

## Episode 71

### Emotion at Work in Reactions to the Physical Work Environment

Phil Willcox

Hello and welcome to the Emotion at Work podcast, where we place emotion at the heart of the people, the processes and the place of work. Today we're focusing on the place of work. It's often overlooked and something that we've looked into in the past on the Emotion at Work podcast on episode, I think it was 23 with Monica Parker. And I think the workplace is something that impacts how people feel and then that will impact how they think. Which I find really fascinating because in places like retail or maybe hospitality, a huge amount of effort is invested, well effort and money actually, is invested into looking into how the place impacts the customers that may be in there or the clientele that may be in there. And I don't think, or it doesn't feel to me anyway, that the similar level of investment or interest is taken into the place of work and how that can impact how people feel and therefore how they think? And you also know, as fair listener, that the Emotion at Work podcast loves a bit of evidence based practice in what we do. And so I'm delighted that our guest has chosen to join us today. As a leading academic who spent over 20 years working in organisations, our guest is an internationally renowned expert on work and the workplace. They're the MBA director and assistant professor of organisational behaviour at Bond University. Also, they're a leading thinker on the understanding of the future of work and how we can reimagine work to live more meaningful and creative lives. I mean, what an introduction is that? So, let's welcome to the Emotion at Work podcast Libby Sander. Hi, Libby.

Libby Sander

Hi, Phil. It's great to be here. I don't know if I can live up to that, but sounded good.

Phil Willcox

Based on our conversations that we've had off air, I'm absolutely sure that you can. So, no, I think it's going to be really good, I'm really looking forward today. And as always, we begin with our innocuous yet unexpected question. So, my innocuous yet unexpected question for you is, what is a feel good film for you?

Libby Sander

I'm the worst with films, I tend to just watch documentaries all of the time. So, look a little bit in the vein of what we're going to talk about today, Phil...

Phil Willcox

Yeah, go on.

Libby Sander

I have to say one of my favourite ever TV shows is Silicon Valley. I don't know if you've ever seen it about...?

Phil Willcox

No, I've heard of it, but I've not seen it, no.

Libby Sander

Super, super funny. Yeah. So, I would have to say that would be one of my favourites.

Phil Willcox

Okay. And is it the satirical element in particular that makes it one of your favourite things?

Libby Sander

Yeah, the sad thing is, it's not even actually that satirical. It's pretty much exactly what happens in organisations in startup, let's be real, like we saw with The Office here. So, it's probably a bit too true to be funny in some cases, but, yeah, hilarious.

Phil Willcox

Okay. Yeah, that sounds good. So, one of my feel good movies, or a lot of my feel good movies actually, kind of remind me of family stuff. So, one of my feel good movies that I could watch again and again, and again is Disney's Tangled. I love the slapstick comedy in it. I love the score. And I think the score in it is fabulous. And I love the slight reinterpretation of that kind of classic Rapunzel story. So, yeah. And there's one scene in particular that I could just, yeah, sit and watch every time, makes me cry every time. It's lovely. So, yeah, Tangled for me.

Libby Sander

I haven't watched that. My kids are 14 and 16 now, so two boys, so I might have to have a look.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, so my three are, what are they, 17, nearly 14 and nearly 11, so they're less keen on watching Tangled with me, but I don't care, it's fine. So, we have like a regular ritual where we do a family movie night and then the choice of movie alternates from one person to the next, to the next. And there are two rules which are one, it can't be Star Wars, because if it was Star Wars I could just use that every week, and the second one is it can't be Marvel. They've been instilled by two different members of the family. So, often we go to animation-y stuff. What did we watch on the weekend? I think it was Luca, which was another Disney one but set in Italy, so that was good fun.

Libby Sander

Yeah, nice, very cool.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, it was good. Okay, so Silicon Valley then, a little bit true to life or too true to life maybe?

Libby Sander

Probably not that feel good when we be honest about it, but it's funny, yeah.

Phil Willcox

Well, as long as it makes you feel good, that's fine, that's what works, that was what we were after. Yeah, definitely. And do you see some overlaps then in between what you see in that particular show and your research and what you've looked into in the workplace and how people's reactions to the physical work environment? Do you notice any overlap between the two?

Libby Sander

Yeah, absolutely, because there's a whole, quite a few different scenes and different episodes where they've got funding for their startup, and then they're building an office to look something like Google, and does that actually have any scientific effect? Should we have a slippery slide in our office? And they end up with all kinds of weird and wonderful inventions to try and make them more creative or more innovative, and to get the startup to launch to the moon, become a unicorn. So, yeah, there are definitely some parallels there for sure.

Phil Willcox

Should we have a...I'm sorry, go on?

Libby Sander

Yeah, one of the guys starts out working actually at the, it's supposed to be Google really, called Hooli and they spend months just coming up with a potato cannon. So, in terms of silly workplace ideas that people get put on projects that don't matter. So, yeah, there's the potato cannon. Haven't had one of those in my life though yet.

Phil Willcox

No, I didn't even know a potato cannon was a thing.

Libby Sander

You'll have to watch it now [laughs].

Phil Willcox

I'll have to watch it now, yeah, I definitely will. I suppose then I'm left with two maybe, I don't know, slightly tongue in cheek questions, and one is, should an office have a slide in then? So you said you talked about the slippery slide, so is there evidence to suggest officers should have slippery slides in them?

