

Art Works! The importance of art in the workplace

Research, including that reported in this issue of *Work&Place*, has demonstrated that the workplace can affect job satisfaction, motivation, creativity, mood and productivity. Various aspects of the workplace have been isolated for individual consideration, but they have tended to be the easily measureable aspects like temperature and air quality. However, there is emerging evidence to suggest that the other less tangible and potentially more subjective aspects of the workplace should also be considered. One such aspect of the workplace is the installation of artwork. The incorporation of artwork in workplaces has increased, but is it merely decorative or can it be having a positive impact upon organisations and their employees?

Art in the workplace

Accepting that the workplace matters, we set out to discover whether artwork plays a role in the positive impact that the working environment can have upon people. A survey by New Hampshire Business Committee for the Arts and the International Association for Professional Art Advisors (IAPAA) (2003) revealed that over 800 workplace occupants surveyed across the USA felt that art was an important element of their workplace environment. They reported that it had a very positive impact upon them by reducing stress and broadening employee appreciation of diversity. They also felt that artwork helped to increase their creativity, productivity and enhance morale. Overall, 82% of respondents felt that artwork was important.

More holistic studies of the whole workplace environment have revealed that artwork has a significant impact upon people's satisfaction with their environment overall. However, in Dr Thomas' doctoral research (Thomas, 2010) provision of artwork was frequently rated as being the least satisfactory aspect of the workplace environment by the 350 workplace occupants who took part. Whilst many organisations had installed artwork in their reception area and meetings rooms, very few of them had incorporated any artwork in the main office area. Within the research 16 different workplaces

were evaluated to discover the impact that the workplace as a whole was having upon satisfaction, stimulation levels and perceived productivity. The results of the research highlighted that 70% of workplaces had no artwork installed in the main office area and 95% of people could not see a piece of artwork from their workstation clearly demonstrating that artwork provision is being neglected.

The team behind the Leesman Index (see page 23) support these findings, reporting that 85.1% of the 7000 plus people who have completed their survey were dissatisfied with the artwork provision in their offices, but 50% thought it was an important part of their workplace environment (Leesman, n.d.).

Thomas also found that perceptions of artwork were significant predictors of satisfaction with the workplace and how stimulated people felt by their working environment. The more people liked their artwork the higher their levels of satisfaction and the more alert they felt in the workplace environment, and when people had artwork in their main office environment they tended to be more satisfied. For an example of where this has worked well, see Case Study Square One (page 10).

Other aspects of the workplace environment studied within the research may also affect the impact of artwork. In particular choice in the design of the workplace which was very strongly correlated with satisfaction. The more choice people had in the design of their workplace, including the artwork installed, the more satisfied they were. For an example, see Case Study Deloitte (page 11).

So if we accept the research findings that the installation of artwork in the workplace is important, how exactly is artwork having an impact? Can the workplace environment affect people by motivating them and increasing how alert they feel at work? To test this theory Thomas conducted some experimental work based upon her evaluation studies. This involved systematically changing aspects of an existing workplace and discovering whether it affected how alert people felt in their workplace environment. The experiment

Case Study: Square One

Following a company-wide training scheme, IT recruitment specialists Square One Resource wanted to introduce images reflecting what had been discussed. Works in Print was commissioned to work with one of the managers, source pictures and install them in the back office. Key in this project was the inclusion of art in the main workspace. Inspirational sports figures like Bannister, Ali and Wilkinson were chosen. Life-size vinyl cut-outs were created to fit in with the modern sleek design of the space, with corporate-colour detailing. The idea behind using vinyl was twofold: the client wanted the art to be reflective of a 'clean-cut' graffiti style and to ensure ease of removal. This was not because they were unsure of the concept or collection, but because they plan to change the entire collection regularly. They felt that regular changes of artworks would be an important factor in keeping staff engaged and enthused.



included changing the colour of the walls by washing them with coloured light, changing the temperature and air movement, providing access to a new breakout space, giving people more personal control of the internal climate and the addition of artwork. The artwork was projected on the wall and consisted of a range of nature scenes which were changed daily.

Of all the aspects changed, the biggest impact came from the introduction of artwork. When assessing how alert people perceived themselves to be in the afternoon, during the traditional post-lunch slump in concentration, compared with the morning there was less of a dip reported when there was artwork displayed. Qualitative data collected in the study revealed that this effect was the result of a number of factors which included providing people with something to look at rather than their work and giving people something to talk about which promoted social interaction.

In light of this we were interested in further exploring the power of artwork in the workplace. Our starting point was the field of art appreciation, to establish how it is embedded within our culture, and to understand the relationship between artwork and people.

