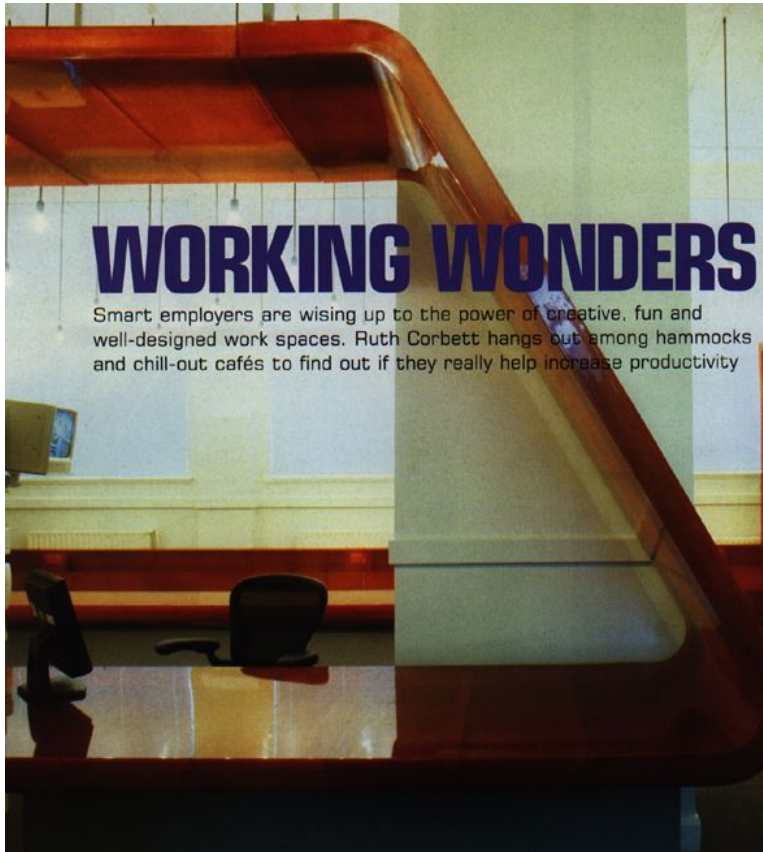


WORKING WONDERS

Smart employers are wising up to the power of creative, fun and well-designed work spaces. Ruth Corbett hangs out among hammocks and chill-out cafés to find out if they really help increase productivity



1. The culmination of the orange fibreglass ribbon that forms the superb reception desk in Oyster's building.
2. Squire and Partners' offices – a super-modern space, crisscrossed with internal glass bridges, and filled with natural light.
3. Chilling and shooting pool at St Luke's.

St Luke's advertising agency recalls the fictional agency that featured in *thirtysomething*, the hit American TV series of the late 1980s. All exposed brick walls, funky modern art and basketball hoops, every time it appeared on screen, viewers took notice. The company and the staff were perceived as sexy, smart and going places. And from the comfort of our sofas, we daydreamed about working in a place so cool. Surely our jobs would be so much more enjoyable (and productive), if only the environment were right?

Fast-forward a decade or so and for some the dream has started to become a reality. Forward-thinking companies are pulling out the stops to redefine their working environments, in an effort to attract the most effective workforce

possible. Of course, St Luke's is far hipper, younger and altogether more chilled than its transatlantic forebear, but it still triggers the impulse to mouth "wow" when you step inside the doors.

St Luke's has a hot-desking policy, where no-one has an assigned work area – they use whichever desk/phone/computer is available, enabling them to rub shoulders with many different colleagues throughout the day. They chat into wireless phones and meet clients in zoned areas called "the hub," "the caterpillar," "the egg" and "the clover". There's table football, a pool table and a trendy café with resident chef. There's even a garden, for heaven's sake.

Sue McGrath, St Luke's business development director, is convinced it's a working environment that produces great results. "The idea is

that work should be more like play," she says. "It's about bumping into people for a chat, listening in on conversations. No-one ever had a creative idea sitting in a corner." The agency has a string of successful ad campaigns behind it, including projects for shoe company Clarks, BT Broadband and many government-related projects. For such a happening young company, its client list might sound surprisingly dull. "Yes, but it's those rather staid, corporate companies that want to work with us, precisely because they so badly need a shot in the arm of creativity and excitement," explains McGrath. "They walk in here, see our work space and loads of happy, creative people and say, 'Wow!'"

