

MAGNET, NOT MANDATE

How Inspired Workplace Design Is Good Business

Employees Appreciate Ownership and Control in Workplace

By Elizabeth Lowrey | Special to Banker & Tradesman | Aug 28, 2022 | [Reprints](#) | [Print](#)



A double-height amphitheater that adjoins the reception lobby at the Boston offices of Publicis Groupe is used for company-wide presentations and client receptions and can be adapted to host a variety of functions. Photo courtesy of Eric Laignel

Good design is good business. As the pandemic evolves and we begin the process of accommodating the new normal, with hybrid working definitively part of the mix, executives need to hear: It is risky to do nothing.

Workplace strategy and design must be part of your business plan going forward. If your firm's workplace does not help attract and retain talent, spur innovation and reflect your company's essence and beliefs, you risk presiding over a fluorescent-lit ghost town.

These are blunt words, but we're in an era when directness is called for. Consider the findings of a recent study: If employees were to work remotely three days a week or more on a schedule of their choosing, their chance of running into a particular colleague drops to about 10 percent – a metric to be concerned about.

Some form of the hybrid world of work is here to stay, which means that your workplace can no longer be a passive container for employees, but must become a machine for engagement and innovation, flattening hierarchy and facilitating spontaneous encounters, engagement and mentorship. It must be a magnet, not a mandate.

Good workplace design can help you right-size your company's real estate. If employers want to bring people back together, human-centered design for the workplace must be at the foreground of their plans. The latest thinking in office design not only maximizes your square-footage but rethinks the whole design equation – for example, the spaces with the most daylight and best views are given over to the company as a whole, not to the executive suite or guest spaces. Good design fosters communal behavior, promotes connections and ultimately leads to innovation and business success. As an added effect, it can reduce the square footage you lease – still one of the highest line-item costs of doing business.

Surveys Show a Disconnect in Expectations

At present, people are coming back to the office after a substantial amount of time spent looking inward at their changing habits, skills and purpose, and outward toward the larger world of work. This is apparent in surveys, which show disconnects between the expectations of employers and employees. Humans are social beings, and mass remote work de-socialized what was otherwise a very social activity.

The majority of people working in hybrid or entirely remote work environments say they have fewer work friendships than before, and report feelings of increased isolation and disconnection. According to Microsoft's Work Trend Index, this is having a negative effect on wellbeing and productivity. The office is the culture-keeper of your organization and must have an abundance of spaces that allow people to re-familiarize themselves with one another.

The best-designed offices manifest a company's aspirations and deeply-held beliefs. We hear a lot about environmental, societal and corporate governance (ESG). But to prevent ESG from becoming just another empty management fad, companies first and foremost must create a workspace that prioritizes community and employee interaction, the foundational elements of workplace culture. Places for socialization and collaboration should be celebrated and located in high-traffic areas like company cafés and hospitality-inspired work zones.

A Constant Challenge

In the current employee market, attracting and retaining the best and brightest staff is a constant challenge that can be impacted by the impression your workplace imparts. What's more, regardless of the pandemic, the nature of productivity and innovation in knowledge work has slowly become less department-based and more project-oriented. Coordination and relationships will be key in this new world of work, which means workspace must be reimaged to focus on people's needs around collaborative activity. Does your office do this?



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Innovation also requires time for more reflective, heads-down work. We know people tend to be very good at focused work at home, but we also know that the office can certainly support this kind of work and even serve as a benefit. The office furniture company Steelcase found that employees were more willing to work in the office three days per week if they were given their own desk instead of two days a week with a shared workspace. In essence, people were willing to “trade” a work-from-home day for more ownership and control. Many businesses are now including this transactional approach in their return-on-investment plans. Balancing this approach with effective design nudges employees into taking certain actions and supports the workplace as a strong keeper of the work ethic, culture and community.

Ask yourself: Am I presiding over a workspace that elevates, inspires, and facilitates, or am I standing watch over a ghost town? The answer can affect your bottom line.

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