Libby Sander

[Laughs] Not unless you're in kindergarten, perhaps or you're running a series of kindergartens. I don't know, maybe at Google, but for most of us, I think that's the problem, we see all these images and think, oh, that's what a good office should be like, and for most of us, it's nowhere near what we actually need. And so I would say, no, definitely no to the slide. No.

Phil Willcox

And then the potato cannon?

Libby Sander

Well, actually, most of us aren't very creative at work, so who knows? That could help with team cohesion, it might help with a bit of humour, creativity, but I don't think it's going to produce anything useful, no.

Phil Willcox

Okay. All right, well, let's get into what might produce or what does produce some really useful outcomes for the workplace then. Because I really enjoyed your 2019 paper, which is called Perceptions Matter, the reactions to the physical work environment. And what prompted you to do that piece of research? Because when I was reading it, it felt like this was something that you really wanted to research. It wasn't like, oh, this might be funky to look into, it felt like it was something that you really, really wanted to get into. So, what prompted you to want to do that particular piece of research?

Libby Sander

So, I've been working in industry for quite a long time and I'd often been tasked with designing offices and saying, how do we make the workplace better? It doesn't make any difference if we just have grey plants, well, maybe not grey, maybe dead, grey cubicles, grey carpet, fluorescent lighting. Does it make any difference? And there wasn't a lot of research that looked at the entire workplace, which seems quite strange. So, plenty of research on the effect that plants have on us. Plenty of research on knowing what kind of lighting does for us. Air quality. But when you walk into an office, you don't just react to a plant or to the lighting or to the lack of open space or too much open space. And there wasn't really any research that looked at the environment as a whole, because you're

going to walk in and you're going to react consciously/unconsciously to that. So, that actually formed the basis of my PhD research to figure out, well, what are the most important reactions psychologically that people need from their workplace? And there really wasn't anything to assess that.

Phil Willcox

Okay. And how did you go about assessing that then? That sounds like a massive question, but, yeah, is that okay?

Libby Sander

I'm not going to bore you to death with the excruciating detail that goes into a PhD thesis, but in a nutshell, essentially what we did, or what I did initially, was look at, well, what are the most important things we need to be thinking about? And so one of those was a cognitive reaction. So, as knowledge workers in an office environment, what is the cognitive reaction that we actually need? So, I developed a measure to assess these responses that people actually have. And so the most important cognitive reaction that we need in the modern workplace is, it wouldn't be no surprise to your listeners, focus and concentration. But how many can actually do that in a modern open-plan office? Because I'm sure you've heard, maybe you've experienced, the number one complaint in an open-plan office is just can everyone be quiet, stop talking on the phone, stop doing Zoom meetings in an open office with no headphones on. I actually had that last week with somebody. So, cognitive is one of the first reactions. The second one is an affective or an emotional reaction, which, of course, is something I know you're very, very interested in. And this is the one that often gets quite, I think, forgotten about because, of course, it makes sense, we need the cognitive reaction of focus and concentration, but what about this affect thing, like, really? Because for a long time we told people just don't bring your emotions to work, could you please leave them at home, we don't want to know about that. And as you followed so brilliantly through your episodes with your guests, understanding how important emotion is and what role that plays in the workplace. So, we looked into, well, what is the most important affective emotional reaction? And quite surprisingly, I think to us initially, was a sense of beauty. So, this is different from what you might think in terms of, well, , beauty is quite subjective, I like that painting, I like that person, but it is, I guess, a little bit more visceral than that. It's this unconscious reaction. It's a fundamental human need. And anyone that's walked into very inspiring architecture, if you've been out in nature, I think we have this reaction that we feel this sense of beauty. And that is actually really important. It's correlated with increasing our mood. And mood, we know, has a positive mood and negative mood as well, has a range of outcomes that are very important in the workplace. And the negative ones, the ones you want to avoid. And so that was really, really interesting. I think that took a while to really get people to understand that, well, can't you just make grey cubicles? And we're seeing a change now, of course, even in our urban landscapes in terms of natural materials, the use of biophilia that we're designing for beautiful places that people want to be in. And, as you said, we've been doing it with environmental psychology, in retail for a long time. You know, we want to get you to come into the store, we want to get you to stay as long as possible, and we want to get you to spend as much money as possible. And so the engineering those environments has been in place for a really long time. If you look at an Apple store, it's designed for all of the senses. It is specifically engineered in a particular way to make you have a particular emotional experience. And think of another store where it might be the opposite and you think I just can't wait to get out of this place. But we've been really slow at applying it to the workplace. And so the sense of beauty is the second reaction of the emotional one. And then the third one was a relational reaction, which is connectiveness, but not the, could you all come on Friday and let's all have a pizza party and be forced to watch a movie together? Because as we've seen since the pandemic, nobody really wants that, do they? Well, I don't know many people that like the idea of [laughs] being forced to go to the office and watch a movie.

Phil Willcox

No, a bit of forced fun is something that is always the antithesis of that thing. When somebody's saying, right, go do this thing, because this is going to be fun, I rarely meet a team or a group of people that all go, yes, that was actually fun, thanks.

