**Your Perfect Fit   
Work Environment**

*Whether you have just one site or a diverse range of offices, worksites and working environments, reviewing where each environment sits on the five continuums below can help you assess how close you come to that highly elusive “perfect fit environment” and the areas where you have work to do.*

**Self-Check**

Health, Safety and Wellness

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| Basic/legal safety requirements not met |  | Basic/legal safety requirements met |  | Basic requirements met & further improvements underway |  | Environments designed for optimum safety & health of workers |  | Effective wellness initiatives in place |  | Health, safety & wellness are significant focus areas. Initiatives go well beyond legal requirements |

[See more here](#HSW)

Functionality

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| Basic functional needs of workers are not met |  | Basic needs of workers sometimes met, issues with tools and equipment required for the job |  | Workplace is suitable for work being undertaken |  | Tools and equipment required for the job are generally available/workable |  | Workplace has been specifically designed  with functionality in mind, with actual users consulted |  | Highly functional workplace environment, with right tools/equipment always available as needed |

[See more here](#Functionality)

Pride

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| Workers describe being embarrassed by their work environment & have no control over their environment |  | Workers have little ability to make changes, and show a lack of care for their environment |  | Workers are able to exert some control and make some changes over their environment |  | Workers keep the environment in a tidy and fit state. Tools such as 5S may be in place to assist this |  | All workers have an appropriate level of control of their environment & can make changes where needed |  | Workers show significant pride in their environment & therefore treat it with a high level of respect |

[See more here](#Pride)

Reflecting Who We Are

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| The environment is at odds with our values, purpose and/or culture we wish to achieve |  | The environment neither adds to or detracts from our values, purpose or identity |  | Some attempts have been made to reflect our purpose/values through use of posters, artwork etc. |  | Changes have been made to the layout/ design of the environment to better match the organisation’s purpose/values |  | The physical environment clearly reflects & supports the purpose & values of the organisation |  | Team members describe the environment as inspiring, showcasing our unique strengths & sense of identity |

[See more here](#Reflect)

Flexibility

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| All team members must adhere to rigid work hours on-site & there is little opportunity for flexibility |  | Some flexibility is available to team members though a formal request & acceptance process, not necessarily encouraged |  | Flexible work practices are made available where roles lend themselves to flexibility |  | Most team members have some form of flexibility available to them and are encouraged to consider flexible options |  | Flexibility is easy for team members to access, role-modelled by leaders, & staff are empowered to be flexible |  | Innovative solutions have been developed to allow all team members access to some flexibility at work |

[See more here](#Flexibility)

**Health, Safety and Wellness**

Health and safety are hygiene factors for your business and for your environment. There is little point in spending valuable resources (time or money) creating a beautiful, inspiring place to work if you people are not safe there. Consider this short clip:

[**https://youtu.be/TwQRXSvgm5o**](https://youtu.be/TwQRXSvgm5o)

Enough said.

When considering the development of your perfect fit work environment, health, safety and wellness should always be your starting point.

Wherever you operate in the world, you are likely to have regulatory/legal requirements which will drive a certain level of health, safety and wellness compliance. This is a great place to start. Once you are fully compliant, you can then consider initiatives that take you from “compliant workplace” to “workplace that genuinely cares about the welfare of workers”. You can guess which is more beneficial to driving a strong workplace culture.

Health and safety at work is a highly technical area and you may well have specialists already employed in this field. If so, speak with them about initiatives that can drive your H&S from compliant to best-in-class. If you don’t have access to in-house experts, find an external H&S firm who can partner with you to help you drive excellence in this area.

**Wellness**

Of course, employee wellness is about more than just preventing accidents and personal protective equipment (although both a very important). More and more, organisations are also addressing the mental and physical wellbeing of their people, on order to ensure not just that the work environment doesn’t cause harm, but in many cases, that it actually improves the wellness of employees. It makes good business sense too, according to the Human Capital Management Institute, companies that invested just US$1 per person in well-being initiatives outperformed their peers and experienced a 11.7% productivity gain.

