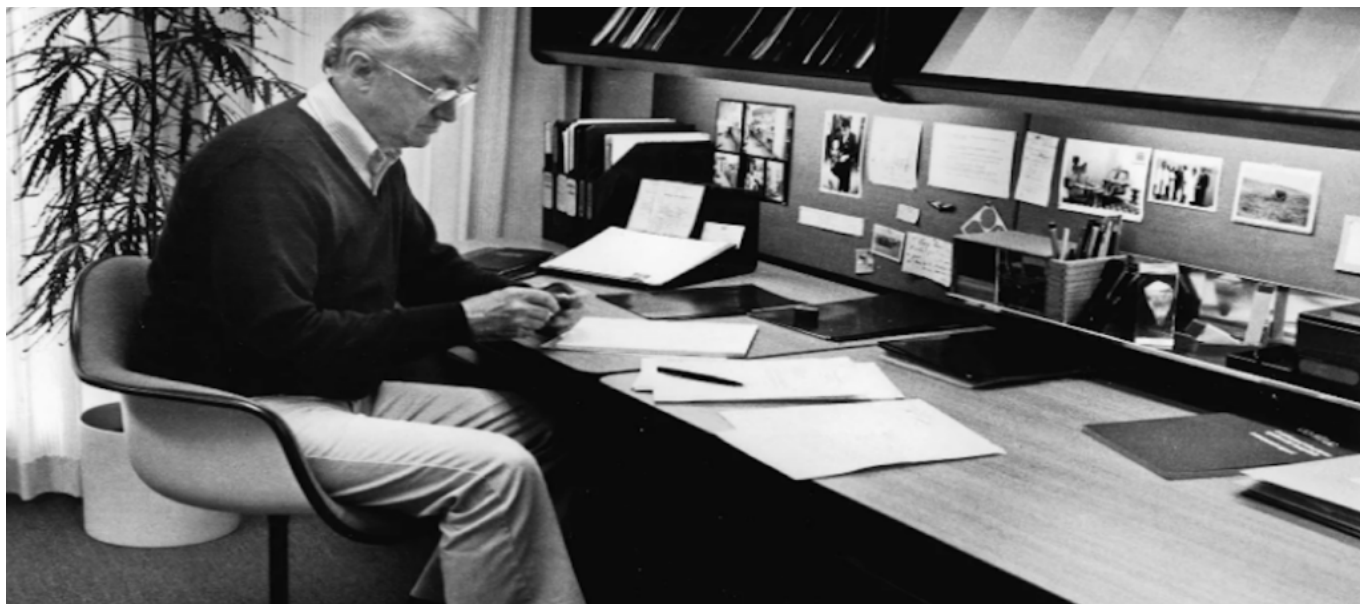




Why a good company should reward failure/private office versus Action Office, or shared desks

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The book by Friedman highlights the importance of diverse spaces in offices, aimed at enhancing mental well-being, productivity, and employee engagement

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Through Ron Friedman's book we can easily understand what it means to open the door to scientific research when designing workplaces. *'The Best Place to Work'* is brilliant but systematic in indicating indispensable elements in today's workplaces. Speaking with the author today, Ron suggests, however, *"that the most crucial of all is the inclusion of caves and bonfires in the layout. Without these, any office space is destined to be crippled"*. With this beautiful metaphor the author underlines how, in addition to the variety of neuropsychological profiles, many activities develop in the workplace. Some of us may wish to find silent places at certain

times, while others desire livelier areas. Adopting a similar strategy allows us to think about opposite extremes while caring for everyone.

The book develops a path in three distinct parts, united by a vision centered on mental health as a trigger for corporate health. How office design is deeply linked to a structural change in human relationships emerges clearly from its pages. Not only that but the very idea of work is also reworked, as is that of leadership and group. The first chapter focuses on **why a good company should reward failure**. This invitation may seem counterintuitive, but in the economy of knowledge, subjective contribution is discouraged if it is not accepted, as a business rule, that those who do not try never fail. Great innovators are always remembered for their discoveries, never for the thousand mistakes made in approaching success. Yet, changes are not produced except through trial and error.