Libby Sander

Yeah, I don't really want to do that, yeah. So, it's about being able to connect when you choose to. And I think that's the key point. So, how can we create a workplace that then facilitates these reactions? One that you can think and concentrate when you need to, another one that you can connect with people and you can collaborate, and you can do all of those things when you need to. And then I guess, underpinning all of that is this sense of beauty that's inherently built into the entire workplace. Because the workplace is a physical scaffold, it's a cognitive scaffold for our brain. So, we're always picking up messages. If you're in a place with a concrete floor, architects love those, they're really awful. As humans, we don't like concrete, have a very constricted reaction. Low ceilings also do that. It's like a threat response. And that will make you feel very different than if you're in a space that has beautiful natural light and views of nature, and high ceilings, natural materials. So, we don't have to know the science, just to know I know how I feel when I go into this space. Does it make me feel good? Does it make me feel calm? Does it make me feel inspired or creative? Or does it make me feel angry or threatened or I just can't wait to get out of here?

Phil Willcox

So, I spent three days a week working for a company in their, what they called their support office, it was like their head office, and it had loads of light, loads and loads, and loads of light, which at times brought with it its own challenges around comfort and heat, because the amount of glass meant that the office could be quite hot sometimes. But the glass was set in these big, I don't know, big pillars or big columns, I suppose, of grey concrete. And you had this...I always found it interesting, you had this contrast of these, I don't know, must have been eight/ten metre high and two/three metre wide pieces of glass that gave you views outside, and actually the office was set in some ground, so you had some grass spaces outside, you had some trees, you had some greenery outside of it. And then it was almost set in a real contrast then to these really big, thick pillars of grey concrete. And it was what you described as well, was the epitome of the big open-plan offices. So, you could have banks of 20 desks, and then you'd have ten rows or ten banks of 20 desks in a row. And then you had a meeting room in the middle of the office, which I've got a separate story which I'll tell in a minute, we had a meeting room in the middle of the office which was completely glass. So, even if you went into a meeting in the middle of the office, then everyone outside could see...was it completely glass? No, three sides of glass.

Libby Sander

Like a fishbowl.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, you were like a fishbowl in the middle, to the point where one day I was doing some strategy work or strategy thinking, and I was trying to come up with like a framework to hang together these different elements we've been working on. And I got asked to stop, somebody came over and knocked on the door and said, you're really distracting everybody, because you've got scissors and you've got Sellotape and you've got, like, coloured pens, and you're playing some music, all right it's not very loud, but you're still doing all of these things, and you're just distracting everybody else. And I was like, oh, okay, I'm sorry. And I thought, right, well, clearly, if I want to do my creative thinking stuff, then I need to do it somewhere else that's not in the office.

Libby Sander

It sounds hideous, the whole office sounds like a complete nightmare [laughs].

Phil Willcox

Yeah, it wasn't great. I can't remember where I was going to go with that now. Anyway, so I think I was sharing it because at the start you said you might have experienced these things. And I was thinking, yes, actually, I did, and that memory came back. So, when we think about the three different reactions then, so the cognitive, affective, and relational, can I work my way backwards through them, if that's okay? So, on the relational reaction, you talked about that being connectedness, and you made that additional distinction then around that being connectedness when you choose to. So, could you tell me a bit more about that and then I'll probably ask you a follow-up question around, so how can we help that then? So, if the listeners they're listening to this thinking about their office or their workspace that they might be in, what might they be able to do? So, yeah, so let's do the connectedness when you choose to, yeah, could you tell me a bit more about that?

Libby Sander

Yeah, I think often we feel like there's a lot of focus, especially after the pandemic and the change to working from home and hybrid that you have to connect, whether it be like we are right now, online, the online meeting, everyone's so traumatised of the Zoom meeting, aren't they? Or you have to make that effort, go to the office in the hybrid model, and you should be connecting all day with your team. And there's too much focus on what we call the synchronous work, and that is what has to get done with everyone else at the same time as everyone else, versus asynchronous, where you're working on your own. And that is actually a big piece of most modern knowledge worker's jobs and we sort of forget about that, because we think we've got to be talking to each other all day. And I think that's definitely a mistake. And each team will have its own rhythm, its own dynamic in terms of what's right for them and what they need for the particular project or that task at hand. And so giving people that choice in the way we design work is really important. And then by following from that, how we design the work environment? So, what can employers do? It's a little bit trickier sometimes for employees to do this, but providing a range of spaces that give people flexibility about the type of work that they need to be focusing on and how they might like to connect and meet? It sounds silly, because often it's just, well, you're either at your team desk or you're in the café area. And in fact, that's not always the ideal place to connect either, because it might be too noisy. It doesn't have whiteboards. It might not have the things you might want to use. Like, you just talked about the meeting room, that was the fishbowl, but that wasn't ideal because everyone was looking at you and told you to stop while you were trying to be creative. So, I think it really is thinking about, and for me, a lot of this conversation about how work is changing is thinking about the psychological state that we need to be in. And so we need to connect what spaces are we going to be able to use that will support that? And it doesn't have to be sitting down, it doesn't have to be in the fishbowl meeting room. Walking meetings increase creativity by 81%. I know there's a CEO of a big Australian company here, Lendlease, who takes most of her meetings walking. So, that changes the dynamic. It's good for our health as well. So, it's really about thinking differently about give people a choice to connect. Don't say you must be sitting with your team all of the time, you must be immediately interrupting each other and bouncing ideas, because that's going to have a huge effect on the cognitive reaction when you get to that one. I can talk more about what happens when we force people to connect too much or all the time.

