

Designing for a Distributed Workforce

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Designing for a Distributed Workforce

Occupancy quality and the quality of work life for employees should be a top priority for any organization. After all, engaged employees result in organizational improvement and positive performance.

Ironically, a narrow focus solely on the bottom line often fails to achieve the desired results due to a failure to include employees in the decision-making process. This is especially important if those decisions impact them. Organizational programs and initiatives must always involve the employees in their development and implementation to ensure cooperation and employees' enthusiastic contributions. To impose organizational change in a top-down fashion without consideration for bottom-up input and open communication — horizontally and vertically within the organization — may seem to succeed over the near term, but such short-sighted methods will invariably fall short of reaching the true performance potential of otherwise positive change programs.

Labor-related costs represent fully 70 percent of total costs to an organization. This estimate increases to 85 percent of fixed costs over any significant time period. Therefore, to ignore employees in pursuit of any organizational initiative — including interior design or facilities renovations — would seem foolhardy based on massive available evidence.

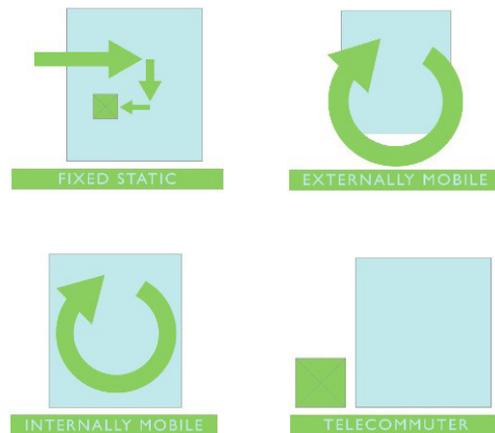
The Shift to Greater Collaboration

Workplace researchers have long known of problems with open-plan offices for individual job performance and productivity. Although lower consensus exists on this broader conclusion, some researchers have even argued that "more open" does not equal "more collaborative" for corporate office environments. Evidence actually suggests that within enclosed, private spaces, employees feel free to interact, because they know they won't disturb others and they can assume their conversations are private. Nonetheless, due to the costs of providing enclosed offices (according to the International Facilities Management Association,

\$6500 per employee in 2008), most organizations have opted for the best possible open-plan design (\$2800 per employee). At the very least, acoustic separation for speech privacy between individual and group work areas should be considered for knowledge-worker environments. This usually requires floor-to-ceiling enclosure — either for individual or group spaces. Using moveable, mostly glazed walls for this purpose allows interior and exterior views while still providing necessary acoustic isolation.

Although the difficulties relating to individual job performance within open-plan offices are well documented, work styles have begun to shift away from individual work to team-oriented, collaborative work. In fact, this trend emerges from comparisons between older and younger employees as well as across enclosed to more open office designs. Whether more collaborative organizations prefer and thus provide open-plan offices, or more open-plan offices encourage more communication has not been determined (although evidence suggests that being able to see other employees increases the chances of interaction of all kinds — not necessarily work-related). In any case, at least from an organizational perspective, it makes sense to increase the proportion of office floor plans devoted to team or group work in support of this documented trend toward more time spent collaborating. Case studies at several organizations have identified three or four basic categories of worker in our increasingly mobile world:

1. Fixed/static
2. Internally mobile
3. Externally mobile
4. Telecommuter



Most fixed-in-place employees engage in independent work — traditional office tasks ranging from process support implementing the thinking and ideas of others to knowledge work originating information, concepts, and ideas. Internally mobile employees — the still-dominant work style — alternate between individual and group work throughout the day but mostly remain within the corporate office environment. Externally mobile employees also perform both individual and group work, but they work any time, anywhere. This represents a growing segment of knowledge workers who tend to use corporate office environments primarily for meetings, collaboration, and community. For these workers, corporate offices become less about destinations or locations and more about hubs, centers of excellence, or communities of practice. Telecommuters are full-time employees working home or in a satellite office.

Given the continued high cost of corporate real estate, a more group-focused facilities strategy will inevitably require that less space be allocated to individual workspaces. However, if the right proportion and variety of group-work areas are provided, almost the same level of environmental satisfaction can be achieved for contemporary office workplaces as private, enclosed offices provide. These group areas should range from formal to informal, spontaneous for dynamic problem solving to predictable for planned agendas and participants, and small to large, based on organizational culture and work styles across generations and functions.

