

BY PAULINE TINGAS

flex time



flexibility is in demand for today's evolving workplace.

Change is inevitable and often positive – unless, of course, the environment is unable to accommodate it. Some corporations are struggling to keep up with the extreme shifts taking place in today's work spaces.

THE BACK STORY

"It started in the 1990s with the dot-com boom, which reinvented the workplace as a cultural center," says Tom Vecchione, Principal and Design Director in Gensler's Northeast region.

Vecchione says this reinvention was later interpreted by consulting companies who looked at the issue not as a lifestyle concern but as a real estate play – a way to reduce occupancy costs and manage underutilized office space by an on-the-go workforce. They began to allocate less square footage to individual offices and introduce "hoteling" or "free address" offices, which offered limited numbers of individual work spaces that employees could reserve in advance. "Real estate is static, costly and long term – the exact opposite qualities needed by companies that should be nimble, agile and flexible," Vecchione says.

Evolving demographics are another important force

behind the workplace's changing face. An influx of younger workers, women and even retirees indicate a need to adjust to aspirations of this next generation of workers. "Back in Dad's day, a company was defined by a homogenous workforce," Vecchione says.

Contemporary employees are demanding more flexible work styles, chief among them a work/life balance characterized by custom schedules and spaces that blend both leisure and work. "Today people can work anywhere and do work anywhere," says Kay Sargent, IIDA, LEED AP, Principal of IA Interior Architects in Washington, D.C. "People want the office to have the comforts of home and the house to accommodate technology, and they want to go seamlessly between the two."

Ironically, while workers are experiencing the freedom to work anywhere at any time, management has experienced a cultural shift that pushes more collaboration. Typical projects must involve a variety of work groups: on-site employees, telecommuters, contract workers and other variable business entities.

THE RESPONSE — AND THE CHALLENGES

Many companies are taking a harder look at how their work environments are designed, as well as how they



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are utilized to manage real estate costs, changing market conditions and an ever-mobile workforce. The result is a push for designers to rework the traditional concept of office space, making it more flexible and more supportive of the new workforce and its new way of working.

Designers say the hoteling trend has been struggling, however, mainly because workers tend to want their own territory that they can call and characterize as their own. "People still need to connect to a place," Vecchione says.

Technology might be one way to get buy-in for the new space-sharing concepts. "There's a generation of workers coming up who have had the ability to customize everything through technology," Sargent says. "They'll be looking for the ability to customize their work place to the extent that no generation ever has."

One system that could fill the need is *BlueSpace*, an office environmental system designed by IBM and Steelcase. The *BlueSpace* prototype features a touchscreen that offers users control of their environment, including the ability to customize lighting, temperature and other variables and to communicate their location and privacy needs to colleagues. Until this system is viable, however, other tools will lead the charge. Existing technologies already have pushed office flexibility

forward, including advances like handheld work devices and wireless voice and data systems that have eliminated phone and computer cables, releasing workers from the "anchors" of their desks.

Other innovations work to stem issues like voice privacy. *Babble*, a new device that earned "Best of NeoCon 2005" status, provides voice confidentially by sending a telephone user's voice out in "babbled" form. Surrounding workers are unable to decipher specifics of a conversation. Designed by Chicago-based Insight Product Development and introduced through Sonare Technologies, a Herman Miller company, the product can be used either as a stand-alone solution or as part of a layered approach to sound management.

While technology is clearly buoying new office design in instances like these, it also can pose challenges. Electrical systems, for example, are what Sargent calls "the last tether of the workplace." "We have a lot of technology coming in, and we're trying to integrate it into work spaces," Sargent says. "Before, there were power panels and corner work surfaces for larger monitors. Today that doesn't suffice and often isn't needed. Workers want work spaces that more reflect how we work today, and they don't want to be physically tied down."

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An increasing solution has been to install raised panel floors that not only incorporate power but also complex HVAC, voice and data cabling systems. Such systems simplify and alleviate the costs associated with moving partitions, walls and internal wiring to reconfigure space.

One initial response to the new collaboration mindset was the universal plan: a model with fewer private offices, a common kit of furniture parts and rows of identical cubicles. This plan was thought to foster communication by creating a more open work environment. It also supported the prudent concept of moving people – not the facilities – to accommodate change. The arrival of the universal model was one of the first instances in which business truly affected office planning, says Tom Powers, Managing Principal of IA Interior Architects in Chicago. “Companies thought that because they were growing so fast, they needed a generic space to move people around quickly,” Powers says. “Modularity became status quo for so many companies.”