The text then focuses on the design of the office. One aspect that is precisely remembered is the role of the evolutionary dimension of man. Without deeply understanding the psychological needs that have consolidated throughout human development, we risk exposing people to stressful situations. In the African Savannah, the landscape from which we all *Sapiens* come, we find the **crowns of the Acacias** as a salient element. According to the '*Prospect and Refuge Theory*' it is these that, by protecting *Sapiens*, created the conditions necessary for the survival of our ancestors. An office should create areas and configurations to give the same sense of safety as those crowns, creating places to see the world outside move without being watched. One feature of the office that today, in the modern shared open space, seems to be disappearing is personal territory. Each of us, however, feels the deep need to transfer parts of our memory into space, to manipulate objects, furnishings, and finishes that gravitate around us. The term *agency* condenses the need to express our freedom to mark the place. In the volume's appendix, experiments are cited with which the productivity increases connected to this aspect were measured. The data can be surprising. No doubt feeling familiar with the territory around our body, in the workplace, produces economic benefits that are by no means negligible.

Friedman's work then moves on to the development of the modern office and the role of furnishings. We should never furnish meeting rooms with rigid chairs. The rigidity of the object that encounters the body translates, in fact, into the rigidity of the statements. From Harvard to MIT, to Yale, various work groups have demonstrated this fact.

The history of the modern office translates into the layout of the Taylorism typical of the Fordist

factory. A human assembly line made of curved backs on an infinite series of identical desks. Robert Propst, at the beginning of the 60s, began the revolution that would lead to the cubicle, *The Action Office*. The idea was to create a more private dimension of the desk, less noise, and distractions in peripheral vision, with greater control over one's activities. Therefore, walls are erected around the desk that screen those sitting at the table on two or three sides. Towards the end of his life, however, the designer himself, as Ron recalls, was forced to define how his invention had been adopted as a "**monolithic folly**". Companies had introduced the model with the same massive Fordist approach as the single desk, completely isolating people inside individual enclosures, and crowding them together like in beehives. The reaction produced a return to open space with the usual consequences: total exposure, to noise and to everyone's sight. For one or a few people, the private office remained an archetype reserved for a few top figures in companies.

Closing this analysis, and returning to the present, the author recalls how today the collaborative dimension, in addition to being co-essential to our mental well-being, cannot be promoted by this or that model: **private office versus Action Office, or shared desks**. The ideal solution involves a calibrated composition of all three models because the conditions and needs expressed by the different activities carried out in the office are very variable. In today's information economy, there are few completely repetitive activities. Bottom-up involvement, the contribution of those who work becomes increasingly decisive for the success of economic initiatives. In a section of the book, Ron reconstructs how, in a way that is only apparently paradoxical, the best choices can mature unconsciously, temporarily shifting attention. Inside the offices, therefore, play and playfulness become key elements in the construction of the professional community. Spaces and places to develop activities related to free time, body care, and pure fun, are key pieces of the project. Also for another good reason: body movement, even small physical exercises, trigger the release of BDNF, or *Brain Derived Neurotrophic Factor*, which protects the hippocampal area with proven benefits on memory. Memory, learning, and body movement have been linked since the dawn of time, as many studies cited in the book document.

The author closes his work by citing a Gallup study on the sense of engagement perceived by company employees. The data is very worrying: 70% of those interviewed do not feel involved in the fate of their company. Among these, 18% declare that they feel "actively disengaged", or in other words, they work in the opposite direction to the well-being of their employer. A new

office will not change this situation, of course. It is otherwise clear, however, that the change in company strategy capable of giving back a role and meaning to the work of the active community within the perimeter of the company, cannot but also pass through a radical rethinking of the place of the workplace.

Immagine copertina: Robert Propst working (© Herman Miller)

 **Condividi** _____