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How to create a workplace for career-long learning

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We live and work in a knowledge economy that values people's ability to solve complex problems and coordinate with others. Today, workers' abilities to learn and apply new skills is fast becoming another important priority. Many organizations report they're either facing skills gaps now or expect them to develop within five years, and a high percentage of workers under age 40 believe skill and knowledge acquisition is the No. 1 way to advance their careers, beating out networking and forming new connections.

In order to attract and retain the talent needed to maintain a competitive edge, companies must pursue robust education programs in their own workplace to match the needs and workstyles of their employees. To get it right, they must think critically about how people acquire knowledge and the sort of spaces that best blend working and learning together.



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As employees return to the workplace, company leaders should be considering how learning and skill development will play into their organizations' futures.

Three learning styles

People learn and process information in a variety of ways. For this conversation, we can anchor our thinking to three broad modes of learning: visual, auditory and tactile — or, what we see, hear and do. These three modes aren't mutually exclusive and should be understood as individualized, context-dependent ways that people absorb and apply knowledge.

Visual learning involves the use of imagery and cues to form associations and solve problems. A common approach is to look at the big picture first, then work down to the finer details.

Auditory learning often is associated with traditional education, with rows of desks and an instructor. This can include group discussion or brainstorming sessions.

Tactile (or kinesthetic) learning modes involve "learning by doing," often in a group but sometimes as individuals. The focus is on physical engagement with an active environment rather than passive observation.

Design for learning

So what implications do these modes have on the design of the physical workplace? Learning styles and subject matter interact to inform peoples' decisions regarding the spaces in which they choose to work and learn. That means these preferences should be top of mind for designers when thinking about the right mix.

Consider how new ways of working during the past 20 years have impacted workspace design. Activity-based working enables workers to choose how and where they work in the workplace. From a design perspective, this means that the workplace must be purposively designed around the employee experience; the form of the office must follow its function. The same is true of workspaces to support learning.

First and foremost, employees need choice among a variety of space options that support their unique learning styles while also offering different levels of concentration, interaction and socialization:

Concentration spaces must have appropriate levels of acoustic privacy and perhaps also be somewhat visually shielded from high-activity spaces, especially for auditory and visual learning. Natural light should be abundant, windowless enclosed spaces should be avoided, and artificial light needs to be optimized.

Interaction spaces that are embedded into the fabric of contemporary offices, often found in peripheral or connective areas, serve as ideation and brainstorming zones for teams. In terms of learning, these are ideal sites for discussion groups and mentor sessions and are vehicles for passive learning through observation and hearing. The spaces themselves should be away from focus work zones and should be inviting — with comfortable, informal furniture and collaborative tools.

Socialization spaces are the heart of company culture and as such are also widely used in many corporate learning and development programs. Given their more generous floor area and delineation away from other office functions, these space types are ideal for tactile learning endeavors.

Spaces must be designed with user control and flexibility in mind to remove limits on intended and unintended use. Applying modularity to the design so that little change is required to change a space's purpose allows spaces to be adapted on the spot without the help of facilities or support staff.

The importance of ensuring that areas are equipped with appropriate tools for interaction and connection cannot be overstated. These include digital whiteboards and surfaces, video-conferencing technology, and real-time interactive tools as well as lower-tech collaboration tools.

Future considerations

As employees return to the workplace, company leaders should be considering how learning and skill development will play into their organizations' futures. In order to attract and retain top talent, organizations must create environments that promote and enable career-long learning in the workplace. The most forward-thinking companies will focus on understanding the ways in which people learn, comprehend and process information and will call upon designers to create workspaces that enable every employee to

learn while working and work while learning — all with the goal of empowering each person to do their best work.

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