

Regional Employee Preferences and Global Workplace Strategy

A Multinational Study and Recommendations

Dr. Michael O'Neill
Senior Director, Workplace Research
Knoll, Inc.

Knoll

Regional Employee Preferences and Global Workplace Strategy

A Multinational Study and Recommendations

Multinationals can refine global workspace strategy by understanding employee priorities

With global business on the rise, multinational organizations are challenged to create a manageable workspace strategy that makes efficient use of capital - but also respects regional preferences and expectations for office space. To assist, Knoll embarked on an international study to understand similarities and differences between North American and “Rest of World” employees in how they rated the importance of a wide variety of workspace design and technology capabilities.

We gathered survey data from more than 20,000 employees of three US multinational organizations in the financial services and consulting industries, across twelve global geographic regions (Table 1).

Key Findings:

- ▶ Overall, the physical workspace is highly important to employees - regardless of geographic location.
- ▶ There are more similarities than differences between North American and Rest of World employees – they rated the same top eight (out of nineteen) workspace features as most important.
- ▶ North American employees place top priority on a narrower set of workplace capabilities: choice over work location and type of workspace, and technology support for collaboration. Rest of World employees also highly value choice of workspace type, in addition to broader issues such as having an engaging workplace, and physical comfort and ergonomics.

Definitions of Geographic Areas

Geographical Area	Component Countries
North America	Canada, USA
Latin America	Chile, Mexico, Venezuela
Ireland/UK	Ireland, United Kingdom
EU	Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Spain
Sub-Saharan Africa	South Africa, Nigeria
Turkey	Turkey
Brazil	Brazil
Russia	Russia
India	India
China	China, Taiwan
Japan	Japan
Pacific Rim	Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, Australia

Table 1. We surveyed more than 20,000 professional workers in 40 countries. These countries were subsequently grouped into twelve “geographical areas” according to generally accepted language, cultural and regional commonalities.

Both North American and Rest of World workers highly value the workplace

A global workplace strategy should recognize the great importance that employees – regardless of their location - place on workplace capabilities.

On a five-point scale, North American participants rated the overall importance of workplace a 4.14 and Rest of World a 4.25. This shows that all employees highly value the eight workplace facets related to programs, technology and workspace.

We asked participants to rate the importance of nineteen workplace capabilities to their work lives

More than 20,000 employees of three US multinational companies in the financial services and consulting industries participated. Employees rated aspects of facilities support, amenities, cleanliness, workspace design features and furnishings, equipment, personal and group technology, and workplace policies. We then compared the ratings between North American and “Rest of World” employees on the top eight issues (listed in Table 2).

In the analyses, we statistically controlled for the effects of generational affiliation, job type, and employee mobility (time spent working in locations other than primary workspace) on the preference outcomes. Thus, the differences in preference among regions that we found exist despite differences in workstyle and demographic characteristics.

Definitions of the 8 Most Important Global Workspace Features and Capabilities

Feature/Capability		Definition
Choice of Workspace Type		Ability to choose from a variety of individual and group workspace that fit current work needs.
Collaboration Technology		The office provides necessary collaboration technologies.
Comfort and Ergonomics		Comfort provided by the furniture and equipment within the primary workspace.
Engaging Workspace		How well the overall office provides an engaging workspace (feeling of belonging, ability to connect with others, appropriate image of the company, welcoming environment).
Flexible Work Location		Availability of other locations to work, outside the primary building.
Safety and Security		How safe and secure the employees feel in the building and within the primary workspace.
Support for Casual Interaction		How well the design and layout of the overall office facilitates casual interaction and collaboration throughout the space.
Sustainability Initiatives		Corporate programs that reduce energy usage, reduce waste materials, encourage carpooling, encourage selection of furnishings with minimal environmental impact.

Table 2. Study participants provided importance ratings on nineteen aspects of the office environment. This table shows the top eight features and capabilities (those rated a 4 or higher on a 5-point scale) listed in alphabetical order.

