

Cultural Daily

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Creativity & Nature Play a Crucial Role in the Workplace

Daphne Stanford · Thursday, June 8th, 2017

Do you ever wonder if there is more to life than getting out of bed and going to work? I certainly do! In fact, I've deliberately created a life full of reading, writing, art, and wonder. I try to spend much of my free time in nature—meaning, specifically, trees, wild grasses, sagebrush, and bodies of water—while also devoting time to reading and creative writing, daily. Because the warmer weather months are more conducive to outdoor activities (I've never been much of a skier), I also tend to feel happier and more fulfilled during the times of the year with more temperate weather.

It's very likely no coincidence that the months I spend the most time outside are also the months in which I get the most creative writing done. In fact, numerous studies have shown that spending time in a natural setting [improves creative thinking](#). Moreover, while creative thinking and creativity is often associated with artists, writers, and other creative professionals, it actually applies to most job functions.

But how, specifically, can companies encourage, nurture, and facilitate creative thinking? Furthermore, how can physical workplaces and office spaces be altered to not only incorporate more natural elements but also imitate nature?

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Fostering Creativity

There are a number of workplace culture factors that can better enable employees' creativity levels. On a basic level, people must gauge the extent to which they're willing to 'stick their necks out' and challenge the status quo. If there's too much [risk of rejection and shaming](#) involved in proposing an innovative idea or project, employees will be less likely to offer up unique ideas in the future.

This is not to say that every creative suggestion should be accepted blindly and without hesitation. However, team members should be encouraged to bring new and different ideas to the table, and there should be an honest, critical, and open-minded discussion that takes place, as a result. Otherwise, workplace cultures will merely fall back to the acquiescent, top-down approach of the 1950s—or worse.

In order to encourage a culture of creativity, it is necessary for leadership to [re-think how they think](#) about everyday tasks and duties. For example, are employees encouraged to take risks, or are

new ideas discouraged? Does the management team utilize data to promote better output? Are members from different teams or departments encouraged to collaborate? Are employees encouraged to not only generate new ideas but also to improve upon those ideas? Are they given the space to think, create, and refine, and are their creative proposals rewarded?

Lastly, [Ideo suggests](#) a number of ways to introduce playfulness into office spaces in order to inspire more creativity. Possibilities include hiding all visible clocks, introducing moveable furniture, building a homey kitchen, installing a communal table or other gathering space, and thinking about a landscape of creative spaces. Rather than relying on the traditional incentives of emotional and economic pressure, motivators like [play, purpose, and potential](#) promote a positive company culture that sets employees up for creativity and success.

Speaking of creative spaces, one of the most creative environments available to people is the one located away from urban spaces; that is, natural environments such as forests, riverbanks, and seashores.

Imitating Nature

[National Geographic](#) recently published a story about the importance of nature to not only creativity and reducing stress, but also overall brain functioning. In fact, David Strayer has conducted quite a bit of neurological research; in so doing, he has formulated the hypothesis that “being in nature allows the prefrontal cortex, the brain’s command center, to dial down and rest, like an overused muscle.” It’s as if nature is something that is mandatory for our continued good health and brain function—rather than simply a luxury or an occasional pastime.

Research also suggests that [going for a walk](#) helps relieve writer’s block and gives us a much-needed change of perspective, while problem-solving or working on a challenging work-based dilemma. Many people hold the misguided opinion that working longer and harder, without a break, will help them produce better results. However, the opposite is often true: sometimes, it simply takes a change of scenery or an inspiring hike through the forest to help us find the words or ideas we need to finish the job.

[According to Urban Forestry researchers](#) at the University of Washington, “Outdoor activities can help alleviate symptoms of Alzheimer’s, dementia, stress, and depression, and improve cognitive function in those recently diagnosed with breast cancer.” Moreover, *not having* natural views or indoor plants can lead to unnecessarily high levels of anxiety in office workers. The benefits of introducing natural elements to indoor spaces is tied to the notion of [biophilia](#): “the instinctive affinity that humans have with the natural world and other living systems.” Moreover, natural elements have been shown to increase feelings of well-being and creativity by 15 percent and productivity levels by six percent.

Because research has so clearly proven the beneficial effects of nature on workplace culture and productivity, Google and other companies are experimenting with “[biophilic design interventions](#)” like introducing dramatically more natural light via numerous skylights and solar tubes throughout interior spaces. [Studies have indicated](#) that while indirect sunlight is associated with reduced depressive symptoms, direct sunlight is linked to increased job satisfaction and employee loyalty. Take a cue from Patagonia’s workplace tradition of “[Let My People Go Surfing Time](#).” Imagine going surfing or bodyboarding on your lunch break to help inject your brain with new ideas. That doesn’t sound bad to me, at all!

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Creative people with artistic and inventive temperaments are valuable to corporate teams and organizations because we bring new ideas and perspectives to the table. We can argue for the value of natural elements in the workplace by demonstrating benefits of creativity and innovation in our everyday workflow and life choices. The global marketplace is a competitive place, but innovation, creativity, and diversity can bring some much-needed fresh air into the boardroom and help inspire us all to think a little differently about business and corporate culture.

The future of work is now: let us think bold thoughts.

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Image Source: [Bureau of Land Management Oregon & Washington](#)

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