



IN-HOUSE ISSUES

FEELING AT HOME IN-HOUSE

The corporate environment isn't always conducive to creativity. To make your in-house design group the best it can be, here are 4 key issues to address.

Quality of life and a workplace that's personally and professionally fulfilling are higher priorities for designers than pay. Unfortunately, there are a number of factors—some historical, others relatively new—that challenge an in-house team's physical and psychological workspace. While there are ways to influence and improve these environments, it's also important to understand that creatives need to adjust their expectations and mindset **about** what their workplace can realistically offer.

The basic problem areas almost every corporate creative team must grapple with include high turnover, poor physical workspace, and a restrictive client and corporate culture.

COMING AND GOING

Companies today have a revolving door when it comes to staff. Between staffers working remotely, companies using consultants and contract workers, and the volatility of permanent employees' tenure, the person sitting in the cube next to you could be different on any given day. As a team leader, you have a responsibility to contribute to your group's need for community in spite of these challenges. There are several ways to create a secure sense of place that will enable everyone to do their best work.

First, it's important to make a good initial impression. Often, once a new team member is hired, getting him the tools and access he needs to do his job is

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pushed off to the last minute, sometimes even to the day he starts. Aside from not making the best use of his first days or weeks in the group and costing your company money, this creates an impression with the new hire that either your team isn't buttoned up or, worse, that you and your team really don't value him.

Make sure that, as much as your corporate bureaucracy will allow, e-mail access, ID badges, network access, phone, computer and office space are all in place the day of your new hire's arrival. Assign him an "onboarding buddy" to show him the ropes. Introduce him to the entire team in a live meeting, not in an e-mail announcement. Encourage your team to stop by and say hello.

For staffers who are on the other side of the working continuum and are about to leave, how their departure is handled impacts not only them, but the team that remains. It's important to treat a staff member who's

moving on respectfully and professionally, no matter what the circumstances of her leaving. The others in the group closely watch and form their opinion of the department based on how well or poorly departures are orchestrated.

The team member leaving is also going to represent your group to others in the industry, making her an important contributor to your future recruiting efforts. If she's leaving on good terms, a going-away party may be appropriate. Conducting an exit interview is a great tool to get candid feedback that may lead to ideas and actions to improve your team, and gives the departing employee a sense that you value her and her opinion.

Other staffers who are witnessing the movement of creatives into and out of their group need to feel valued, respected and in control to some degree of their environment. They need to be involved in strategic and tactical initiatives such as workflow processes, departmental goals and decisions about roles and responsibilities. They also need to be informed, as early as possible, of any changes that will impact the group and why those decisions were made.

More than recognizing life events like birthdays, marriages and new children, sharing day-to-day conversations about personal lives, interests, and personal and career goals will foster a sense that the members of the creative team aren't just numbers on a spreadsheet or cogs in the corporate machine. Most important, honest, accurate communication devoid of corporate-speak and euphemisms will let the staff know they're being dealt with respectfully and professionally.

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CUBE LIFE

Companies are always out to maximize efficiencies, and, when it comes to physical space, that mandate translates into the ubiquitous cubicle. Nothing hinders communication, prohibits personal space and destroys self-expression more effectively than "the cube." The creative process is collaborative—the cube is not.

At the very least, make sure your team members are in cube clusters and that they have common areas for impromptu meetings. As much as the corporate bureaucracy will permit, allow your creatives to personalize their cubes with custom lighting, posters, collections, plants, etc.

The place where your team spends most of its time—the cyberworld—should be open to self-expression. Individualized desktops, icons and alerts should be encouraged as long as they don't impede necessary archiving and equipment-sharing needs. If in compliance, you should permit certain widgets and custom applications.

In order to give in-house creatives some control over their aural space, you should also allow MP3 players. Not only do these devices set the creative mood, they also block out distracting background chatter that can slow down the creative process.

ALL ABOUT ATTITUDE

In-house groups often feel as if they exist outside the company culture. This is inevitable given the fact that the creative team has a different mandate, working

process and culture than their counterparts in other departments. It's best to strike a balance between adopting the rah-rah corporate mindset and maintaining the "rebel with a cause" cowboy attitude. There are advantages to both in enhancing and maintaining a positive working environment.

All human beings want to feel that they're contributing to something, be it a company; a cause or another individual. It's imperative that you draw a clear line that connects the creative team's responsibilities to the company's goals. Having presentations by the heads of departments responsible for research and development, customer relations and sales can help establish this connection. Distributing letters from satisfied customers and clients can also give a more personal dimension to an in-house group's efforts.

The other side of the creatives psyche, though, involves being a rebel, an individual and a nonconformist—hardly the makings of a good corporate citizen. If you try to toe the company line on teamwork and compliance, without a wink and a nod to the absurdity of some of those mandates, you'll lose both the respect and commitment of your creative team. It's a tightrope, to be sure, but there definitely are some ways to walk it.

Poking good-natured fun at the company bureaucracy is a great way to diffuse frustration and anger. I remember receiving a three-page memo from Facilities on how to properly use the newly installed security turnstiles, which pretty much just required putting

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your card on the reader and walking through. Our team wrote up mock instructions on how to open a door, flush a toilet, etc.

Spoofing the proliferation of corporate acronyms is another harmless but effective exercise in venting. Groups that I've worked with would create lists of ridiculous and amusing takes on existing and concocted acronyms. There are many easy targets to satirize; just make sure that it doesn't turn hateful, personal or malicious.

Slightly subversive expressions of creative solidarity can help make working in a corporate setting more palatable. For example, have a "designer black" dress day. Create buttons with slogans like "The glass is half empty—Redesign the glass." At one company where I worked, we used the Homeland Security alert legend for project priorities.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Of all the debilitating and demoralizing situations foisted upon in-house groups by their parent companies, lack of resources and accompanying unrealistic expectations are the worst. Corporate creative teams are often understaffed, underequipped and underfunded. They're given less time to complete projects than their peers in outside agencies and are paid less money. Under these circumstances, resignation and apathy can begin to eat away at the delicate fabric of the design team.

Unfortunately, while these issues are the most destructive to the department, they're also the most difficult to address. Help your team adopt realistic expectations so they'll maintain a healthy attitude toward their work environment. Advise them not to expect their jobs to totally satisfy the creative muse—they must look to personal projects to scratch that itch. They also shouldn't expect a job to meet the need for friendship, though you should work toward creating a sense of camaraderie among the members of your team. And they can't expect their careers to fulfill their need to lead a purposeful life, but you can offer opportunities for them to be giving and supportive of others and to further the group's mission.

What they should expect in return is respect, fair play, support and compensation for their talent, hard work and experience. If you can offer that, the rest will fall into place and your company will become a place your team enjoys going to, both on a professional and personal level. In-house is not a home, but given that you spend a large part of your life there, it had better be pretty close. ■■■

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