

THE UNDERVALUED PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT OF THE ENTERPRISE THROUGH THE DILEMMA OF "DESKS"

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Abstract

The physical environment of the enterprise is taken for granted, but not with essential importance for group and interpersonal dynamics. The physical side refers mainly to occupational health and safety. The issue has been taken as a leading one in European Parliament policy since the 1980s. It is a key element of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. The focus is on prevention and securing the physical health of workers. The psychosocial aspect remains unappreciated or underestimated by the governing bodies. The mental-cognitive impact of the physical environment is acknowledged, but does not have the weight of the physiological, on employee satisfaction, according to a number of managers. The question of the properties and stresses of the physical environment of the organization is limited by the paucity of research on the topic, especially on the intrapersonal structure of individuals. Within the present study, we will focus on a case study of the problem posed. We focus on an over-centered, small-scale dilemma of the "messy versus tidy desk." Focusing on a specific case study, serves as our basis for tracing the relationship between situational positioning to the generative impact of the physical environment and its functions on the employee.

The study allowed us to demonstrate the relationship of the physical and the intangible in individual job satisfaction and motivation at the level of perception, emotion and formulated individual interpretation.

Keywords: *physical environment; dilemma; management; understandings.*

JEL Classification: M12; Z13; D23

1. INTRODUCTION

Enterprises are configured through two primary environments - physical and social. They collaborate to shape the organizational environment, the ecosystem of a company. The physical environment of an enterprise is composed of the objects and external factors, as well as their arrangement, with which employees interact during their work experience (Carnevale, 1992; Sundstrom *et al*, 1996).

Modern management establishes a connection between human resources, network structures, and assets to support work activities. The differentiation of the physical environment's features focuses on material and technological indicators, as well as safe and healthy working conditions. European regulations and policies

place a strong emphasis on the physiological aspects of occupational health and safety. The focus is on protecting workers and preventing harm, particularly in professions with a high risk of injury or illness. A key example is the European Union Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work for 2021–2027, which aims to predict and manage changes in the evolving world of work, enhance the prevention of workplace accidents and occupational diseases, and strengthen the capacity to respond effectively to potential future health crises. (European Parliament, 2024) Next to physical health, the European Parliament also highlights the importance of workers' psychological well-being. It has adopted resolutions urging EU legislation to encompass all factors that directly or indirectly affect employees' physical and mental welfare (Kennedy and Makay, 2024).

Presumptions in practice lead us toward the technical dimension of the physical - primarily in the context of productivity and efficiency. However, artifacts - both directly and indirectly - affect individuals on personal, interpersonal, and group levels. This is largely due to the pressure placed on employees when there is a misalignment between the intended function of objects and the way they are interpreted outside of production processes.

This raises the question of how to manage the physical environment in a balanced way, considering all its functions. When management focuses predominantly on the physiological aspect, it can have a negative impact on the overall organizational climate. Often, management operates within frameworks that fail to capture the full physical potential of the workspace. There is a clear gap in prioritizing the social system, instrumental functionality, and the physical and health-related consequences of the environment. Such a narrow focus tends to overlook the significance of other functions that physical constructs serve.

Author's thesis: The symbolic and aesthetic functions of physical constructs influence how individuals perceive and interpret their interactions in the workplace. Three hypotheses have been formulated:

H1. The material attributes of physical objects place psychological and emotional pressure on individuals, which in turn impacts their behaviour - or lack of it - within the organizational system.

H2. The formation of an initial image, through the embedded meaning in a material object, holds significance for the participants in the social structure and their relationships.

H3. The physical environment and its elements directly or indirectly affect a person's emotions and mental state, influencing how they perceive and form mental images.