Phil Willcox

Okay, wonderful. Okay, so for the listener then it's maybe thinking, all right, well, within the environments that I work in or my teams work in or my organisations work in, how might I have a



range of spaces for different types of work which encourage those different reactions? So, if we want to have a space where people connect, those connections could be on a one to one basis, so you might want somewhere that, I don't know, might have a bit of privacy with it. So, I run the risk of sounding like I'm just going to insult the organisation that I was describing earlier on, they basically had what you described, there was desks or canteen or offices or meeting rooms. And the amount of one to ones that would happen on tables in the canteen, and then some days it would just get so noisy down there because you had so many people. It was like flamingos, you know when a load of flamingos come together and they start to make a load of noise, it sounds a bit like a cocktail party. But also you had very little privacy then, so people could walk past and would naturally overhear snippets of discussion and snippets of conversation. So, I suppose would that connectedness relate to maybe more one on one type connection and then maybe, I don't know, small group connection and then bigger group connection? So, would you potentially have...again, I don't want to presuppose that everyone's got enough physical space to do this, but would you have different types of connected areas for different types of connection ideally?

Libby Sander

Yeah, absolutely. And I think the exciting thing is now with the change in our urban landscapes as well is you don't have to do all of this in the office. You just raised a really good point about overhearing other people's conversations. And so when you're in the office your brain is always attending to the conversations around you, even if you don't want it to, and the reason for that is because it might be about you or it might be something you need to know. And so unconsciously, you're trying to get on with your job there and your brain is listening, thinking, oh, something happening over there I need to know. When you go to a coffee shop, it can be that buzz, a bit of background noise, that hum, so it can be noisy, but the conversation is unlikely to be about you and it's unlikely to be about what you need to know. So, a low level of noise is actually good for creativity, but it depends on the type of noise that it is. In the office, in the environment you described, it isn't good. So, getting out of the office is great. Yeah, go to a coffee shop. Go and have a one on one meeting. At the Met in New York it's regularly used as a coworking space, which I think is fantastic. We could talk for ages about the cognitive scaffold of that particular architecture in terms of creativity and innovation. So, I think this idea that work is distributed, it happens everywhere now, so get out of the office, get out of your house, go and find spaces that are going to make you feel supported in the task that you're trying to do.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, definitely. I love a walking meeting that you mentioned earlier on, I think I first started using walking meetings back in 2008, I think I first started doing walking one to ones with my team, just because I found that we got on, we achieved more and we had better conversations out walking than we did together. And I feel like there's something, I say I feel like, there's the symbolic nature of being beside somebody rather than being opposite somebody. And I think often when you, or at least when I used to do one to one in a small meeting, you'd be sat opposite sides of a desk and then there is that potential feeling of opposition, whereas when we're out walking together, we're literally together, we're side by side. And it also takes away that potential feeling of scrutiny. So, if you ask someone a question and they're doing some thinking and you're sat opposite them, then there's that, I don't know, potentially felt psychological pressure of, oh, I need to answer quickly, or I need to control my behaviour so that somebody doesn't misinterpret what I'm doing. Whereas I think if you're next to somebody and you're already moving, if there's a bit of a pause, the level of felt scrutiny from the person who's doing the thinking is less because they can't see all of you in that way. And I do get interested in terms of when people slow down, when I ask them a question and their pace slows down, like, oh, they're really thinking about this one then, this is taking some cognitive effort to do, and then we'll pick up the pace again maybe when the thinking's finished. And where I'm going I think then is from a workplace point of view, so Emotion at Work is a relatively

small company, so we're five employees strong, and we're spread all over the country. So, we are 100% remote, we don't have any physical spaces that we work in, and what we do is make sure that we invest with our employees in terms of getting the right setup for them at home. So, making sure they've got the right kit, they've got the right equipment, they're ergonomically done in the right way, but we also then will cover costs of if somebody wants a day pass for a coworking space to go there because there's a particular environment they like to work in, then we'll do that. We encourage them to go out for a walk and to do their thinking out and about rather than doing it sat at a desk, and using different spaces for different purposes. And then we have some money set aside to cover that because we think it's important. I don't want to sit at my desk all day, why would I want to try and tether somebody else to their desk all day?

Libby Sander

Well, it doesn't work because you have to do all the different types of work, as you said, and the idea that any one space is going to support all of these different needs we have during the day is just silly frankly.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, definitely. Okay, so that's the relational reaction then, so let's do the effective reaction. And I think the listener might have been surprised by the way that you took it on to being about the sense of beauty. Because I think historically I would have thought that you want the affective reaction to be like a named emotion, so say, oh, you want people to be happy or you want them to feel safe or all those kinds of things. And I love that actually, no, it's about, the effective reaction we want is that feeling of a sense of beauty and then the impact that has on our mood. So, yeah, could you tell us a bit more about where sense of beauty came from?

