

A Weimaraner dog is lying on a bright yellow sofa, looking towards the right. The dog's head is resting on its front paws. In the background, a person's legs and feet are visible, suggesting a domestic setting. The overall scene is bright and clean.

# SMALL COMPANIES ARE JUST LIKE BIG COMPANIES...

# ONLY DIFFERENT.

IT'S NOT THE SIZE OF THE DOG IN THE FIGHT THAT MATTERS, IT'S THE SIZE OF THE FIGHT IN THE DOG, ACCORDING TO THE OLD SAYING. IT'S THE SAME WITH A COMPANY IN TODAY'S GLOBAL, MOBILE, INTERCONNECTED WORLD.

Large or small, every company competes in the same marketplace for talent, suppliers and, of course, customers so it takes something special for a small company to thrive in this environment.

Since their resources are comparatively limited, small companies have to think and operate differently. Hiring from the same overall talent pool, they use their unique environments and workstyles that are seldom found at big companies to attract workers. Hiring decisions are often based on how well a person fits the company culture as much as the skills they offer. Company assets, such as real estate, furniture and technology, are not only carefully husbanded but used in different ways, too.



↑ At RocketSpace, a shared office space in San Francisco for high-tech companies, bench workstations support impromptu collaboration, knowledge-sharing and a sense of shared endeavor. Benches reconfigure at, well, rocket speed.

These insights and more were gathered in a study of small companies conducted recently by the Steelcase WorkSpace Futures research and design group and sponsored by Turnstone, the Steelcase brand inspired by the spirit of small business. It's the second study of small companies sponsored by Turnstone.

"We work with many small companies. Some act like big companies; others act completely differently. We wanted to understand new ways to create a better experience for our customers," says Jim Abraham, head of product marketing for Turnstone. "Our Turnstone team itself numbers about 30 people, so we learned some things about being a better company, too."



The research involved on-site visits, interviews and observations at 19 different companies in the U.S., including private and nonprofit organizations across a range of product and service industries. The average company size was 40 to 50 employees.

"We discovered some important nuances in how small companies view their business and how their size changes the way they operate," says Melanie Redman, one of the lead researchers.

#### **A FOCUS ON EMPLOYEE WELLBEING**

For example, small companies are like small towns. Everybody knows each other, individual distinctions are apparent, even celebrated. It's

impossible for the president of a Fortune 500 company to personally know every employee, but the owner of a small company can.

Consider an employee for a cleaning products company in Chicago. The woman's car broke down on the way to work. It was an old vehicle, the single mother's only transportation, so she caught a cab to the office. The company owner soon heard the story. That afternoon he took her out to find another car, loaned her the money to buy it, and arranged for her to pay it back through payroll deduction.

"Small companies are better able to react to individual situations, instead of relying on corporate policies and procedures," says Redman.

Other small companies have their own ways of watching out for their people:

- ▶ A software design firm founder believes that the industry's typically crazy-long hours aren't good for a healthy lifestyle; he insists on maintaining regular business hours, and at 3 p.m. each day all employees take a group walk outside to get refreshed.
- ▶ The owner of a search marketing firm founded his business where he could enjoy an outdoor lifestyle; he had a bike track built outside the office door for everyone to use.
- ▶ One company's human resources department is named the "people department," to recognize employees as individuals.