The clear implications from space-utilization rates as low as 30 to 40 percent (although estimates based on self-report are somewhat higher) within individual environments also argue for a strategic shift toward fewer, more flexible individual workspaces and a greater number and variety of team workspaces.

Creating Alignment throughout the Organization

As the proportion of floor plans supporting individual-to-group work decreases (say, from 90-10 to 50-50 or even 40-60 and beyond), strategic alignment among an organization's support departments becomes crucial. The information technology group must provide technology support for a more distributed, mobile workforce. Human resources must adapt policies and procedures to nurture and reward collaboration and its components — sharing best practices, reducing redundant mistakes, learning from clients, and leveraging the cumulative knowledge and experience of the entire organization. More frequently than any of us would care to admit, even Fortune 50 companies have often launched ill-conceived organizational change programs — often using the occasion of a major office re-design or renovation — that feature facilities goals at odds with policy and strategy within other organizational sectors. For example, if the office design changes to encourage more collaboration and team work, yet the incentive structure remains comparative — or worse, competitive — less than stellar results can be expected.

The Advantages of Distributed Work

Providing technology strategies that allow employees to work in a more mobile or distributed way increases individuals' latitude and personal control over how they work. Giving employees more control over where and how they accomplish work-related tasks and goals leads to improved work-life balance, lower stress levels, higher organizational commitment, lower turnover, increased individual creativity (which may lead to greater organizational innovation, but this has not yet been established empirically), higher job satisfaction and morale, and increased environmental satisfaction, many of which also support human resource goals.

Whether these benefits provide the same level of personal control afforded by an enclosed, private office with a door may not have been investigated, but it seems reasonable — even when there are fewer workstations than employees supported by the workplace.

The advantages of face-to-face meetings for increased communication efficiency and collaboration remain, but improvements in technologies that support distributed teams are closing this gap. Whether globally distributed teams provide equivalent organizational advantages to co-located teams represents an ongoing debate among organizational development specialists — this issue can prove to be as divisive as politics in dinner conversations with workplace researchers.

Learning from Preferred Environments

People can usually describe places they prefer to be as well as places where they can think and accomplish work requiring concentration. For most people, these places tend to differ, yet this distinction is rarely made by workplace designers. We often assume that if we provide environments that people prefer at the level of sensory and perceptual experience, we have also provided an efficient work environment. For example, one might love being on the beach at the ocean. But due to extremely high brightness levels, it might be difficult to read there. Turning this conjecture into a design hypothesis, we might argue that work environments that support group work can be more aligned with generally preferred spaces than workspace intended for individual work. This hypothesis seems reasonable if we further assume that most group work is less concerned with resolving fine visual details and quiet concentration than with perceptually and behaviorally larger-scale kinds of activities.

These suggestions imply that corporate office environments designed to support collaboration and a mobile workforce should also be places where people might prefer to be. This leads to the need for daylight, exterior views, and community or group identity. Because group work has become less and less about process support and more and more about creativity and innovation, workspace design and planning must be flexible, adaptable, and support sustainable and cost-effective moves, adds, and changes. Not only must such workspaces provide an adequate variety of team areas as previously mentioned, it must also change and adapt to allow alternative functional strategies and cross-functional groups of different sizes and composition.

Work methods are changing as well to include more external partners, and this implies more globally distributed team members from various cultures. All these trends favor workplaces that reflect human preferences rather than the specific requirements for individual work.

The Importance of Daylight and Views

In conclusion, daylight and views relate to workspace mobility, because as work becomes more mobile — thus requiring more workspace adaptability and flexibility — the sensory and perceptual quality of office environments needs to increase to ensure an engaged, creative, and innovative workforce. These qualities may not be uniformly helpful for individual work, but there is substantial evidence that most people prefer access to daylight and views both within the office and outside the building.

What’s more, corporate offices are transitioning from being merely destinations for a fixed number of employees to dynamic social hubs — nodes within increasingly unpredictable professional networks. The organic nature of future organizations will require equally organic workspaces to improve organizational effectiveness, reduce the time for critical, distributed

decision-making, and motivate younger generations of employees moving into the workforce to contribute their talents toward accomplishing organizational goals. Aligning the personal values of these young individualists with the vision and mission of their companies represents one of the most important challenges for middle managers into the foreseeable future. Personal control will only increase as an important issue for the youngest generations of employees as they contemplate the increasingly global opportunities available to them.