Trends & Hype—What's Hot and What Really Works

A perspective on workspace planning trends and their impact on supporting dynamic business cultures.

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July 30, 2013
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Hip or Hype? There are multiple avenues of discussion about the workplace today, workplace of tomorrow, how we work, where we work, who we work with, and more. Workplace decision makers are inundated with the latest, greatest and trendiest of what is being promoted in the market place and what is being integrated into the everyday workplace experience.

It is time to take a deep breath, examining what is real and what is working—for employees and employers. There are a multitude of newsletters, magazines, and links to web sites offering insight and information. It can be overwhelming and confusing, even for professionals, to sort through the chatter in order to best advise clients for their particular situations and to ensure that each project gets the most functional, cost effective and aesthetic solution to their operational space requirements.

The definition of work as we know it has changed. With the introduction of shared workspace, hoteling, telecommuting and distributed work force, a whole new vocabulary is emerging. It is affecting choices in real estate acquisition, design and construction for all sectors, including corporate, government, institutional and educational markets.

At one end of the spectrum there is the stipulation that every worker should have an assigned space in a designated building or office location. They live with the expectation that they are to be in that location for the duration of the work week. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the work anywhere, wherever, whenever mindset that became more prevalent as companies and organizations embraced the concept, put forward by their younger workers and promoted heavily. Recently, we have witnessed this trend begin to shift back to the more traditional office approach as organizations such as Yahoo make sweeping changes to the telecommuting model once embraced. Mainstream media is constantly publishing articles such as, “Cubicles: The Great Mistake” or “Younger Workers Seek Stability While Older Colleagues Want Flexibility” versus “Changing Office Trends Hold Major Implications for Future Office Demand.” The media attention focused on Marissa Myers’ “no more teleworking” edict speaks directly to the intensity of the discussion around how and where we work.
These fluctuations in workplace models need to be viewed and analyzed on multiple levels. There are the physical ramifications of the workplace. What does it mean to “go to work?” How do we define “office?” What must we do to promote productivity and employee well being regardless of how and where they actually work?

From an employer perspective, the goal is to provide the space and environment required to achieve optimum productivity and results to meet business objectives. From the employee point of view, the desire is to have a place to go to get the work completed, with the appropriate support mechanisms in place. At one extreme is a sophisticated infrastructure for voice, data, printing, meeting/collaboration and heads-down work; collateral spaces including fitness and day care centers as well as cafés would be adjacent. These spaces are now stretching to offer laundry, dry cleaning, pet care, and concierge services. At the opposite extreme is the aforementioned telecommuting concept for which the daily commute may be to a home office/kitchen table with a work wardrobe of sweats and flip flops. With today’s available technology, the workplace can really be anywhere and therein lays the flash-point for discussion.

A bit of historical perspective is in order to frame the dialogue. In the past, “going to work” implied that one would leave home in the morning, spend the day in an office, perhaps attend meetings, spend some time on the telephone, wrap up for the evening, return home, and that was it. In today’s world, work goes with you 24/7 so you can plug in any time via mobile devices ranging from smart phones to tablets and laptops.

Today, one cannot simply walk along an airport concourse without seeing someone sitting on the floor near an electrical outlet for their laptop. We can easily grab coffee at a Starbucks but then we have to negotiate for a place to sit with the “campers” hunched down over their laptops or iPads utilizing the WiFi. Let’s not forget how rare it is these days to sit on a plane without being jabbed from either side by fellow passengers balancing their laptops on table trays and negotiating with a flight attendant to just finish that one important call.

We are defined or often define ourselves by what we do, and today we can do it from almost anywhere on the planet. So what does this mean in terms of defining workspace (or office) in today’s work environment?
The Reality of “Office”

1. Anywhere with WiFi;
2. Waiting in the car pool pickup line;
3. The local coffee shop;
4. The kitchen table;
5. At an actual office building, in a specifically assigned space with a desk, ergonomic chair, network printer, and multi-function/multi-line telephone with conference call capability; and
6. An actual room with your name on a sign outside the door.

The Office is everywhere and nowhere in particular at the same time.

