

The Office of the Future: Designing a space worthy of your company's potential



ILLUSTRATIONS: LORENZO PETRANTONI; PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

By Chris Rauber – Contributing Writer

Jun 1, 2018, 5:55am

It all comes down to culture.

Employee engagement — an objective that aligns tightly with recruitment and retention of valued workers — can be enhanced by workplace design that augments a company's culture. But it can be undercut just as easily by design that doesn't make employees feel they're valued parts of a team or allow them to work in ways that make them most productive and most satisfied.

That's why business owners and executives need to think hard about how technology, demographics and worker mindsets are changing the way we work when planning for new and refurbished workplaces.

"Some of our more progressive clients are moving toward more collaborative spaces, more amenities," like ping-pong tables and on-site baristas along with standing desks and white-noise equipment to help counteract noisy environments, said workplace researcher Dan Harris. "It's largely about flexibility and adaptability."

Quantum Workplace, where Harris is lead researcher, annually surveys 600,000 employees from 8,000 organizations on engagement-related issues. Among the efforts of the Omaha, Neb.-based company is collaboration with The Business Journals publications on Best Places to Work surveys.

Flexibility can translate into simple things, Harris said, like a work-from-home option even if it's just one day a week, or a 5- to 10-minute grace period on when employees check into work. It's not enough to just copy what others are doing. Workplace design, and related policies on scheduling, vacations, telecommuting and the like, need to connect to a company's specific culture. "It's not just going toward what's trendy. It's matching the look and feel of the office to your unique culture," Harris said. "Design shouldn't be window-dressing."

Learning from the entire organization

According to top designers and other office-space experts, it's critical to know how your employees actually use the space and the tools that are available to them. Specifically, it's smart to ask them to be involved in envisioning your workplace of the future. It's also important to create a sense of community and common purpose that ties in with your brand and your company's traditions.

"It used to be that folks would embark on (the process of designing a space) without including anybody (except the bosses)," said Primo Orpilla, principal and co-founder of San Francisco based Studio O+A, whose client list includes the likes of Cisco, Facebook, Microsoft, Levi Strauss, Uber and Yelp. " (It was) very hierarchical, with private offices on the outside and cubicles in the center, and the cubicles turned into 'cubeville,'" Orpilla said, referencing a dismal place few workers wanted to inhabit. That kind of "I'm-in-charge," top-down approach won't work with many of today's — and presumably tomorrow's — skilled staffers whom companies are eager to attract and retain.

It's also why Orpilla's design firm turns that top-down approach upside down and inside out, getting input from throughout the ranks of a client company, "trying to understand how people work," he said, and including a variety of voices in decision making. He calls the process "design by the folks who are there," or "democratic design," and sees his role as helping them "envision something that is innate in their culture."

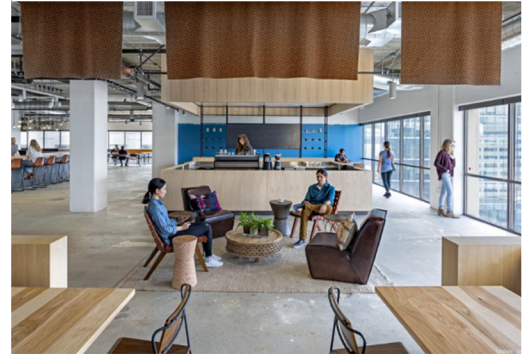
Joe Valerio, a principal with Chicago-based Valerio Dewalt Train Associates, takes a similar approach, embedding staffers in a client company and monitoring how people work: when they're at their workstations, who's using conference rooms and when, where their needs are unmet, and where there's "poor alignment between the design and the way the staff is actually using that workplace," he said.

A key finding: Most of the time workers are not at their desks at all, which perhaps should not surprise given that technology enables them to work almost anywhere. "People think they sit in their workstations a lot, but the highest measurement we've ever found is 35 percent," Valerio said. That means two-thirds of the time staffers are in meetings, in conference rooms, chatting with colleagues about projects, hanging out in the company cafeteria or a nearby restaurant, or otherwise eschewing their desks.

