Personality and Preferences for Interaction in the Workplace

People's preferred work settings vary according to their personality, as well as to the task at hand, according to a study commissioned by Herman Miller, "Personality and Preferences for Interaction in the Workplace."

Preferences also vary by individual, of course. In fact, previous research of individual employees at multinational organisations conducted by Herman Miller found that the top workplace preference is "being able to choose where and how I work."[1]

This has implications for workplace design or planning professionals. In order to create an office that is based on the distinctive purpose, character, and activities of its inhabitants—an office in which people can work effectively—designers need to provide a variety of spaces in a workplace.

Another finding in the research, however, suggests that doing so may be a bigger challenge to designers than they realise: Architects, designers, and workplace and business consultants tend to be more open in their personality type than other professions. This may affect their perception of what makes a good workplace. Designers therefore need a good understanding of the personality types of the occupiers to help them guard against creating workspaces that fit their personality type but may work less well for others.

In response to what Herman Miller has been learning through its research efforts, we developed Living Office, a holistic offering of tools, furnishings, and services that put people and organisations in sync with the new landscape of work, in part by providing a variety of settings, each of which is distinct in its purpose, scale, and sociability. We gave each setting a name; Plaza, Cove, and Jump Space are just a few.[2] Those settings are based on ten Modes of Work (e.g.,chat, co-create, contemplate), which we identified through in depth primary research.[3]

This document presents the key findings of the research. The full report is available from Workplace Unlimited.[4]

Investigating the Psychology of Collaboration

Herman Miller commissioned Dr. Nigel Oseland, a psychologist specialising in the workplace and director of Workplace Unlimited, to help us better understand the psychology of collaboration space, in particular to identify the preferences of team members with different personality types. The research comprised a review of existing literature and a survey of over 900 people—a significant and statistically robust sample.[5]

The survey used a personality questionnaire to rank respondents on the OCEAN scale, according to the strength of five personality factors: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extroverted, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism.[6]

Research Summary

Preferred Spaces for Core Work Activities	YOUR DESK IN OFFICE	MEETING ROOM	PRIVATE/ ENCLOSED OFFICE	INFORMAL MEETING	CAFE OR BAR	HOME OFFICE	ELSEWHERE AT HOME	OUTSIDE – GARDEN	SPORTS FACILITY	CO-WORKING CLUB
Where are you most creative and have your best ideas?	26.0	9.2	11.0	29.9	13.2	24.1	31.0	25.6	5.6	5.3
Where do you like to do quiet, focused and concentrated work?	39.7	12.7	38.6	5.8	4.9	51.0	15.8	1.6	0.1	2.7
Where do you prefer to meet colleagues?	11.5	37.1	6.6	67.1	33.7	1.2	0.9	4.7	0.9	12.4
Where do you like to go to take a short break from work?	2.2	0.9	0.9	18.0	50.7	0.5	7.0	70.6	15.1	3.5
Where are you usually most productive?	50.0	10.6	22.7	12.5	4.9	44.7	15.4	1.3	0.1	3.9

High %   Low %

The participants were asked about their workplace preferences, including: how they prefer to communicate; where they prefer to meet; their use of social media; their preferences for meeting space design; and the time they spend in and out of the office.

Nearly three-quarters of the respondents were drawn from the property and design industry, and about two-thirds of respondents work in the UK.

The Fundamentals of Collaboration Space

The literature review highlighted some of the key principles of successful collaboration:

- Building trust within teams—by creating a community and through social interaction—promotes collaboration.

- Teams with a mix of personality types are the most effective, but may take longer to bond.

- Interactions in the workplace aimed at sharing information, making decisions, generating ideas, resolving personal problems, and socialising may need different meeting environments.

- Different personality types prefer to interact through different media and meet in different settings.

The online survey was then used to investigate how workplace design could best promote these principles.

Workplace Design Issues

The survey respondents generally prefer different work settings for different types of interaction: meeting rooms for sharing ideas and making decisions; office and quiet rooms for resolving personal problems; local cafés and breakout spaces for socialising; and informal meeting spaces for creating ideas and general communications.

Half of the respondents prefer their home office for quiet and concentrated work such as contemplation, while two-fifths prefer their usual desk or a private office. Where people consider themselves to be most productive is almost evenly split between their desk and the home office. Nearly three-quarters of respondents prefer to take a break from work outside in a garden or park, and half selected a local café or bar.

Face-to-face meetings, group meetings, and email are the most popular channels for sharing information. Telephones and teleconferences are preferred by just over a third of respondents, particularly for dealing with personal problems. Respondents send an average of 40 emails a day and around half prefer email for sharing information, making decisions, and for general communications.

As shown below, availability is the most important factor when it comes to physical meeting spaces, just ahead of comfort (seating and decor) and provision of audio-visual equipment and Wi-Fi. Daylight and ease of booking are also important.

Research Summary

Preferred Meeting Space	SHARING INFORMATION	MAKING DECISIONS	CREATING IDEAS	PERSONAL PROBLEMS	SOCIALISING – COLLEAGUES	GENERAL COMMS	MEAN % PREFERRED
Meeting room	64.3	60.9	25.9	41.1	3.4	35.6	38.5
Informal meeting area	33.4	22.3	45.2	10.0	26.4	54.9	32.0
Private/enclosed office	23.7	48.0	7.4	67.4	1.8	9.2	26.3
Breakout or soft seating area	13.8	8.1	33.3	6.8	39.4	37.2	23.1
Local cafe or staff restaurant	5.8	3.1	15.5	9.9	63.2	19.8	19.6
Huddle or quiet room	20.6	25.3	9.5	36.1	1.6	6.7	16.6
Brainstorm or war room	15.0	5.5	39.9	2.2	2.0	4.9	11.6
Hotel or bar	1.3	1.2	6.4	3.5	38.2	7.4	9.7
Club or co-working space	4.3	2.7	8.8	1.1	16.9	10.9	7.5
Conference suite	5.3	4.1	3.1	0.9	1.0	2.7	2.9

High %   Low %

Three-quarters of respondents consider the availability of impromptu meeting space to be a core design consideration for collaboration.

