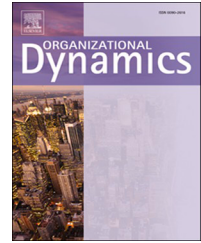


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Cultivating place identity at work

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Abstract

Despite growing interest in the effect of office design on organizational outcomes, we know relatively little about how physical space influences the formation of identity in the workplace. Borrowing from environmental psychology, we employ the concept of place identity, i.e., self-esteem and distinctiveness derived from one's physical setting, to explore the interplay between the places in which people work and how they describe their work experiences. In this paper, we describe how the process of introducing a new space to workers can enhance the swift formation of place identity, ultimately leading to enhanced collaboration, work engagement, and organizational commitment. We illuminate that while the physical design of office space matters, equally, if not more important, are the social conditions leaders cultivate within the space. Specifically, understanding the vision for a new office design, having leaders who model and convey a positive attitude about the space, and feeling empowered to adapt the space to meet one's needs upon move-in can positively impact how workers frame their identity in connection to their workplace. We build on these ideas by providing a set of best practices that leaders can use to support the formation of place identity and conclude by considering the implications of place identity for the hybrid and virtual workplace.

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Introduction

The changing nature of work in recent decades has brought about a reevaluation of the workplace. Out go cubicles in favor of open office layouts, ping pong tables, and bean bag

chairs. One of the goals in rethinking the office has been to support greater collaboration and engagement. Even with the dramatic rise in remote and hybrid work, the office remains a center for collaborative activity, and leaders are concerned about how to configure these settings to promote engagement and productivity most effectively. By leveraging concepts from environmental psychology and our own original research, we use a novel lens to understand workplace dynamics. Specifically, we present data from the rollout of Innovation Centers in a global technology firm and

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describe the role of *place identity* in fostering collaboration, engagement, and commitment. We conclude by speculating about how place identity may play out in remote and hybrid work.

Organizations invest heavily in office space design and renewal. And as globalization, emerging technologies, and the pandemic have changed the nature of work, this trend is only accelerating. Pre-pandemic, organizations such as Google, Genentech, Alibaba, IBM, SAP, and Microsoft devoted millions of dollars to the redesign of their offices in which walls and cubicles were replaced by workplaces frequently referred to in the popular press as open-office, activity-based, hoteling, and hot desking. Post-pandemic iconic office design firms such as MillerKnoll and Steelcase are making headlines for reimagining the workplace to support hybrid work. They argue that the office remains an anchor for work and a sandbox for collaboration and community building. Firms often assert office space design is a strategy to retain talent, encourage cross-functional collaboration, enhance exposure to different kinds of expertise, and hasten innovation.

Despite optimistic assertions about the benefits of workspace design, the empirical evidence is equivocal. Studies of how the physical setting, office objects (i.e., furniture, desks, etc.), and environmental factors such as noise and light affect workers' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors indicate that the same physical attributes of workspaces can create both desired and undesired outcomes. Open-plan office designs, for example, have been found in some studies to increase employee satisfaction and communication, reduce costs, and increase flexible and collaborative use of the space. In other studies, however, compared to private cubicles or offices, open-plan office designs have been found to lower perceptions of privacy, negatively impact performance, decrease communication, reduce satisfaction and motivation, and contribute to overstimulation and stress. These seemingly contradictory empirical results demand a better understanding of how workplace design affects organizational outcomes. Specifically, when does the redesign of physical spaces bring about desired behaviors or organizational results? And when does it fail? In this paper, we connect the concept of place identity, which has been used by environmental psychologists to understand the dynamics between people and public spaces, like parks, to understand workplace dynamics. According to Harold Proshansky and colleagues, the scholars who introduced the concept, place identity captures an individual's self-esteem and distinctiveness that is derived from the physical setting a person occupies or uses. In the following paper, we present data to illuminate place identity in an organizational setting and offer advice for leaders to cultivate place identity across organizational workplaces, including traditional offices and remote and hybrid work arrangements.

The Case for place identity: our research study of Innovation Centers

Our interest in place identity began while working on a research project examining the transfer of work practices in a

global software organization implementing Innovation Centers. The Innovation Centers were part of InnoTech's (a pseudonym for a global software development company) broader transition from traditional hierarchical and linear work processes to innovative, agile work methods. Unlike the more structured nature of their previous processes, InnoTech's new focus on agility relied on rapid iteration and adaptation involving collaboration across multiple stakeholders. The vision for the new space was to align the office space design with the new ways of working. The Innovation Centers departed drastically from the organization's prior workspaces, where leaders inhabited private offices, individuals worked in cubicles that separated them from other employees, and spaces specifically dedicated to collaboration were limited. The new Innovation Centers were designed as flexible, open work spaces intended to enhance worker interaction and communication and scaffold the transition from traditional work processes to innovative, agile work methods. The vision for the new space was to align the office space design with the new ways of working. Within and between the sites, however, we found there was great variety in how employees experienced the new work setting and the resulting outcomes.