Art appreciation

Culturally, art can define nations. Socially, we dedicate great institutions to art. And financially, it is a multi-billion industry in most countries and currencies. The art industry's products receive great media attention, which everyone has an opinion on. Whether positive or negative, art inspires conversation. We are taught it from an early age, we appreciate it at school, we have it on the walls of our home but we forget about it in our workplaces. Yet, as mentioned above, we have found that the provision of art in the workplace is a neglected area, despite its obvious cultural significance.

Research undertaken into the importance of art in education showed that 93% of people agreed that the arts are vital to providing a well-rounded education for children,

and that 83% believed that arts education helps teach children to communicate effectively with adults and peers. Research into collective decision making in care homes also referred to the importance of displaying "recognisable artefacts that have meaning" to the residents. The paper went on to focus on the importance of the idea of collective decision making; indeed later, we propose that this 'empowerment' is just as important in ensuring the art of a workplace works. So if art positively affects the young and the old, and we think it is tantamount to our education, is it such a jump to think it has a positive impact at work?

And if that is the case, why are we forgetting about it in the place many of us spend most of our daylight hours?

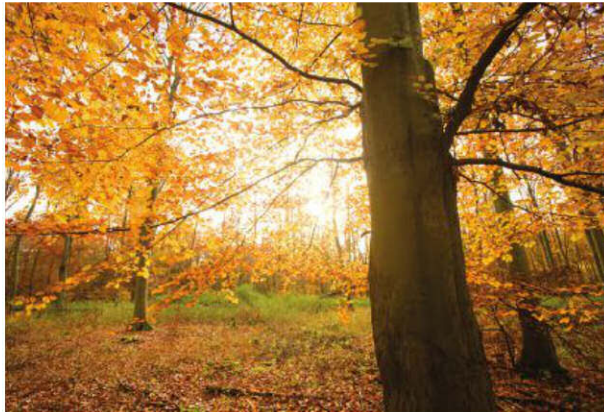
At the heart of The Arts Council England's *raison d'être* for 2011-15 is to get more people to experience and to be inspired by the arts. Their publication, *Achieving Great Art for Everyone*, the product of an exhaustive consultation process, states that success of their experience/engagement goal is that there will be "an increased likelihood of people's engagement in the arts, irrespective of their socio-economic or educational background." Our national institutions are behind the move to have more people experience and interact with art. We want to take this a step further and prove that a well-thought out, relevant provision will increase well-being, satisfaction, happiness and even productivity in a workplace.

Art Works! – pilot studies

Patrick McCrae's company, Works in Print, has been supplying artwork to workplaces in the UK for two years, and has placed around 1,000 pieces. From this experience, an understanding has developed concerning how and why organisations select artwork for their workplaces. Despite a belief that preferences for artwork are very subjective, McCrae has observed patterns in peoples' preferences for the types of art they would include in certain spaces in the workplace.

Based upon this observation, and the research evidence, we have started to explore whether it is possible to understand more about the positive impact that artwork can have, and how this can be harnessed by organisations. We have conducted some initial pilot studies to gauge the reasoning behind the selection of artwork and also to establish what people really think of the artwork in their workplaces.

Through a series of presentations to architects, facilities managers and others involved in the selection or commissioning of artwork we have gathered information on the types of artwork people might choose for different areas of the workplace. From the wide range of artworks available through Works in Print, a selection of 40 pieces was



reproduced as postcard-sized images. People attending Art Works! presentations were asked, in groups, to select the two pieces of artwork which they felt would be most appropriate for different areas of the workplace such as meeting rooms and the main office, and to support different activities including concentration and well being. If the assertion that peoples' preference for artwork is entirely subjective were true, we would expect very different pieces of artwork to be selected by different groups. However, the results from running this activity to date have produced some interesting commonalities.

We have found that people's reasoning for selecting images for most of the areas, particularly meeting rooms, was consistent. People felt that artwork in a meeting space should not be too distracting but should offer something interesting to look at if people wanted a brief mental break from what was being discussed. The main office was the area for which most people found it difficult to select a piece of artwork. The nature of the organisation and the type of work that people were doing was felt to be very important to inform the decision and as they weren't given this as a term of reference it was difficult. Even once a self-imposed organisational type was specified, people still found it difficult to decide whether the artwork should be interesting to offer people a mental break from their work, whether it should be aspirational or inspire creativity, or whether it should be calming to allow people to focus on their work and concentrate. This led to the selection of a wide range of images depending on what people felt artwork in the main office should achieve. It was interesting to note that the area of the workplace people struggled with the most was the area that was found in Thomas' research to be the least populated with artwork, the main office. This leads us to question whether

there is a lack of art in the main office because people do not know what artwork to install to have a positive impact.

