

Running Like Clockwork: A Cultural Analysis of the Workplace

From color, lighting, and decor to furniture, construction materials, and spatial layout, the aesthetic details of a workspace can reveal aspects of a company's culture. Although culture is fluid and socially constructed (Kramer & Dailey, 2019), such artifacts provide insight into an organization's people, processes, and values. The office of Clockwork (CW), a Minneapolis-based interactive and design technology company, suggests the organization is deliberate in creating culture by embracing its office's past as an automotive service station with touches of whimsy and care. In this paper, I analyze photographs of CW's office, guided by the model of organizational culture (Schein, 1990), and argue that the organization's culture is industrious, creative, and people-centered.

I first provide a brief overview of existing literature about organizational culture, emphasizing the values of productivity, creativity, and the prioritization of people. I then present findings, which focus on an in-depth analysis of the artifacts, values, and assumed values communicated in the photographs, supplemented by claims from CW's website. I then explore how my findings connect to create CW's broader organizational culture and identity. Finally, I discuss the implications of my findings for practitioners and future scholarship.

Organizational culture is of particular interest as companies seek to redefine themselves and their workplaces in the wake of the pandemic. As employee stress and turnover increase (Jiskrova, 2022; Kokubn et al., 2022) and work-life balance and hybrid work become expectations (Mihalache & Mihalache, 2021), companies have a unique opportunity to reassess their cultural values. This paper contributes to ongoing scholarship about how organizations can foster a positive culture to support workplace satisfaction and overall wellness.

Theory and Literature Review

The study of organizational culture developed in the 1980s as an alternative approach to a previous emphasis on objective outcomes (Putnam, 1982). Cultural studies seek to understand how organizational members communicate to create a set of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs about how their organization functions (Keyton, 2014). While some scholars hold that culture is something an organization *has*, and others hold that culture is something an organization *is* (Smircich, 1983), culture is widely understood to be fluid (Kramer & Dailey, 2019). Early approaches focused on top-down models that sought to teach executives how to impose a culture for profit (Keyton, 2014; Nicotera, 2020;). Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982, 1983) offered an interpretive approach focused on members' roles in generating culture through behavior. Following this ideological shift, scholarship shifted to a social view of organizations, focusing on interpreting messages and members' perceptions (Bantz, 1993). Critical scholars examined practices that constrained communication and ways organizational and individual interests could be mutually accomplished (Deetz, 2005). Scholars have also taken a communication-centered approach, exploring the role of discourse (Taylor & Van Every, 2000; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Bisel et al., 2010). Organizational culture research is experiencing a resurgence following dramatic changes in the workplace caused by the pandemic (Collings et al., 2021; Schieman et al., 2022; Spicer, 2020).

While further research is needed to develop a comprehensive theory of organizational culture (Keyton, 2014), scholars often use Edgar Schein's (1990) model of organizational culture, which asserts that culture derives from a combination of layered artifacts, values, and assumptions that create a shared social experience. Cameron and Quinn (2011) developed a broad culture typology, which includes clan, adhocracy, hierarchy, and market categories.

Elements of Workplace Culture: Industriousness, Creativity, and Centering People

Scholars have explored how workplace productivity can be encouraged through culture. Chanen (2005) studied design elements and found that exposed ductwork and unfinished wood in an office visually suggest the prioritization of work over appearance. Morsy and Emam (2019) found that incorporating natural elements, like unfinished wood and natural light, increased productivity. Existing literature also provides insight into symbols from the automotive industry that communicate progress and freedom through work ethic and the humble nature of blue-collar work (Booker, 2012; Lewis & Neville, 2013; McLeod, 2020).

Defined as a driver of innovation, creativity is an ambiguous but frequently studied topic (Woodman et al., 1993; Zhou & Hoever, 2014). Scholars have found that color in offices (Hnatiuk & Polishchuk, 2020) and workplace humor (Fry, 2007; Holmes, 2007; Lang & Lee, 2010;) promote creativity. While some employees view fun as a distraction (Plester & Hutchison, 2016), others who participated in games and social activities experienced increased creativity (Boekhorst et al., 2021; Fang et al., 2021; Fluegg-Woolf, 2015; Yang, 2020).