Our views were validated through a survey on workplace organization. We focused on the dilemma of the "desk" - how a cluttered versus an orderly desk affects perception and experienced emotions (Sitton, 1984). This study builds on the work of S. Sitton, M. Pratt, K. Elsbach, and D. Rafaeli, reflecting their views on this topic. We use the "desk" as a metaphor to compare how employees feel

about an organized versus a disorganized work environment. This dilemma reveals the relationship between the physical environment and its functions in shaping interactions among employees under conditions of functional pressure. This dilemma reveals the relationship between the physical environment and its functions in shaping interactions among employees under conditions of functional pressure. What guides us is personalization, as a vivid expression of individuality and a factor in forming an attitude toward other subjects within the organization. Understanding symbols and aesthetics is a personal process that depends on each individual's traits and cultural background.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The material aspects of organizations are an ever-present element, manifested through the organization and setup of the physical environment. Without physical attributes and assets, it is impossible to perform work activities. Physical environments play a major role in facilitating and constraining organizational action. Everything... is affected by the design and arrangement of machinery, workspaces, environmental controls, and equipment (Elsbach and Pratt, 2007, p. 182). The physical environment of a company is understood as the material features of the workspace that integrate with the work experience (Oldham and Rotchford, 1983). Material characteristics include all objects, ranging from small items to major assets, that participate directly or indirectly in work activities. They influence both individual and group work behavior. These material features become a source or channel for conveying impulses related to organizational goals and vision; they demonstrate organizational resilience and care for employees; and they represent organizational culture and values to both internal and external stakeholders. These various material features create the functional, ambient, and social conditions that affect the user experience of work (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2020, p. 236).

The organizational physical environment is a dynamic relationship between purpose, form, and function. It reveals assumptions about organizational life and offers interpretations of organizational reality through visual and aesthetic evidence (Meyer *et al.*, 2013). Companies independently define the purpose of the physical work environment. This purpose can represent corporate priorities, organizational virtues, or some form of "best practice" drawn from external sources or the organization's past experience. Together with architects and designers, organizational leaders jointly determine the functionality of buildings, spaces, and other design elements (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2020, p. 237).

The physical environment of an organization includes specific functions that come into play during daily operations. It reflects the aesthetic (look and feel), symbolic (identity), and instrumental (creativity, collaboration) attributes of the workspace (Elsbach and Bechky, 2007). For this study, we will focus less on the instrumental function and more on the smaller details - the individual workspace. By paying attention to the signals sent from personalized work areas to others, we

can better understand how symbols and aesthetics shape people's attitudes and biases when working together in the future. Even without directly using the objects, the experience of the physical environment offers valuable information for managing workspace on a small scale. Using the power of symbols and aesthetics well can improve both individual productivity and teamwork.

Objects used to personalize a workspace carry symbolic meaning. Together with other items and stimuli, they shape the overall aesthetic of an individual's work area. Each object also has its unique style, reflecting the personal taste of its owner. The combination of these material elements creates an aesthetic and symbolic impression for anyone who sees the space. Personalization brings up questions about how symbols and aesthetics are interpreted, the potential for tension between different functions, and how this affects the working relationship between the observer and the workspace owner. A good example of this is the "desk dilemma," which highlights how people perceive personalized workspaces and make sense of the way work areas are organized..

The symbolic function deals with the ideas of "symbol" and "symbolism" in management theory and practice. It is understood in the physical environment through a social perspective. The symbol denotes elements of the social world that are considered 'not real', 'not rational', and/or 'not material'. Thus, while the concept has diffused widely, its meaning has become less and less clear (Muzio *et al.*, 2024, p. 2). Pressure comes from how people react socially and from the cultural identity of people and objects within an organization. D. Muzio and colleagues (2024) offer two ways to understand the role of symbols in organizations. The first is the idea that meanings are socially created, meaning that "all symbols are created subjectively and are invested with a particular kind of subjective meaning." (Morgan *et al.*, 1983, p. 5). Many studies show that symbols depend on personal interpretation, associations, beliefs, and ideas developed inside organizations. These create shared systems of meaning, which Muzio and others describe as „[s]ymbolic processes ... work to construct social reality' and defines symbolic systems as shared models, classifications, representations, and logics" (Scott, 2001; Muzio *et al.*, 2024, p. 3).

The second perspective views symbols as opposites to values or realities, for example, contrasting "surface" with essence (Perrow, 1985).

Symbolism gives meaning to things that matter to a specific group of people. These meanings come from social and cultural contexts and are used to represent something significant. Even though symbolism is not material by nature, it becomes part of the physical environment when meaning is attached to a physical object, artifact, or stimulus. This connection between the physical and the intangible shows that symbolic meaning can exist within physical spaces. The symbolic function of the physical environment is shaped by how people attach meaning to spaces through shared social understanding. In social systems, symbolism can also take the form of behaviors or routines that help individuals influence how others perceive them.

