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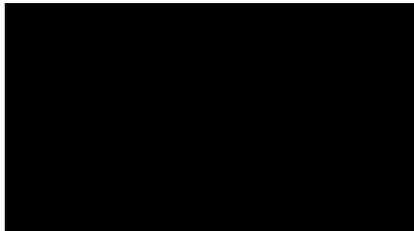
Companies Try to Boost Productivity by Micromanaging Seating Arrangements



By RACHEL FEINTZEIG  
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Office workers are being treated to a new game: musical chairs.



Office workers are being treated to a new game: musical chairs. Rachel Feintzeig joins the News Hub with a look at how companies say they can increase productivity and collaboration by shifting employees from desk to desk every few months.



Workers at travel site Kayak.com, whose co-founder uses new hires as an excuse to alter seating plans. *Dominick Reuter for The Wall Street Journal*

By shifting employees from desk to desk every few months, scattering those who do the same types of jobs and rethinking which departments to place side by side, companies say they can increase productivity and collaboration.

Proponents say such experiments not only come with a low price tag, but they can help a company's bottom line, even if they leave a few disgruntled workers in their wake.

In recent years, many companies have moved toward open floor plans and unassigned seating, ushering managers out of their offices and clustering workers at communal tables. But some companies—especially small startups and technology businesses—are taking the trend a step further, micromanaging who sits next to whom in an attempt to get more from their employees.

"If I change the [organizational] chart and you stay in the same seat, it doesn't have very much of an effect," says Ben Waber, chief executive of Sociometric Solutions, a Boston company that uses sensors to analyze communication patterns in the workplace. "If I keep the org chart the same but change where you sit, it is going to massively change everything."

Mr. Waber says a worker's immediate neighbors account for 40% to 60% of every interaction that worker has during the workday, from face-to-face chats to email messages. There is only a 5% to 10% chance employees are interacting

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with someone two rows away, according to his data, which is culled from companies in the retail, pharmaceutical and finance industries, among others.

Want to befriend someone on another floor? Forget it. "You basically only talk to [those] people if you have meetings," Mr. Waber says.

### Office States of Mind

Research shows that employee temperaments can be contagious. Here are the four emotional states you might spot at the office:

**Calm, relaxed**—Employees experience less conflict and feel they perform better. Workers are most likely to "catch" this state from colleagues.

**Stressed out, anxious**—Frustration, anger and hostility also can mark this second-most-contagious state.

**Cheerful, high-energy**—Like the calm state, workers tend to be more cooperative. But compared with the above two states, calm or stress trumps cheerful.

**Sluggish, low-energy**—A dull, lethargic state that workers are least likely to catch from colleagues.

Companies should think carefully about who they put where, according to experts who study office design and workplace psychology. Grouping workers by department can foster focus and efficiency, says Christian Catalini, an assistant professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management, but mixing them up can lead to innovation

In his dissertation, Mr. Catalini examined the impact of proximity at an academic campus in Paris. When scientists were shuffled around to different buildings because of an asbestos problem, the result was more experimentation, he says. The shake-up produced some bad ideas—but also more breakthroughs.

MODCo Media, a New York advertising agency, has tested three different seating arrangements over the past few years. For about six months, the company intermingled its accountants and media buyers, hoping they would begin to absorb each others' skills through "osmosis" and "overhearing phone calls."

The experiment ended up saving MODCo "a couple hundred thousand dollars a year," says CEO Erik Dochtermann, but it turned out badly for the accountants. The media buyers began to understand the financial side of the business so well that MODCo no longer needed a full accounting department. Now, the media buyers "do the accountancy on the fly" and the company's chief financial officer checks their work, says Mr. Dochtermann.

Other seating configurations have helped inspire new products and expedited the training of new employees, he says.

At travel website Kayak.com, co-founder and Chief Technology Officer Paul English has joked with his colleagues about developing an algorithm to capture all that goes into devising his seating plan for the engineering team.

He uses new hires as an excuse to alter the existing layout and thinks carefully about each worker's immediate neighbors. He takes into account everything from his employees' personalities to their political views to their propensity for arriving at work early—or, more important, their propensity for judging colleagues who arrive late.

"If I put someone next to you that's annoying or there's a total style clash, I'm going to make your job depressing," he says.

Young Chun, a product designer at Kayak, is one of Mr. English's ambassadors in his



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pursuit of an office with "a balance of energy." A self-professed member of the "loud" contingent of Kayak employees, she was recently dispatched to the mobile group, where she estimated 90% of the workers were quiet, to get them to be more vocal.

"The first week that I was down there I was like, 'Oh my god, I could hear a pin drop here,' " she says.

It took a few weeks, but Ms. Chun says she was able to get the group to open up and start chatting. Her seating mission accomplished, she was soon switched to another section of the office.

Aspects of a worker's disposition can, in fact, be contagious, according to Sigal Barsade, a management professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. "People literally catch emotions from one another like a virus," she says. Her research has found that the least-contagious emotional state is one marked by low-energy and sluggishness. The most contagious is a calm, relaxed state—which she nicknamed "the California condition."

People with similar emotional temperaments work best together, Ms. Barsade says. But if a manager is trying to get a stressed-out worker to brighten up, the best strategy is to surround her with lots of cheerful, energetic people.

Constantly shuffling people around has its consequences, however. Ms. Barsade says that moving from desk to desk can make workers feel like they have little control over their environment. And some seating experiments can cause a backlash.

For about four years, employees at HubSpot Inc., a marketing-software company based in Cambridge, Mass., switched seats randomly every three months. The seating strategy was meant to reflect the lack of hierarchy at the company, which HubSpot says was especially helpful in recruiting Millennials. Eventually, the company added some structure to the arrangement, splitting workers into loud and quiet groups.

But when HubSpot decided to group its executives in one part of the office, the employee feedback was negative. The executives felt more efficient and liked being able to chat without having to arrange formal meetings, but the employees felt the higher-ups were too far removed. The setup was reversed after six months.

Employees now have the moving process "down to a science," says HubSpot Chief Technology Officer and co-founder Dharmesh Shah, unplugging their phones and rolling file cabinets to their new spots swiftly.

But having grown to more than 600 workers, the company is facing a new problem: no one can remember who sits where.

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