On average, respondents spend around two-thirds of their working week in their office, but only half of that time at their desks. The rest of their time is spent interacting with others either face to face or in virtual meetings.

The Impact of Personality Type

As expected, the study found that different personality types prefer different work settings, within and outside the office, depending on the task. We believe access to these settings is likely to affect their performance at work.

The survey also found that respondents who scored high in terms of creativity (Openness) spend more of their time at home than others, possibly to allow them to focus on and formulate their creative ideas. However, some respondents, particularly the introverts, prefer to carry out focused and quiet work at their office desks, suggesting that desk-sharing may not be suitable for all personality types.

Although there is a lot of emphasis on connection and collaboration in the office, workspaces need to accommodate all personality types, including introverts. Not everyone thrives in stimulating, noisy environments, and many may not have the opportunity to regularly work from home when they need peace and quiet. The office must have settings that support focus.

An important finding of the study is that practising architects, interior designers, and workplace/business consultants have a statistically significant higher score in Openness. This may affect the way they design office spaces and influence what they see as the preferences of others. Unless they have a good understanding of the client's needs and of personality types of those working in the offices, design professionals may default to their own preferences for stimulating, open-plan, buzzy workplaces.

Designers should therefore listen carefully to the client and provide settings that support all tasks—quieter areas for carrying out work requiring focus and concentration, and a range of areas for one-to-one personal meetings or creative team meetings.

While design can help change behaviour, it can't dictate behaviour. When it comes to work settings, personality also plays a role. Our survey identified some personality-related preferences in the office.

- Respondents who score high on **Openness** prefer one-to-one meetings for generating ideas. They prefer to meet colleagues in the bar, huddle, war room or café rather than formal meeting rooms. They believe they have their best ideas outside of the office.

- Respondents who score highly on **Conscientiousness** like breakout spaces for socialising. However, they have different views about what they consider to be acceptable places to carry out work activities. For example,

they may take a break from their office in a local café but do not consider it a workspace. The conscientious use social media less frequently, possibly because they consider it a non-work-related activity that should be conducted outside of normal working hours.

- **Extroverts** prefer to meet face to face and in a variety of work settings, whereas those scoring low in this factor (introverts) prefer to communicate through email. Extroverts prefer to meet in breakout spaces or a hotel or bar for generating ideas, rather than formal meeting spaces. They also prefer huddle rooms for sharing information, and they feel more creative in informal spaces. Extroverts value views out of meeting spaces, whereas introverts prefer enclosed or private team spaces. The survey also showed that extroverts spend more time out of the office, more time in meetings, and less time computing than introverts.

- Respondents high in **Agreeableness** prefer meeting in groups for generating ideas but appear to prefer one-to-one meetings for socialising. They prefer conference suites for sharing information, the breakout space or local café for generating ideas, and clubs for socialising.

- Respondents scoring high in **Neuroticism** prefer email for sharing information whereas those scoring low on this measure prefer group or face-to-face meetings. The higher scorers in Neuroticism appear to prefer documented information and avoid sharing information that is not recorded in meetings. They spend more time in solo activity and prefer meeting rooms that are quiet and private.

These findings underscore what we know about the importance of providing workers with choices within the workplace. They also suggest that different personality types favour different *settings* for the various *modes of work* that we identified through other research.[7] For example, introverts and more open (creative) people require a *haven* to *contemplate* and *create*, whether working through a complex problem or developing ideas. Some personality types, such as extroverts and those who score high for Openness, value *chat* whereas other types (conscientious, introvert), may consider *chat* to be a non-work-related activity. This suggests that settings provided to facilitate chat, such as a *landing* or *cove*, should be separated from the main workspace or *hive*.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the psychological makeup of office workers and serves as a reminder that organisations need a variety of kinds of spaces to accommodate various personality types and individual preferences, as well as tasks. It is the job of workplace design professionals to provide office environments that support a wide spectrum of preferences.

1. Herman Miller, "Individual Workplace Preferences & Attributes," September 2013.

2. Mindy Koschman, "Ideal Settings," WHY magazine, Herman Miller, http://www.hermanmiller.com/why/ideal-settings.html.

3. Herman Miller, "Anatomy of Collaboration," confidential report, 2012. For more information about settings and modes of work, visit http://www.hermanmiller.com/about-us/press/press-releases/all/herman-miller-introduces-living-office-a-holistic-solution-for-the-new-landscape-of-work.html.

4. Oseland N A (2013) Personality and Preferences for Interaction, WPU-OP-03. London: Workplace Unlimited.

5. Oseland N A (2013) The Psychology of Collaboration Space. London: Herman Miller.

6. John O P, Donahue E M and Kentle R L (1991) The Big Five Inventory - Versions 4a and 54. Berkeley, CA: UC Berkeley.

7. Herman Miller, "Anatomy of Collaboration," confidential report, 2012. For more information about settings and modes of work, visit http://www.hermanmiller.com/about-us/press/press-releases/all/herman-miller-introduces-living-office-a-holistic-solution-for-the-new-landscape-of-work.html.