We became curious about this phenomenon and began scanning existing research in an attempt to find plausible explanations. In this effort, we discovered scholarship on *place identity*. Proshansky and his colleagues argue that identity "is not restricted to making distinctions between oneself and significant others, but extends to objects and things, and the very spaces and places in which they are found." Although environmental psychologists have studied place identity for nearly 40 years, the focus has been on communities and public spaces rather than organizations. We began to wonder if the concept of place identity could help us understand why the Innovation Centers were experienced differently by different workers—leading to different outcomes, even within the same locations and organization.

To explore these ideas further, we conducted a second study to understand what was triggering these different responses - both positive and negative. Through our observations, interviews, and surveys, we sought to understand: is space a source of identity in organizations? And does this identity influence how individuals collaborate with one another, engage with their work, and commit to their organizations?

Place identity: the missing link to workers' varied experiences of space?

Our initial insights emerged over a 20-month study of three new Innovation Centers in InnoTech. In this first study, we observed and interviewed 57 employees at three sites located in the United States, China, and India. We started our research at each site in conjunction with the opening of each Innovation Center. This allowed us to capture the initial experiences of workers and observe how their experience of the workspace evolved over time. We interviewed and observed most members of the Innovation Centers at each location. Common to each interview were questions about members' (a) professional background and

experience, (b) typical work day, and (c) understanding of and experience within the new Innovation Center. A typical field day involved observing members' work practices, such as individual work and project meetings, participating in informal interactions, such as coffee chats and lunches, and conducting semi-structured interviews. We also attended numerous conference calls and joined Innovation Center members at social events. These observations were important for gathering behavioral data and detecting how workers made sense of their new work setting.

Before launching the Innovation Centers, workers at InnoTech worked in multi-story buildings in each location's primary campus. Most workers sat in cubicles on the same floor as their functional teams. When asked how this previous workspace compared to the Innovation Center, one individual shared, "[on campus] they are all in cubicles... that makes it different, you see, because you're only looking at your computer and three walls. You're not looking at anybody else. So, I feel like it's more formal." The furniture on campus was stationary and uniform from floor to floor. The color palette was consistent, often white or beige, and while there were occasional impromptu interactions, most work was done independently or in formal meeting rooms that required a reservation.

In contrast, the Innovation Centers were located in smaller buildings away from campus. Each Innovation Center included a variety of spaces that differed in the amount of natural sunlight. The colors of the walls varied but were typically in hues of orange, green, and purple. While most of the space was open, there were smaller rooms designed for impromptu meetings and private phone calls. The furniture included couches, bean bags, and portable whiteboards, as well as mobile desks and tables. Workers could choose where to sit on any given day. As one of the leaders expressed, "People do not sit necessarily with other team members, but they sit wherever they feel like, and most of the time, there is mixing across teams. Often where [people] sit is based on personal relationships." Some workers revealed that they sat where they felt most comfortable, either because they wanted to sit with a teammate or a friend or because they needed to be in a quieter location to do their work. Workers were also encouraged to personalize the space, which they did with the arrangement of desks and decorations, as well as bringing in snacks to share with the team and objects like instruments to create music together. Several of the walls were painted to serve as additional whiteboards and were littered with writing and post-its. Workers negotiated shared norms with regard to lighting and music.

What varied was the way in which people experienced the space, even within the same location, functional roles, and professions. One employee who worked at the Innovation Center but then returned to the main 'campus' listed the things he liked about the Innovation Center. First, he said, "I was able to make the space [my] own... [I also] liked how productive I was in the space. I used to finish my work every day by 4:00 p.m., and I had time to do research or follow blogs. Somehow, that just doesn't happen here on campus...something about the Innovation Centers helped me focus. It's like shutting yourself in your room at home to

study." In contrast, another worker shared, "It was too hard to communicate with people at the Innovation Center...for example, when we had to collaborate with people from other teams, they had to call or schedule a meeting request...it was also too hard to get a meeting room in the Innovation Center, and even once you were in the meeting room, everyone could hear everything that you were saying anyways." Notably, both individuals quoted were engineers, so their divergent experiences and opinions could not be explained by different job functions or professional identities.

