



## Autonomy at Work

Create workplaces that give people the freedom to choose where and how they accomplish their goals.



### Key Points

- **Autonomy, or the freedom and the opportunity to make self-determined choices, is one of six fundamental human needs that motivate us at work.**
- **Research shows that autonomy at work correlates with greater commitment, creativity, and job satisfaction for people, and improved attraction and retention rates and productivity levels for organizations.**

**We help organizations realize these benefits by determining the right variety of settings, and encouraging individuals and teams to test and explore how, when, and where they can work to achieve the best results.**

Over the past few decades, the nature of work has become steadily more complex, collaborative, and cognitively demanding. Business leaders looking to attract and engage the skilled and talented people they need to perform this work are discovering the importance of nurturing autonomy and the intrinsic motivation it fosters.

Recent research in the fields of psychology and neuroscience confirms that autonomy is a basic need all people share and that its fulfillment at work can increase job satisfaction, creativity, and commitment.



Encourage people to be more creative and collaborative by providing a variety of flexible tools and the freedom to tailor them to their work.

Workplace design that offers people purposeful choices for where, how, and when they work can improve knowledge sharing, better support permanent part-time and contingent work populations, and encourage the creative and collaborative efforts essential to organizational success.

## Foster the Freedom to Choose

Philosophers from Aristotle to Immanuel Kant have drawn connections between autonomy—the freedom to take responsibility and make self-determined choices—and human happiness, worth, and inherent dignity.<sup>1</sup> Our modern understanding of the term incorporates the idea of authenticity<sup>2</sup>—of being one’s own person, directed by reasons and motives that are not imposed by others, but that emanate from an authentic self.<sup>3</sup>

Twenty-first century psychologists, economists, and neuroscientists have been studying the nature of autonomy and its social and practical significance. Empirical studies have established an essential connection between autonomy and intrinsic motivation—action driven by curiosity, interest, and enjoyment.<sup>4</sup> Social and environmental contexts that support autonomy by providing choice and encouraging personal initiative have been linked to “increased behavioral persistence, improved task performance, and greater psychological, physical, and social wellness.”<sup>5</sup>

Recent research also indicates that autonomy has a direct and positive effect on cognitive function, creativity, and collaboration<sup>6</sup>. Given the importance of innovation and teamwork to organizational success, it is not surprising that a recent survey of 16,000 employees in 17 countries found that companies that encourage autonomy perform better than those that don’t.<sup>7</sup> Organizations with high autonomy outperformed others in increasing market share and business results as well as measures that included “customer satisfaction” and “systematic innovation in products and services.”<sup>8</sup>

Although autonomy support is typically thought of as an issue of management style<sup>9</sup>, recent research indicates that the physical environment can also foster or thwart the fulfillment of autonomy and other basic psychological needs.<sup>10</sup>

As part of our ongoing pursuit of human-centered workplace design, Herman Miller’s Living Office® helps organizations and their design partners create environments that support—rather than control—people and their work. Drawing on proprietary studies conducted with our Living Office Research Partners<sup>11</sup>, we offer the following design considerations for workplaces that offer freedom of choice in where, how, and when work gets accomplished.

## Provide Purposeful Settings

Mobile technology has made it possible for people to work from virtually any location, and they do: on airplanes, at home, in coffee bars. But only the office workplace offers the potential for work settings tailored to support the particular activities of a particular person working for a particular organization.

A workplace that offers choices of where to work is essential to autonomy support. Simply giving people some control over the type of setting in which to perform a specific task can overcome other dissatisfactions with the workplace. For example, studies have shown that when people have the potential for choosing a quiet and protected place to work when they need it, complaints about the noise and distraction of open environments evaporate.<sup>12</sup>

When it comes to autonomy support for teams, defined team areas, such as Clubhouse Settings, are essential. Clubhouses have work areas arranged in proximity to each other that enable the variety of tasks team members do throughout the day. People can transition smoothly between activities while maintaining team communication and identity.



Give diverse settings a purpose by getting to know how and why people work, and aligning each space around these needs.

But, when it comes to allocating space to a variety of different work settings, quality of choice trumps quantity. In fact, too many choices can undermine satisfaction and performance.<sup>13</sup> It is essential to provide purposeful settings aligned with the unique character and activities of the organization and its people. Meaningful landmarks and purposeful adjacencies between work groups can help to differentiate settings and guide individuals to one that best suits a particular activity.

Herman Miller's Living Office Discovery Process<sup>™</sup> offers helpful methodologies for identifying organizational character and prioritizing activities for support. With this information, business leaders and their design partners can allocate space to the appropriate variety of settings to contribute to autonomy and peak performance.

For example, one of our Living Office Research Partners used their workplace redesign to reflect an organizational character they defined as “self-directed, open, and casual.” Prioritizing support for work activities related to knowledge sharing, their new office landscape incorporated a number of Jump Space Settings that people could use to accomplish basic work tasks during downtime between other activities. Because these functional settings were located along highly trafficked routes and adjacent to busy intersections within the landscape, they also served as connection points for people who otherwise might not encounter each other over the course of the day.

By adding purposefully designed workpoints<sup>14</sup> that people could choose to use at their discretion, the organization not only improved knowledge sharing, but also improved their “autonomy score” by 23 percentage points following the implementation of their Living Office. As one employee noted, staff now “think of the whole office as their space. You see different people in different places all the time.”

Taken together, our Living Office Research Partners realized a relative percentage increase of 100 percent in employee agreement with the statement “My work team and I have the ability to choose where we work in our workplace”—an important indicator for autonomy.

