



## We're All in This Together

### Workplaces That Fulfill Our Need for Belonging



#### Key Insights

- **Belonging is a fundamental human need that affects engagement and productivity at work.**
- **As humans, our brains are wired to seek positive social experiences.**
- **An essential aspect of belonging is helping and being helped by others in our group.**
- **Physical proximity is as important as management methods and technology tools in promoting a sense of belonging.**
- **Places and settings that encourage positive human interaction help fulfill the need to belong and make meaningful connections.**

The need for belonging is a powerful and fundamental motivator of human behavior. Scientific studies have found links between belonging and cognitive processes, behavioral responses, and physical and emotional health and well-being. In their seminal paper, “The Need to Belong,” professors Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary write: “Much of what human beings do is done in the service of belongingness.”<sup>1</sup>

Experienced as inclusion, affiliation, acceptance, and social validation, belonging is epitomized by the feeling among members of a group that “we’re all in this together,” sharing common experiences, goals, and challenges.

## Belonging affects engagement and productivity.

A recent study found that business leaders can increase employee engagement and improve performance by helping their staff to identify with the organization and create meaningful connections. “Leaders who create a strong sense of ‘us’ and a sense of belonging within their teams help staff to feel more positive about their work,” according to the lead researcher, Dr. Niklas Steffens from the University of Queensland, Australia. “This feeling translates to increased levels of engagement.”<sup>2</sup>

The importance of belonging and its effect on engaging employees was one of the findings that informed the development of Living Office®, a high-performing workplace that delivers an elevated experience of work for people, and helps organizations achieve their strategic goals. Herman Miller has been exploring ways in which tools and technology and workplace design—in addition to management methods like the one outlined above—can affect belonging at work. Belonging is one of the six fundamental human needs we identified based on an in-depth review of literature, study, and research from the past 80 years. From among that substantive body, we arrived at the six needs that we believe are fundamental to all people: achievement, autonomy, belonging, purpose, security, and status.

Focusing on belonging, our Insight + Exploration team conducted a global investigation of knowledge workers. The team found important relationships between a sense of belonging and certain workplace attributes. For example, balancing workplace technologies with spaces that encourage face-to-face interactions helps improve knowledge workers’ perceptions of belonging at work, as does creating a workplace that supports collaboration, mobility, and proximity to fellow workers.

To further understand the connection between belonging (along with other fundamental human needs) and the built environment, Herman Miller’s Human Dynamics + Work group collaborated with architects and designers at Rapt Studio, NELSON design, and HOK. We asked these professionals to share design features, settings, and place attributes from recently completed projects that support fundamental human needs.

We highlight some of their design ideas here, connecting them to findings about ways the human brain is programmed for social interaction, and to explore how place can help people make the meaningful connections that enhance well-being, engagement, and performance at work.



## Community spaces that encourage employee interaction do a good job of supporting the need for belonging.

For a foundation client in New York, HOK designed a tea room that serves breakfast in the morning, tea in the afternoon, and informal activity all day long. It serves as a welcoming, public space where employees can meet and engage socially.

For a client in Milan, Italy, NELSON design created a “work/café” with a variety of seating options—from a social bar to private booths—to support planned or spontaneous casual interactions. Busy all day, and used by everyone, it’s a place to take a break, grab a coffee, or work alone away from the desk. Its popularity makes it the perfect place to encounter people from all areas of the organization.

At the Herman Miller Design Yard (shown above), a Plaza setting features lounge areas and a coffee bar where people can gather to interact with coworkers. With a variety of places to work and many opportunities to connect with others, the setting has become a people-magnet.

## Our brains are wired for belonging.

Human beings are neurologically wired to seek positive social experiences. These encounters stimulate the brain to release oxytocin, a neuropeptide that has the effect of increasing feelings like empathy and trust, making people more cooperative and caring towards others within the group.<sup>3</sup> Recent research conducted by the Claremont Graduate University Center for Neuroeconomics Studies on behalf of Herman Miller showed that open spaces with some ambient noise and foot traffic (“buzz”) actually enhance these feelings.

Other neuroscientific research has demonstrated that the human brain processes positive social experiences in the same reward centers that process positive physical experiences such as eating a favorite food. Conversely, people excluded from a group activity as simple as tossing and catching a ball were found to process this social rejection in the areas of the brain that process actual physical pain.<sup>4</sup>

The need to belong can be a huge motivating factor in the workplace; its fulfillment has positive effects on productivity,

performance, loyalty, and *esprit de corps*. Organizational cultures that foster participation, use technology platforms that enhance opportunities to connect, and provide inviting settings for collaboration and social interaction can improve effectiveness, reduce stress, and attract and engage talented employees.

A major finding of our global investigation of knowledge workers indicates that a sense of belonging can be improved through a balance of workplace technologies and spaces that encourage face-to-face interactions.

Rapt Studio supported belonging in an especially innovative way for one of its clients, the GE Design Center. A 360-degree immersive environment that digitally transports design teams to the locations where their solutions will be put to use combines the latest technology with a place that supports in-person communication. By using technology to heighten the experience of being together, GE is giving its design teams tools that reduce one element that gets in the way of people feeling like they belong: distance.



