

Designing next-generation workplaces

Cubicles, at least the gray, high-walled variety, are on their way out

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by [Richard R. Rogoski](#)

The office of the future will be liberated from endless rows of gray cubicles, hard-walled conference rooms and bleak break areas.

New, more mobile technology and a push for increased personal interaction are redesigning the office.

"There's so much emphasis now on communication," says Jeff Davis, president and CEO of JDavis Architects in Raleigh. "People are going to work in offices where they see people face to face, so there's going to be less of an emphasis on walled offices."

It's not surprising that many of the changes in office look and feel are related to the wants and needs of a younger work force. "This generation under 30 is into entitlements," Davis says. "They want to work in an environment that's friendly."

Paul Fox, interiors manager at Cline Design Associates in Raleigh, says increased mobility and a growing trend toward telecommuting has put the traditional office in a precarious position.

"Companies have to compete with home offices," he says. Businesses need to provide an enticing environment if they hope to make people want to spend time in the office, he says.

In this new environment, even traditional office furniture is not as important as it once was. "It's all about change and mobility," Fox says. Instead of stationary desks that tend to isolate workers into separate work spaces, teams of employees often will gather around tables, he says. "They don't want to move furniture. They want to move people."

Some theorize that workers who are mobile feel less isolated and are better able to exchange ideas. "People are creating lots of spaces for conferencing opportunities spread throughout the office - everything from bar-height stools to easy chairs," says Davis.

In an era where some younger workers are more productive working on their laptops at a nearby Starbucks, says David Bradford, a principal at Cline Design, newer office designs can include open cafes, lounge areas and smaller comfort areas for quick meetings.

"Companies are competing for employees like never before," says Dan Forest, a partner in the Durham office of Little Diversified Architectural Consulting. "Those that can implement these changes are better at attracting and retaining employees."

But it's not just tech companies - which historically have attracted young, free-thinking workers - that have begun remaking the office, says Forest. "It's across the board. Tech companies drove the trends of funky work environments. But we're seeing all industries, even companies like Bank of America and RBC Centura, using a cutting edge approach."

TEAR DOWN THE WALLS

The first step in transforming today's workplace into the office of the future is to rethink the use of space based on what tasks need to be done and by whom, says Bradford. "It's not who you are but what you do and what it takes to do your job well."

Davis calls it a "breaking down of hierarchical space." Large office suites that traditionally were reserved for executives take up a lot of floor space.

The placement of these executive work spaces also is changing, Fox says. Historically, walled offices were built along the perimeter of each floor of an office building, so that executives got the benefit of having windows while the rest of the employees had to toil under fluorescent lights.

But now, a growing trend is to move executive offices into the center of the room and put employee workstations along the perimeter to take advantage of natural light, he says.

And while the ubiquitous cubicle is expected to remain a fixture in future offices, its basic design is changing. "Cubicles are getting shorter," says Davis.

Forest agrees, noting that the lower walls are "high enough to give you voice privacy but low enough to give you all-around visibility."

The growing use of laptops and flat-screen monitors in the workplace also means that cubicles don't have to be as large - or as tall - as they once were, he adds.

The importance of office design on worker productivity was dramatically underscored by an online survey conducted by Gensler, a leading architecture and design firm with 28 offices around the globe.

The results of the Gensler 2006 U.S. Workplace Survey, which was published July 20, showed that of the random sample of 2,013 office workers in all staff and management strata in the U.S., the most common complaints about today's office include a lack of space, too few quiet areas, uncomfortable workstations, and bad layout and design.

Nearly 90 percent of senior executives surveyed believe that a better physical working environment would have a positive impact on their company's bottom line, and that their companies would be able to perform an average of 22 percent more work if their office environments were better designed.

Furthermore, two-thirds of office workers believe they are more efficient when they work closely with co-workers.

Yet 30 percent said they don't think their current workplace promotes spontaneous interaction or collaboration among colleagues.

And as for the way corporate executives work, 62 percent of the respondents said they have "great respect for leaders who work in an open plan environment with their teams rather than in private offices."

TURNING UP THE HEAT

Forest says sustainability issues and the trend toward environmentally friendly, or "green" designs, are helping to reduce energy costs while improving employees' comfort and health.

One innovation could bring a peaceful solution to the office thermostat wars. Access flooring, basically a raised floor under which cabling is run, also can accommodate pared-down HVAC duct work so that employees can control temperatures at their own workstations.

Typically, heated or cooled air in an office is forced out of ceiling vents. But getting the right temperature air down to a seated employee - normally four feet above the floor - requires more energy, both in heating or cooling the air and blowing it down from the ceiling.

Individual floor vents require less energy and provide a greater comfort level. Newer buildings, Forest says, are starting to take advantage of natural light by using larger windows and more of them.