North Americans want the workspace choice and collaboration technology tools to “get the job done”; Rest of World employees value a broader range of capabilities

A global workplace strategy could emphasize a broader range of elements for Rest of World employees than for North Americans.

Workers in Rest of World locations place greater importance on a broader range of issues, rating six of the eight workspace facets higher than did North American workers (Table 4). Like their North American counterparts, Rest of World employees highly value choice over type of workspace used, but they also value the emotional and physical aspects of the work experience. Their top preferences include having an engaging workplace/work experience, and comfort and ergonomics (Table 4). The differences between geographic areas are statistically significant in all comparisons.

A global workplace strategy should recognize that all employees need workspace and technology that supports distributed work.

North American workers are dealing with two emerging workplace issues: the targeted per person space allocation is steadily shrinking (from an average 237 square feet in 2001 to 135 square feet in 2012); and workplace programs are offering previously unheard-of

Comparison of “Top 3” Most Important Issue for North America, with the UK/Ireland, EU, BRIC, and Pacific Rim Regions

	North America	UK/Ireland	EU	Brazil	Russia	India	China	Pacific Rim
First								
Second								
Third								

Table 3. This comparison shows that no one issue dominates across geographies; seven of the overall top eight features appear in at least one region's top three list.

Comparison of North American to “Rest of World” importance ratings

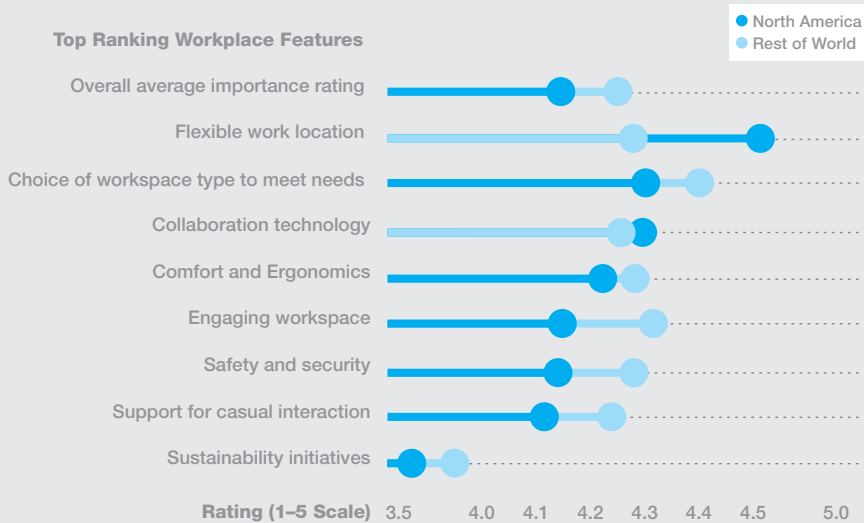


Table 4. Comparison of the average importance ratings for each of the eight workspace features (using a five-point scale for which 1=least important and 5=most important). Top of Table 4 shows a single “overall importance rating” comparison between Rest of World and North America that is an average of the eight feature rating scores. The importance scores are arranged in descending order of the North American ratings, with the most important features at the top.

workstyle flexibility in terms of time and location (O’Neill and Wymer, 2011).

Just as the small size of the workspace is pushing employees to spend more time out of their traditional “nest” (primary workspace), they are being offered many new options for work location. These changes are widely embraced and, in fact, once experienced, employees typically want workplace flexibility programs to be expanded (O’Neill and Wymer, 2011). An important requirement for mobile employees is the technology to support their intense need to collaborate (Ouye, 2011).

Thus, it is not surprising that North American employees express a narrow focus of priorities that highlight flexible work options and collaborative technology.

A global workplace strategy should recognize that Rest of World workers require a broader range of capabilities.