Employee wellness is an emerging area of interest based on the belief that an organization's members shape its culture (Keyton, 2014; Tracy & Redden, 2019). Although scholars disagree on the metaphor (Furlich, 2016; Casey, 1999), the branding of culture as familial has increased over the last decade as companies seek to position themselves as nurturing and care-oriented (Luna, 2021). Corporate wellness programs and in-office resources have promoted health (Passey et al., 2018) and created a sense of appreciation (Seward et al., 2019). While scholars have struggled to define comfort and happiness at work, they have found that relaxed employees are more satisfied (Haynes, 2008; Vischer, 2007). Another study found that workspace personalization supported employee wellness (Busse & Schneider, 2020). While issues of isolation and equity require further exploration (Song & Gao, 2020), some studies have

found that hybrid and flexible work contributed to increased employee work-life balance and overall happiness (Kortsch et al., 2022; Okulicz-Kozaryn & Golden, 2018; Sunaryo et al., 2022).

Findings

Industriousness

In a description of its guiding values, CW (n. d. 2) claims to be "fueled by challenge," and its industrious culture is visible in the office. CW's office features unfinished wooden beams, walls, and ceilings (#152647, #151933, #152330, #152838), exposed ductwork (#151622, #151246) and visible electrical panels and wiring (#151516, #14400). Together, these unfinished elements recall an active construction site, suggesting that work is always in progress. The space also includes overhead flood lights extended on yellow beams reminiscent of factory arms (#151236, #151159, #151246), sliding office doors made of embossed steel and hinged on open metal brackets (#151703, #151652), cubicle walls made of textured sheet metal (#152647, #151443), and exterior garage doors (#151827, #160729). These industrial elements recall a factory environment, suggesting that work at CW is efficient. The emphasis on texture in the metal elements (#151703; conveys a grittiness that suggests CW's employees are hard workers. The blending of natural wood and manufactured metal (#151933, #152647) also suggests that work is a natural part of life. In calling to mind construction and factory sites with somewhat mundane design elements like cubicle walls, doors, and support beams, CW institutionalizes the notion that its office and team are, quite literally, made for work.

CW also creatively uses its office's history as an automotive service station to communicate its industrious culture strategically. Vintage metal signs associated with automotive brands, like Kendall Motor Oil (#151553) and Star Tires (#160129), adorn the walls. A metal cabinet, which looks like a large toolbox, is covered in a collage of overlapping stickers

for automotive brands like Ford, General Motors, and NAPA (#151454). CW's branding also includes nods to the automotive industry, with its logo resembling gears and a tagline promising "genuine service" (#144246) and an exterior façade (#160729) featuring garage doors and repurposed pegasus artwork from the building's prior occupant (#143944). Although unrelated to the company's work, CW's creative and witty decision to incorporate visual symbols of the automotive industry suggests that its culture is "fueled" (CW, n. d. 2) by work and values skilled workers who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty.

Creative

CW (n. d. 2) claims to be curious and to "actively seek out new skills, new information, and new ways of working." As such, its culture values creativity and fun. The office features restrained use of bold colors, like yellow accent walls (#151648), green and red cabinets in otherwise neutral spaces (#152838, #151553), and brightly colored pillows in a generally dark room (#152607). This deliberate placement of color suggests an intent to stimulate, but not overwhelm, employees and create a sense of energy. Beyond the standard brainstorming whiteboard (#151347), CW also displays whimsical art to inspire creativity. For example, an abstract piece constructed from a decommissioned gasoline pump and modified to look like a person (#153102) encourages new purposes for old things. Additional artwork features *Simpsons*-like cartoon figures among stars with flowers and trees growing in outer space (#143951), suggesting rules don't always apply. These selected art displays suggest that CW seeks to see things beyond their surface value and think outside the box. CW's oversized pillows (#152415) are couch-sized but lack traditional structure and formal arrangement, suggesting the company encourages freedom of interpretation and use. CW's office also features evidence of fun, including video game controllers (#153041), a ping-pong table (#15255), and alcohol and

beer on tap (#160129; #151553). These curated opportunities for breaks suggest that CW encourages employees not to take themselves too seriously and promotes unstructured socialization and fun as part of the creative process.