When considering possible wellness initiatives, here are some questions to ask yourself:

Are there aspects of the work environment that may have a negative impact on wellness, for example highly stressful work, long working hours, shift work, time away from family etc.?

If so, focus initiatives in these areas. For example, where team members are having to deal with stressful or emotionally taxing situations (think complaint lines, counsellors, youth workers, emergency workers etc.) you may wish to consider resilience training, group support systems, professional supervision etc, to help these workers deal with the situations they must face on a daily basis.

Do your team members keep good physical and mental health generally?

Initiatives that help team members to be healthier physically and mentally, and more active are a great way to give back. However, a word of caution – ensure any initiatives are culturally sensitive aren’t considered condescending or overly invasive. This will likely depend on the workforce and there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution.

Consider the example of an organisation with many international sites. Each year they came out with different health initiatives. One year they decided to provide “helpful” tips about healthy eating, along with other activities. One such “healthy eating” tip was *“Did you know that bananas can be eaten raw?”*. While this may have been a revelation (maybe) for some employees in the country where it originated, in other countries it was considered so condescending that it turned workers off the whole initiative.

The same company decided to monitor success by, among other measures, weighing employees regularly throughout the initiative. Luckily the company saw sense before initiating the weigh-ins. Again, in the country where this initiative was developed, it wouldn’t have been an odd thing to do, but employees in other countries probably would have handed in resignations and taken legal action long before joining the weigh-in line.

Do team members maintain a healthy balance between work and life? (Or do you have employees “burning the candle at both ends”?)

If this is an issue in your workplace, consider whether your leaders are setting the right example themselves. Are they leaving at a reasonable time and encouraging their staff to do the same? Are workloads reasonable? If the answers are YES and YES, you may simply have highly conscientious staff that need some encouragement to take breaks, go home at a reasonable hour and take their holidays. This can be a genuine issue for companies that purposely employ A-Type, highly-conscientious and (sometimes overly) driven employees.

As demonstrated in some of the examples above, wellness initiatives must be developed with the employees they are created for in mind, and most should be voluntary. To start you thinking, here are some initiatives that may work (or not) in your environment:

**Wellness Initiatives – Examples**

* **Confidential access to counsellors for employees that would like support (many countries have employee assistance programmes or similar to provide such a service)**
* **Training for employees in topics such as stress management, building resilience etc.**
* **Providing access to exercise in the workplace. This could be through provision of a staff gym, yoga or other exercise classes (paid for by the employee or the company)**
* **Retirement seminars for employees considering retirement or semi-retirement**
* **Company attendance at organised exercise events such as local walking or running events etc. (or even multi-sport if you have super-fit employees)**
* **10,000 steps programmes and similar**
* **Subsidised or free health checks and flu vaccinations**
* **Access to healthy food options while on-site, e.g. fruit bowls in staff cafes, replacing traditional snack machines with healthier vending machines etc.**
* **Confidential access to smoking cessation and alcohol and drug dependency programmes**
* **Active encouragement to leave the office on time, banning emails after hours and during holidays etc.**
* **Animals in the work environment (e.g. introducing a ‘dogs at work’ policy). (Research has shown strong links to stress reduction in the workplace where companion animals are present)**
* **Providing incentives for taking holidays throughout the year**

**Functionality**

Even the very best workplace cultures are susceptible to erosion, and erosion can have a variety of causes. One such cause is the frustration created by working in environments that are not fit for the work being performed. Not only is productivity hampered, but so too is good will and the ability to think positively about the workplace.

**A functional workplace is one that is *fit for purpose.***

To understand whether your workplace is appropriately functional, start with these two questions:

* What is the purpose of the space? and
* What is the nature of the work being performed?

Think about what you require of people on a daily basis. Do they need to focus on tasks un-interrupted for periods of time? Do they need to collaborate with others throughout the day? Do they work independently or as part of a team? Do they need specialised workspaces or equipment, and if so, do these things affect other workers? How much time are they spending in the workplace?

Once you understand this, you can then perform a gap analysis between what is needed, and what currently exists.