Initially, offices were fairly benign spaces. Companies leased or planned office space with little thought or much analysis. In the mid-1970s, there was not much in the formalized planning for office beyond providing four walls, a door, desk, chair, and possibly a bookcase or credenza. Technology was typically a telephone and perhaps a typewriter or Dictaphone, maybe a clunky interoffice desktop intercom. The focus was always on the overall building plan and exterior design elements. If a higher level of design was required, perhaps an interior decorator would be retained most likely for the higher echelon executive level space.

Now, the evolution of workspace design has grown from an afterthought to a clearly identifiable practice area for architects, interior designers, project managers, furniture designers, facilities professionals, administrators, psychologists, and a host of other industry experts. Deeper involvement in the office or facility design process has also offered the opportunity to develop long-lasting working relationships with clients and the original design team. Sometimes these teams are brought back together to re-evaluate and redesign space as requirements change and additional space is added or surplus space shed. This has elevated the design professional to more of a business partner instead of just providing a one-off, one-time service.

Designing, managing and furnishing workspace has become more sophisticated. Collectively, they are all drivers of workplace change beyond just providing “office space.” Even Staples and Office Depot now provide “design services.”

Industry professionals providing this service need to be on top of issues as diverse as ergonomics, sustainability, space efficiencies, and maintenance factors, as well as the bottom line to help clients evaluate and plan on how much space they actually need to carry out their business missions. In a sluggish economic climate, we are also called upon to help determine what is the most cost-effective way for companies and institutions to manage and allocate their real estate. We are all
constantly bombarded with images of the latest innovations and strategies to promote efficiency, collaboration and capture the benefits of technology all towards harnessing costs yet promoting productivity, employee health and well being, and work life balance while also saving the planet and meeting shareholder expectations!

The bar is now set even higher with increasingly complex issues for decision makers to evaluate and incorporate into their business plans.

**So what do we actually have here?**

There are those who still advocate for traditional workspace: a fixed amount and permanently assigned territory per employee. At the other end, we have the virtual workspace: companies with little if any actual real estate and a network of workers tethered in the ether. Somewhere in the middle is everybody else either working to keep up with the newest, latest and greatest or maintaining their particular “status quo.” So, we have some places with the ubiquitous yoga balls strewn about the loungers and collaboration nooks and others that are rabbit warrens of corridors and single occupant offices with traditional furniture, lighting, and multiple years of paper and other workplace storage challenges. The differentiators seem to be how managers plan to integrate a multi-generational work force, increased reliance on technology, and competing work styles into the new office/workspace paradigm.

The truth is there is no obligation to give employees anything beyond the basic accommodations they will need to do their specific job as long as it is in a code-compliant facility. In actuality, current convention decrees that in order to be competitive, businesses need to go above and beyond the basics in workplace accommodation to recruit and retain the best employees. The investment in better facilities is paid back by the employee’s energy and commitment to do their best work in an inspiring, healthful and ergonomically correct environment. Developers and landlords are pushing to provide the envelope for these workplaces while design and industry professionals strive to deliver spaces on time, within budget and in a way that meets all of the client’s requirements.

In order to get past the buzz, we need to understand that the competing interests at play are those needed to balance the measurable physical requirements to house a business and its workforce as well as the financial repercussions to the business’ bottom line. All of which must be weighed against the need to support everyday activities that are required to make the business function efficiently, seamlessly and profitably.
Real World Examples

Company A
An entrepreneurial professional services firm needed to adjust their physical space to the new direction they wanted to promote not only for themselves but for their clients. As the lease renewal date for their charming, but too small space in Georgetown approached, they determined that they needed to relocate to the Central Business District (CBD) in downtown Washington, DC. The CBD presented a more practical solution not only to their space problems but it allowed for greater flexibility in access by clients and employees. The resultant selection of 6,200 SF in a classic downtown office building offered the right size space to house 30 staff including administrative, accounting, project management, and architectural personnel. The space posed some unusual architectural challenges yet informed the management decision to promote a collaborative and interactive activity-based work environment.