We began to wonder why workers were having such different reactions to the same spaces. Initially, we thought there might be differences across locations, professional backgrounds, ages, or gender. Our observations and interviews, however, did not reveal these patterns. What we began to notice, instead, was that when workers had a positive experience in the space, they tended to focus on how the space connected to them personally, positively differentiated them and reflected a sense of belonging to something meaningful to them. As one worker revealed, "...you design the place, you think what needs to be in your design, oh I want to sit here. You design, the table has to be [there]. It's more like it's ours. There's a sense of 'my stuff'... and I think that's really exciting." Similarly, an individual shared, "I prefer informal environments, you know, so it's much friendlier. You have freedom of thought. And...if you want to sit with others, you have a place for that. If you want to sit alone, you have a place for that...So, I think, no matter what mood you are in throughout the day, you still have...someplace where you can sit."

Conversely, when workers had a negative interpretation of the space, they tended to focus on how the physical attributes of the space didn't align with what was meaningful to them. For example, one of the employees explained, "We've all been in the IT industry for three or more years. This makes us used to certain ways of an office. An office [should have] a perfect infrastructure, flooring, coffee machines, hot and cold water, and clean workspace." This individual saw himself as an established IT professional and did not appreciate the rough and rugged space, which he experienced as unprofessional.

Conversations in our research meetings would often steer us to discussions about how and why people identified or not with the Innovation Centers. It appeared that the physical space, and the way in which it was socialized, affected both how workers experienced the office aligning with their work identity and interpreted it as a place that could support them in doing their work. It seemed to us that what they described was distinct from other sources of work identity, such as team, professional and organizational identity. Existing theory, however, was inadequate to explain what we were seeing and hearing. When we encountered the concept of *place identity*, the dynamics we were observing began to make sense.

According to environmental psychologists, place identity rests on two primary assumptions. The first is that individuals develop a sense of belonging and purpose through personal attachment to geographic places, which gives them meaning and enhances their sense of self. The second

is that the physical environment is the backdrop where action and organizing occur. According to environmental psychologists, place identity evolves through the psychological investment that develops as we observe, think, and feel during our exchanges with the physical world.

Indeed, in our conversations, we noticed that people who described feeling connected to the Innovation Center also expressed more excitement about their work. As one leader shared, “The new space is not about efficiency, but about reshaping the way that the employee relates to work. It is about changing the atmosphere, making it fun, creating an emotional connection to the project, peers, the office, and the company.” As an employee said, “There is a chance for cross-information. So, for example, [if] we are talking about a problem we are facing, and somebody else [hears us and] might have a solution, [they] will come and say, I can deal with that. Which is amazing!” In contrast, others told us that the space negatively affected their connection to their work. They described concerns about privacy and how their inability to focus detracted from their work. As one worker said, “You know, as a marketer, as a professional marketer, we always want to stay in a place that is quiet. Sometimes, we have to focus on something.” Overall, we observed that workers who were positive about and felt connected to the new space described more fluid and rewarding collaboration, more excitement and engagement in their work, and more commitment to the organization.

Why place identity matters: collaboration, engagement, and commitment

To further examine our emerging insights about place identity, we followed up our interviews and observations with a second study in which we surveyed over 300 employees as they transitioned from traditional offices (cubicle/private offices) to Innovation Centers in France, Israel, and a location in the U.S. (different than the location of our first study).

The new offices were designed with the same features as in our first study, in which the physical space was open, and the desks and chairs were mobile. There were couches, bean bags, mobile whiteboards, and other colorful furniture configured to create gathering areas. The walls were painted in bright red, purples, and blues or with whiteboard paint. The large open spaces were divided by partitions into neighborhoods that allowed for openness and division simultaneously. We measured place identity, its drivers, and consequences three weeks after move-in and again four months later. In our survey at four months, we captured objective data about the physical attributes of the space, including measures of density, noise, and light, to understand whether differences in the physical attributes of the space between neighborhoods might impact place identity and, in turn, collaboration behaviors, feelings of work engagement and commitment to the organization. We focused on these work outcomes because they are associated with team and organizational performance.

Results from our second study, as suspected, reveal a relationship between place identity and collaborative behaviors, work engagement, and commitment. We discovered that those who expressed a greater connection to

the new workplace also communicated more informally with team members and perceived the communications as timely, clear, and free-flowing. Our results further show that place identity predicts work engagement. Engagement reflects a state in which employees are both dedicated to excellent performance and confident in their effectiveness. Finally, commitment to the organization was associated with place identity. That is, the more employees felt a connection to the new workplace, the more likely they were to care about the fate of the organization, feel the organization was the best place to work, express a willingness to put in effort more than what is normally expected to ensure the organization's success and believe that their personal values and the organization's values are aligned.