Libby Sander

It's really interesting when you talk about that because of course we need our workplaces to be psychologically safe, but we also have this idea, and it's been an age old discussion in organisational behaviour forever, about, well, what comes first, the happy worker and then the satisfied worker, or the productive outcomes or the other way around? But is it realistic that people should be happy all of the time? Because that is literally the satire isn't that we see in The Office TV show. If you watch Silicon Valley, the same thing. We're always high fiving, we're hustling, we're geeing each other up and this is how it has to be, everyone has to be high energy all the time. And that kind of workplace can become extremely toxic. You're very negative today, Phil, you have to be positive all the time, you have to be in a really good mood, and that just isn't the reality. And I think I started to look into this because it's quite an interesting topic, as you said, and it really hasn't been looked at a lot in the workplace at all. A colleague of mine did a study in the US where he looked at what you would call really not spiritual buildings per se, but very significant buildings. And I'm sure your listeners will be able to relate, when you've been into a building and it just makes you feel, wow, it's like a bit of awe and wonder. And so what he did was use mobile fMRI scanners, so mobile brain scanners and he just put people into these buildings with the scanner on and looked at, well, what actually happens? And what he found was that just putting them into the building without doing anything else, put them into a meditative state, a very mindful state. And when you think about if you've ever tried to meditate, how difficult that is. In two seconds your brain's like, oh, did I turn the oven off? What do I have to do after work today, right? And we go and do these courses, we go off on retreats with Yogi gurus and we try to learn to meditate. But just putting people in a certain type of building and environment actually will have that effect on your brain. And so this idea of the scaffolding of the physical environment, the neural architecture, is extremely significant, and we're just starting to really understand this now and particularly in the workplace. And so when you have this sense of beauty you can feel things like, maybe not as much awe and wonder in the workplace, unless you work somewhere pretty fantastic, but certainly it can produce positive mood, it can make you feel



calmer, it can make you feel more creative and more inspired. And it's logical as well, when we think about our houses, how much money do we spend? Look at all the reality TV show channels now on redesigning homes and changing all of those sorts of things, we spend a lot of time making our houses a place where we want to be that make us feel good. Not many people have grey carpets, well maybe they have some dead plants, they don't have this sterile, very austere environments, because we want to feel physically and psychologically comfortable. That's what we need in a workplace. And so if it's ugly and if it repels you, it's not going to have that effect. And so it makes sense, you go into a place and there is detail and there is interest, and there are things that spark curiosity. And we can get down into, obviously, materials that you might use in terms of construction, views, lights, nature, all of those sorts of things. But beauty is a fundamental human reaction that we all need. We're seeing it much more now in workplaces, but going back ten years or more, it was much, much less of a thing. Most workplaces were horrible, couldn't wait to leave at the end of the day.

Phil Willcox

[Laughs] Or they were built for function rather than feeling, I think.

Libby Sander

Right, exactly. So this sense of it's an aesthetic reaction as well, yeah.

Phil Willcox

So, I know we've talked quite a bit about knowledge workers and maybe those office spaces. What about for those workplaces maybe where the the function is absolutely critical? So I suppose I'm thinking about like, I don't know, maybe a garage or like a mechanics garage, not like a fuelling station garage, but like where mechanics might work, or like a water treatment kind of place, where actually the building does need to fulfil a purpose, because it links in with the task that individuals are there to do? And it might give maybe less flexibility in terms of how we might be able to create that sense of beauty and think about how those things might be? So what, if any, advice might you have for people that might work in that kind of environment?

Libby Sander

Well, I think we're seeing this shift as well, because you're right, there is obviously there are environments that have a particular function, they have a whole range of different requirements in terms of safety and different things, but that doesn't preclude them from embracing these principles. And so if we look at hospital settings, which are some of the noisiest workplaces, which has a huge impact on patient recovery but also on the staff that work there, they're often very austere and very clinical, and we can see how that design has shifted, particularly over the last ten years. So, you can still retain what are the core functions that we need in terms of that, as you said, functionality and safety and whatever else that might be, but a study done quite a while ago now showed that when hospital patients were put into a room that had natural light and views of greenery, and was basically a much nicer environment than what a hospital room used to be, that they required 20% less pain medication after surgery and they recovered much, much more quickly. I think it's just how we're seeing that actually shift in terms of the changes. So, we're seeing a lot more emphasis on this in school environments, there's been increasingly research done on the effects of noise in school classrooms. And so if you've been into a classroom recently you might have seen they look very different to perhaps when you went to school in terms of the layout, that functionality to move and change the room. So, the student is just not sitting at one desk all day listening to the teacher, which isn't really great for learning outcomes. And so there are numerous examples of this throughout different settings as well. In factories, same kind of principles as we look at the hospital. If we make the environment more conducive to putting the human at the centre, they're having an experience that promotes the psychological states we need for work. If you're

