



Belonging at Work

Create workplaces that connect people to each other and to the organization.



Key Insights

- **Belonging, or the feeling among members of a group that they share common experiences, goals, and challenges, is one of six fundamental human needs that motivate us at work.**
- **Research shows that employees who experience a sense of belonging at work are more productive and engaged.**
- **Organizations can enable connections among their people by creating workplaces with settings that encourage people to socialize, prompt spontaneous interaction, and make all employees—both local and remote—feel at home.**

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.

The need to belong is a powerful and fundamental motivator of human behavior.¹ Scientific studies show that a sense of belonging affects cognitive processes² as well as physical and emotional health and well-being.³ When people feel like their need to be part of something bigger than themselves is fulfilled, they are more satisfied and are higher-performing at work. This, in turn, helps organizations retain valuable employees and achieve business goals.⁴

Successful and proactive organizations use their work environments to enhance belongingness by providing a variety of settings that encourage social interaction and by carefully planning physical proximities, traffic paths, and sightlines across the landscape. Incorporating purposeful visual cues that welcome, engage, and inform a diverse employee population also promotes inclusion and esprit de corps.

The Belonging Breakdown

“Much of what human beings do is done in the service of belongingness.”⁵ A fundamental human motivation, the need to belong shapes the way we think, feel, and behave.

It’s a drive we come by naturally. From an evolutionary point of view, social connection was basic to human development and survival. In early times, competition for limited resources and vulnerability to predators favored individuals who formed cooperative groups for hunting and protection.⁶ The bond between babies and the adults who provide for their basic needs remains as essential to the species’ continued existence as access to food and water.⁷

As a result, the human brain is wired for belonging; we’re programmed to seek positive social experiences just as we’re driven to satisfy our hunger or thirst. Recent studies in neuroscience indicate that social pain and pleasure use the same neural mechanisms as those stimulated by physical pain and pleasure. The brain treats real or potential separation from others just as it would a stubbed toe or a blow to the stomach and is unable to focus on anything else until the pain is relieved. In contrast, connection—the giving or receiving of positive attention—stimulates the same reward centers as positive physical experiences, like eating a favorite food.⁸ We’re motivated to pursue the experience over and over again.

The desire to belong and fear of being excluded have important implications for individual and organizational performance. Social scientists studying school and work environments have identified “belonging uncertainty” as a major roadblock to performance and achievement. As the authors of one study put it: “One of the most important questions that people ask themselves in deciding to enter, continue, or abandon a pursuit is, ‘Do I belong?’”⁹ In environments where people continually question the quality of their social connections, this state of belonging uncertainty acts as a drain on energy and emotional well-being, and hampers productivity and motivation.

As part of our ongoing pursuit of human-centered design, Herman Miller’s Living Office[®] helps organizations and their design partners create environments that promote positive social experiences at work. Drawing on proprietary studies conducted with our Living Office Research Partners,¹⁰ we’ve identified design considerations for settings throughout the workplace that help people feel like they belong.

Make Room for Socializing

As a group, our Living Office Research Partners share characteristics of healthy and engaged organizations; staff and leaders have a strong sense of purpose, belonging, and commitment to their organizations. Before implementing Living Office, Belonging Index scores (measured by level of agreement with statements like “I feel a sense of belonging to my organization” and “I feel that I can be myself at work”) were already high (78 percent), and post-move averages were even higher (83 percent).

But questions about the contribution of the new work environments to a general sense of belonging revealed significant improvement. Average agreement with the statement “The design of the workplace contributes to a sense of community at work” was a statistically significant 27 percentage points higher post-move.

One design strategy that our Research Partners employed was to provide a variety of Living Office Cove Settings—such as small, informal lounge areas or niches with standing-height tables—that allow for casual interactions among employees



A small, comfortably furnished Cove Setting encourages impromptu conversations without disrupting others’ work.

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throughout the workday. Research has well-established the positive effect of face-to-face communication on team performance,¹¹ and recent studies have begun to highlight the neural mechanisms involved. One study measuring brain activity and comparing the performance of workers in two different call centers found that more informal chats facilitated by an expansive community space—such as a Plaza Setting—had a positive effect on tasks involving “verbal working memory.”¹²

Many of our Living Office Research Partners are strengthening a sense of community at work by providing a comfortable and centralized place where people from all areas of the organization can meet for informal interactions over coffee or food. As one leader commented, “We have social gatherings in our new collective space, and it’s substantiated our culture again.” Other Research Partners who created Plaza Settings in their new workplaces reported that these spaces have become go-to spots for both work and socializing. “The café is a flexible space,” one staff member noted. “[I can use it to] focus on getting work accomplished or just to have lunch and chit-chat with the team.”



A centralized Plaza Setting brings people together from all parts of the organization and gives them an opportunity to connect as they share a meal or grab a cup of coffee.

In addition to a centralized space designated for working and socializing over food and drink, our Research Partners provide a greater variety of settings, open and enclosed, where informal interaction can take place. A recent study of the communication that happens between formal meetings and work sessions found that frequent face-to-face interactions were essential to developing social bonds among coworkers. The researchers

contend that “meetings” are not discrete events, but rather “persistent conversation processes” that positively impact “social capital.”¹³ By purposefully placing Landing Settings with café tables and chairs outside of Meeting Spaces, or by including Coves with comfortable lounge seating, organizations can encourage and support ongoing conversations and contribute to social bonding at work.