Overall, our data suggest that workers collaborate more actively with one another, are more engaged, and are more committed to the organization when there is more place identity. Our results also provide insight into actions leaders can take to promote place identity. In the following section, based on our research insights, we examine the factors differentiating those with a strong sense of place identity in the new Innovation Centers from those without.

Cultivating place identity

To better understand what contributed to place identity at InnoTech, our second study examined factors that were correlated with place identity. Specifically, we explored how understanding the vision of the space, the leader's attitude and enthusiasm about the Innovation Centers, and the extent to which employees felt they had the autonomy to configure the space as they liked influenced the development of place identity. We also wanted to differentiate the functional needs of a workplace from place identity, so we borrowed the concept of ‘place dependence’ from the environmental psychology literature to assess how the space met individuals' functional work needs.

Importantly, we also examined key attributes of the space (noise, light, and density of objects, such as desks and computers). We found that differences in the physical characteristics of the space did not significantly influence place identity. Our results, however, also show that although the *objective* measures of the physical space (e.g., noise, light, & density of artifacts) were not associated with place identity, individuals with higher levels of place identity *perceived* the physical attributes of the space more positively. For example, individuals who felt more identified with the workplace also perceived the space as more comfortable, of higher quality, and more private. This suggests that cultivating place identity requires more than attending to the physical attributes of the space. Accordingly, we next describe the conditions that were associated with heightened place identity: understanding the vision, leaders' attitudes, worker agency, and place dependence.

Understanding vision

Throughout our initial study, we observed differences within and across the locations in employees' understanding of the purpose and strategic vision behind the design of the Innovation Centers. People who developed strong place identity with the Innovation Centers understood that the

new workspace existed to support new ways of working that were innovative and collaborative. As one worker shared, “I actually prefer to work in the Innovation Center than on the main campus because it’s just like [how] we do design in school. Open space...open mind...and like freestyle working, rather than sit in your cubes.” Another worker agreed with this sentiment, saying, “The Innovation Centers are about a different type of work, different type of product, and a different type of work environment.” In contrast, other workers didn’t understand how the rough and rugged design of the space supported their work and expressed frustration with the workspace. As one worker shared, “it was cement flooring, and it was not finished flooring. Even if you walk in, by the time you come out from the Innovation Center, your whole pants [are] full of dust. Right, so you wouldn’t want to work in such conditions. And if we have to have a standard look [across the Innovation Centers]. understand either you will [irritate] the employees who are working there [or you need to] make [a] provision.” Similarly, another worker expressed, “I think [the ease of] communication [is] for sure a disadvantage because some people will be [easily] disturbed. So, if some people are concentrating [on] work and then people come over asking questions, for sure, this is a disadvantage.” As anticipated, our survey results confirmed that workers who were clear on why InnoTech invested in the new Innovation Center and how the design related to their day-to-day work also reported greater place identity. Whereas those who did not understand the vision for the space felt lower levels of belonging and connection to the new centers, reinforcing the importance of ensuring workers understand the vision of the space.

Leadership attitude and modeling

From our initial exploration, we noticed that leaders were an important source of social information and provided cues about the desirability of the new space after the move-in. When an organizational leader, for example, displayed a positive attitude towards the space, it helped workers understand the positive qualities of the workplace, how it aligned with their self-concept, their connection to their team, and how it could enhance their ability to do their work. As one worker commented, “I think the attitude of the people is very good here. [The attitude] should come from the managers. I mean, they are quite helpful, though they might be senior to us. But still, they are very helpful.” Leaders modeling the desired behavior in the space was also critical. In one transition into an Innovation Center that did not go smoothly, the manager rejected the idea of open office space and claimed a meeting room as his office, placing a sticky note declaring “Joe’s Office” on the door. The members of his team expressed confusion from the conflicting messages being conveyed by their direct manager and the vision set by senior leaders. The teams that embraced the new space were frequently those whose managers were sitting in the shared space, moving fluidly between different types of spaces (e.g., desks, huddle rooms, etc.), and eagerly interacting with their teams. Indeed, our survey results found that leadership attitude was strongly and significantly associated with place identity, suggesting leaders play an important role in modeling

appropriate behaviors and encouraging workers to embrace the new place.