## Offer Variety in Tools, Posture, Mood

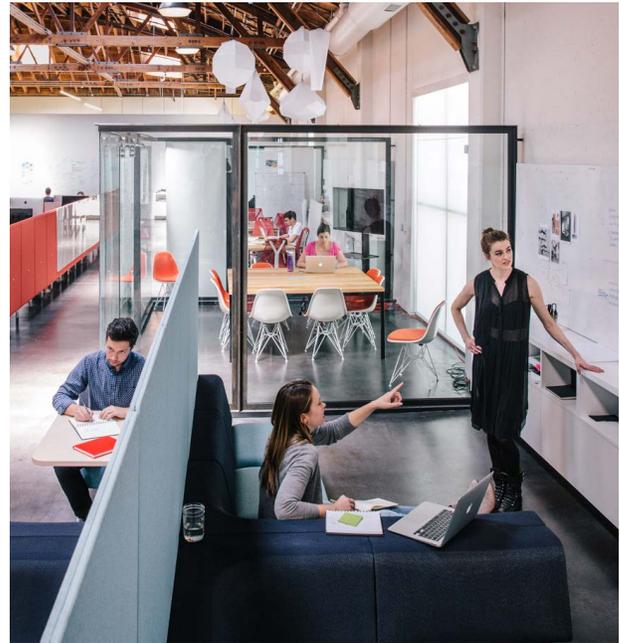
Providing a choice of settings designed to support specific work activities is a start, but it is also important to provide choices within those settings. Researchers refer to these choices as “affordances” in the physical environment that can “facilitate the development of new skills, help people overcome the limitations of their own capabilities, and make them feel like active agents.” In contrast, “the lack of needed affordances may pose a significant challenge to carrying out expected activities, handicapping cognitive functioning in the space, and making people feel incapable of performing the expected tasks.”<sup>15</sup>

Two different people performing the same activity may have very different needs and preferences for how they accomplish it. Provisions for connecting and charging various types and quantities of personal technology are an obvious requirement in today's workplace. It's equally important for organizations to provide a variety of analog tools like whiteboards and tackable surfaces, as well as places to display work-in-progress and symbolic artifacts.

Accommodations for different postural preferences and formal or casual arrangements contribute to a sense of autonomy. Similarly, sit-to-stand desks and mobile furnishings give people a level of control that bolsters autonomy. The ability to make even small adjustments like moving a monitor, turning on a task light, or orienting furniture to suit their working preferences can make a major difference in people's perception of control.<sup>16</sup>

Findings from our pre- and post-move research surfaced direct correlations between autonomy and the ability to change the way one does daily activities and the ability to rearrange the workspace. Overall, Living Office redesigns contributed to a relative percentage increase of 33 percent in employee agreement with “My work team and I have the ability to change the way we perform our daily tasks” and a relative percentage increase of 58 percent in employee agreement with “Wherever I do my work, I am able to arrange the space to effectively conduct work.”

Understanding how people experience the work landscape over time should also play into the design. State of mind, workload, or even the time of day may impact an individual's preference for mode of activity completion. Research suggests that, given



People are unique, and so are their approaches to completing daily tasks. Empower people to do their best with a mix of digital and analog tools fine-tuned to their work.

the opportunity, individuals decide how and where they want to work based on the state of mind they are trying to cultivate. And different individuals may use different settings to cultivate similar states of mind.<sup>17</sup> Time of day will also affect this dynamic as energy levels wax and wane over the course of the workday.

Holistic workplaces have characteristics such as circulation paths designed to allow people to walk side by side, providing options for walking meetings. Landscapes that offer sensory variation and views of nature afford opportunities for stimulation or respite. Natural environments (or even man-made environments that incorporate living plants and images of nature) have been shown to elicit experiences of autonomy by “presenting individuals with inherently stimulating and interesting stimuli” that orient them to “their present and internal states.”<sup>18</sup>

## Accommodate Flexible Schedules and Contingent Workers

As technology continues to increase mobility and flexibility in the way people work, there is increasing pressure on—and benefits to—organizations that offer their people autonomy in decisions about when they work. Flexible work schedules are becoming more popular, and there are a growing number of permanent part-time employees and contingent workers, including contractors, consultants, and temps. This requires an agile and dynamic workplace that can accommodate fluctuating numbers of workers on a day-to-day basis.<sup>19</sup>

Many of our Research Partners are allocating more space to shared, unassigned workpoints as part of “a comprehensive design strategy focused on making it easy for people to personalize their own work experience on an ad hoc basis from day to day and even from moment to moment.”<sup>20</sup> In addition to reclaiming space wasted in assigned workstations that may be unoccupied a large percentage of the time, well-appointed shared workpoints provide equitable accommodations for both full-time staff and contingent workers so that everyone feels valued and integral to the team.

Research suggests that differences in treatment between contingent workers and permanent workers within an organization can have powerful consequences on employee relationships and act as a barrier to the knowledge sharing in

the organization.<sup>21</sup> Equal access to centrally located Plaza Settings that offer enticing amenities and comfortable and convenient meeting and work locations encourage information exchange and camaraderie at all hours of the day.

## Plan for Prosperity

When people have choices about how, where, and when they accomplish their work activities and goals, they are more likely to feel motivated and empowered to perform their best. Organizations that design their work environments to support autonomy in alignment with business goals and values are poised for ongoing success. This adds up to prosperity at the broadest and most personal levels.

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](https://hermanmiller.com/livingoffice) or connect with your local Herman Miller representative who can engage you with a Living Office Specialist.



Everyone needs to feel welcomed at work—especially people who don't have a permanent home in the office. Create settings where anyone can drop in and work by repurposing unused assigned workstations.

# White Paper

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14. In legacy plans, one individual is typically assigned to one workstation. But in the new landscape of work, people can choose from a variety of shared or owned workpoints. A workpoint is any spot within an office landscape that is intentionally designed to support people's activities and the postures they assume while working for varying durations of time.
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