For the GE Design Center, Rapt Studio created a 360-degree immersive environment. It digitally brings people together to overcome one element that gets in the way of people feeling like they belong: distance.



## A place that provides “instant proximity”

For the GE Design Center, Rapt Studio created a central working space called the “collaboration machine” where people from different areas of the organization can quickly create a place to work together. Equipped with sliding walls and mobile furniture, the space can be expanded, contracted, subdivided, and rearranged to meet the needs of the moment.

## Proximity is important to our relationships.

Research shows that the need for belonging is satisfied by “regular social contact with those to whom one feels connected.”<sup>5</sup> Physical proximity turns out to be a potent factor in creating and maintaining these essential relationships.

In one landmark study, employees were asked to complete a project with coworkers they believed to be located across the building, across the nation, or across the globe. In actuality, all participants were in the same physical location, so proximity was purely a matter of perception. The study found that perceived distance had a significant impact on behavior: follow-through, openness, trust, and work completion were all positively correlated with perceived proximity. People felt more responsible and connected to people they believed were located in the same building.<sup>6</sup>

Our own global investigation of knowledge workers found “proximity to fellow workers”—along with support for “mobility” and “collaboration”—to be a significant feature of workplaces that enhance a sense of belonging.

Organizations can exploit the power of proximity by locating team members and teams based on important work relationships and by providing a variety of settings where colleagues who are not situated near each other can meet up or run into each other on a regular basis. Workspaces that offer visual access and convenient guest seating let passers-by see when others are available for a quick chat. For mobile workers, it’s important to provide a place they can call “home” when they’re in the office. A drop-in workstation, a lockable file for storing work materials, a place to meet and chat with coworkers—these signal to the mobile worker that they belong.

# White Paper

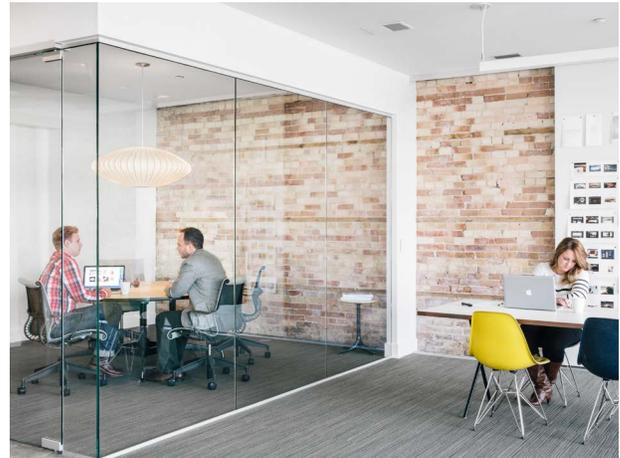
## Humans are wired to help others.

An essential aspect of belonging is helping and being helped by other members of the group. A sense of belonging increases a person's willingness to voluntarily assist others with work-related problems, and studies show that those who offer help reap intrinsic rewards that include a sense of purpose as well as increased feelings of belonging and community.<sup>7</sup>

The rewards are also neurological. One study demonstrated that people process both the experience of being comforted and the experience of providing comfort to someone else in the same area of the brain where they process physical rewards. In many cases, the person giving comfort experienced the greater reward response.<sup>8</sup>

Workplaces can be designed to promote opportunities for helpful connection by paying careful attention to lines of sight, so coworkers can easily see one another, and by providing furnishings that allow for convenient, spontaneous interaction. When workplaces provide a foundation for attachment, they contribute to employees' feelings of connection and engagement and—ultimately—to the success of the organizations they work for.

To learn more about how Herman Miller's Living Office can create an environment that fulfills the need for belonging and other fundamental human needs—achievement, autonomy, purpose, security, status—please visit [HermanMiller.com/Living-Office](https://www.hermanmiller.com/living-office).



## The use of transparent boundaries, such as glass on chat rooms helps support quick collaboration.

For its client in Milan, NELSON used glass fronts on chat rooms designed to support quick collaboration. The glass not only makes it easy to see if the rooms are occupied, it also gives passers-by a glimpse of who is inside and possibly a hint of what is being discussed or worked on, providing the opportunity to jump in with a bit of helpful information or a relevant idea, something this client's culture values.

At Concept A, a graphic design firm (shown above), a glass-walled Meeting Space located near work areas gives designers a nearby place to meet for impromptu conversations or brief chats.

# White Paper

1. Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation." *Psychological Bulletin*, vol.117, No.3, 497-529. 1995.
2. University of Queensland, "Workplace leaders improve employee well-being." *UQ News*, December 17, 2014.
3. Paul J. Zak and Jorge A. Barraza, "The Neurobiology of Collective Action," *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, 7, 211. 2013.
4. Matthew D. Lieberman. *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*. Crown, 2013.
5. Baumeister and Leary, "The Need to Belong."
6. Karen Sobel Lojeski and Richard R. Reilly. *Uniting the Virtual Workforce: Transforming Leadership and Innovation in the Globally Integrated Enterprise*. Wiley, 2008.
7. Nathaniel M. Lambert et al., "To Belong Is to Matter: Sense of Belonging Enhances Meaning in Life," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* vol. 39 no. 11, 1418-1427. November 2013.
8. Lieberman. *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*.