Worker agency

As members began moving into the new innovation spaces, we also observed great variation in how workers exerted control over their environment by adapting their space to meet their needs and preferences as they worked. In some cases, workers kept the space as originally designed, while others moved the furniture on a daily basis or moved to different work areas depending on their work needs for a given day. When asked about the experience of other team members, one worker expressed, “Oh, they are extremely excited because for the first time, they are having the ability to choose our own furniture, their own space, everything by themselves, and that’s the sense of ownership that they’re getting by moving into the space.” In contrast, one worker shared that when she asked for input from other team members on their dream items and how they wanted to configure the space, “Some people said they would have to think about it; and while some of these people followed up with her, others said that they would follow up with her, but never actually did.” She went on to say, “no one seemed so excited.” Our survey results confirmed that feeling agency, the belief that employees have control over their environment was critical upon move-in to the Innovation Centers. That is, the ability to reconfigure and adapt the space contributed to a stronger sense of place identity. Alternatively, workers who experienced little influence to revise and tailor the space to meet their needs tended to feel a weak sense of place identity, highlighting the importance of establishing norms and practices that embolden workers to adapt the space.

Place dependence

As our observations unfolded in our initial study, we noticed differences in workers’ attitudes toward how the space supported how they preferred to work and their ability to work effectively. The open design of the space, for example, was perceived by some workers as highly effective, whereas for others, the open design impeded their ability to work. As one member shared, “I think the key thing I would never want to give up on is just having this kind of an open, collaborative environment, right? The fact that no questions asked, the teams can just...go in there, and that becomes their sort of war room, go ahead and do it. But I want to be able to have that kind of an environment and a facility where people can have their own little mini-war rooms, where they just simply sit together and plod through the most intense phase of a project. The fact that they can write on almost any wall...I mean, these are just tactical things, but I can’t tell you how valuable these things have been, just having access to all of this, right?” In contrast, another worker conveyed, “The downside of having meeting space in the middle of the room is that often meetings will go on right next to my desk that don’t involve me. If these meetings go on for more than an hour, they are disruptive. I guess it allows us to know what is going on with the other projects, but sometimes it is too much.” To tease apart the functional needs of the space from workers’ emotional

connection to the workplace, we wanted to understand how alignment between the office design and what workers perceive they need to get their job done is related to place identity. Not surprisingly, we found that more place dependence (i.e., belief the space meets a worker's functional work needs) was associated with greater place identity and was also positively associated with more collaborative interactions with team members, higher work engagement, and a stronger commitment to the organization. This further reinforces the importance of investing time to understand the work needs of employees in order to design spaces that meet those needs; and, if gaps emerge, to either clarify the aims of the space in supporting work or provide resources to make necessary changes.

Multiplex workplace identities

Through our discovery process, we also explored whether place identity is distinct from other forms of workplace identity, including team, organizational, and professional. We indeed found evidence that place identity is distinctive, and yet it also works in concert with other forms of workplace identity to buttress collaboration, work engagement, and organizational commitment. For example, place identity is particularly powerful in supporting workers' feelings of engagement with their work when they also have a strong team identity. Interestingly, we find that if another source of identity is low, place identity can step in to compensate. When team identity is low, for example, place identity can serve as a scaffold to keep engagement levels high.

In summary, our research shows that workers who understand the vision for a new workspace, perceive their leaders as positive, feel they can customize the space as needed, and believe the new design supports them in working effectively have a greater sense of place identity. We also find that place identity is important in encouraging collaboration, enhancing work engagement, and commitment to the organization and that it can serve to reinforce or compensate for other forms of work identity.

Best practices we discovered to cultivate place identity

Our research offers several points of prescriptive advice for organizational leaders, team managers, and individual employees seeking to foster collaboration, engagement, and commitment through place identity in their workplace. From what we observed, there were common behaviors among leaders whose teams had a strong sense of place identity. Below we offer some best practices that emerged from exemplary leaders in our study.

Broadcast the vision of the space

In the organization we studied, the strategic vision was communicated through multiple channels and contexts. InnoTech held workshops with leaders and employees when launching a new Innovation Center. The goal of these workshops was to provide workers with an understanding of

the aims of the space and to also provide them with an overview of how the space could be used to engage in new work practices. How the vision was communicated varied by leader and location. Prior to moving into the space, for example, one leader held team meetings to discuss the purpose of the space. He then created a forum where his team members could participate in helping to choose furniture. His objective was to enable a greater understanding of how the new workplace could support both InnoTech's mission as well as the work needs of the employees. In another center, leaders pulled workers into the vision creation process as a way of enhancing employees' connection to the space. The team in this center spent time prior to move-in visioning the goals for the space. The leaders provided workers with materials to construct furniture and the opportunity to participate in the actual buildout of the space. We observed that this Innovation Center had particularly high levels of place identity, suggesting that engaging employees early in developing and enacting the vision for a space may be a robust strategy for increasing place identity.