The choices of artwork based upon activities also produced some consistencies. When asked to select images for well being and relaxation similar images were selected by the majority of people. Images tended to be of nature scenes. This is supported by the work of Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) who found that several elements – including 'fascination', a perception that the environment extends beyond the view, and other attributes - images of natural environments were those that had the most positive impact upon the restoration of concentration levels. In fact, over 75% of people selected the same image to include in the workplace to promote well being (see left). The artwork selected and reasoning given for areas where people needed to concentrate produced different responses. Some people felt that the artwork should offer a distraction and, in itself, be something that requires people to concentrate on 'to work it out'. Others felt the artwork should be a calm and fairly simple image which did not distract people at all, so they were able to focus more easily on their work. Again, different responses were given, but the reasoning led to similar images being selected depending on which of the groups people fell into in terms of the impact they felt the artwork should have.

To understand more about the impact of artwork on workplace occupants we conducted a small pilot study with employees of Peel Hunt, for whom Works in Print installed a series of artworks. The brief was to ensure that the art reflected the client's position as a reputable City financial institution. Works in Print held discussions with the interior designer, project manager, facilities manager and executives to select the collection. The artwork reflected the finer details of their high-end fit out, their City location, and was reflective of their brand. A survey of staff revealed that they were satisfied with the artwork installed. However, they would have liked some artwork to be installed in their main office areas as well

Case Study: Deloitte

The Deloitte project highlights the importance of empowering the staff in choosing a new art collection. Following a refurbishment of their Cambridge office, one of the Senior Partners wanted to theme their meeting rooms. The staff were asked to submit ideas, and it was turned into a competition. The winning idea was Footlights Presidents. Through the archives, we sourced images of the likes of Fry, Laurie, Cook, Oddie and Frost. We commissioned a digital artist to work on the project, and he themed the images using Deloitte's corporate colours and added his unique style. The images were very well received; the senior partner said the work was "an interesting talking point and has been a great success with staff and clients alike."

By empowering staff and getting them involved in the project, we were able to ensure that people embraced the idea and that when the final collection was installed they felt a sense of ownership of their workplace.





as the meeting rooms and circulation spaces. There were also mixed responses when asked whether they would like the artwork to be changed on a regular basis. Around half of the respondents wanted it to stay as it was. However, the artwork had only recently been installed and people liked it, so may have been concerned they would get something they didn't like if it was changed. Most striking from the results was that there was a unanimous response when people were asked to chose their favourite piece of art installed in the workplace. It was a painting of the Palace of Westminster and the St. Stephen's Tower (see above). These results add further weight to the argument that artwork is not entirely subjective and that the selection of artwork in terms of subject, colour, style and maybe even media could have a positive impact upon employees and the occupying organisation.

What next?

We have discussed some of the research to date, highlighted case studies, and some important aspects to consider when choosing an art collection. But, this paper is really the start of a greater movement to codify the importance of art in an office; to show that art does work. We have shown that the research conducted to date highlights that art is important, but it is not comprehensive and further study is needed to answer questions raised by this paper. Our future research will therefore focus on the impact of art in relation to factors such as well being, motivation, creativity and ultimately productivity. To be able to assign a value to art (over and above the cultural, the aesthetic and the monetary value) in relation to its relevance and engagement of the people of an organisation, will be ground breaking.

We are in discussions to progress the "Art Works!" programme with some significant arts institutions and occupiers in the UK. We are looking for:

- organisations with whom we can further our research
- office occupiers to talk to as part of the round table discussions that will frame the details of the research;
- arts institutions who believe what we believe.

Art is often forgotten about and dealt with absent-mindedly, leaving one of the most prominent aesthetic centrepieces of a workplace looking either out of place or irrelevant. If we can discover how it can be viewed as an asset, having a positive impact upon people and the overall organisation, the decision to include art can be significant and well informed. **W&P**

Jenny Thomas

Jenny Thomas is Director of Performance Consultancy, an organisation specialising in evidence based design and post-occupancy evaluation. Her doctoral thesis was entitled "An Holistic Evaluation of the Workplace. Understanding the Impact of the Workplace Environment on Satisfaction, Perceived Productivity and Stimulation."

Patrick McCrae

Patrick McCrae is Director of Works in Print, an office art company. Established in 2009, WIP has the vision to provide a rented changing collection of art to occupiers while giving artists an almost unprecedented 'paid-for' exhibition.

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Editor's footnote:

This is a promising partnership between two young and talented people: entrepreneur and art-lover, Patrick, and academic/consultant Jenny. You will read more about Patrick and Jenny over the next few years, I am very sure. This paper is also another great example of 'real science' being applied to elements of the workplace. Do please join this discussion with Jenny, Patrick and others on our [Work&Place LinkedIn Group](#).