working in a factory you need to concentrate still, there's safety issues if you aren't able to concentrate well. If you're standing on a hard floor all day, how can we engineer that environment to produce the outcomes that are going to better psychologically, physically, and in terms of the performance that we want from employees? And so I think we're seeing a fundamental shift on this, where work is becoming much more life centred, rather than it was always very mechanistic, it was always very system focused and machine focused. And if we go back to the origins of job design research decades now, originally, it was like, Phil, you just make this one widget all day, and you keep making widget. And then we realised, well, that's not great for your motivation, that doesn't do much for you in terms of your satisfaction at work to just think, I'm only making this tiny widget. How can we expand your job to make it more interesting and to incorporate other elements so you can see what that contribution is? And it's a little bit like that with the workplace as well, that we don't just accept anymore, well, that's the way it has to be. You know an office has to be ugly, it has to be noisy, you just have to sit at that one desk all day. It requires this change in thinking and then we see dramatically different outcomes supported by the research.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, yeah, wonderful. And some fantastic examples in there, thank you, that was really useful, thank you so much. All right, so let's move into the third set of reactions then, which I guess in a way you touched on just there in your example of retaining focus, if I'm just doing a single widget all day, that repetitiveness might get boring for me. So therefore, I get distracted and think about different things, and the quality of my work might go down, or the productivity of my work might go down. So, yeah, tell me a bit more about the cognitive reactions, and again, what can our listeners learn or take from what you found?

Libby Sander

Yeah. So I don't think it's any surprise to anybody listening that you need to be able to concentrate and focus as the most important work reaction. But what people don't realise is that firstly, you don't habituate to noise. So people often think, oh, you just get used to it, but actually you don't. So, we did research in the lab here at my university where we showed a causal link between standard open-plan office noise, so not even particularly loud, and then we objectively measured people's physiological stress. So, we measured galvanic skin response, which is your sweat response that shows how stressed you are, we measured heart rate and heart rate variability. And what we found was there is this causal link between the office noise and your stress response, to the tune where your stress went up by 34% and it made you in a 25% worse mood. So, if you think about that in the workplace, if you're going about your job all day in a 34% more stressed state, objectively measured, and you're in a 25% worse mood, that's not a great thing for you, it's not a great thing for your workplace and for your employer. So, when people can't focus and concentrate then there are other reactions that flow from that. So, what happens is that, and this is why open-plan offices that are poorly designed don't work, because the original idea was, let's just shove everyone together, they'll be really creative, they'll be more innovative, they'll collaborate and problem solve, and they'll get to know each other better and meet new people. And actually, none of those things happen in a poorly designed open-plan office. And what does happen is that people get more withdrawn, they don't collaborate more, they collaborate less, and they can even become hostile to their colleagues. Because when you just can't actually concentrate to get your job done, then everything else becomes a nice to have. And so it has this flow on effect across the other scales in terms of, well, are you in a good mood? Are you connecting with other people? No, you're not, you're just incredibly frustrated that you can't get your job done.

Phil Willcox

Yeah, I can imagine how that goes on to impact that relational reaction and also the effective reaction as well. Often I get asked to work with teams or with organisations in terms of how do we

think about how we feel? And one of my favourite questions to ask is, what's got in your way recently? And then a variation of that might be, what barriers do you experience? Or it might be, what do you find yourself banging up against or hitting when you're trying to get your job done? And that links to the emotion of anger then, because anger as an emotion is about trying to get over an obstacle to achieve a goal. So there's a goal I want, I want to be productive, I want to complete this task, I want to connect with my colleagues, I want to experience the great feelings of working in whatever setting I'm in, and then what happens is things get in the way. And then if I just keep hitting up against or running into these different barriers the level of frustration can grow and grow, and to the point then where, yeah, I'm just grumpy. I'm just in a grumpy mood because all these things are in my way, and I can't do anything about it to change them because I can't shout everybody just be quiet, or I can't maybe take myself off, because then I might be seen as not wanting to be part of the team. So, it was really interesting, one team I was working with recently, a member of the team goes and sits in a different part of the office regularly, because that's where they go to complete a particular style of work that they want to do. And the team took great offence to that, they were like, well, you'd rather be over there than you'd be here, why would you rather be away from us than be with us? Part of the discussion I had with the team afterwards as I was reviewing my findings, the individual said, it's nothing to do with you, I really like you all, I enjoy being around you all, when I've got this particular type of work to do though, I find it really difficult to do it sat at my desk, so I go and sit in this other part of the office, and I go and do it over there because that's where it works best for me. But the team had made it mean something, they'd made it mean that the individual was disengaged, they didn't want to be part of the team or was being actively resistant. Whereas it was not, it's actually I just want to get my job done and that particular task that I'm doing I find I get best done over there. So, it was a really interesting discussion with the team in terms of, yeah, like I said, what they were making it mean.

Libby Sander

Yeah, I think it's a great point coming back to it's why people like to have their hybrid days at home, because they don't get interrupted visually or auditorily, and they can actually get things done. So, having the flexibility to do that is so important.

Phil Willcox

Okay, so I'd like to move into maybe some quick fire questions on, so what do we get wrong? What do we need to avoid? And what could we do to make it better? So, what's maybe your three most common things that, I don't know, organisations or teams or workplaces get wrong in terms of their design and then how that makes people think, feel or connect?