Model enthusiasm for the space

Ensuring workers understand the vision of a new workplace is an important first step. Equally important, however, are the actions leaders take to model enthusiasm for the new space upon move-in. We found the leaders who were most effective in conveying a positive attitude were approachable and helped team members through the transition from the traditional office space to the new open design. They regularly sat in the open office space, making themselves available to answer questions and provide insights into how the new space could best support new ways of working. Enthusiastic leaders were more likely to use the new space as intended, modeling flexibility and collaboration. They actively used the whiteboards and post-its available for brainstorming. They joined team lunch outings and encouraged socializing within the space. Leaders who displayed a positive attitude played an important role in branding the Innovation Centers as distinctive places where workers could be proud to belong.

Empower employees in the space

Leaders who want to promote place identity should encourage workers to tailor the space to suit their needs and preferences. Proactively encouraging workers to distinguish themselves by adding photos of family or other artifacts that reflect personal interests and lived experiences was one strategy we found leaders using. In several of the locations, leaders sent signals of empowerment by providing resources for workers to co-create spaces where they could connect and engage creatively. In one location, for example, workers created a space for sharing music; in another, the workers designed a kitchen space with a long farm-style table to cook and eat communally. Other leaders supported their teams in developing shared norms that encouraged workers to adapt the space to meet their needs best. Interestingly, the way leaders empowered employees was not uniform across Innovation Centers, further

reinforcing the message that workers could adapt each space to reflect their needs and preferences. We also observed that having furniture on wheels and temporary walls in the space made it possible and inviting for workers to adapt the space to their evolving needs. Despite the opportunity for flexibility, not all teams reconfigured their space regularly. In most cases, norms were negotiated within “neighborhoods” (composed of approximately 8-12 individuals who often worked together) - some of which chose to have unassigned desks and others that gravitated to sitting in the same places day after day. Our observation is that place identity was highest when the teams felt that they were able to choose what worked best for not only themselves individually but also their neighborhood.

Align function with form

While our research affirms the importance of the place identity of workers’ experience vis-a-vis a space, it does not replace the logistical and material ways that individuals depend on their workplace. In the Innovation Centers we studied, the organization established formal and informal opportunities for feedback loops. Any organizational transition is difficult, complicated, and unlikely to be perfect on the first attempt. The centers that were particularly successful in maximizing place identity established both types of channels for feedback and then acted responsively to the needs expressed by workers. The central leaders responsible for the Innovation Center rollouts kept in touch virtually with the managers and workers once they moved into the Innovation Centers. Key individuals advocated for the members of the Innovation Centers, for example, letting company leadership know if the extended internet needed to be strengthened or if the team preferred carpet over cement floors. One site developed a “Wish List” where individuals could track things they thought the space needed, such as more light or additional seating. Other members could add comments to advocate for a request, and leaders reviewed the list regularly to identify resources and provide feedback to workers for things that could not be addressed. In one location, the local leader created a forum workers could join to have input not only on the design selections prior to move-in but also to serve as a channel to provide feedback for enhancements after people began using the space.

Amplify complementary identities

Although the potential impact of place identity is significant, it is not a replacement for team, organizational, and professional identities. Our study, however, reveals the potential of place identity to enhance other coexisting identities. Accordingly, leaders should cultivate ways to support individuals’ multiple identities at work. One of the key ways InnoTech amplified team and organizational identity in concert with place identity was by using space to reinforce all three identities simultaneously. It was not uncommon, for example, for an entire team to inhabit a subsection of the Innovation Center. In these shared spaces, we observed personal artifacts sitting on an individual’s desk and team awards or symbols from a project in a

common space, serving to reinforce place and team identities concurrently. Similarly, members of the Innovation Centers would spend short stints visiting other locations. A member from the Innovation Center in China, for example, joined one of the Innovation Centers in the U.S. for three months. Travel to other locations afforded the transfer of best practices while also reinforcing a sense that the new Innovation Centers reflected the distinctiveness of the broader organization. For some workers, the new open office design either aligned or conflicted with what they felt was professionally normative. Designers appreciated the open office design where they could visually process information reminding them of their design school experiences. For other individuals, on the other hand, the space was very different from the spaces where they had previously worked, creating tension in their professional affinity. To help amplify both place and professional identity, leaders would highlight examples of other successful technical organizations who were using similar spaces and how the space supported a more agile and ultimately effective approach to software development.

In the end, leaders play an important role in cultivating place identity. Our data provide concrete actions that can be taken while also providing clear zones where leaders can focus on designing techniques and strategies that align with the industry, organizational goals, and the aims of the individuals nested inside the workplace. Although we didn’t examine organizational culture directly, we know from others’ research that workspace is intertwined with culture. That is, the workspace is a reflection of the culture, and office design, in turn, guides the development of the culture. As such, by cultivating place identity, leaders have the opportunity to further reinforce the desired culture of the organization.

