

How We Work

Psychologist Ron Friedman '08 (PhD) says the modern workplace is surprisingly out of date.

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

Shortly after I finished graduate school, I entered the business world. And I was surprised to realize that all of the research I took for granted about motivation, creativity, and working productively was not something that most people in the business world were even aware of. Everything—from the way that organizations hire, to the way that leaders motivate, to the layout and design of most office spaces—appeared blind to a wealth of research about how we can build a better workplace.

It's remarkable how much research there is showing that flexibility yields positive results. The more flexibility you give people over their calendar—in other words, where and when they work—the more engaged and productive they are over the long term. Employees are able to calibrate their best times of day, as opposed to just sitting in the office in front of a computer because it's not yet 5 p.m.

Empowering people to do their best work requires recognizing the limits of the mind and the body. The modern workplace is based on the factory floor. At many organizations, employees are expected to work as if they're machines, as though they're going to function the same way at four o'clock in the afternoon as they are at eight o'clock in the morning.

Ron Friedman '08 (PhD)

Home: Rochester, New York

Occupation: Business consultant and founder of ignite80; author of *The Best Place to Work: The Art and Science of Creating an Extraordinary Workplace* (Penguin Random House/Perigee).

On his first visit to Rochester: "I came to Rochester to study psychology with Ed Deci and Andy Elliott. In my interview, Ed asked me about my personal essay, in which I wrote that I thought happiness was among the most important topics you could study. He replied—I think these were his exact words—'I think happiness is a bunch of crap.' He said that if you're singularly focused on being happy, you're overlooking the benefits of other emotions. That had a real impact on me, and I write about allowing employees to feel authentic at work, rather than pressuring them to be relentlessly happy."

Most workplaces provide an office or cubicle, and employees are expected to remain in that space for eight or nine hours a day. It's a recipe for disengagement. I was in an organization where, if you left before about 7:30 in the evening, you were perceived as a slacker. So two things would happen. If people were done with their work at 5:30, they would go on social media for two hours; or, people would have in the back of their heads, the workday isn't going to end until 7:30 anyway, so I'm not really going to do the difficult work until five o'clock.

Workplace design can foster autonomy by learning from the design of a college campus. Think about the expectations we have for students. The professors say, "Here are the outcomes that we expect by the end of the semester, and it's up to you to get this done." Students have different environments that they can then choose for the purpose of fulfilling their work.

They can go to the library, or to their dorm, or to the gym. How they spend their time is up to them, and if they're not successful, then at the end of the semester or school year, they may be asked to leave.

If you start your day with a brief planning session, you're going to be a lot more productive. An exercise I often encourage people to do is to imagine it's the end of the day and you're going home with a tremendous sense of accomplishment. What have you achieved? Taking just a few minutes to think about what a successful day would look like helps us separate tasks that feel urgent from those that are truly important.

The problem I often see is the feeling of being overwhelmed at work—the constant emails, the constant text messaging, the constant conference calls. What's the first thing you do when you sit down at the office? For many of us, it's looking at email or checking our voicemail. That puts us in a reactive mind-set rather than a proactive mind-set. It's the worst thing you can do. 📧