**Limited budget?**

Often simple changes can be made to a work environment which can make a major difference to functionality. This could be about where people and equipment are situated in a space, or small inexpensive changes that alleviate frustration or build a better environment. Take these examples:

**A clothing design company moved into a new state-0f-the-art building that was designed as a highly functional office space – but not so much a clothing design space. Designers were constantly frustrated that they had no way of displaying mock-ups of their designs for design meetings etc. The addition of some inexpensive racking on meeting room walls and in the design space made all the difference.**

**A tech company with a stretched budget wanted to encourage more collaboration between engineers and teams. They visited a discount furniture store, purchased some low-cost couches and coffee tables, added some coffee machines and set up ‘discussion hubs’ throughout the building. This low-budget initiative immediately led to a change in team member behaviour, as people began chatting over a coffee on the couches rather than rushing back to their desks, cup in hand.**

**Open Plan Work Environments – should I or shouldn’t I?**

In some organisations, there is nothing more controversial than the idea of going “open-plan”. In other workplaces, open plan work environments have been the norm for years.

Open plan environments have been touted as a great way to encourage better collaboration and communication, bring teams together and break down those dividing lines between departments. They can also be a great leveller where the senior team are also open plan.

However, there are many frustrations with open-plan environments too, from excess noise, overcrowding, lack of privacy, and difficulty concentrating. A [2018 Harvard study](https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/new-harvard-study-you-open-plan-office-is-making-your-team-less-collaborative.html) has even shown that open-plan environments can actually drop collaboration.

Bring yourself back to your original questions – what is the purpose of the space and the nature of the work being performed? If you decide the open plan is right for you, then employ the experts and do it properly. A professionally and thoughtfully designed open plan environment can remove many of the frustrations listed above, through the provision of plenty of private meeting rooms, discussion spaces, use of noise-cancelling materials and other technologies to create a highly functional open plan environment, rather than one that will have your people pulling their hair out.

**What about equipment?**

In terms of alleviating frustrations so that people can be productive and effective, having the right tools of the trade can be just as important as the physical environment, sometimes more-so. Most of us have at one time or another, been guilty of almost throwing a badly-behaving device or tool out a window/at the wall/onto the floor etc. in sheer frustration.

It may cost a little more but making sure team members always have easy access to the tools and equipment needed to do their job, and critically that these tools are in top working shape and if not, fixed or replaced fast, will have significant payoffs for your business in terms of productivity gains. State of the art equipment can even be an attractive selling point for talented people considering you as their next employer.

**Ask your people!**

Ultimately, it’s your people who will tell you how functional the environment and equipment are, because after all, they use it!

If you are serious about wanting to improve the functionality of your workspaces, a great place to begin is with some simple focus groups. However, don’t engage in this work unless you are genuinely committed to following through with actions from their feedback, or you are likely to actually increase frustration, rather than alleviate it!

**Running a Focus Group**

* Plan for between an hour or hour and a half per focus group
* Select people that regularly use the space/equipment in question, and who   
  represent a good culture fit for your organisation
* Plan for about 5-8 people in each group
* Engage the group in a discussion about functional issues and possible solutions
* If there are a number of issues identified (and there could be!) record them on a whiteboard or flipchart as you go and have the group prioritise – what issues would alleviate frustration and improve productivity the most if fixed?
* Follow up with focus group participants once you’ve decided what you will do as a result of their feedback

**Pride**

When team members take pride in their environment, two things will naturally be increased:

* Enjoyment in spending time in that environment
* Respect shown for that environment

There are many ways to drive your team members’ pride in their work environment. Here are two major starting points:

**Give them something to be proud of**

The broken windows theory is a criminological theory devised in 1982, that theorises when people see evidence of minor crime like broken windows, vandalism etc., they are more likely to engage in further crime.

The theory can be applied to workplace environments – if an environment appears run-down and uncared for, it’s less likely your staff will show respect for it.

Take a wander around your workplace. Are there obvious signs of dis-repair that can be fixed? (It’s amazing how long we can keep walking past that leaky tap or broken frame on the wall and stop seeing it!) Is the environment in the best condition that it could be (within the realms of reasonableness). A lick of paint here and there and repairing some basic building issues can make a world of difference to how your people feel about the environment.