We studied a technical firm, but argue that place identity is a fundamental human process, and the relationships that we describe likely hold across different industries, job types, personalities, and demographic characteristics. That is not to say that different people will not react differently to space - they will. But, the factors that promote place identity and the outcomes of place identity should remain constant. Specifically, in addition to our study of engineers and designers, with their varied personalities, the concept of place identity emerged from research conducted in public spaces, such as national parks, with a more heterogeneous population. Further, one of our co-authors has conducted research on Uber drivers and reports that they often experience a deep attachment to their cars (e.g., their workspaces), further suggesting that place identity may be an important feature across job types, personalities, demographic characteristics, and other individual differences.

It is also important to note that the organization studied in this paper invested heavily in the redesign of its physical office space. InnoTech selected leaders eager to bolster the initiative and provided them with resources to run workshops, adapt the spaces, host lunches, and engage and respond to employees as they engaged with the new spaces. While InnoTech invested heavily in fostering a connection to the space, the most critical investment may have been the time dedicated by leaders and employees to understand the vision and adapt the space. We also stress that although our

study took place in an organization undergoing a transition into a newly designed office space, we anticipate that leaders and organizations can cultivate place identity at any time and in any type of workplace (hybrid, virtual, in-person). Place identity may also be important to emphasize with new employees or when other shifts occur in the work context.

Place identity in the future workplace

Recent years have brought a sea change in the workplace, most notably the increase in remote and hybrid work. Although our study focused on in-person office space, the concept of place identity helps us to anticipate how organizations can create more engaging hybrid and remote workplaces. While we discuss remote and hybrid work as distinct work arrangements, we acknowledge that, in practice, organizations may include a combination of remote and hybrid work in a single company and perhaps even a single team.

Place identity in the hybrid workplace

Although place identity for hybrid work may be different from the in-person work we studied, there is every reason to expect that place identity plays a pivotal role in the hybrid office, the home office, and in co-working spaces, all places associated with hybrid work. Place identity may, in fact, be more important as workers transition between workplaces, confront changing space designs, and consider the behaviors that are possible.

We define the hybrid office as a workplace in which some workers reside some of the time. For example, members of a team may all come to the office on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays but work from home or elsewhere Mondays and Fridays. Alternatively, workers may come to the office a day or two a week but not necessarily be joined by their team members. The hybrid office is, therefore, a more fluid and less easily defined workplace, potentially making place identity more challenging to achieve. In the Innovation Centers we studied, workers did not have dedicated spaces, but teams typically did, so workers were able to personalize the space and have a sense of what to expect each day when they came to work. In hybrid workplaces, there is a risk of space becoming less personalized, which could undermine place identity.

To help mitigate these risks, we expect that communicating a compelling vision, leader modeling, empowering employees to adapt the space, and supporting place dependence will continue to matter and may, in fact, play a more central role as people transition between different kinds of spaces (i.e., office, home, elsewhere). First, leaders should communicate their vision for what work is best done in-person vs. remotely and how different types of work will be allocated across employees. Perhaps leaders suggest hybrid workers who spend some days of the week in the office should use that time for collaborative work, such as brainstorming sessions and workshops, and save heads-down work for the home office. Some have called this “intentional togetherness” - that is, being explicit about how time together is spent. Having a vision for how the different spaces

are used should enhance a sense of connection to both the office and home office workplace. Second, leaders could convey a positive attitude towards this approach by holding in-person meetings with their team on the in-office day and blocking time on their calendar during work-at-home days to make their allocation of solitary work tasks from home visible. In hybrid teams where some members are remote and rarely come to the office, the risk is that place identity will be weaker than the hybrid workers who come to the office. In these cases, leaders can work toward creating place identity in the digital spaces they share and also explore ways to create commonalities in their various workspaces that strengthen place identity. Third, encouraging workers to adapt the different workspaces as needed will continue to be imperative in the hybrid workplace. There may be some limits on employees’ ability to tailor and revise the work office, for example, as organizations may scale back on real estate, leaving individuals to negotiate a smaller physical space with a changing set of actors. To help overcome this new constraint, organizations could invite workers to participate in redesigning the new office spaces. This approach provides workers with the opportunity to personalize the design as they consider what is most important to them, given the ways in which they will use the in-person office space. The risk is that place identity in the office weakens, and place identity at home strengthens, thus making the pull to work from home greater. To retain the connection to the organization, leaders could provide resources for employees to tailor their home offices in a way that reinforces their connection to the team and the organization. Finally, organizations will have to remain attuned to the place dependence of their workers. While some work may require in-person collaboration that is suited to being in a shared office, employees may also have tasks that are best suited to do alone at home, such as solitary thinking or even phone calls with outside stakeholders that make them feel self-conscious of disrupting their colleagues in the open hybrid office space. To promote greater place identity, it will be important for leaders to continuously evaluate the different types of work and engage with employees to design spaces, whether at home or in the office, that meet their emotional and functional needs.

