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## A Little Nature in the Office Boosts Morale and Productivity

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Summary: Research on “micro-nature” — the incorporation of small, affordable natural elements into workplaces — demonstrates its positive impact on employee performance and well-being. Studies show exposure to nature at work boosted productivity, helpfulness, and creativity, with no

evidence of negative effects. Recommendations include both real and artificial nature, extending beyond the office environment, utilizing underused spaces, and encouraging nature exposure outside work hours. The integration of nature in workplaces enhances overall business performance.

In Canary Wharf, the bustling district that serves as the London base for many global enterprises, developers are building a “green spine” that will soon wind through the skyscrapers, giving workers ready access to green spaces during their workdays. Across town at Google’s under-construction UK headquarters, a 300-meter-long rooftop park with over 250 trees crowns the building, providing employees with a natural escape from the offices and urban environment below. On the other side of the Atlantic, retailer L.L. Bean cut out the middle of one of their warehouses and turned the space into a courtyard, so that everyone at their new home office would have views of nature while working. These real-world examples of incorporating nature into commercial spaces are part of a growing trend to design places where employees can be immersed in nature during their workdays.

Increasing nature in the work environment certainly aligns with many companies’ sustainability initiatives. However, the motive also stems from nature’s effect on humans — it is well established that nature makes us feel better. Our emotions, our thinking, our connection to others, and our physical well-being are all enhanced by being in and around nature.

Despite the connection between contact with nature and our well-being, large investments in bringing nature into the workplace raise some thorny issues. First, in a time of economic headwinds and cost-cutting, is there a business case for incorporating nature into employees’ surroundings? Second, what about those workplaces where it is not feasible or sensible to incorporate a green spine or a rooftop garden?

Answering these questions requires first understanding whether nature has effects on metrics that matter to organizations’ bottom lines (e.g., employee satisfaction and performance) and if so whether less-extreme doses of nature are meaningful enough to elicit these gains. Thus, we set out to test the effects (if any) of what we call micro-nature — small, affordable, seemingly innocuous ways of incorporating nature into the workplace — on how employees feel at work, and how they perform.

### The Research

We measured or manipulated contact with nature at work in different ways across multiple studies, with workers in the U.S., Canada, China, New Zealand, and Indonesia. In experiments, working adults were simply shown images of workplaces suffused with natural elements or matching images without nature. We then asked them to imagine they worked in these spaces and report how it would make them feel and perform. We also conducted more complex studies in real-world work settings. For instance, we assessed employees’ actual contact with nature during a week at work (e.g., working near plants, natural views, or the sound of running water), and then measured their feelings and objective job performance. Finally, in a field experiment in an accounting firm, we went into the offices at night and placed potted plants at some



½ Glenn Howells Architects’ vision for Canary Wharf



[Photo: L.L. Bean]

employees' desks and similar pots, only filled with office supplies, at other desks. We then measured the attitudes and job performance of the two groups and compared them.

The results were largely consistent across these studies: Experiencing even small doses of nature at work improved the way employees felt in ways that fueled higher task performance, increased helping, and enhanced creativity. These findings indicate that incorporating micro-nature into work settings can contribute to worker well-being and performance in a meaningful way.

We also looked into whether there were differences between employees that shaped how nature affected them at work — factors such as how much individuals appreciate nature in general, and the extent to which they are drawn to novel experiences. Our findings showed that some people are especially prone to experiencing the benefits of nature. However, we found no evidence that any employees were negatively impacted by nature exposure at work; thus, micro-nature seems

to hold considerable promise for employees with little downsides.

Bearing these findings in mind, we believe that nature should be accessible to as many employees as possible, not just those lucky enough to work below a green roof or alongside a park. Companies should provide employees with micro-nature experiences. Below, we offer suggestions for incorporating micro-nature into the workplace, while also encouraging managers to take liberties and get creative in their specific organization.

### Capitalizing on Micro-Nature

**Real is best, but artificial works too.** Giving employees opportunities to access “the real thing” is ideal when it comes to nature: indoor water features, windows with views of nature or that open to let in natural sounds like birdsong. But just because it's not the real thing does not mean that employees will not benefit from nature. Research shows that even depictions of nature, such as murals and artificial flowers, can give employees a natural boost.

**Think beyond the office...** It goes without saying that it is not just office workers who benefit from nature. Employees in settings where the work environment feels especially removed from nature — think warehousing or manufacturing — are especially likely to notice a dash of the outdoors brought inside and be positively impacted by it because of how different it is from their status quo

**...and beyond the workplace.** The benefits of nature extend beyond employees' work lives. Some of our research looked at the work-related benefits of spending time outdoors in the evening, after the workday. We found that employees were more productive the next day when they spent time outdoors the prior evening. Especially for hybrid and remote workers, the implications are clear: The benefits of being around nature at home carry over into work. So even incentivizing employees to take an evening walk can help them be more productive the next day.

**Utilize unused or underused spaces.** By definition, micro-nature is small, and can be as simple as painting a wall with natural tones, adding flowers to the break room, or landscaping the area outside employees' windows. We encourage managers to keep an eye out for the unused or underused spaces around their workplace that can be easily and cheaply turned into natural features. For instance, adding more landscaping to an overly industrial parking lot may boost employees' morale.

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Overall, our findings indicate that the benefits of connecting employees to nature at work extend beyond sustainability, and include positive effects on employees' well-being and how they perform their jobs. As

such, we view contact with nature as a valuable supplement to well-designed jobs that already include meaningful work, fair compensation, and respectful treatment. For firms that provide these things and are looking for more ways to enhance the environment in which their employees work, micro-nature offers considerable promise.

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