Analyzing the way staff, management and project teams utilized the existing space—separated on two floors and individual workstations—pushed the new space design to a more visually and spatially open design. Natural light and view points across the space allow for anyone to have a quick overview of who is in the office, what meetings are going on, and who is entering the space. Managers are in glass front offices, and workstations are designed for collaboration with shared work tables, and low seated privacy panels. Although each zone houses eight staff there is ample room for informal meetings without disturbing adjacent staff.

Collaboration space was built into the overall office design, with a main hub in the bright, café/pantry and informal bump zones and break-out meeting space in the reception area. Transition to the new space has increased staff interaction both informally and in two adjacent, transparent conference rooms with enhanced technology and audio visual capabilities.

Even at this scale, planning for change involved staff from top to bottom. Everyone was encouraged to discuss what changes would benefit their personal and team productivity. The new look and design has allowed the firm to encourage more in-house meetings with clients, lunch-and-learn sessions, and social events in a space that is flexible to accommodate each requirement.
Leveraging the technology enhancements, staff is able to easily move around the space with their laptops, convene in any of the open collaboration areas, and easily pull together for impromptu meetings and conversations. Planning up front allowed for minimal changes post move.

Full disclosure: This is Kramer Consulting’s new office, which recently won the “Bronze, Corporate Space Under 20,000 SF” award at IIDA Mid-Atlantic Chapter’s 2013 Premier event.

Company B
A large consulting/government contracting firm had established real estate and facility design requirements to meet the need for proximity to client engagements and the premise that staff functioned best in standard size, shared offices (two people), located by team, with managers in single offices and executives in larger offices with an attached office for their executive assistants. Only support staff was in open space sized to match a standard module.

Parameters of their workspace use extended to limiting subsidiary space to a prescribed amount of standard conference space, reception and support spaces. The rigidly held space standards facilitated calculation of required space and provided a path for easier space reconfigurations as needs changed. The FF&E was also standardized in a way that made it easier to budget for those requirements and was specified to maximize the ease of utilizing and distributing furniture as facilities relocated or were reconfigured. Furthermore, the narrow design bandwidth for aesthetic improvements was limited to finishes and some architectural definition within a certain tolerance depending on the clearly defined size of the facility with larger facilities allowing more differentiation and upgraded material (within limits).

With these parameters established, all space was leased with durations tied to the estimated time frame for client engagements supported by that particular facility. However, over time there was an increasing need for more technologically advanced meeting spaces, (some contractually mandated) and specialized, high-security spaces.
The introduction of shared workspace was initiated by the decision to merge space requirements of multiple business units which had historically been housed in separate facilities with different support staff and facility standards reflecting equally different workplace cultures. This was further bolstered by the observation that on any given day, across all business units, much of the staff was not actually in their assigned space. They were traveling, at meetings and conferences, and at client locations. Consequently, studies were done and the conclusion was to re-think how space was sized and allocated to match actual usage. This triggered a re-evaluation and ultimate implementation of new space standards and a shared workspace model across all facilities. Pilot programs were designed and implemented in a few key locations, then slowly rolled out across the company’s 100 plus facilities across the US.

Merger of the business units did not last and there was a strategic separation of the company. The larger part of the business became a publicly held corporation pushing a highly elevated initiative to again re-visit facilities, space, costs, and how these elements affected the bottom line. What started as a space initiative and cultural revolution to unite multiple business units under one roof, metaphorically and realistically, led the business entity in an entirely new direction.

Anecdotal information on the subsequent execution of the “hoteling” initiative indicates that it is still a work in progress as that firm is facing reductions in leased space. We can intuit that workplace change does alter corporate culture significantly; that there is often “aftermath” re-assessment to manage issues not apparent when designing the changes, and that across-the-board edicts don’t usually work in all locations and within all business units.

