Physical work conditions

Lesson 6.4.1 | Organisational psychology

Core ideas

Physical work conditions include features such as lighting, noise, temperature, space, privacy and office layout.

Work conditions can affect productivity directly by making tasks easier or harder, and indirectly by changing comfort, stress or motivation.

The Hawthorne effect describes behaviour changing because workers know they are being observed or given special attention.

Open-plan offices may increase contact and visibility, but they can also reduce privacy, increase noise and make concentration harder.

Oldham and Brass studied employee reactions to moving into an open-plan office, making the topic useful for discussing questionnaires, longitudinal change and real workplace application.

Key terms

Physical work conditions: Environmental features of a workplace that can affect behaviour and performance.

Productivity: The amount or quality of work produced over a period of time.

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Hawthorne effect: A change in behaviour caused by being observed or receiving special attention.

Open-plan office: An office layout with few or no interior walls separating workers.

Privacy: The degree to which workers can control access to themselves, their work and conversations.

Noise distraction: Unwanted sound that can interrupt attention or reduce comfort.

Quasi-experiment: A study where the researcher uses naturally occurring groups or changes rather than full random allocation.

Longitudinal study: Research that collects data from the same people or setting over time.

Further detail and evidence

Physical influences include lighting, noise, temperature, ventilation, seating, privacy and layout. Assess accuracy, speed, fatigue and wellbeing rather than assuming that higher output captures all benefits. Task demands can change which conditions are helpful.

The Hawthorne effect is the proposed change in behaviour associated with observation or special attention. Kompier (2006) critically reviewed the original evidence and rejected the simple textbook story as inadequately supported: methodological weaknesses and changes in pay, conditions and organisation complicate attribution.

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Oldham and Brass (1979) followed a real move from conventional offices to open-plan space. Satisfaction and internal motivation decreased after the move. The naturally occurring comparison had practical relevance, but office design was not randomly assigned to otherwise identical workers.

Open plan can improve visibility and ease of contact, while increasing distraction, noise and privacy loss. Individual concentration and collaborative work can demand different spaces. Flexible access to quiet and shared areas is a testable application rather than proof of one ideal layout.

Applying the ideas

If productivity rises during a lighting trial, consider altered incentives, supervision, task learning and staff changes before attributing the increase to being observed. For a relocation study, measure employees before and after and use a comparable group where possible.

Evaluation and connections

Longitudinal questionnaires can track change but repeated responses, expectations and attrition affect interpretation. Objective output and qualitative comments complement ratings. Kompier's critique does not prove that observation can never affect behaviour; it challenges the evidence for the classic causal story.