

# Make offices 'just right' for childfree women (and everyone else) with Goldilocks thinking

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Too big, too small, just right! Too hard, too soft, just right! If even that young trespasser and thief Goldilocks understood the importance of things being customised to suit the individual preference, then workspaces can do the same.

We have hybrid animals, plants, cars, and now hybrid working, combining both remote and in-person hours, perceived to offer the best of both worlds. Three years after the start of the pandemic, we have changed the way we work but the question remains: is hybrid working actually working, and is it working for everyone?

When it comes to the growing group of non-parents in the workplace, the answer, in a nutshell, is sometimes.

For a while now, companies have been prioritising family friendliness, which is a positive step towards greater inclusivity. However, it is crucial to remember that the typology of families vary and we need to accommodate childfree employees too.

For various reasons of choice and consequence, the number of people who are childfree in the workplace, is rising – particularly in the cohort of skilled professionals.

While much has changed, we still have a way to go when it comes to society accepting those with no children without judgment or stigma in the workplace. Despite their growing numbers, globally people without children still feel they face certain barriers at work.

Some individuals report experiencing slower promotions or being denied equitable raises because their managers assume that only working parents require additional income. Others experience meetings that conclude punctually when a parent needs to pick up their child, but tend to run late when a non-parent has another commitment.

Moreover, in the past, some companies have leaned harder on non-parents. For example, some corporate cultures have tended to assume that childfree employees can work late, take on graveyard shifts, travel more, or schedule their holidays during off-seasons instead of during traditional holiday seasons. This is due to the incorrect belief that they have fewer significant personal commitments compared to parents. However, there are many different permutations of family structures and numerous types of family responsibilities, including caring for elderly relatives, siblings, extended family members, pets, livestock and their own selves.

Tone-deaf environments like this risk making employees without children feel that their employer values the personal lives of parents more than their own. That said, in this era, talent that does not feel valued tends to leave the building, never to return.

While an organisation's policies make a big difference, their physical workspaces can contribute to ensuring that all employees feel valued and considered too. So how does this manifest in workspaces?

In the last decade or so, we have seen welcome signs of progress. More companies now treat all employees equally regardless of their parental status. Hybrid work strategies now tend to focus less on why an employee requires flexibility and instead on how the job is getting done. This is the kind of flexibility that doesn't stigmatise or exploit.

For instance, during the lockdowns, many parents in traditional family homes had to deal with the chaos of working in a



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busy, noisy environment that wasn't conducive to productivity. As a result, they were keen to return to the office.

However, for those who live solo or childfree, in many cases working from home provided an environment where they could focus and ideate better without disruption, nurturing an appreciation for quieter spaces. For many of these people, returning to a bustling office was unsettling.

A survey from Leesman Review shows 76% of workers list noise as a crucial workplace factor, yet only 30% are happy with the noise levels at their office.

For those used to a quiet environment, the distraction from the clickety-clack of keyboards, pinging apps, ringing phones and leaking noise from meeting rooms can lead to taking longer to complete tasks and lower productivity.

Women tend to be impacted differently by light, sound and sensory stimulation. When it comes to sound, many men are not as responsive as women may be to auditory stimuli, and for those women who enjoy tranquil solo living even more so.

And yet the changes that will instantly make an office more women-friendly, and therefore more likely to retain those vital female employees, may be more subtle than many would even notice. When it comes to sound, it makes sense that this means modern workspaces should be designed with pleasant acoustics in mind.

New approaches to workplace design combine designated collaboration, quiet and focus areas. Even so, it isn't always practical to head off to a quiet room each time you need to take a phone call, and often, people need to access their computers while on the phone.

Utilising sound-absorbing materials and noise-reducing materials, fittings and furnishing can go a long way to hushing the hustle in general. Then, there are also clever little acoustic devices, like noise-cancelling halos or hoods suspended above desks, which offer a great solution while retaining visual connection in open-plan offices.

At Cushman & Wakefield | BROLL we are seeing increasing importance given to the sensory experience of the workplace. One of the biggest challenges being put to us is to provide privacy for focus work, while also creating a sense of togetherness. After all, if work from home has taught us anything about the office, it is the critical role it plays in organisational culture, collaboration and innovation.

This requires thinking about the office not as isolated pockets of experience, but rather spaces that help businesses be more culturally inclusive. This helps organisations to be more accommodating of a range of lifestyles, whether employees are working at the office or at home.

The company that makes an effort to employ a diverse range of people and adapt to their diverse needs, will itself be more diverse, agile, innovative and adaptable, and prove to be a better business prospect in the long run.

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