But the model has fallen out of favor, because universal plans assume that all work processes are universal. “Flexibility and the need for collaboration is a logarithmic change for companies,” Powers says. “Now, companies grow and stay competitive by collaborating interdepartmentally.”

As a result, designers are reducing the size of individual work stations to make room for quiet zones and community spaces that accommodate groups of many sizes. The mixture is often referred to as “caves and commons,” the caves being the private areas and the commons being teaming spaces. For example, Powers’ firm has moved away from the idea of an enclosed pantry and instead, groups it with resources like the copy area and library to create a clustered amenity center. “Workers can make coffee or copies and be out in the open,” he says. “It fosters more *ad hoc* meetings between individuals and encourages more natural flow.”

What’s more, rather than designing conventional conference rooms, Powers’ firm has incorporated multipurpose project rooms into its corporate designs. “They can be used for meetings but rearranged for training,” he says, “and they open and connect to outside open areas for large gatherings and events.”

Even office corridors are increasing in size to create larger “bump” zones and opportunities for office nomads to connect. “People don’t have to come to work anymore,” Sargent says. “Today people come to the office to engage one another, so shared support space is essential.”

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This new breed of social spaces, though, is fundamentally different from the foosball tables and lounges that typified the 90's dot coms. "There's been an evolution of collaborative space, a decisive move from social areas that you can't do work in," says R. J. Brennan, LEED AP, Senior Workplace Strategist in the Chicago IA Interior Architects office.

Instead, Brennan says designers are looking into how other office environments can incorporate connectivity to encourage work activity. Cafes, for example, are being fitted with residential-style furnishings to resemble living rooms. At the same time, they also are being fully wired for teleconferencing and video conferencing capabilities.

FILLING THE GAP

That's not to say individual spaces are being left out of flexible office design. The next generation of flexibility incorporates the innate need for individual enclosed space. "It was thought that 'all open, all the time' was right for everyone," Brennan says. "And there are some organizations where that works, but many more need an individual approach."

Privacy booths, for example, can be set up as one- and two-person

work spaces furnished with lounge seating and floor lamps that simulate a residential area. Brennan says the right ratio of quiet-to-group space is determined through more than just a tally of a corporation's workers and their necessary workspaces dimensions. The correct mixture is revealed through an extensive data gathering process. "The need for flexibility is driven by business issues," he says. "We question clients about their business model and their work process. It's generally not the answers but the gaps that come up through the exercise that translate into an opportunity."

One thing is clear: design firms, once limited to space planning and aesthetic concerns, now are increasingly involved in these high-level business issues, which require organizational planning skills. Such surveying also helps designers overcome client objections over the increased costs normally associated with flexible design. "We're more like consultants now," Brennan says. "We spend more time to ensure the spaces we design are aligned with business goals. But your data must support the need, and you must be clear in terms of what you're trying to accomplish."

Smart purchasing also plays a role. Brennan says the design community is fortunate in that most major manufacturers are now providing high quality products influenced by Europe. Because standards are getting tighter and space is at a premium in Europe, corporations there are pushing harder to maximize the potential of their office environments. "They've worked in an open-plan model and desking system for longer than we have," Vecchione says. "The way we saw innovation migrate from the West Coast to the East in the 90s, we're now seeing European innovation migrate to the U.S."

And, according to Sargent, the time for the U.S. design community to change is now. "The design and construction processes haven't evolved enough to stay on track with other industries," she says. "Basic construction today is done the same way as 20 or 30 years ago."

Fortunately, evolution is not only forthcoming, but bringing positive change. "Office space is no longer a liability," Sargent says. "It can be a huge asset to a company. Business leaders need to understand the power of design and how it can be a key element to the success of their goals. And designers need to make it happen." 📌

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Adapted as an exercise by Heather Jakusz, IIDA Director of Education and Professional Development

exercise:

- 1) How have current workplace and home trends changed your work setting?
 - a. How has this shift helped or hindered your career and/or home life?
- 2) Suggest ways designers can make the workplace a more social atmosphere.
 - a. How could this potentially help the design profession?
- 3) What are some technological considerations behind designing a work environment?
 - a. Hospitality environment?
 - b. Home?
- 4) Why did the “universal model” fail?
 - a. What are some variations that would make the model more successful?

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