Marcie Larizadeh, associate at architectural practice Squire and Partners, agrees that >

contented employees are more likely to produce better work. You would expect the offices of a successful architectural practice to be fairly swish and Squire's don't disappoint. Located in the less-than-lovely area of London's King's Cross, it's one of the fastest-growing and most talked about companies in the industry, due partly to its fabulous working environment. Larizadeh explains: "The brief for the new building was to incorporate the informal, intimate way of working that the company had grown up with, with the rapidly expanding, young workforce. Previously the company had been housed in a Georgian terrace, so this space gave us the chance to provide creative working conditions for employees and a radical showpiece for clients to visit."

As well as a cool café, designer



openness and freedom. They want to work in a beautiful but ordered environment and are motivated by it," says Larizadeh. Squire and St Luke's also share a philosophy on hierarchy. At the former, it's "very flat", with "a forum in which everyone can be involved and express ideas". This philosophy is taken further in the offices of Brazilian millionaire businessman, Ricardo Semler. He's not your everyday boss and his engineering company, Semco, has been called "the world's most unusual workplace". The offices in São Paulo have hammocks, meetings are voluntary and staff set their wages and choose their managers. They work in small groups and make all decisions themselves. They set objectives and decide who they need and what they should be paid. Get

greedy with your pay packet, though, and you'll be frozen out. Semler actively promotes idleness (he's written a book called *The Seven-Day Weekend* £16.99, Century), reckoning it liberates people and promotes creative thinking. "From a distance it can sound like a workers' paradise," he says. "But the system is unloving. Put your salary too high and people won't put you on the list as someone they need for the next six months." At Semco, it's not so much the office design that is radical, but the owner's philosophy. At its heart is the idea that employees must be challenged and given freedom in order to produce good work. Semler is not a fan of traditional work systems. Throughout the company there are no PAs or receptionists, no fancy titles or business cards. But with

that freedom (which some would consider anarchy) how successful is Semco? The figures speak for themselves: 3,000 staff produce a turnover of \$160 million a year. Back in the UK, Richard Found of Found Associates designs spaces for the country's top creative firms and is responsible for some radical work solutions. In the offices of Frank PR he incorporated bright red retro ambulance called Britney to provide a private space for meetings within an open-plan floor. "From the staff point of view, it's a morale boost to have meetings see. From a client perspective, Frank is up against three other companies for an account, it's then the meeting in Britney that clinches it," he says. Britney goes some way to consolidating Frank R as a fresh and exciting public relations firm.

'If Frank is competing for an account, it's often the meeting in Britney the ambulance that clinches it'

Another Found project, and one of its most challenging, was to design the offices of website company Oyster. "It was about creating the right impression and instilling an element of excitement about going to work," says Found. "The company wanted its offices to reflect the way it works – loose and relaxed – so we created a space where people could take an hour off and play pool or table football. Staff were encouraged to travel to work on scooters and the effect has been to create an office that is completely removed from a corporate environment."

Aesthetically, Oyster's offices are impressive, without being precious. The approach to the design of

the old school site was matter-of-fact, to allow work to develop in a logical, straightforward way. Found retained the original structure and introduced an orange fibreglass ribbon that runs the length of the building, appearing to punch its way through walls, carrying data and power to all the rooms. "It morphs into vertical planes, walls, doorways and ceiling rafters, creating and defining spaces," he says. It culminates in the reception, where it folds away from the ceiling and wraps around itself to form the cantilevered reception desk. It's a practical and dynamic solution to servicing the space and one that's typical of Found's innovative team. Away from the hustle and

bustle of city offices, one might not expect to find such attractive work spaces. But The Creative Village in Buckinghamshire is a stunning example. The company, which provides global design and marketing solutions, is set in an idyllic, rural location amid three acres of lush rolling countryside. Creative director Paul Thornton-Alan is something of a maverick when it comes to staff input. When the lease expired on his old premises, he gathered the eight-strong workforce in his kitchen to discuss where they might move to. "There were a couple of old cowsheds in our grounds, overlooking acres of countryside, and we decided that this was >