These symbolic actions allow members of an organization to shape the impressions of external audiences (Muzio *et al.*, 2024, p. 4).

To summarize, symbolism encompasses various aspects of physical and visual symbols within organizations, particularly in the context of organizational culture and behavior. As a result, symbolic functions can shape the workplace environment and influence the overall organizational climate (Yusof, 2009, pp. 144–145). Symbols are objects, acts, relationships, or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings, evoke emotions, and impel men to action (Cohen, 1974, p. 23).

Aesthetics in organizations shares many touchpoints with symbolism, but it stands out through its form and the way it impacts the individual. In organizational management, the aesthetic function emphasizes the significance of material objects based on how they are used (Nicolini *et al.*, 2003). The dimensions of aesthetics are shaped by subjective perceptions - they arise from perception and personal evaluations of what is considered beautiful or not. This function includes various categories of aesthetic judgment, such as “beautiful, ugly, sublime, gracious, and so on.” (Strati, 1999, pp. 184–188).

The aesthetic categorization of material objects is carried out by individuals or groups through the use of attributive labels - pairs like “beautiful–ugly” or “elegant–rough.” Through their knowledge and experience, employees actively shape the physical environment by applying aesthetic judgment. The aesthetic responses evoked by physical objects are not merely momentary impressions or emotional reactions; rather, they arise from perceived qualities embedded in stylistic features. In this study, aesthetic influence on individuals is explored through sensitivity and personal evaluation, viewed through the lens of the “desk” as a symbol of the organizational environment - its layout and structure. In line with the perspectives of K. Elsbach, M. Pratt, and A. Strati, we argue that the role of objects in organizational life is informed by knowledge, emotion, aesthetic judgments, and experience.

The significance of the symbolic and aesthetic functions is particularly evident in the arrangement and design of workspaces and work areas. The presence of order or disorder in the physical environment triggers a wide range of associations. The horizon of apperception extends from individual understanding to shared social norms. A dominant perspective in organizing the work environment is that disorder is the opposite of organization - two concepts that hold central importance in management. The aversion of messiness might root in the assumption that disorganization and messiness impair the efficiency and survival of complex systems (Elias, 2000). Because messy environments often lack structure compared to less messy (tidy) environments, they make it more difficult to detect objects and less clear what the guiding norms are (Liu *et al.*, 2012, p. 3).

This interaction between the work environment and personal characteristics is a topic of interest to the person-organization (PO) fit, which is defined as the

compatibility between an individual and his work environment (Mateo *et al.*, 2013, p. 1862). The relationship between individuals and their surroundings is crucial for organizational effectiveness. Personalizing one's workspace can foster a sense of harmony, but it also raises the question of how such choices affect others. Aesthetics and symbolism function as a complex channel of both physical and social signals - they can express diligence and care, but may also lead to misunderstanding or confusion. The meanings triggered by material objects and artifacts often serve as subtle yet powerful sources of perceived pressure, which can sometimes feel intrusive or irritating. We cannot expect uniformity or repetition in how employees interpret or react to the physical environment. Our argument is reinforced by the varied and non-homogeneous ways individuals assign meaning to the arrangement of physical space. A strong representation of this collective perception of order versus disorder is reflected in the ongoing debate surrounding the "desk".

3. METHODOLOGY

The study's methodology is primarily quantitative, complemented by qualitative tools. The research was carried out in four main phases, following the logic of the research thesis.

The first step involved defining the target audience by composition and profile. A total of 32 working individuals, aged 27 to 33, participated in the survey, with a gender distribution of 56.25% women and 43.75% men. The respondents are "external" to the object and subject of the study, meaning they are not direct users. The subject of the study is the symbolic and aesthetic functions from the perspective of an external observer. The object of the study is the participants' perspective on symbolism and aesthetics in the process of forming beliefs about the "true user" of the artifact(s).