**“PRETTY MUCH EVERY WEEK WE’RE MOVING FURNITURE. IT’S LIKE A GIANT GAME OF TETRIS.”**

Duncan Logan  
RocketSpace founder

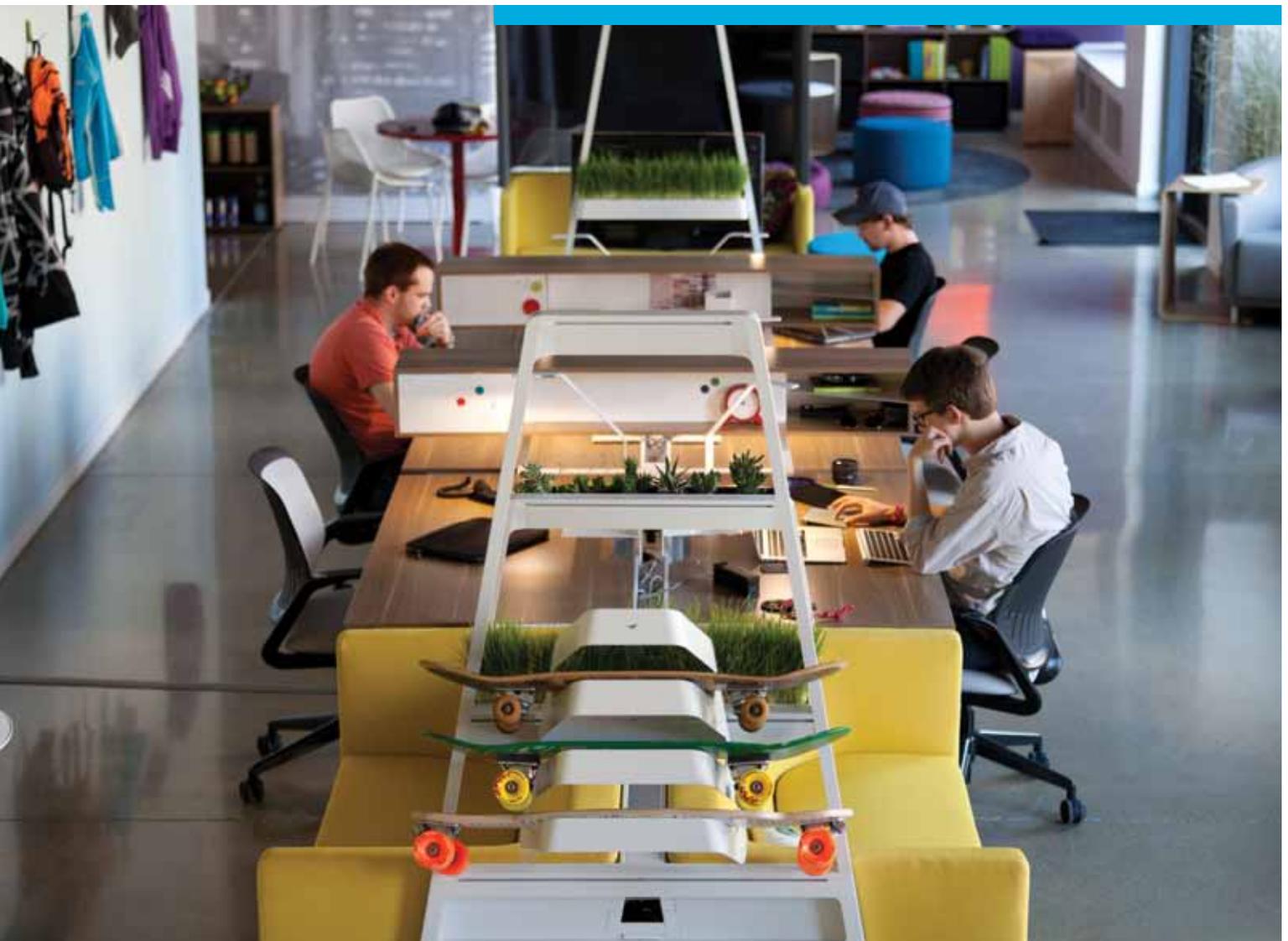
#### MAXING OUT WORKSPACES

Small companies don't have the resources of their larger cousins, so they expect space, furniture and tools to be hardworking. Furniture that's simple, adaptable and technology-friendly is a continuing theme, allowing employees to move between individual and collaborative work. Entry areas are used in some businesses for company meetings. A few organizations rearrange desks on a regular basis to keep people from getting into ruts.

“We use space as a platform for building an ecosystem for technology and new media companies,” says Duncan Logan, founder of RocketSpace, a shared office space in San Francisco for high-tech organizations. Logan's

company (not part of the research study) uses its Turnstone furniture in its marketing efforts to prospective customers. “Try hiring a programmer these days and asking them to work on beat-up old furniture.”

RocketSpace's open plan offices include a variety of workspaces, technology and tools in its monthly fee. “We know the importance of good office space as well as the enormous benefits in sharing with like-minded, fast-growth companies. Companies here specifically mention RocketSpace in their ads as a draw for potential employees because the environment makes a difference to these people, and the market for talent is very competitive,” says Logan.