The conclusion is that successful workspace design is based not only on the actual physical space, but analyzing and understanding the corporate DNA and cultural identity of the firm. It is critical to pay careful attention to how changes are introduced and assimilated long before the actual changes are made. How the changes are implemented makes all the difference in the world. In this case, the perception was that the “hoteling” adversely affected the firm culture, teams were separated, and made it difficult to have a cohesive spirit among related departments. The reality was that re-evaluating how people were assigned to their workspace by assigning them to
“home” office locations in closer proximity to where they lived would improve work life balance by reducing commuting time. Additionally, by hoteling and utilizing office space only on days when employees actually needed to be in the office, space for conference facilities, meeting rooms, smaller collaboration space, technology hubs, and other amenities were available when the demand increased. Gradually, as managers were able to review the metrics provided by their software program that tracked space reservations, usage and demand, adjustments could be made to accommodate requirements for team co-location on an as-needed basis and to tailor specific space requirements in a dynamic, cost efficient way.

The changes seem to be having the desired effect of keeping real estate costs in check, while providing a platform where staff can best function with flexible space assignments.

**Company C**
A large defense contractor notes changes in their market, and is also feeling the pressure to make changes to manage costs in light of current and future headcount reduction. Their space is managed by geographies/regions and business units, with each unit having some discretion as to how space is allocated and designed. Although there are established standards for furniture, fixtures and equipment (FF&E) and types of office, research and meeting space, there is some leeway to make adjustments for new initiatives dependent on specific situations for certain market segments.

*Initial feedback from employees indicates that time invested to prepare staff for the changes paid off in satisfaction after the fact.*

For example, the company recently relocated a large number of administrative staff to an open-plan environment. Previously, this group worked in individual offices and the change was implemented to reduce individual employee footprint as well as to foster a more collaborative environment. After much discussion, new space standards were implemented placing managers in workstations and shrinking director offices with placement on the interior and glass fronts. Initial feedback from employees indicates that time invested to prepare staff for the changes paid off in employee satisfaction.
A second project, currently in design, is to develop a model for a more creative workspace to house a business unit with more flexible space requirements. This change, dictated by an executive’s desire to act as an agent of change has been assigned to the facility manager to define and manage. While basic standards are being taken into consideration, the end users are being consulted in advance to ensure the design matches how they plan to work, and the facility manager is coordinating with the design team to ensure that the new concept will mesh well with existing corporate requirements. It is too early to tell how this project will end, the important fact is that there is a willingness to experiment and seek alternatives to the status quo.

Conclusions

- Each company or institution needs to assess its own unique requirements without bias towards the latest style and design trends.

- It is critical to do research and evaluate how the company’s work/mission and culture are affected by changes in market conditions, business goals, and financial means.

- Smart companies retain an objective, unbiased subject matter expert, such as a program manager or project manager, to guide them in the effort to evaluate their workspace needs. Most progressive firms have recognized this and are seeking out a truly independent advocate, who has the resources to build a team that best meets their immediate and long-term requirements. Having a “ringmaster” to manage all aspects of the expected work in an unbiased manner, representing only the client’s interests, frees the company to focus on their business, not project management. Even a small project can benefit from retaining an outside program manager or owner’s representative. The benefits of this plan of action include:
  - Having a true partner to help determine the specific scope, schedule, and budget for the project, then implement those decisions throughout the project.
  - Defining early on how decisions are to be made, and developing the communication path for presentation of ideas, solutions, and implementation of the plans.
  - Clarifying all roles and responsibilities for each team member, from design to construction, and the expectation for each party’s contributions to the project.

- Like one’s taste in art, music, clothing or color, the design of workspace can be extremely subjective. While we all enjoy seeing cutting edge design solutions, encouraging innovation and embracing new technology does not have to be extreme. A workspace solution can be tailored to fit any business environment.
Resources

There is abundant information and research available on workspace design. Discerning what is most valuable to each organization can be a daunting experience. Here are a few suggestions to start the journey.


- “Five Trends That Are Dramatically Changing Work and the Workplace,” by Joe Aki Ouye, Ph.D., Co Founder and Partner of New Ways of Working, LLC, Knoll Workplace Research

- Alternative Workplace Benchmark Study, Authors: New ways of Working Network Benchmarking Team, Haworth
Questions?

For questions or inquiries about workspace design and construction as well as program/project management, you may contact:

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