A Landing Setting next to the formal Meeting Space provides a place to continue conversations and plan next steps once scheduled gatherings have ended.

As the leader of one organization that implemented a Living Office design observed: “The balance between the workspaces, breakout spaces, and meeting rooms is facilitating the myriad types of interactions that happen during the day. Investing in creating the diversity of spaces where you actually have facilitated social interactions has been transformative.”

Taken together, our Research Partners measured a statistically significant 14-percentage point increase in agreement with the statement “The design of the workplace allows me to interact informally with coworkers.” One respondent pointed to the mix of settings “which facilitates formal and informal communication, as well as a sense of community and camaraderie.”

As psychologists have found, people “reserve particular, more extensive, and more favorable patterns of information processing for people with whom they share social bonds.”¹⁴ It all adds up to better communication and more effective information sharing.

Plan for Proximity

Social connection is essential to a feeling of belonging, and physical proximity turns out to be a potent factor in creating and maintaining this connection.

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.¹⁵

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 capitalize on the power of proximity by locating team members and teams based on important work relationships. Another strategy is providing settings where

colleagues who are not situated near one another can meet up or run into each other on a regular basis. For example, a Clubhouse Setting is a place where members of a highly collaborative team have everything they need to work together in a centralized location. In this setting, a team can take ownership of its space, demonstrate its own identity, and establish group norms. In addition, workplaces that offer visual access and convenient guest seating let passersby see and take advantage of the moments when others are available for a quick chat.

An essential aspect of belonging is helping and being helped by other members of the group. A sense of inclusion increases a person’s willingness to voluntarily assist others with work-related problems. 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.¹⁶

To promote opportunities for helpful connection, ensure that sight lines are clear so coworkers can easily see one another. Provide furnishings that allow for convenient, spontaneous interaction, and position Jump Space Settings—where anyone can touch down to work for a few hours—near full-time team members. This will give part-time and contingent workers more opportunities to seek assistance and learn from their coworkers.



A drop-in Jump Space Setting encourages helpful interactions and information exchange among full-time and contingent workers.



An inclusive environment that supports equal participation enhances a sense of belonging and strengthens commitment to organizational goals.

Cue Inclusion

In today's highly mobile and global business world, physical proximity is not always possible. Important team members may be located on the other side of the country—or the world. Even colleagues from the same geographical location increasingly communicate via electronic devices rather than in person.

Our increasing dependence on screen-based communication has led to a rapidly growing and measurable phenomenon called “virtual distance,” defined as “a sense of psychological and emotional detachment that begins to grow little by little unconsciously when most encounters and experiences are mediated by screens on smart devices.”¹⁷

In the absence of shared physical context and opportunities for informal face-to-face communication, (including the loss of nonverbal cues, spontaneous communication, and the ability to take advantage of incidental meetings and learning) a sense of belonging deteriorates, along with cooperative and helping behaviors. When some team members are co-located and others connect only virtually, an “us and them” situation may develop, leading to reduced trust and distorted perceptions.¹⁸

Plan a workplace that combats virtual distance by carefully selecting and placing digital screens. For example, videoconferencing set-ups that use separate monitors to display people and presentation materials—either digitally or by placing analog materials like white boards within camera range—allow remote participants to see what on-site viewers are looking at. Purposeful camera placement for effective eye-level viewing and capturing body language, facial expressions, and eye movements can restore some of the lost benefits of face-to-face interaction.

Furniture selection and arrangement within a Meeting Space designed for videoconferencing can also help give remote workers “a seat at the table.” Tables and seating that allow all participants to share a common seated or standing posture and that are configured to assure that no one is blocking anyone's view can encourage equal participation in discussions and provide more direct social connections for all.

The degree to which people feel like they belong in their physical surroundings can affect their decisions to join or stay with an organization, as well as their performance while working there.¹⁹ An inclusive work environment plays an

important role in mobile and contingent workers' sense of belonging. Studies show that people who work from home or client-based locations report significantly lower rates of "workplace inclusion, defined as an individual's sense of belonging, a perception that they are able to participate, and that their opinions matter within the organization."²⁰

For these employees, it's important to provide a place they can call "home" when they're in the office. There are several ways to signal to mobile and contingent workers that they belong. Consider providing a drop-in Jump Space Setting located in a high-traffic area. Here, a shared work surface becomes a place where those who aren't often in the office can work alongside colleagues and bump into people they don't often see. To enhance this approach, provide smart, connected furnishings that remember and respond to an individual's preferences. These will help give people a sense of comfort and familiarity, even in a workplace where most workpoints are unassigned.


Plan for Prosperity

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. When individuals have a strong sense of belonging where they work, they are motivated to cooperate, help each other, and share in the risks and rewards of the kind of creative thinking that will propel corporate profitability to new heights. It all adds up to prosperity at the broadest and most personal levels.

To learn more about how Living Office can work for your organization and your people, visit hermanmiller.com/livingoffice or connect with your local Herman Miller representative who can engage you with a Living Office Specialist.

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