**Give them some control**

How much control do your team members have over their environment? Can they make changes? Can they customise their space or decide where to sit/stand? The level of control that employees can have over their work environment will, of course, need to be balanced against the needs of the wider group, health and safety requirements, whether you have programmes in place such as 5s etc. However, as humans, we all like to have a level of control over our surroundings (depending on personality types, this will be more important for some than others). By allowing team members to have some control, we make it more likely that the team member will “own” their space, therefore taking greater pride in it and treating it with respect.

Another way to hand control over to your team members is to invite them to fix an environment issue they’re unhappy about. For example, an organisation that had a very “prison-like” and run-down staff cafeteria called for volunteers to form a working group. The group were tasked with making recommendations to senior management, and then carrying out the actions once signed-off. For very little money, the staff cafeteria was transformed with a new colour scheme, wall art, couches, and removal of unnecessary equipment. Better yet, the staff-owned the changes and took greater pride in the space, hence keeping it in a much tidier state than previously.

**Reflecting Who We Are**

We all want to be inspired when we come to work. Just imagine if our physical environment could help us achieve that. The good news is, by reflecting the amazing things you stand for, strive for and care about, your environment can do exactly that.

In order for the environment to reflect the purpose, vision, values and secret sauce (unique strengths) of your organisation, it’s important that these things can be clearly articulated and understood first. For help in these areas, please see the toolkits under:

* Your Purpose, Vision and Strategy
* Your Values
* Your Secret Sauce

Ok, you have a clearly articulated Purpose, Vision and Strategy, compelling Values and unique Secret Sauce concepts, and you’re ready to bring all of this to life in your work environment? Great, then it’s time to get creative!

An effective, engaging and fun way to think about how your physical environment can reflect your purpose, vision, values and secret sauce is to ask your people. Here’s a suggestion:

**Running a Physical Environment Think Tank**

* Take a large meeting room, clear out the tables and plaster the walls with your purpose, vision, values and secret sauce concepts (and culture excellence pillars if you have them).
* Next to all of these, add blank sheets of flip chart paper and make plenty of flip chart pens available.
* Invite into the room people across the organisation who enjoy getting creative.
* Explain that the goal of the session is to brainstorm ideas for bringing the concepts on the wall to life in the physical environment.
* Invite your “creatives” to wonder the space, pen in hand, and put ideas up onto the blank flip charts. Encourage people to throw up as many ideas as possible and to be as radical and crazy as they like at this stage. Also encourage people to add to others’ ideas.
* Once all ideas are up, ask everyone to again wander the room. This time they are reviewing all the ideas. Instruct all participants to vote for the ideas they think could genuinely work. 5 votes each, to be used in any way they like (e.g. vote 5 times for one thing if you REALLY like it!).
* Thank and release the participants.

You now have many ideas and a prioritisation (from the voting) of those that are most popular.

This is a great project to create a cross-functional team around. You could ask for volunteers for the team at the conclusion of the Think Tank session. Once formed, give the team an indicative budget and ask them to consider the ideas from the session, and develop recommendations. The same team could also be responsible for following through with bringing the recommendations to life, once signed off.

Bringing the above to life is a brilliant way to reinforce all the things you stand for and that make you great and unique as an organisation. It serves as a physical reminder to your people of why they come to work each day and can be an extremely effective retention tool. It will also encourage significant pride not just in the environment, but in the organisation itself.

**Flexibility**

The world of work has changed dramatically in the last decade and will continue to do so as society norms change, and new technologies allow us to redefine when, how and where work is completed.

Add to this a growing demand from the workforce for a better balance between work and home life and increasing awareness from businesses that flexibility can actually help their work force be more efficient and effective. Change is inevitable (and constant!).

In fact, flexibility is perhaps one of the biggest current trends internationally in the world of work, with whole conferences dedicated to the topic. Governments world-wide have also been taking note, with many passing legislation requiring businesses to consider flexible work requests from workers.

All this focus has led to a re-considering for many businesses, of what defines productivity. It is becoming less about hours worked and more about outputs achieved. The 9 to 5 mentality is fast becoming a relic of the past.