Compared to North American employees, many Rest of World workers have long

experienced (relatively) small primary workspaces with much less enclosure as a standard way of working, as well as a more flexible workstyle (O’Neill and Wymer, 2010). Because of their familiarity with this approach, they do not have the same focus on these workplace issues that are expressed by their North American counterparts.

In addition to valuing **choice over type of workspace** they use, Rest of World employees also value an **engaging workplace**, one that helps them feel welcome, and connected to co-workers and the organization. As the ongoing tempo of movement between locations increases at work (coupled with a lower proportion of “assigned” or “owned” workspaces), the need to keep employees feeling connected to their organization will increase (O’Neill and Wymer,

Russian employees rated the overall importance of the work environment lowest of all regions. Pacific Rim countries rated it the highest. North Americans are almost exactly in between these extremes.

The regions highly value a wide range of workspace features

North Americans rated “flexible work location” as most important

“Choice of workspace type” was rated as the most important capability for the EU, UK/Ireland, and Russia.

The Pacific Rim, China and India rated “safety and security” as their most important issue.

Brazilian employees rated “comfort and ergonomics” as most important.

2011). An engaging, welcoming space that connects people to each other and binds them to the organization could be a response to the sometimes tenuous connection between mobile employees and employers.

Finally, Rest of World employees value a foundational aspect of office work, a **comfortable setting with ergonomic features**. Good ergonomics characteristics, of course, should be basic to good office design. People desire a degree of comfort from their seating and furniture, as well as proper functional relationships between furnishings and equipment within their workspace. Comfort and ergonomics may be a less salient issue for North American workers because ergonomics is “built in” to the furniture and how it is specified, and is less obvious an issue for most employees. For Rest of World workers, comfort and ergonomics is dealt with through more visible work rules that directly affect the nature of their job.

These three features represent a more holistic valuation of the work environment and work experience than the more narrowly focused set of features that revolve around “choice” identified by the North American group.

“Distributed work” is a broad descriptor of an emerging workstyle

A combination of heads down “focus” work, formal and informal collaboration of varying duration, and social interaction, distributed work occurs in a wide variety of settings within the building, campus or other locations. In addition to physical space, work policies, technology and communications networks play a key role in facilitating distributed work (see O’Neill and Wymer, 2011).

Drilling down into regional differences, one size does not fit all but some broad patterns emerge

A comparison of the top three employee workplace priorities reveals several insights about regional preferences (Table 3):

- ▶ No single issue really dominates; in fact, seven of the eight top issues that emerged in this study are also represented as top issues among these eight regions.
- ▶ Safety and security, choice of workspace type, comfort and ergonomics, and an engaging workplace appear a total of sixteen times as a top three issue among the seven comparison regions (out of a possible 21). Of these, only choice of workspace type appears in the North American top three.
- ▶ The EU is more similar to North America than not, sharing two of the three top issues (choice of workspace type and location).
- ▶ The UK/Ireland region is similar to the EU, sharing two of the three top issues (choice of workspace type and comfort and ergonomics).
- ▶ India and China identify identical issues and ratings including safety, engaging workspace and collaborative technology.

Sustainability is ranked relatively low in importance but may be an emerging issue

The lowest ranked issue for both North American and Rest of World employees, “sustainability initiatives” pertains to programs that reduce energy use, reduce waste materials, encourage carpooling, and selection of furnishings with minimal environmental impact (Table 4). Technically, this issue did not meet the 4.0 cutoff score for inclusion into this analysis, but it was included because the score was within .04 of the mark, and because of the rising importance of sustainability issues in general.

The somewhat lower score may indicate its relative “newness” as an issue that affects office employees. It will be interesting to see if it rises in importance over time in a global context.

A workplace strategy assuming North American preferences would be missing the mark for most other regions of the world

Thus, a workplace strategy assuming North American preferences would be missing the mark for most other regions of the world.

Certainly individual elements of the North American top three appear in the top rankings of the other regions, but in no case (other than the EU) is there more than one element from North America in another region’s top three rankings.

