

Physical environment in counseling and planning



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Physical Environment in Counseling and Planning I have recently read an interesting article about the impact of physical environment on the financial counseling and planning relationship and process. The publication raised my great interest because I have noticed before that our offices have several deficiencies that may have negative effects on the quality of our relationships with clients.

The physical environment includes many aspects of our surrounding, including furniture and room design, color, accessories, lighting, sound, smell, thermal conditions and others. I have learned that all of these aspects can have bigger impact on relationships and the quality of our work that most people would expect. Therefore I took the initiative and researched the topic a little further to get a better understanding of the issue. Although there's not a lot of a material available that refers strictly to financial planning, I was able to borrow ideas from other, more general studies. I believe that we can greatly improve our work place and clients' satisfaction by implementing some changes in the physical environment in our office building. I came up with several recommendations regarding different elements of physical environment in our work place.

The research conducted by Pressly and Heesacker (2001) indicates that all of the elements of physical environment can have a negative or positive impact on the workplace. One of the most interesting things I found in their article is that self-disclosure increases in warm, intimate settings (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). Self-disclosure and feeling of privacy and intimacy are crucial elements of our business and it is really worthwhile to consider implementing some of their findings. Here are some factors that could

positively impact these qualities: •Colors – Research suggests that deep, cool colors contract space and therefore make the big rooms feel more intimate (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001).

In addition, cool colors tend to have a positive impact on the body by lowering blood pressure, pulse and respiration. The clients would be more relaxed and prompt to give true responses about their personal lives. Furthermore, people in general feel more comfortable in rooms with pastel or earth tone colors (Pulvino, Lee & Pulvino, 2002). Since all of our office rooms are quite big, my recommendation is to paint the walls in the planners' offices with colors that match the above description.

The planners should individually choose the specific color that is most visually pleasing to them, because it's important for them to feel comfortably in the work place. •Furniture and Space – The article by Pressly and Heesacker (2001) says male and female counselors were perceived differently based on the style of their offices. Females are perceived more competent when they occupy a “ traditional, professional” office, whereas men are considered more competent if they reside in “ humanistic” offices. This is an important consideration to keep in mind when arranging offices for male and female counselors. Another consideration with furniture is providing some level of autonomy for the clients when it comes to seating positioning.

Movable chairs and couches in our offices will provide clients with “ greater degree of comfort, autonomy and equality” (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). It will also allow the planner to “ read” the interaction changes during the

counseling/planning process. It is extremely important that we arrange enough space in our offices for the client to comfortably adjust his position with respect to the planner. Since we want to emphasize the feeling of equality between the planners and counselors, we need to consider the seating arrangement very carefully. I have noticed that in almost all of our meeting rooms, the chairs provided for clients are worse than the one of the planner.

According to Pulvino et al. (2002), “ types of chairs can generate power or influence. ” In case of our offices, the planners’ chairs, that are more expensive and usually higher than the ones provided for clients can produce an unwanted feeling of inferiority and discomfort for some of the clients. I propose to equip our office with chairs that would be at least comparable to the planners’ chairs.

Also it is desirable to have at least two of the same chairs for clients so none of the spouses would feel less important than the other. Space – The appropriate use of space is very important. Even though we as planners often prefer informal arrangements and closer distance, research shows that most clients feel more comfortable in more formal seating arrangements, such a traditional “ across the desk” (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). Pulvino et. al (2002) give examples of appropriate seating arrangements for different kinds of interactions and power distribution in a counseling setting. It seems like the best seating arrangement for our kind of relationship with clients would be the following: This arrangement is most appropriate for planning and productive counseling rather than teaching activities and it would be most desirable for most of our clients.

Another important issue I need to stress is the level of privacy we provide to our clients. Luckily we have enough rooms to provide private setting to all of our clients, but we still need to make sure that we don't interrupt other planners when they are in a meeting with clients. Studies have shown that interruption by a third party during a counseling session decrease the level of privacy and self-disclosure by the clients (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). This one detail can make a difference between our company being good and great. The last factor regarding to space I'd like to stress is the compliance of our offices with the American with Disabilities Act.

The act requires that the offices provide sufficient space for people in wheelchairs to function comfortably. I know that currently all of our office space comply with the rules, but this is a consideration to keep in mind for possible future changes of our office space. •Artwork and Accessories - According to DSA Fine Arts, art in a work place serves several good purposes including: simulates creative thinking, conveys ideas, values and visions to clients, enhances public image of the company. Research shows that some artwork is also desirable in the counseling setting; however planners need to be aware of the meanings and visual connotations of the piece.

The most preferable are painting of natural, soothing environments with a lot of texture, rather than poster images (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). Also other items, such as family pictures can have a positive impact on the clients and obviously on the planner. I recommend that all planers in our company should surround themselves with objects that are visually pleasing to them and at the same time not in any way offensive to clients (ex. sexual connotations in art should be avoided). Including plants in a space in office

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decor is a great idea. Plants represent vitality and growth and can have positive influence on the clients' wellbeing (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001).

It is also a good idea to display the planner's credentials and diplomas.

Generally, if the planner acts accordingly to the displayed honors, the clients perceive him as more competent. Even though men and women perceive the displayed credentials a little differently (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001), I would recommend that our planners not hesitate with demonstrating their awards and diplomas. Overall, accessory items in offices are highly desirable and should be used by all of our planners (within the above guidelines). Personal accessories such as artwork, family pictures or diplomas give the planner a degree of ownership of the space and make him more important in the eyes of the client (Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). •Light – According to the International Labor Organization, good lighting at a workplace can lead to 10-50% increase in productivity.

All studies that I came across stress the importance and benefits of natural light in the counseling process and in the work place in general. According to Pressly and Heesacker, (2001), natural light combined with full spectrum and soft lighting will facilitate self-disclosure and lessen the possibility of depression. My recommendation is to always allow natural light to come through the windows and get rid of the heavy curtains we have installed in one of our meeting rooms. Also to provide the feeling of privacy diffused amounts of light should be used near the client and the rest should be focused or distributed away from him. Sound and Smell – Sound can affect the communication with clients in both positive and negative ways. According to Pulvino et.

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al, (2002), low-volume classical music in the background can facilitate communication. On the other hand, outside noises can be annoying and distracting. Since our building is located right next to a main road, this is often a case in our company. Installing sound proof windows would decrease or completely eliminate the outside noises. Also, it would be a good idea to get a water fountain to our main lobby.

According to Pressly and Heesacker, (2001) sound of the water is soothing and can also decrease the distracting noises. Smell is something all the planners should be aware of. The most important and somewhat obvious consideration is to be aware of body odors (bad breath, sweat etc.).

A cologne that is too strong can also be disturbing or even offensive. I really believe that putting these ideas into work will greatly benefit our company by improving the quality of our relationships with clients as well as the wellbeing of all our workers, Some of the recommendations, such as hanging furniture or painting the walls, would be more costly and cumbersome to perform, but they are some things to think about in the long-run and I believe we will eventually have to implement them to stay a top company in a competitive market. Other concepts, such as decorating offices in art or personal items or even changing the lighting can be done right away. I think that everybody, including planners and clients will be amazed by the improvement in the quality of our work.