People-Centered

CW (n. d. 2) claims to put people first and offer "human-centered solutions," and its culture emphasizes its employee's well-being. While CW does not directly position its staff as a family, the office's design elements mirror a cozy home. A modest couch next to a collection of awards displayed in mismatched frames, like a set of proud family photographs, sits in a lobby area resembling a living room (#143944). The kitchen and break areas (#152837; #151553) include a large rectangular table with bar stool seating for group meals. CW's positioning of office staples like corporate awards and lunch breaks as shared and celebrated experiences expresses a desire to make employees feel connected, valued, and nurtured.

CW's culture also attempts to support employee self-esteem and health. Elements intended to make employees feel like they can be themselves are also present, including personalization at workspaces with photos and desk toys (#152202; #151443; #151303) and spaces labeled, in handwriting, with employees' names (#152146). Photographs of smiling employees wearing costumes and casual attire are displayed in a common area, along with a camera (#151454), suggesting that people are special and worth documenting exactly as they are. CW also offers meditation space in an intimate basement setting, with dim lighting and bare walls (#152011). The dedication of a calm space for wellness, entirely removed from work areas, suggests that CW cares about its employees beyond their professional roles and positions self-care as routine work. CW's office is also equipped with flexible workspaces to allow private cubicles (#151652), communal areas with both traditional (#151347) and creative (#160118) aesthetics, and

technology to support remote work (#152354), suggesting that employees are encouraged to choose where and how they work. In giving employees this freedom, CW communicates that they have authority over themselves and promotes work-life balance.

Discussion

Together, these findings show that CW has created a culture in which employees are encouraged to work hard, think outside the box, and feel valued. On its website, CW (n.d.) declares "business as usual is over" and promotes digital expertise "delivered by real smart (and nice) people," which accurately summarizes my cultural observations. The themes of industriousness and creativity fuel objective outcomes like efficiency, innovation, and profit. However, CW's social and humanistic prioritization of its employees' well-being is a guiding principle that serves the organization and its members. The cultural themes intertwine often, and CW exhibits values for its members to follow. For example, the company creatively used the office's heritage to promote hard work. Efforts to support employee well-being go beyond a traditional corporate wellness program, with the act of self-care positioned as work equal or greater to one's job.

CW is frequently recognized for its culture. Critics cite CW's office as an example of fostering positive, employee-first culture through design (Cazares, 2016). CW is a 13-time honoree of *The Minneapolis-St. Paul Business Journal's* (2019) Best Places to Work award, and has also received national recognition (NBC, 2014; Inc., 2018). The company has favorable reviews on user-generated sites like Indeed (n. d.) and Glassdoor (n. d.).

This analysis authenticates these accolades and shows that CW's corporate branding as a "people-first company" (CW, n. d. 2) is rooted in reality, with supporting evidence strewn about its office. While an organization can try to define its culture through branding, authentic culture

is forged over time and shaped by and for people (Kramer & Dailey, 2019). CW's culture is a symbiotic blend of the organization's attempts to create a culture and its members' adoption and adaptation. The company's claim that "when people get here, they stick around" (CW, n. d. 2) can be attributed to a culture that makes people feel valued, motivating them to contribute positively to that culture.

My deductive analysis prioritized the provided workplace photographs over content from CW's website, with posted cultural claims (CW, n. d. 2) serving to affirm rather than guide my analysis. Another approach may have yielded different results. Working from CW's (n. d. 2) value claims first may have narrowed the analysis into a simple confirmation activity, but working from the photographs first may have presented more opportunity for subjective (mis)interpretation. Some values, like transparency or adaptability, may be present but not as apparent through artifacts alone. Future studies could consider how CW's culture has shifted since these photos were captured in 2017, emphasizing pandemic-related changes. Additionally, scholars might explore whether CW's culture aided the company in adapting during the pandemic and how companies seeking to redefine culture might communicate appreciation and value for employees.

This paper provides a snapshot of CW's organizational culture. Through an analysis guided by the model of organizational culture (Schein, 1990), I used workplace artifacts to draw conclusions about CW's values. Findings show that CW's culture is industrious, creative, and people-centered. The company's people-first approach can guide other organizations seeking to foster a positive culture.

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