As a result, many clients — and VDT's include Northwestern Mutual, Adobe Systems, eBay and Juniper Networks — are shaving inches off workstation desks or tables and concentrating more space on conference rooms and other meeting places, including "micro-kitchens, stocked with food, on every floor of the office building," Valerio said. Cafeterias or restaurants, mini-kitchens, stairwells, courtyards, outdoor patios, and even in-house fitness centers are being re-envisioned as workspaces so teams can hold "flash meetings" almost anywhere on a company's campus, "and amenities become extensions of the work environment," Valerio said. Companies are realizing that employees can be anywhere and be texting, sharing digital content or "talking in a virtual meeting," he said. "That's a huge change, and it's being facilitated by technology." Organizations with the best-designed workplaces are five times more likely to focus on a combination of individual and group-work situations, said Janet Pogue, a Gensler principal and the design firm's global workplace sector leader, who works out of the company's Washington, D.C., offices. They also give employees five times more choice on options of when and where to work.

Office of the Future: Yelp

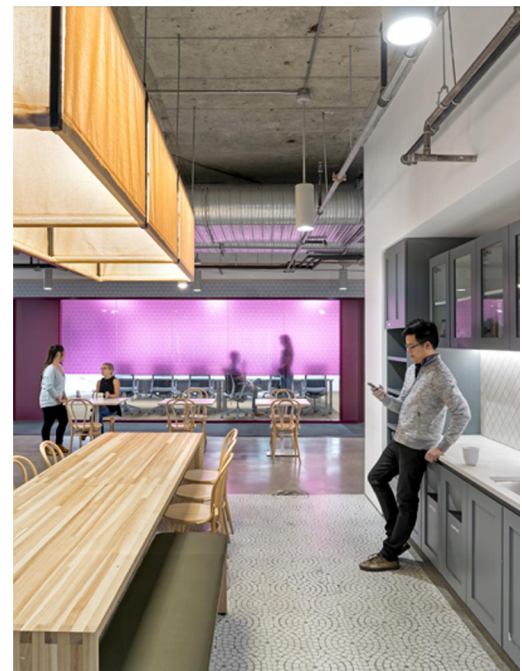
Yelp is among the clients of Studio O+A of San Francisco.



Yelp's office space designs aim to draw on cities where the company has a strong presence: Istanbul, Amsterdam, London and Tokyo. Here, the wall graphics are based on how Dutch tulip fields appear from the air. (Courtesy Studio O+A)



Yelp's office space designs aim to draw on cities where the company has a strong presence: Istanbul, Amsterdam, London and Tokyo. Here, the wall graphics are based on how Dutch tulip fields appear from the air. (Courtesy Studio O+A)



Yelp's office space designs aim to draw on cities where the company has a strong presence: Istanbul, Amsterdam, London and Tokyo. Here, a kitchen space is transformed by artful lighting. (Courtesy Studio O+A)

Employees in general need spots for individual, focused work, collaborative work spaces, social spaces, places to “simply reflect,” places to be inspired, and places that “expose them to new or unexpected ideas,” Pogue said. Sometimes it’s as simple as finding a place to sit where the sunlight streams in. Unlike earlier generations, she added, the trend now isn’t focusing just on efficiency in the workplace. What’s also key is making it a place for people to connect in meaningful ways. Individual workers are looking to connect and “understand how their piece fits into the whole,” Pogue said. They want to see the big picture and feel that their work matters.

Office of the Future: Cisco

Cisco is among the clients of Studio O+A of San Francisco.



