

# What color is your workspace?

## Soft touch, strong impact: How color, pattern, and texture in textiles influence the workplace

by Jean Gorman (Nayar)

Deep indigo was everybody's favorite choice for the new corporate logo, so why do the fabric-covered partitions in the same color seem to be putting the staff to sleep?

With attention spans shortening by the minute, it's possible that all of the employees simply tired of it at once. More likely, they're the unwitting victims of a subtle and mysterious science/art known as the psychology of color.

"The only color that's dangerous to work around is dark blue," says New York-based color consultant Donald Kaufman, who has authored three books on color. "This is because we're conditioned to associate it with the absence of light or vitality – it's the color we all see as night falls." In other words, it gives most of us the unconscious cue that it's time to head for bed. At the same time, blue, particularly navy, is also one of the most popular colors in America, according to textile designer Kristie Strasen of Strasen Frost Associates in New York. "It's equally appreciated by men and women," she says, noting that the appeal of blue lies partly in the "personality" it can express through its broad range of shades and hues.

So how does a person come to terms with such paradoxical reactions to color in the workplace—particularly when it's employed in something as ubiquitous as a textile? The key, says Kaufman, depends not so much on which colors are used as how they're used. "The Pantheon is made of stone of a single color, but what space could be more beautiful than that?" he asks. "The Hagia Sofia, on the other hand, is made of materials of zillions of colors, but they're combined in a way that creates a wonderful atmosphere." Basically, experts agree that in the hands of a skilled designer, even fabric in a color like dark blue – used in a transitional setting such as a reception area, for example, or introduced as more softly tinted accents – can be successfully employed in a work environment.

Textiles and the impact of their colors, patterns, and textures on the human psyche may not be the first priority for an interior designer or specifier



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working to create an office space, but their significance in the built environment should not be underestimated, says Susan Lyons, executive vice president and creative director of DesignTex. “Textiles are the most important piece of the finished palette in that they provide the first impression of the space,” she explains. “They can make a space inviting or not, depending on how they’re used.”

Shashi Caan, a textile designer and associate design director at SOM’s New York office, believes their role is even deeper and more complex. “Color, pattern, and texture, as simple design elements, are often overlooked or relegated to subjective, emotional realms – but how can we ignore them?” she asks. Caan points to research that suggests a proper balance of color, pattern, and texture can actually provide the type of sensory stimulation we need to be creative and productive. “The layers of pattern, texture, and color in a fabric-covered paneled wall can stimulate the brain, giving us access to knowledge we already have,” she says.

The most significant factor to bear in mind when choosing a textile for any given work environment is its context, says Lyons. “Europe may have a common currency now, but it’s not likely that it will have a common palette any time soon,” she says. “Cultural and geographical differences from country to country influence taste as do variations in the quality of light.” And regardless of where in the world a business may be located, corporate culture can play as strong a role in choices of color and pattern as local or regional culture, says Kim Noland, president of Design Success, a Fredericksberg, Denmark, company specializing in conceptual development and trend forecasting for consumer products. “A mature director of a traditional company is typically going to lean toward conservative, safe neutrals, while a 25-year-old CEO of a new media company would likely choose an environment with spots of strong color,” he says.

Though differences in textile choices clearly exist from country to country, region to region, and corporate culture to corporate culture, Noland sees some threads of consistency around the world, including a move away from large-scale patterns toward small graphic patterns or those typical in men’s suiting, an increase in complex textures inspired by nature, and a broad preference for light, warm colors and neutrals such as black, silver, and anthracite grey. The reasons for these universal trends may be practical. “Smaller-scaled patterns just work better on the limited surfaces and complex curves of ergonomic seating,” says Strasen. Or they may be fashion- or media-driven. “A return to the minimalist colors of the 80s is very hot at the moment,” says Noland. The bottom line surely plays a strong role. “When we look at the rate of sales of certain textiles, the ones that sell the most usually relate to the way men dress,” notes Strasen.

But chances are that people around the globe are also universally attracted to certain elements for those harder-to-define reasons that relate to their feelings of well-being. “Although there may be major geographical and cultural differences, we live in a shrinking world, where the workforce is





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increasingly nomadic,” says Caan, who grew up in India, was educated in England, and lives in New York. “People now move across the Atlantic as if it were a short train ride uptown. We need to make these individuals feel comfortable. There’s a fundamental sameness in all of us, no matter where we live, that craves both an underlying complexity and comfort.”

### What’s Next in the New Millennium?

Fashion moves more directly into the corporate environment than it used to according to executive vice president and creative director of DesignTex Susan Lyons. Now color is all over the block, she observes. At the same time, advances in yarn technology and weaving techniques have allowed textile palettes to become more subtle and complex, notes textile designer Kristie Strasen, who points out that the same holds true for two other integral components of textiles pattern and texture. Classic patterns and neutral colors may give people the comfort they need, but fashion and invention give them them the excitement they crave.