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Excellence  
by

## Redesign

By Ellissa Bravenec

Like a car, an office needs maintenance. And there's more to it than just keeping the carpets clean and the computers running. Business managers need to periodically assess and update workspace to keep it functional and in line with the company's needs and goals.

Workplace strategy consultant Jill Duncan, president of aha!Works Too, and office design consultant Jean Bellas, president of SPACE, shared ideas about redesigning offices with real estate professionals at a General Services Administration (GSA) educational conference in The Woodlands in February.

In the past, Duncan says, building owners would pour money into a building, market ten-year leases and then let the building degrade for ten years. Today most building owners continuously make improvements to keep buildings up-to-date.

The same is true of office design. Duncan gives her clients schedules for reviewing how office space is being used and identifying areas that need tweaking.

Many office design ideas being implemented today are not new. Elements such as mobile offices, which can be converted to an entirely new arrangement in a weekend; touchdown (also called hoteling) areas, which serve as temporary offices for workers who are out of the building most of the time; informal meeting areas; open work areas; and cubicle clusters have been around for a while.

What is changing is management's awareness of how workplace design affects recruitment and retention of employees, time management, efficiency, exchange of information and creativity. Whether deliberate or unintentional, workplace design makes a statement to employees, clients and visitors regarding the business' mission and core values.

An environment in which space and resources are shared, doors are unlocked and group accomplishments are celebrated

*REDESIGNS BY SPACE: A tire factory (left) was converted to a network operations center for Qwest. The redesign of the Qwest customer care center (below) reduced real estate costs 20 percent and increased productivity through improved ergonomics, lighting and information access. Photos courtesy of SPACE.*



reflects a company that values trust and integrity. A workspace in which everything is locked down or hoarded suggests the opposite.

Bellas and Duncan agree that when redesigning space, the greatest amount of time and effort should go into evaluating business problems and brainstorming solutions. Problems that can be solved with new workplace designs include those relating to noise, productivity, creativity and communications.

For example, one of Duncan's clients wanted its workers to spend more time working with clients in person. The consultants pointed out ways the existing workplace design encouraged workers to stay in the office, where they were conducting much of their business on the phone.

Everyone who will be affected by a redesign should have a voice in the decision-making process, Bellas says. She especially takes note of what the outstanding achievers want or need. The consultants suggest tracking how space is being used and measuring performance or revenue before and after the redesign to determine its effectiveness. Did the redesign result in an increase in sales or productivity? Redesigning should focus on improvements in productivity and an increase in revenue rather than cost savings.

The consultants explain that while there are no one-size-fits-all solutions, some general trends are driving workplace innovations. Today's business climate is interactive. People work in teams and often share ideas and expertise, Bellas says. Studies have found that increasing the connections and communication between workers increases profits.

The arrangement of workspace can facilitate or hinder this exchange. Informal gathering areas at work are growing in popularity, as are offices with sliding translucent doors or



*THE QWEST training-conference room (left) uses modular furniture and moveable panels for flexibility. Lucent Technology's café (below) provides workspace for casual interaction. Photos courtesy of SPACE.*

panels, which allow for some privacy and noise control while lessening the isolation associated with traditional private offices.

Duncan says taking a fresh approach to a problem could be less costly than plugging in a standard solution that may not improve the situation. For example, open work areas fit some businesses but are not a panacea.

Although open areas are thought to be more efficient in terms of office workers per square foot, research shows no difference in efficiency between open and closed environments. Because open environments cause noise and distractions, sound-related protocols would need to be established. For example, speaker-phones might need to be banned.

“The success of any new working environment depends on teaching people how to use it,” Duncan says. Learning to function efficiently in a redesigned space is complex because it often involves changing employee behavior.

In today's more democratic workplace, large corner offices and luxurious upper-floor suites for senior managers are being replaced in some instances by offices centrally located to facilitate communication between management and workers.

A reduction in document storage space is influencing trends in office design. Less space per worker is needed because space-



eating manuals and files can be stored electronically. To increase efficiency, many companies are putting information in databases and integrating those databases with a web-based program making them accessible to both in-house employees and those working in the field.

Bellas and Duncan stress that workspace design changes should not be made for the purpose of changing the culture of a business. Changing workspace alone will not change the culture, although it is one element of such a change. What matters is that the workplace fit the culture and vision of the company. 📌

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