The second step involved asking participants to share their interpretations of the study's subject, specifically in the context of someone else's workspace. This relates to the general question of a "tidy versus messy work environment." We focused on the opinions of people who were not directly involved in organizing the workspace - in this case, the desk. The third phase was a survey asking respondents about their views on a "messy versus tidy desk" belonging to someone else. It didn't focus on a particular person or situation but was based on their own experiences and opinions. The questions asked whether they accepted or rejected the desk's arrangement and how they understood a similar situation, based on their perception. Participants shared their feelings and emotions about these two basic types of desk setups - both positive and negative. The results were analyzed statistically to draw conclusions using quantitative methods. The questions and answers were grouped into two main categories, which helped us summarize two key "dimensions." These dimensions depend on how people perceive and understand things, showing the roles of symbolism and aesthetics.

The fourth phase consisted of in-depth interviews conducted in two stages. The first stage took place in 2023 with 12 working students participating, and the second stage occurred in 2024 with 13 working students. The interviews were structured, which allowed for quantitative analysis by identifying repetitions and similarities.

The data collected form a secondary source of numbers and facts. These results help us check the main idea, test our guesses, and make judgments. We used mostly numbers and statistics, supported by looking at other research and analyzing texts. The main methods we used were correlation, ANOVA, and F-statistics. We picked these methods based on the type of data and how the study was planned. Correlation helped us see the link between how people view aesthetics and symbolism and how they act, mainly focusing on the physical space. We used ANOVA and correlation to study survey answers and support our ideas. For the in-depth interviews, we used a mix of methods based on average values. Conclusions are drawn through deduction from the particular to the general, supported by qualitative methods of synthesis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the second phase, the first target group was surveyed with seven questions. The first question was introductory, asking whether the appearance of the workspace, viewed through the lens of the desk, affects the respondents. The answers were: Yes – 81.25%; No – 12.5%; Cannot decide – 6.25%. Based on the majority of responses, the appearance of the workspace is considered to have a significant influence. The pressure is understood to be distributed along the interaction between the one who perceives and the one who generates it.

The next six questions are divided into two parts, focusing on the functions of symbolism and aesthetics in the physical environment, specifically from the perspective of the desk. The questions were rated on a five-point Likert scale - from 1, meaning "Strongly Disagree," to 5, meaning "Strongly Agree." These questions allow us to identify how respondents understand symbolism and aesthetics as functions, and how important they are to them. We refer to the overall understanding, without including the specific desk dilemma. The goal is to determine how clearly people distinguish and comprehend these two functions in their work environment. The questions are as follows: Questions 2 and 5 focus on identifying symbolism and aesthetics in how the desk is arranged; Questions 3 and 6 ask whether symbolism and aesthetics can be distinguished in the work environment; Questions 4 and 7 measure the importance of the symbolic and aesthetic functions for participants in the context of business relationships. Table 1 presents the total scores for the symbolism questions (Q..S) and the aesthetics questions (Q..A), along with their average values.

According to the data, there is a recognition of the symbolic and aesthetic functions within the physical environment of the organization. Identification occurs through symbolism and aesthetics, which are given importance in the

realization of relationships with others. Aesthetics scored 0.532 points higher than symbolism, probably because it is easier to notice visually, while symbolism requires understanding of deeper psychological aspects.

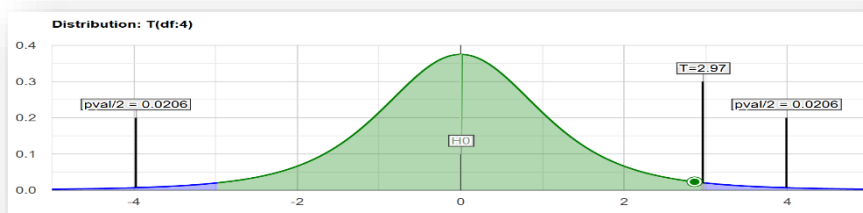
Table 1. Evaluation of symbolism and aestheticism as functions and their meaning

Question	1	2	4	5	6	AV
Q2 S	2	6	18	36	60	3,75
Q3 S	1	8	15	32	70	3,938
Q4 S	2	2	21	40	60	3,844
Q5 A	0	4	12	28	95	4,344
Q6 A	0	2	9	32	100	4,469
Q7 A	0	2	15	28	95	4,375

