas and report improved satisfaction post-move. "Common space, especially the kitchen, is really successful as a work space, meeting space, and social space—sometimes all three at once," was one survey response.

Empower Deliberate Action

Perhaps most importantly, workplace design can be leveraged to empower action toward an organization's shared purpose. A landscape designed to communicate and connect purpose to individuals and groups can also embody the actions that bring it to life. An organization's place can literally act as a stage upon which its purpose can be performed; it can communicate, connect, and ultimately inspire individuals to act upon its pursuit.

The way an organization chooses to allocate space and other resources speaks directly to its purpose and values. In a *Harvard Business Review* article titled "Rules for Designing an Engaging Workplace," environmental psychologist Sally Augustin states it simply: "A place indicates respect for employees when it supports them as they do their jobs."²⁵

Forward-thinking organizations listen carefully to what their people say about their workplace needs and support them by providing a choice of settings tailored to specific types of tasks. For example, settings that support quiet focus and concentration (we call them Havens) can have an enormous impact on helping people work towards a purposeful goal. Our Living Office Research Partners typically use enclosed Havens to provide “privacy on demand” where individuals can retreat to make phone calls or perform work activities that require focus.

Specialized settings for different types of group work also empower purposeful action. Living Office Research Partners are moving from workplaces with a few all-purpose conference rooms to landscapes that incorporate a greater number and variety of group settings. Semi-enclosed Coves offer places for impromptu gatherings that help to build alignment among team members. Workshops provide resources for visual communication of co-created information, while Clubhouses, or working neighborhoods, include a “wall of awareness” that displays and reinforces shared purpose. Forums bring people together for presentations and learning events.

When these settings are thoughtfully located with respect to important adjacencies and the sharing of views and natural light, the workplace becomes a virtual blueprint of the way work gets done in a purposeful organization.

Plan for Prosperity

What does all this add up to? We believe the sum total is prosperity. When people understand and harness their unique passions as individuals and apply this through the greater context and purpose of an organization, both can fulfill a holistic range of needs—from financial security to personal success.

With our Living Office Research Partners, we are exploring and documenting the ways in which workplace design can contribute to shared purpose and prosperity. If you'd like to learn how Living Office works for organizations and people, visit hermanmiller.com/livingoffice or connect with your local Herman Miller representative who can engage you with a Living Office Specialist.



A variety of settings that support specific work activities empower deliberate action. These settings are most effective when they offer access to natural light and are purposefully adjacent to other settings.

White Paper

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