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## BEYOND STYLE: SOCIAL COMFORT AS THE NEXT MOTIVATOR

As you enter the most dynamic workplaces of the late 1990s, what strikes you are the many features you might expect to find in an urban club, or perhaps in a lavish home: soft lounge seating, for instance, and pool tables and kitchen facilities with cafe seating.

Such amenities are the hallmarks of the fascinating emergence of "social comfort" in the workplace. In the new economy, work is now broadly seen as a social enterprise. Knowledge workers must see, speak and interact in order to learn and generate new ideas. And for that reason, it's now seen as smart business to make sure employees have plenty of opportunities to socialize, meet and converse.

"Providing social comfort is the next step beyond the dimension of physical comfort in enabling a workforce," says Paul Siebert, vice-president and creative director at Metro, a Steelcase Design Partnership® company in San Francisco. He notes that social comfort figured prominently in the development of Metro's new Detour? line, which supports individuals and teams in open plan settings.

The idea of social comfort in the workplace is so new that there's still much to learn about settings that make people more receptive to social interaction. Nevertheless, Mr. Siebert points out that many organizations are now encouraging casual dining as a social ritual, even attracting gourmet chefs to enliven the experience. Other experimentation is directed toward optimum person-to-person distances and finding ways to encourage visual as well as verbal communication.

### *COGNITIVELY INTENSE*

The attention paid to social activity in the workplace recognizes the need to provide a range of different types of space and stimulation in order to support different work styles and tasks and to keep creative people thoroughly engaged.

"The goal is to provide a diverse range of spaces and experience," says Mr. Siebert. In the high-tech companies of northern California, for instance, it's not unusual to see a casual cafe, a highly networked videoconference room and a rejuvenating garden in close proximity. "They are elevated sensory experiences," he adds. "You will smell the aroma of espresso, you'll see a range of lighting from intimate to bright, and you might hear music in one area and heightened silence in another. It's a more cognitively intense workplace that seeks a balance between the hard, soft and fast dimensions of work. It's about creating equilibrium."

One side benefit of such a diverse workplace is that it reduces the need for people to go elsewhere. That's entirely possible if the employer welcomes the idea of people working in a social setting. An example is the club-like lounge area with network access and cushioned

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seating that can easily be rearranged to accommodate two people talking or eight people brainstorming. "The intent of these kinds of spaces is to create a sense of 'getting away' while still being connected," says Michael Fazio, a principal in ArchIdeas Inc., a Chicago architectural firm. "You can't be cut off from telephones or e-mail, because that would keep you from using these spaces."

### *SPACE SPEAKS TO EMPLOYEES*

In the competitive labor market of the late 1990s, the workplace that offers social as well as physical comfort is gaining a clear advantage. It is fanning the flames of employees' creativity - and helping them meet an important motivational need at the same time. "There's an emerging perception that space talks," says Mr. Fazio. "It speaks to who you are, how you perceive yourself and how you relate to people, especially your employees."