↑ Small companies believe it's crucial that new employees can work well with others and fit easily into the company culture.



↑ Open-plan offices at RocketSpace reinforce the transparency that inspires employees of small companies. People know how their work impacts their coworkers and the overall company.

## WHEN THE COMPANY OWNER HEARD HIS EMPLOYEE'S CAR HAD BROKEN DOWN, HE BOUGHT HER A NEW ONE.

Open offices are popular in small companies. Walls, panels and doors can inhibit open communication and collaboration, key work modes for these small organizations. Open environments encourage employees to be informal, get to know each other and, not incidentally, have fun at work. Employees on skateboards, roaming pets and bikes used for commuting are frequent sights at smaller firms. At an online sports equipment retail company, the staff is so passionate about sports that it's not unusual for people to bike to work and start work while still in their bike clothes.

### SMALL COMPANY WISDOM

Organizational culture is duly recognized as critical to a small company's success and they communicate their culture at every opportunity, often using their products, packaging and marketing materials as decor. Company values are posted prominently. And since people drive culture, finding the right employees is approached with great care. Prospective

employees at an online craft and art marketing firm are interviewed over a game of table tennis, since the owners believe it reveals how well people deal with competition and stress.

Small company insights have influenced the experiences that Turnstone provides its customers. "Employees put bikes, skateboards and snowboards on display on shelves like artwork. They have a passion for their space and how it reflects their company. The way individuals can express themselves is a big reason why they work at small companies," says Abraham. It also inspired some unique storage approaches, incorporated into the new Bivi™ benching system.

At RocketSpace, with nearly 100 companies and 400 people using its 40,000 square feet of shared space, "Pretty much every week we're moving furniture," says Logan. "It's like a giant game of Tetris. One company says 'We want to take that corner space and we want to reconfigure the desks,' and another one will say 'We'll take their space.'

## SMALL BUSINESS INSIGHTS

### Individuals matter

Employees are individuals, not "people" or "staff."

Employees are hired first for culture fit, not skill fit.

What is appropriate in personal life is appropriate at work.

Employees are empowered to make decisions and take on different roles.

### Community matters

Interdependency between the company and the local community is mutually beneficial.

Invest time, resources and money in the local community, regardless of direct benefits.

External transparency engenders trust among customers and employees.

### Space matters

Spaces need to quickly and easily transform.

Open spaces promote energy in an informal, fun and sociable context.

These spaces were never intended to be offices.

### Financial matters

Invest in people regardless of direct benefits.

Business critical issues may be different than that of large companies.

Spend money on what's available and what's within budget, and be intentional about it.

### Spirit matters

Be nimble, respond quickly and think outside of the box.

Question yourselves and try new things.

Be true to who you are in terms of values and mission.

Success is not about becoming big.

### Passion matters

Make the world better.

Be extremely passionate about customer service.

Passion and purpose attract new employees.

Passion for the environment isn't just about marketing.

For more information about Turnstone, visit [myturnstone.com](http://myturnstone.com).



## COMPANY SIZE INFLUENCES HOW FIRMS THINK ABOUT PEOPLE, REAL ESTATE AND FURNITURE.

"It's absolutely no problem for us. We just disassemble the Bivi desks, move and reassemble them. All the fasteners are metal on metal, or going into bolt holes. You can disassemble and assemble it as many times as you want. Whether it's a one-person office or a meeting room or a desk for six people, it's the same legs, so we're not constantly looking for parts. It's been easy."

Turnstone, in turn, learns from RocketSpace users. Workers at one start-up turned a small Turnstone table on its side so they could use it in a new way. Few of the high-tech firms ask for pedestals, since workers store most content digitally, yet many tech workers want a lot of digital display – as many as four, 30" monitors on a single desk.

Most any company can learn from how small companies operate: Real estate should contribute to your business performance.

Space, furniture and tools must be utterly adaptable in today's globally competitive environment. Each individual brings unique characteristics to the organization's culture and identity.

"A CEO at a large corporation can't help every employee whose car breaks down," notes Redman. "But the idea of supporting the individual, fostering better communication and collaboration, using space to express company culture – those are helpful insights for organizations of any size." ●

For more insights from Turnstone's small company research, contact Jim Abraham at [jabraham@myturnstone.com](mailto:jabraham@myturnstone.com)