

The Economist

Working in an Attractive Environment is good for Employees



Creative workers need nice surroundings

Look out of the window of your workplace. Is the vista pleasing? Can you see trees and grassy areas, or barbed wire and rubbish bins? Do you enjoy leaving the building at lunchtime or would you rather stay chained to your desk?

A review of the academic literature* suggests that indoor work environments (in particular factors like light, noise and temperature) have an impact on employee productivity. WeWork's business model is based on the idea that attractive offices, with common areas and leisure activities, will appeal to small businesses and freelance workers. If a positive office interior helps, it makes sense that a nice outdoor environment should boost morale too.

The ancient universities clearly believed in building quiet cloisters where academics would have the freedom to think. Big technology companies in California usually aim for a similar effect—and have the finances (plus the space) available to achieve it. Corporate campuses have also been adopted by their Indian counterparts, like Infosys in Bengaluru or Tata Consultancy Services in Chennai. But these projects tend to be built by giant multinationals who employ lots of workers on a single site, out of town with lots of parking space.

Those who work in a big city are typically resigned to being stuck in cramped conditions, surrounded by busy roads. But there are exceptions. Chiswick Park in west London is the kind of area that local residents like to frequent on their days off. It has its own waterfall and lake, where ducks have taken up residence, and there are tree-shaded lawns where one can picnic on sunny summer days. The actively minded can head for a recreation area to play basketball or five-a-side football.

During the week, however, 9,000 people flock into the park's 12 office buildings. They are home to 73 businesses, including big media companies like Paramount and cbs, Japanese conglomerates such as Sony and Mitsubishi, and Danone, a French food conglomerate.

The area used to be a London Transport bus depot, which explains the abundance of space. It was first developed 20 years ago by Stuart Lipton (who also built Broadgate, an office complex in London's financial district) but bits of infrastructure are still being erected. In January a footbridge was installed over a railway junction to provide access to the nearby Chiswick Park underground station.

Matt Coulson is the chief executive of the site's management company, Enjoy-Work, which is part-owned by Blackstone, a private-equity group. Mr Coulson, who previously worked for Centreparcs, a holiday camp, talks about "guests" rather than workers or tenants, and says his focus is services. The autumn brings firework displays and when the weather is good, the site holds food fairs, concerts or other events. A zip wire is occasionally hung from the tallest buildings for the pleasure of thrill-seeking workers.

Anyone who has visited a tech company headquarters will recognise other quirks such as guitars in the lobby or bikes for hire. Bartleby was shown around one newly renovated workspace; with its comfy chairs and pool table, it might have been the lounge of an upmarket hotel.

The cynical view of such facilities is that they aim to keep employees in the office for as long as possible. If you can eat, go to the gym and even get your dry cleaning done at work, why go home?

The industrial revolution led to workers being shepherded into factories with rigid rules and repetitive tasks. Later, workers moved to stultifying offices where they sat in regimented rows of desks and waited impatiently for the clocks to hit 5pm. But futurists constantly warn that routine tasks will be automated and humans will focus on more creative endeavours. That suggests the need for different working spaces, which encourage independent thought.

The danger, as with many aspects of the future economy, is of another class divide. On top of fat pay cheques, luxury offices with top-notch facilities nestled in attractive parks for the fortunate few who code for big tech groups or run profitable multinationals; unfulfilling jobs in "fulfilment centres" and dingy office blocks for the rest. On the bright side, humble drudges will at least still have a reason to head home.

* An Overview of the Influence of Physical Office Environments towards Employees by N Kamarulzaman, A A Saleh, S Z Hashim, H Hashim and A A Abdul-Ghani, Procedia Engineering, 2011

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