Source: authors' own research

Parameter	Value	Test power
Correlation coefficient (r)	0.8296	0.0906 The priori power is low
r^2	0.6882	
P-value	<u>0.0411</u>	
Covariance	81811.6	
Sample size (n)	6	
Statistic	2.971	

P-value graphic



Source: authors' own research and <https://www.statskingdom.com/>

Figure 1. Correlation indicators of the sample

The R between the groups is positive (Figure 1). Changes in one variable will lead to changes in the other. However, the hypothesis is risky because $p \leq \alpha$. The p-value equals 0.0411, ($P(x \leq 2.971) = 0.9794$). It means that the chance of type I error is small: 0.0411 (4.11%). $T = 2.971$, which falls outside the range for accepting the hypothesis, as shown by the test's power. This is likely due to the sample size. Although a relationship between the variables has been proven, the sample size needs to be increased to fully confirm the hypothesis.

The second study looked at more ways to understand people's personal views on the "dilemma." We invited the same group of respondents, but only 27 took part. The survey focused on how people perceive the desk - as something positive or negative. The questions were based on the thematic studies of S. Sitton and K. Elsbach. We made two sets of questions with 6 options each: 3 positive and 3 negative, total 12 questions (Table 2). The evaluation is based on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. The first set was about a "messy desk." Positive answers showed feelings of being busy, working hard, and performing many tasks at once (questions Q2, Q4, Q5). Negative answers showed feelings of irresponsibility, chaos, and disorder (questions Q1, Q3, Q6). The second group of questions was about the "tidy desk." Opinions were divided in the same way. Positive views (questions Q1, Q4, and Q5) expressed ideas of order, management potential, and organizational commitment. Negative views (questions Q2, Q3, and Q6) reflected a lack of activity, pretending, and not actually working.

Table 2. Position "messy vs tidy desk"

Messy desk					
Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6
3.26	2.7	3.25	2.63	2.81	3.29
Tidy desk					
Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6
3.44	2.74	2.67	3.3	3.15	2.85

Source: authors' own research

Two clear groups of data were formed, each supporting one type of desk arrangement and opposing the other. The group supporting the "messy desk" (Factor A) scored lower compared to the group supporting the "tidy desk" (Factor B). We applied a Two Way ANOVA to test the hypothesis and research questions, considering the limitations of the previous study. Factors A and B were fixed, with a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ and an effect size of 0.25. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Two Way ANOVA „разхвърляно срещу подредено бюро“

Source	DF	SS	MS	F Statistic (df1,df2)	P-value	Variance	Mean confidence interval (CL:0.95)
Factor A	1	2185.0417	2185.0417	1.7598 (1,12)	0.2093	1380.2652	[-37.2998, 102.1331]
Factor B	5	1215.875	243.175	0.1959 (5,12)	0.9582	202.9697	[-13.401, 40.0677]
Interaction AB	5	1300.2083	260.0417	0.2094 (5,12)	0.952		
Error	12	14899.5	1241.625				
Total	23	19600.625	852.2011				

Source: authors' own research and <https://www.statskingdom.com>

The analysis of the differentiated variables confirmed that the hypothesis cannot be rejected - with $p\text{-value} > \alpha$ for both groups. The values of the variables are considered statistically equal, with an accepted Type I error probability. Both FA & FB fall within the 95% confidence acceptance range. The interaction between Factors A and B shows a value higher than alpha, with a test sample result of 0.2094 (also within the 95% acceptance range). The data does not contain any deviation from TK, $\kappa = 1,5$. The study confirms the validity of the author's view that a desk, through its symbolic and aesthetic functions, can influence the receiver. The interaction between two professionally engaged individuals in a dyadic relationship is affected by the visual perception of how objects and items are arranged. This visual influence exerts a form of pressure that shapes judgments, particularly in the early stages of interpersonal relations. The impact is both emotional and psychological. The receiver forms a mental image of the owner of the "messy vs. tidy desk," which contributes to the creation of bias or preconceived attitudes. In this context, physical artifacts, through their visual and spatial arrangement, become sources of influence in the social dimension of future interactions between individuals.

It is difficult to determine with certainty which layout is most helpful for the observer and their understanding. Institutional conflicts of function play a defining structural role, shaped directly by the culture, experience, and worldview of the parties involved. The physical appearance creates impressions that are important for establishing effective collaboration. In its management, the physical environment generates tensions that ultimately affect individual socio-psychological indicators.