In addition to respecting regional nuances, a global workplace strategy should incorporate features that transcend borders. A secure, engaging work

environment with comfortable settings that support a distributed work styles should be offered to all employees.

A global strategy should offer four fundamental capabilities

- ▶ Safety and security
- ▶ Comfortable, ergonomic work settings
- ▶ An engaging work environment that connects people
- ▶ Support for “distributed work”

Capability 1: Ensure employees have a safe and secure working environment.

Safety refers to procedures and other matters taken to keep workers from being injured or getting sick. Security overlaps safety somewhat because it can also mean protecting workers from injury, but it is broader and refers to other threats as well, such as data security, and employee assault or theft. Businesses can take measures to ensure that their workplace is safe, such as minimizing the use of materials that emit harmful chemicals in choice of floor coverings, furnishings and other products. Separate workers from specific site hazards, via protective clothing and equipment or architectural features. Provide adequate ventilation to protect against fumes. Enact rules and protocols that promote safe work practices and emergency procedures.

Consider specific security issues, including:

- ▶ Computer and internet-related activity
- ▶ Crisis management
- ▶ Prevention of theft and fraud
- ▶ Prevention of violence

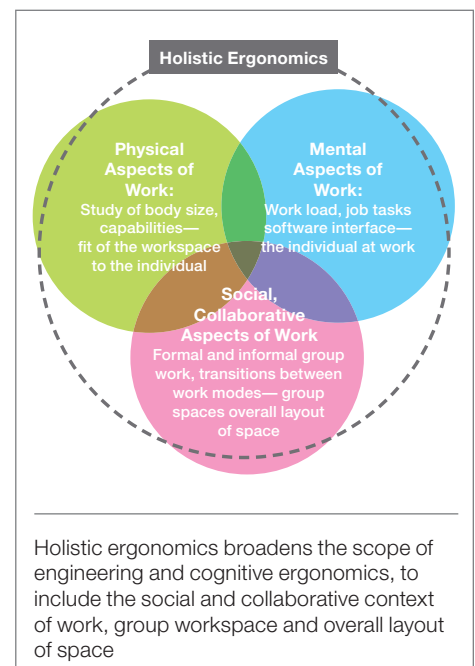
- ▶ Electronic security systems and alarms
- ▶ Controlling access to various parts of the facility
- ▶ Protection of company secrets, trademarks and copyrights

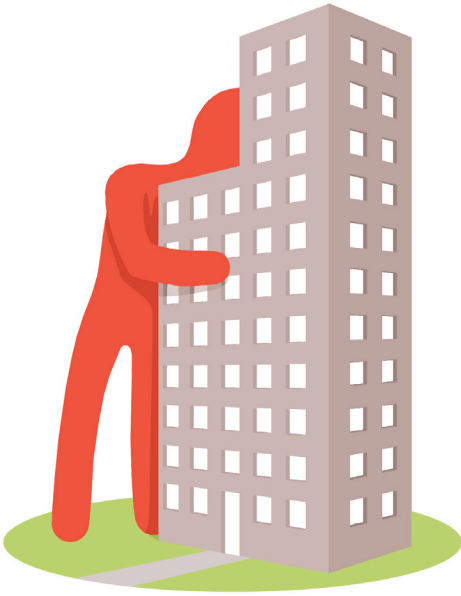
These issues can be addressed in different ways, through rules and policies, physical security measures such as locks and alarms, and plans to be enacted in the event of an emergency.

Capability 2: Support comfort and effective work with “holistic” office ergonomics.

Ergonomics issues are handled differently in North America than in Rest of World locations. Regardless, supporting comfort in the increasing variety of individual and group settings must remain a priority. The relatively newer distributed workplace strategies in North America, with their wider variety of space types, are not yet addressed by ergonomic standards, so careful attention to ergonomics as a global issue is critical to maintain health and comfort for employees regardless of their work setting.