Place identity in digital spaces

Another post-pandemic phenomenon is that workers spend a substantial amount of their time in virtual spaces, such as video conferencing rooms. Many teams are also geographically distributed and have few opportunities to share a physical space together. We argue that digital spaces are also workplaces and may offer the opportunity for developing place identity. In fact, many workers personalize their virtual backgrounds and/or tidy or compose their workspace to convey a particular identity or mood. We encourage leaders to attend to these virtual spaces and consider how to foster place identity in them, despite not sharing a physical setting. Leaders could convey a vision for how video conferences are used on a team, perhaps as a place of levity and connection or a place of efficiency. Leaders might encourage team members to customize their virtual backgrounds or have personal items within the video frame in

order to promote a sense of control and ownership. Or they might suggest the use of organizational backgrounds when working with external constituents to buoy both place and organizational identity.

Place identity in remote work

Even if workers are not coming into an office, place identity is still a feature of the home office and coworking spaces. Although organizations have less influence over these workplaces, organizational leaders may still want to verify that place identity is felt and offer support for creating a stronger sense of connection and emotional attachment to the workplace.

First, leaders should communicate their vision for a remote organization. For example, even before the pandemic, many organizations were remote in order to save costs or support employee choice. Currently, issues of work-family balance and changing state laws about reproductive care dominate many conversations. If organizations are remote in order to live their values around involved parenting or access to reproductive and abortion care, they can make this explicit. This would have the added benefit of potentially strengthening other identities, which our research found was one way to maximize place identity. Second, leaders can continue to model remote workplace connection. Suppose the goal of working from home is to support work-family balance. In that case, leaders might make family photos visible or take the opportunity of a four-legged friend walking across the screen to briefly introduce their team to the family pet. Third, a sense of ownership will continue to matter, and employees may feel more freedom to adapt their home workplace than in the company office. Organizations could offer budgets to support employees in adding infrastructure to their homes, perhaps an ergonomic chair to make a bedroom office desk more sustainable or a screen to block the visual of toys in a repurposed playroom.

Conclusion

Although the pandemic has changed our conceptualization of the workplace, organizations still actively seek to understand how to cultivate a sense of belonging to the workplace while achieving flexible work arrangements. The findings from our study suggest that while the physical attributes of the space may be important, the way in which material space is interpreted, experienced, and socialized can also serve as a source of identity in the workplace. Helping workers to understand the organizational vision for a workspace, encouraging leaders to convey a positive attitude towards the spaces workers inhabit (non-hybrid, hybrid, digital, or remote), ensuring individual agency in adapting the physical environment to meet work needs, and utilizing space to strengthen team, organizational and professional identities simultaneously contribute to place identity. Place identity, in turn, can propel more effective collaboration, fuel workers' engagement, and increase commitment to the organization, all of which have been linked to productivity in organizations. Ultimately, weighting the social as much as the physical in designing and implementing new workplaces may ultimately meet the

needs of critical stakeholders - employees - and deliver the advantages organizations hope to achieve.

Suggested Readings

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Seminal research on the importance of engagement at work can be found in Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692-724.

For more information about the core properties of human agency, the different forms it takes, its development, and its effect, see Bandura, A. (2006). Toward a Psychology of Human Agency. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 1(2), 164-180. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6916.2006.00011.x>

For an earlier paper published from our observations at the Innovation Centers at InnoTech, see Vaerlander, S., Hinds, P., Thomason, B., Pearce, B.M., & Altman, H. (2016). Enacting a constellation of logics: How transferred practices are recontextualized in a global organization. *Academy of Management Discoveries*, 2(1), 79-107.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

The authors of Cultivating Place Identity at Work (Brandi Pearce, Pamela Hinds, Bobbi Thomason, Heather Altman, and Sara Vaerlander Winterstorm) contributed to all aspects involved in the development of this work.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors of Cultivating Place Identity at Work (Brandi Pearce, Pamela Hinds, and Bobbi Thomason, Heather Altman, and Sara Vaerlander Winterstorm) do not have any declarations of interest to report.

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