Libby Sander

So, I think there's still much too much focus on let's have acres of open-plan space without enough barriers or things that will break up that space, not just from an acoustic perspective, but just a visual perspective that people, we like to feel cozy, we like to feel that we can achieve some level of sort of comfort or privacy. The second big thing would be acoustics. They can be quite expensive and often we get to that point in the project and then someone says, what, we're going to spend how much on acoustics? Let's just put a big line through that with a workplace that nobody can do anything in, and I've been in plenty of those. So, acoustics are so important and we need to bring them in from the start if we're designing a new workspace, if we're retrofitting a space then get an expert in to look at that because it makes an incredible difference. The most distracting type of noise at work is multi talker speech and there are so many things that can be done with sound scaping or acoustic treatment that will reduce that speech transmission index, which is how far those voices are going to carry before they interrupt somebody. So, there is a lot that can be done now from that perspective. And I would say that is just an imperative because as organisations are shrinking their workspaces because of the hybrid model in a lot of cases, what that means is you have potentially a

smaller workspace, obviously, because not everyone's coming in every day, but then it's noisier because you haven't still got as much room and there probably hasn't been this thought on the acoustics and there's much more focus on collaboration. So, it's like, well, let's have all these café spaces and social spaces, but hang on, people still need to actually concentrate. They're not only going to come in on the days they're in the office to collaborate and catch up, they need to actually be able to do creative work as well, and so we can't forget about that. So, I would say those two things are, I mean there's a lot, but they're very important.

Phil Willcox

Okay, wonderful. And what was the name of the index? You said there was an index that measures how fast...?

Libby Sander

Speech transmission index. Yeah, how far your speech actually carries before it interrupts somebody else.

Phil Willcox

I love that there's an index for that, I love that. I love that there's an index for that. Okay, what should we avoid then? So if the listener is thinking about their workplace or looking around the environment that they're in, what should they avoid?

Libby Sander

So, I think there is no one size fits all and it always goes wrong when we try to make something think, well, that's going to fit everyone. Everyone doesn't mind having a hot desk. Everybody will be able to deal with this. Everyone needs to come into the office three days a week or five days a week, and that isn't true. So, understand we need to design around who are the people who are in the space and working for you, with you, what kind of work are they doing, and how does that change throughout the course of the day in terms of what are their needs during the course of the day? So, we want to avoid stereotyping. We want to avoid assuming that if something works for you it's going to work for somebody else, and that goes with space and everything else. So, you might read something if you're designing your own space at home and think, well, that's what all the experts say should work, but it might not work for you. Some people can work really well in a noisy, buzzy space because they have a particular personality style or type of work that supports that, and some people literally cannot think. And so it's really understanding knowing yourself, knowing the type of work that you do, and then what type of workspaces support that? And because we have so much variation now with spaces available in a city, as you said, coworking spaces, working from home, it doesn't mean you have to provide all those spaces in your own workplace, but it's providing access to different types of spaces and flexibility for people to use those.

Phil Willcox

Yeah. So, that point you're making there about there being a degree of agency that individuals within organisations can take to say, right, actually, these are the kind of environments that work for me, so I'm going to find a way to access those, and not necessarily being always about the organisation having to put those to, I can't think of a better phrase than put on or to make available those places or spaces. So, yeah, okay.

Libby Sander

Yes.

Phil Willcox

All right. So, recognising that there is no one size fits all and that workplaces, spaces, the types of

organisations, types of work, types of people, all of which would be different. So it might be that I'm asking an unfair question now, and if it is, you can say, Phil, that's an unfair question, I can't answer that, if there were, I don't know, three things, maybe up to three, more than three if you like as well, that somebody could do today, that could make their work spaces or workplaces better for people in terms of whether that be their cognitive reactions, effective reactions, or relational reactions, what might those things be?

Libby Sander

Yeah, so we can't all go and hire architects and build a whole new building, but on a personal level, I know it's probably been said a million times, but honestly, go and get some really nice plants. Just 40 seconds of looking at greenery or green roof has significant restorative effects on our cognitive function. So, buy some plants for your desk. Go outside and look at greenery regularly during the workday if you can't buy plants or you don't like them, or you think they're going to die, just go outside. Even if the weather's bad just go outside and look at greenery is a huge effect. The second one would be, clean up your desk. So, clutter is great for creativity, it actually encourages your brain to think outside of the box, because it looks at the space and goes, oh, my gosh, things are already chaotic here, there's obviously no rules, I can make it up as I go along. But when we're not doing creative work, it's actually very draining for our brain because you're trying to do something and your brain's unconsciously going, oh, look at that pile over there, I didn't get to that yet. Gosh, that's annoying, I want to clean that up. I've written an article about this that we can link in the show notes, if you like for listeners?

Phil Willcox

Please. Yeah.

Libby Sander

It actually has negative effects on what your coworkers think of you. You might not get promoted because they think you're disorganised and you don't know what you're doing if you've got a messy desk. So, cleaning up your desk is very important. And probably the third one would be, again, things that we all know but don't do is drink more water, don't sit down all day, move around more, it will restore your brain, it will make you more creative, it will have obviously good benefits for your health, it will put you in a better mood. But we do. And don't eat lunch at your desk. So, we can link another article that I wrote that showed that the average work desk is actually dirtier than the toilet seat in your office, because they don't get cleaned that much and people eat at their desks, which is not a great thing if people are listening to this over breakfast or dinner, apologies for that. But, yes, don't eat at your desk and clean it because probably no one else is cleaning it. So, yeah, I would encourage that.