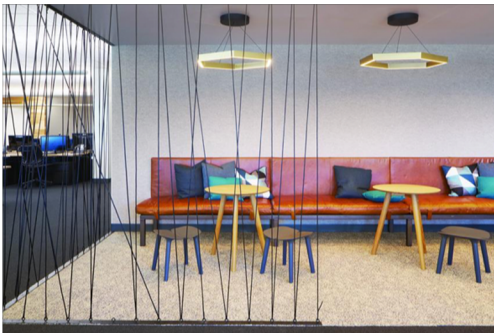
At Cisco's multibuilding San Jose campus, Studio O+A's design aims to reflect Cisco's global reach with spaces meant to reflect different regions of the world. Here, an entry point. (Courtesy Studio O+A)



At Cisco's multibuilding San Jose campus, Studio O+A's design aims to reflect Cisco's global reach with spaces meant to reflect different regions of the world. Here, kinetic wall graphics frame a high-activity space. Environmental graphics are considered a relatively economical way of establishing a space's purpose. (Courtesy Studio O+A)



At Cisco's multibuilding San Jose campus, Studio O+A's design aims to reflect Cisco's global reach with spaces meant to reflect different regions of the world. Here, an example of how “rooms” may be defined without walls – using wall graphics, furniture and flooring. (Courtesy Studio O+A)



At Cisco's multibuilding San Jose campus, Studio O+A's design aims to reflect Cisco's global reach with spaces meant to reflect different regions of the world. Here, an example of how “rooms” may be defined without walls – using wall graphics, furniture and flooring. (Courtesy Studio O+A)

The price of this evolution

Few, if any, company enhancements come without a cost. In the case of building an office of the future, putting a price tag on the benefits can be challenging because attracting and retaining great employees is difficult to link directly to money spent on a cool, cutting-edge look or a new perk or amenity.

Consider that a manager can tabulate what it will take to build out a new office space. That person also can determine the cost to recruit, hire and train a new employee — or to help an existing employee advance. Calculating how much that former spending drives improved office morale and increased productivity: That’s a far tougher calculation, as is the inverse — the cost of lost productivity from an office design that runs afoul of your employees. That could be measured by sick days, with published reports chronicling an increased number of illness-related absences for companies with open floor plans relative to businesses with more private workspaces. It also could track to lower morale.

But there seems to be little doubt — especially in technology hubs like San Francisco, Boston, Seattle, Atlanta and Austin, Texas — that such a link exists between office design and company growth.

In terms of project costs specifically, spending can vary widely depending on location, needs, size of company, and type of construction or renovation required.

Some organizations try to revamp their workplaces using just furniture, “with no physical changes to the space,” said VDT’s Valerio. In such cases, a company might budget \$20 to \$30 per square foot. In cases where the office space itself requires renovation, which is typical, “the cost increases dramatically,” Valerio said. Changing a wall, for example, affects HVAC systems, fire-protection sprinklers and lighting, turning it into a much more extensive project. For more intensive renovations of that sort, costs can climb to \$100 per square foot, Valerio said. Incorporating extra features can add even more to the project cost. Gensler’s Pogue declined to comment on cost, because project price tags vary significantly by client, space and goals. But it’s important to remember, she said, that employee-related costs, such as salary and benefits, are the largest expense in virtually all organizations, exceeding funds spent on technology and real estate. “[So] the greatest ROI for workplace and performance is to focus on the people,” Pogue said. Orpilla said the same when it comes to adding amenities to offices. “You’re messaging to employees that you care about them, that you care about their well-being,” he said. “That’s why you can’t underestimate the value of design.”

Reshaping the workplace

In Northern California in particular — home to Silicon Valley and so many of the trends and technologies that are reshaping workplaces across the country and around the world — companies are trying hard to make work not only a place that you want to be, but also a place where you can be tremendously productive.

For example, Survey Monkey, which provides online surveys as a product, asked employees what they wanted to see in its new San Mateo headquarters. The results: a free gourmet cafeteria, an on-site gym and yoga studio, and restroom-stall dividers at exactly the height its staffers preferred. San Francisco-based Credit Karma features exposed copper pipes and old-fashioned windows that let in lots of natural light. Clif Bar's Emeryville headquarters sports LEED Platinum credentials, a mini-laundry and drop-off dry cleaning. BlackThorn Therapeutics, a biotech company in San Francisco, turned a former auto repair shop into space for its 28 staffers, featuring a giant sculpture of the company's logo, its own take on the human brain — the center of much of its neuro- biological research.

