UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT ON THE CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING PROCESS AT BRAINSTORE LTD

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ABSTRACT

Experimental research in creativity suggests an inter-relationship between the physical environment and individual creativity. But can the physical environment also influence the creative problem-solving process in organizations, which depend as much on the organization’s processes as the individual people for their creative production? To begin to answer this question, this study examines the impact of the physical environment on the creative problem-solving process of a highly acclaimed, European consulting firm which specializes in “ideas”.

The research design employs a hybrid methodology, which combines traditional case study method with narrative inquiry. Data on how the physical environment was perceived to impact this firm’s creative problem-solving process was gathered through open ended, semi-structured interviews of the organization’s key employees, including the project managers, CEOs of a typical project, and also through direct, informal observation of the creative problem-solving process. Key clients from the project case were also interviewed. Published material on the organization and the organization’s official Web site was used to collect additional data. All interview data was taped, transcribed verbatim, analyzed for major themes. A narrative or story was then developed using Labov’s six-point framework.

The narrative entitled “The Tacit Dimension” gives a real account of the client’s subjective experience of the creative problem-solving process and how the physical environment influences it. Results indicate three major functions of the physical environment in supporting creative problem solving: 1) knowledge management, 2) symbolic communication, 3) functional support. The first major function of the physical environment in supporting creative process is to create and dissipate knowledge to both employees and clients alike, about the functioning of the
creative problem solving process — knowledge management The second major function employs signs and symbols in the environment to build appropriate expectations and mindsets which support a healthy creative problem solving process — symbolic communication. The narrative shows that the clients depended on the symbolism embedded within the physical environment of the organization as an assurance of its creative ability thereby making them more receptive to nontraditional procedures and building trust in the process. The symbolic communication also promoted the creative problem solving abilities in the employees. Lastly, the environment should be functional to support idea generation by allowing adequate flexibility — functional support. By providing spaces that efficiently support the work processes but are also flexible enough to adapt and improvise, creatively and functionally empowers the employees to generate creative ideas.