“Holistic ergonomics” recognizes that the physical, mental and social dimensions of work must be addressed together for a successful workplace solution. Office ergonomics remains a top priority for many organizations and forward thinking ergonomists embrace the holistic perspective. Effective ergonomics is more than just specifying an individual workstation.





Organizational leaders are increasingly recognizing that employees need to feel emotionally connected to the organization. Workspace design and planning can be used to foster a strong sense of employee engagement in the workspace.

Holistic ergonomics includes traditional concerns (preventing injuries to individuals in their workstation—the “micro” work environment), but expands to include the shift to more open spaces, issues such as group work, group spaces, employee retention and productivity, and ergonomic issues for a variety of place types (the “macro” work environment).

This broader perspective includes the need to accommodate seamless transitions between heads-down work and various types of casual and formal interaction in your facility plan. The workspace should support ongoing changes to individual work processes. Both of these goals can be achieved by designing to enhance employees’ abilities to shape their work environment and, thus, work experience (O’Neill, 2012).

In the individual workspace, provide ergonomic seating that accommodates a wide range of postures, small meeting tables, tack boards, white boards, adjustable monitor arms and other flexible features.

Capability 3: Use the workspace to enhance employee engagement with the organization.

While an engaging workplace is currently less important to North American than Rest of World employees, it may emerge as a critical issue. Rest of World employees already experience greater mobility than North Americans and, thus, understand how great mobility incurs the risk of disconnecting people from the social network of their organization. The need for an engaging work experience may rise in importance to North American workers because their increasing levels of mobility will also strain the ties of connection with each other, and the organization.

Regardless of location, plan workspace so that it conveys a similar work experience and “feel,” which will promote connection between employees and their organization. Consider the café - an emerging space type that is becoming the social center for employees. The way social connection is communicated through design, visual cues, and programs will vary from culture to culture. Incorporate design elements or cues that help employees learn about enterprise values and traditions and let them make a personal connection with their co-workers and the organization.



Capability 4: Support distributed work by providing choice of location and type of workspace.

Plan and create a variety of spaces that support individual work, as well as formal and informal interaction. Plan for the following criteria, and implement a program that provides guidelines for how people choose—and access—these spaces:

- ▶ Correct proportion of individual and meeting spaces
- ▶ Formal and informal nature of these spaces
- ▶ Number of each type of space required
- ▶ Convenience of location relative to primary workspaces, technology and furnishings used
- ▶ Ease of reserving or accessing the spaces (whether through electronic reservation systems or work rules)

With the ability to work anywhere, employees are working with greater frequency away from their primary desks. Good workplace planning supports a variety of work locations and types of space for employees, as they move through the facility

References and Additional Reading

O'Neill, M. (March 2010). **A Model of Environmental Control and Effective Work**, *Facilities Journal*. Volume 28 Issue 3, Special Issue: Environment Behaviour in Facilities Management.

O'Neill, M. and Wymer, T. (2009). **Design for Integrated Work**. Knoll Research, White Paper.

O'Neill, M. and Wymer, T. (2010). **Implementing Integrated Work**. Knoll Research, White Paper.

O'Neill, M. and Wymer, T. (2011). **The Metrics of Distributed Work**. Knoll Research, White Paper.

O'Neill, M. (2011). **Holistic Ergonomics for the Evolving Nature of Work**, Knoll Research, White Paper.

O'Neill, M. (2012). **Choice by Design**, Knoll Research, White Paper.

Wymer, T. (2008). **Magnet space: Space that Attracts Users**, Knoll Research, White Paper.

Wymer, T. (2010). **Proportional Planning for the Adaptable Workplace**, Knoll Research, White Paper.

Knoll conducts research to investigate links between workspace design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the user experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments. To learn more about this topic or other research resources Knoll can provide, visit www.knoll.com/research/index.



Follow Knoll research on Twitter [@AskDrMike_Knoll](https://twitter.com/AskDrMike_Knoll)