

(PHOTOS) Office of the Future: How companies are putting the 'place' in workplace 🔑



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Workplace design can help move your company forward — or hold it back.

A good design often leads to higher productivity and a happier workforce. But with office technology, work patterns and employee mindsets all changing, it can be difficult for business owners and executives to make the right choices when planning new or 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 equipment to help counteract a noisy environment, 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, Nebraska-based company is collaboration with The Business Journals publications on its 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 are expected to 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.”

Escaping from 'cubeville'

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 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."

"It's definitely changed," said designer Tim Murphy of the process for planning a design. His Tim Murphy Design Associates worked on the new San Mateo offices of tech polling firm SurveyMonkey.

"The way information is gathered is a lot different," he said. "With SurveyMonkey, we had a broader, more democratic process to see what people really needed."

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. He looks at 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 be a 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 getting away from 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 options for when and where to work.

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.



Primo Orpilla, principal and co-founder at Studio O+A.

The price of this evolution

Few, if any, company improvements come without a cost. Building a workplace of the future is no exception. Putting a value on the benefits is more difficult.

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.

It's harder to tell what value improved office design had on office morale and productivity: If a company is successful at recruiting or retaining the workers it needs, it can rarely attribute that directly to one cool amenity or perk.

The reverse is also true. It's difficult to measure the cost of poor design. It can play out indirectly in lost productivity or increased use of sick days.

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 and the 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 budget.

Gensler’s Pogue said 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 return on investment 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.”



SURVEYMONKEY

Location: San Mateo

Employees: 400

Office square feet: 200,000

Key players in office's design: Novo Builders and architects from TMDA (Tim Murphy Design Associates) led the building design and office architecture; in-house SurveyMonkey Brand Experience team led the office design.

Details: SurveyMonkey took an uncommon step in designing its San Mateo headquarters – it asked employees what they wanted. The online survey and data company used employee feedback (gleaned from surveys, of course) to guide its office design down to the smallest of details – even the height of restroom stall dividers. Plentiful amenities like a free cafeteria, onsite gym and yoga studio provide creature comforts.



CREDIT KARMA

Location: San Francisco

Employees: 700+

Office square feet: 120,505

Key players in office's design: Huntsman Architectural Group, ASD SKY

Details: Credit Karma's San Francisco office uniquely blends the traditional with the modern. The personal finance technology company's headquarters is housed in five floors of the historic Phelan Building and maintains much of its charm. Exposed copper pipes run across the high ceilings and large, old-fashioned windows flood the office with natural light. Beyond preserving traces of the past, the company enhances employee well-being with plenty of modern amenities like a coffee bar, spa with subsidized massages, meditation room, game room and nap pods.



CLIF BAR & CO.

Location: Emeryville

Employees: 380

Office square feet: 115,000

Key players in office's design: Co-Chief Visionary Officers Gary Erickson and Kit Crawford, General Counsel Bruce Lymburn and ZGF Architects

Details: Clif Bar's Emeryville headquarters speaks to the company's ethos of fitness and discovery. Rooftop solar installations provide the majority of the office's electricity and hot water needs in the LEED-Platinum building. Other amenities make going to your job there that much more convenient: a salon for onsite haircuts, a mini-laundry to wash clothes and drop off dry cleaning and fresh produce box delivery. An onsite fitness center offers personal trainers, climbing wall, yoga room and exercise classes.



THE KAPOR CENTER

Location: Oakland

Employees: 50

Office square feet: 45,000

Key players in office's design: Architect – Fougerson Architecture; contractor – Oliver & Co.; landscape architect: Hood Studio

Details: Mitch Kapor and Freada Kapor Klein bought the 1920s-era Oakland building in 2012 and commissioned Fougerson Architecture to transform it into a modern and open gathering space for three related social ventures: Kapor Capital, the Kapor Center for Social Impact and the Level Playing Field Institute. All work to improve access to STEM fields and tech careers for underrepresented communities. With a building certified as LEED Gold and contemporary, minimalist interiors, they've created a beautiful space.

Reshaping the workplace

In the Bay Area, 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, SurveyMonkey, which sells an online survey tool, asked employees what they wanted to see in its new San Mateo headquarters. The results: a free 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 at its headquarters. 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.

So designers and their clients need to build features into the workplace that match what employees want to see. And building 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 nurture a 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.

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 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 for 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.

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.

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 controlling where they work, she said. The idea is for the space to "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. 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.

Harris' organization recently asked clients' employees to agree or disagree with whether it would take a lot to get them to leave their employer. Roughly 72 percent agreed that it would take a lot to motivate them to leave, but that means a quarter are open to other jobs.

That's the threat companies are hoping to fend off by improving their workplaces. 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 workforce.