Of course, the same technology that enables workers to meet and be productive in a mini-kitchen also allows them to work at home. But for many companies — and many workers — “the office is never going to go away,” Orpilla said, because there are some things you can't do in a coffee shop or on a mountaintop far from your colleagues and the office milieu. So designers and their clients need to build features into the workplace that match what employees want to see. And creating spaces that actually create a community “is still the toughest thing that companies need to do,” Orpilla said. It's important to be open to new ideas when trying to create a sense of common culture — a true community, he said. “Is it a dog spa? Is it a bike locker? You've got to take into consideration their personal life,” Orpilla said, noting that what matters to employees as individuals is key.

Office of the Future: Uber

Uber is among the clients of Studio O+A of San Francisco.



At Uber's San Francisco headquarters, each floor of the property has its own design theme. (Courtesy Studio O+A)



At Uber's San Francisco headquarters, each floor of the property has its own design theme. Here, an 11th floor image that shows extensive writeable wall capabilities and a workbench ideal for team work sessions. (Courtesy Studio O+A)



At Uber's San Francisco headquarters, each floor of the property has its own design theme. Here, Uber's 11th floor office was designed as a breakaway space for teams with special projects. These wall cubbies allow for quiet solo work or small group huddles, acoustically discreet but still connected visually to what's happening in the office. (Courtesy Studio O+A)



At Uber's San Francisco headquarters, each floor of the property has its own design theme. Here, a café on the 5th floor. The theme of the 5th floor design was “Paris Meets Blade Runner,” a layered contemplation of how design changes over time even in environments as rich in tradition as Paris. (Courtesy Studio O+A)



At Uber's San Francisco headquarters, each floor of the property has its own design theme. Here, a space on the 5th floor accentuating the importance of original wall graphics. (Courtesy Studio O+A)

The bigger cultural picture

Some of the issues of importance to employees are broader, based on ideals shared by many in the workplace. For example, cutting back on carbon emissions is important to many companies and workers. That can mean being committed to using mass transit or other forms of transportation, including ride-sharing options, that don't require all or even most employees to drive to work. In turn, however, that's something that has huge design ramifications.

"No one can figure out how much parking space you need," Valerio said, because usage is "falling off a cliff."

It used to be that designers and developers figured a facility would need as many as five or six parking spaces or every 1,000 square feet of office space. That math drew from allocating about 200 square feet of space for every individual staffer at a company, Valerio said. Those numbers are crashing as many younger workers live without cars and companies locate in urban areas with myriad transit alternatives.

"One developer in Denver asked me, "Do you think I can get away with one per 1,000,"" Valerio said. The answer: Perhaps.

With the rise of ride-sharing companies like Uber and Lyft, and the onset of peer-to-peer car rental companies like Turo, many experts' crystal balls are getting murky. But the consensus is that the days of giant company parking lots filled with cars driven by solo commuters are likely coming to an end. And that's just one example of how employee choice is driving — and in some cases complicating — design.

Let freedom ring

Even so, many experts say it's imperative to give your workers options and a large measure of freedom and flexibility so that in the marketplace of potential employers, your company stands out. That's especially true for younger workers, said Gensler's Pogue. Younger employees like having a sense of controlling their own pathways, she said, of having workplace sites to pick and choose from and of focusing on tasks that "match your energy through the day." In many workplaces, those days can be both long and stressful.

"Students are used to doing that on college campuses," Pogue said, noting that students might study in the library one day but might look to study out on a lawn on a different day. They're looking for the same sort of freedom in the workplace, she said.

For many workers, Quantum Workplaces' Harris said, "It does fundamentally revolve around feeling valued." "That's one of the most important factors of employee engagement," he said.

When Harris' organization recently asked customers' employees to agree or disagree with the statement "It would take a lot to get me to leave this organization," referring to the person's employer, 72 percent agreed — which suggests, of course, that more than one in four of those people surveyed is open to leaving for other pastures. That's the threat companies are hoping to fend off by making their workplaces the best places to be. Having an office space that's seen as a positive work environment can be the key to attracting the brightest members of the next-generation work force.

Chris Rauber is a writer in California. Reach him at chris.rauber.writer@gmail.com.