The study does not provide a definitive answer on how the workspace - whether individual or collective - should be arranged or structured. Firstly, it does not confirm which configuration is superior, which is logical given the diversity of human perception and understanding. Secondly, the study's statistical power is limited. While the thesis and hypotheses are not rejected, a larger-scale study with a broader sample is needed. Validating the relevance of the dual perspective requires careful consideration of both the situational context in which opinions are formed and the characteristics of those shaping them. This nuanced approach would enable the discussion to identify patterns of response and provide insights into how individuals may position themselves in future relationships and interactions.

The research supports and aligns with the perspectives of leading scholars in the field regarding the functional impact of the physical environment on individuals in the workplace. The "messy desk" reveals an interform tension within the function of symbolism. Having a tidy desk may allow one to look more intelligent, but at the cost of appearing unsociable (Sitton, 1984; Elsbach and Pratt, 2007, p. 209). The study connects symbols with the aesthetic experience of the work environment. The study links symbols to workplace aesthetics, emphasizing how they enhance the contrast between internal sensitivities to what is perceived as beautiful or not, in relation to the symbols that express the given proposition.

A practical solution for balancing symbolism and aesthetics in the workplace environment is suggested in the work of Elsbach and Pratt (2007). One promising strategy involves deliberately rearranging the workspace to reflect the preferences or presence of the individuals who will be using it. In our view, this is one of the most effective tools for achieving synchronization between the participants in the interaction. Such an approach would influence the social system of interpersonal relationships and could help reduce the frequency of conflicts arising from functional tensions within workplace dynamics and dependencies.

5. CONCLUSION

Managing the physical environment is not simply a mechanical combination of technological arrangements of workspaces and interior design concepts. The functions of physical components are constructs within the social systems of the organization. They are reflected in the relationships between those who hold authority over physical elements and those who use them without such authority, between owners and observers, and among those who mutually share material resources. Involving design specialists could ease the management of the physical environment. Eliminating the tension between these three functions is unrealistic. There will always be parties interpreting the meaning behind a marker, artifact, or asset differently from its intended use. Further research into the functional nature of the material environment will help find effective and practical solutions. An important aspect, in our view, is the analysis and monitoring of the socio-cultural and psycho-behavioral dynamics of individuals. Regulation of the material environment should follow the principles of common benefit and favorable working conditions for all, rather than just for a specific group of people.

To support future discussions on the topic of “desks,” we offer a synthesized summary of opinions from working students. These insights are drawn from the fourth phase of the study and reflect a variety of perspectives on the thesis, which can be explained by individual interpretations of the issue. The viewpoints expressed are free from scientific or theoretical bias. The selection and organization of these viewpoints offer valuable insight for future research and practical applications. Table 4, titled “Perspectives on the ‘Desk’ Dilemma,” provides a summary of the positions.

Table 4. Perspectives on the “Desk” Dilemma

№	Tidy Desk	Messy Desk
1	Demonstrates a person’s organization and attention to detail in their work.	The person is active but neglects the details.
2	No connection between desk arrangement and quality/quantity of work done; everything depends on the person’s task management.	
3	A tidy desk reflects clear thinking and good organization.	A messy desk indicates chaos, and scattered items make work harder.

№	Tidy Desk	Messy Desk
4	A tidy desk symbolizes love for work and order.	The person is overwhelmed with too much work.
5	Symbolizes inactivity.	Preference for chaos.
6	The person follows certain norms and behavioral traditions.	Inefficient structure for performing tasks.
7	Consistency in action.	Symbol of uncertainty and confusion.
8	A tidy desk means a lack of work activity	Does not look aesthetically pleasing.

Source: authors' own research

We identify a dichotomy in the positions across the domains of aesthetics and symbolism. The distinctions are bipolar in their meaning. Symbolism relates to poles such as organization/order versus disorganization/chaos, and activity versus inactivity. Aesthetics is expressed through perceptions and judgments of a workspace's appearance, ranging from well-maintained to poorly kept, within the context of beauty versus ugliness. The overall conclusions can serve as a starting point for managers to contextually assimilate individual positions and improve the appropriateness of their responses.

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