Phil Willcox

Definitely. I think the paper you're referring to, which I really enjoy reading papers that have amazing titles, and so I think the paper was, get a proper chair, don't eat at your desk, and no phones in the loo - how to keep your home workspace safe and hygienic. I didn't get to read the paper, but just the title itself was like, yeah, that just looks amazing.

Libby Sander

Yeah.

Phil Willcox

Okay, so we can definitely put links to that in the show notes.

Libby Sander

You're going to be a lot happier [laughs].

Phil Willcox

Okay then, so as we start to come towards the end of the podcast then, we'll move into our final section, and, yeah, I think the journey we've been on through thinking about the environment as a whole, the different types of reactions, so the cognitive, affective, and relational reactions. And what I've really loved, Libby, is how you've just interspersed some really practical examples and suggestions, and hints and tips all the way through. So, yeah, thank you so much for sharing your thinking so far, I think it's been really, really helpful.

AD

As Doctor Libby Sander has so brilliantly outlined the places we work create those effective reactions. Emotion at Work. Being able to express all emotion in a constructive way in the physical or virtual place of work is an ongoing challenge facing workplaces all over. If people in your workplace feel unsafe, uninspired or unsure, if they can share how they feel get in touch now on [hello@emotionatwork.co.uk](mailto:hello@emotionatwork.co.uk) Our unique approach of analysis, advice and application enables you to get to the heart of the matter with our investigative eye, curious mind, providing insight often otherwise unavailable. With concise blueprints, precise measurement, and formative facilitation, working together we deliver outcomes which last. If that sounds like something you're interested in, contact us now on [hello@emotionatwork.co.uk](mailto:hello@emotionatwork.co.uk) And for now, back to the episode.

Phil Willcox

Okay, all right then. So, my final couple of questions then, Libby, if that's okay, is looking back now, what has surprised you about your research and your practice in this area?

Libby Sander

Just how much interest there is in it, every time I write an article, I'm often doing radio and TV interviews I suppose it's always been interesting to me, and there was a level of interest for sure, before the pandemic, but since the pandemic I think what's surprised me is just how much interest there is and how sustained that is. It just doesn't go away. I wrote an article on clutter for Harvard Business Review and it just continues to be a topic every year, you can guarantee that someone's going to have you on to talk about that on radio, because we're often not good at changing as humans. So, I think we spend a third of our lives at work and it often is very underexamined from the average person's perspective, outside of these nerdy academics sitting in rooms looking at this stuff. There's a lot of talk about productivity, about sleep, about anxiety and mental health, that's sort of forefront for us all of the time, little things we can do to make life and our health better. But we forget there's this huge chunk of a third of our life that we're spending at work, and what can we actually do there to make it better? Are we just destined to have to go in there every day and put up with this narcissistic boss or the grey cubicles in this terrible workspace? And, in fact, there's a lot that can be done that we can do ourselves to improve our experience of work and therefore our enjoyment of life.

Phil Willcox

Oh, wonderful, that was beautifully said, thank you so much. Okay, is there someone that you would recommend that we seek out to get on the podcast? So, having, I guess, now been a guest, is there someone that you think, oh, you know what, I think this would be someone who would be really interesting for the audience to listen to?



Libby Sander  
About the workspace specifically?

Phil Willcox  
Yeah.

Libby Sander  
I think the colleague I was mentioning in the US, Julio Bermudez, he is the one who did that research, and I just think it's really groundbreaking, the neuro architecture lens that he's taking to that and really bringing the evidence based angle to it, and he's gone on to do some other really interesting things. So, I think it's fascinating to understand more about, how does the building make us feel awe? What actually happens to make us feel these kind of emotions of wonder and mindfulness?

Phil Willcox  
Wonderful.

Libby Sander  
I think it's fascinating.

Phil Willcox  
Fabulous, thank you. So, we'll put a link to Julio's paper in the show notes and then we can pick up his contact details from there, so that's grand, thank you so much. And if our listeners wanted to ask you something more, what would be a good way for them to get hold of you?

Libby Sander  
Yeah, so they can find me on LinkedIn, libbysander, my website, libbysander.com. And then you can find my links to social on my website as well and on Substack, so I write regularly there on a range different topics as well.

Phil Willcox  
So fabulous, wonderful. Well, we'll put links to all of those in the show notes as well. And then my final question then, Libby, is there something else or something more that you are thinking, feeling, or would like to say?

Libby Sander  
I think the thing that I'm really passionate about is seeing things like the work that you're doing, Phil, and bringing awareness to these issues. So it's something I'm really passionate about, and I think you've explored it. Fantastic questions. So, no, I don't have anything else to add at this point. Thank you very much for having me on.

Phil Willcox  
Oh, no, thank you for coming on, it's been wonderful to have you. Yeah. So, thank you very much. Thank you for listening to this episode of the Emotion at Work podcast, and we'll see you soon.

You've been listening to the Emotion at Work podcast and if you've got this far you must be interested in the role emotions have in the workplace either within individuals, between people, in teams or in organisations as a whole, so head over to the Emotion at Work hub which you can find at <https://community.emotionatwork.co.uk/groups>. Thanks for listening.