**Flexibility by degrees**

Like most things, there are degrees of flexibility, and you will need to decide (and probably constantly re-consider) what level of flexibility works for your organisation. A few tips to consider:

**Don’t pay lip service**

At its most basic level, organisations pay lip-service to flexibility by saying they offer flexible work arrangements but making the process for applying overly onerous and actively dissuading people from applying. A word of caution – if this is your approach, you will find it harder and harder to attract and retain talented staff.

**It’s still ok to require people to be at the office**

Teamwork is a critical element of many roles today and requiring people to be present in order to work with the team face-to-face is perfectly OK. You may consider “core office hours” where everyone is expected to be present to attend meetings, team huddles, etc, and allow flexibility outside of those office hours.

**But the nature of the role makes flexibility impossible!**

In some roles, such as customer-facing roles or those requiring you to be present at a worksite or for a manufacturing operation etc., flexible options like working from home or altering hours are unlikely to be possible. But there may be other options you can consider if you think a little outside the box. Coming up with ways to offer flexibility in roles where flexibility is more difficult is what will really set you apart, so get creative! (See ideas at the end of this section to get you thinking)

**One size will not fit all**

Some organisations get nervous about offering flexible options to some areas of the business and not others (e.g. the retail arm of the business can’t have access to working from home, so I shouldn’t offer this anywhere else.)

The reality is, different types of work will suit different types of flexible options. That’s ok. As long as there are flexible options available for all roles, even if they’re different or more limited in some cases, then it will still be considered reasonable and fair to most.

How many different flexible options are there? Well, how big is your imagination! Here’s a list of flexible options to get your creative mind ticking…

**Flexible Work Options**

**Part-time work** – hardly even considered “flexibility” anymore, but don’t underestimate it - being able to reduce to part-time either permanently or for a set time can be a saving grace for workers juggling family commitments.

**Flexible hours** – the employee is required to work 40 hours a week (for example) but can choose when they complete those hours within the week.

**Working from home** – this can be for a set amount of time (e.g. two days per week) or open (employee decides how often they work from home).

**Swings and round-a-bouts** – In other words, employees can take time off during the week for appointments, family commitments etc, without any formal application or recording the absence, in the understanding, they’ll make the time/work up elsewhere.

**Core office hours** – as discussed above, team members are required to be present for certain hours of the day or week for meetings etc. and can be flexible with their hours outside of the core hours.

**Set outcomes over set hours** – where the focus is on the work produced by the employee, rather than the length of time taken to achieve it.

**4-day weeks or 9-day fortnights** – this can be achieved in a variety of ways, from employees working longer hours on the remaining workdays, taking a cut in their pay to subsidise the extra day off, or the employer deciding to absorb the cost in the belief they will benefit in higher productivity on the days the employees are present (the research tends to be bearing this out).

**Self-funded Sabbaticals** – the ability for an employee to take a small drop in pay over a period of time (e.g. 2 years) in order to take a period of paid leave from the company (e.g. 6 months).

**Unlimited Annual or Vacation Leave** – yes you read it right! This is an option being used by companies that believe they have hired the right people who will have the needs of the company in mind when using this policy. It’s important here that the required outcomes are clear for both parties.

**Time off for life events** – While legislation generally allows for some time away from work for the birth or adoption of a new baby and for bereavement of those close to us, many organisations extend the leave available, and offer leave in other situations. E.g. “Paw-ternity Leave” for the arrival of a new four-legged family member, or bereavement leave for the death of a family pet.

This is by no means an extensive list and many of these may not be right for you, but it’s designed to get you thinking. Consider what your needs and requirements are as a business (because this still must come first), what your purpose, vision, values and culture say about you and what you consider important. Consider flexible options that build on and support these things and add to your unique identity.

**The importance of trust**

Many flexible arrangements rely on trust in order to operate effectively. The more mature you are as a business in relation to values and behaviours and strong consistent leadership capability, the easier you will find flexible arrangements become. This is because you are creating an environment of trust and empowerment where adults are treated like, and act like adults, and hence do not require the “monitoring and control” of the traditional 9 t0 5 mentality.

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