

WORKPLACE DESIGN AND PRODUCTIVITY



Workspace dynamics has assumed an unprecedented criticality with the rapid changes in the business environment. Office spaces are being increasingly designed as spheres that lend themselves to collaboration and openness and thereby better productivity. But is an office without boundaries the pattern for the future?

BREAKING SILOS

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MATCH THE CONTEXT

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match the context



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*The way a workplace is designed can impact the extent to which employees connect and identify with their colleagues and the organization as a whole.**

It should not be surprising to find that a happy employee is a productive employee. And workplace design plays an extremely important role in providing the right conditions for an employee to thrive.

It is a given fact that a good workplace design will incorporate company culture—this is not a new phenomenon. For example, why do spaces for startup companies look so different from their larger corporate brethren? It is because of the startup’s understanding about the kind of energy the space needs to channel. Young startups are ready to do anything, include a large amount of collaboration, and are more likely to face unusual situations. All this directly feeds their culture and fuels their can-do attitude. On the other hand, corporate entities already have an established philosophy, follow well-entrenched plans, do not thrive on uncertainties, and always have one eye on the future—this is reflected in their mannerisms, body language, as well as usage of space.

The design of a workplace heavily depends on the kind of profession being dealt with. For example, how people are sitting, where they are sitting, what they are wearing—these are not relevant to an office where ‘design’ is the primary work. Their design process usually involves four people standing over and staring at one sketch, even when

they may be eating or drinking. There is a certain level of discussion-based collaboration that is always going on, and requires a different spatial construct from what is needed for an IT corporation.

Many years ago, Google was supposed to be the forerunner in the way offices were designed—they believe in a non-hierarchy model, and even country heads sit in the same space as everyone else. They believe it is not your space that defines you, but your work. Conversely, in government offices it is found that the square footage of the area associated with each officer’s position is well-defined. To them, the significance of their work and position comes from the next big office they can move to. And that is how people in government settings also recognize authority.

striking a balance

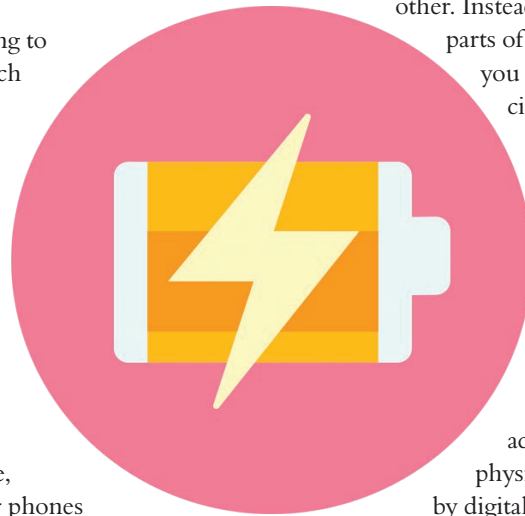
Workplaces have gone from a stage of completely closed spaces to open-plan offices. Over time, research emerged that this lack of privacy was actually creating lack of efficiency at work. Now, there is a dearth of visual

privacy as well as auditory privacy, especially with everyone having smartphones.

Fifteen years ago, there were offices that used to make employees deposit their cell phones before starting work. That is no longer the case since the smartphone is an integral part of the work culture. We are increasingly getting involved with pod spaces, where every private or telephonic conversation is a meeting. Telephone conversations today are replacing the concept of meetings, with offerings such as FaceTime and Skype. As a result, meeting rooms are being replaced by pod spaces. Employees can go there as individuals, with their gadgets, and talk in privacy. People are always trying to find solutions around this complete lack of privacy stemming from open-plan offices.

As designers, we are always trying to determine what a healthy mix of each office type is, and finding the right balance. For example, I work in an architecture firm. My clients are located across the country, and some even outside the country. There are also engineering consultants who we coordinate with throughout the day; they too work at various different locations. As a result, we carry out a lot of conversations over the telephone. We found that, around half the time, architects would walk off with their phones to the driveway or to the backyard. This was telling about the need for numerous individual spaces, where they can have privacy and not disturb others while having these conversations.

We have designed for companies who have offices in multiple locations. We are doing this new kind of boardroom where half the boardroom is in one location, and the other half is at another. Almost the entire boardroom is projected across to each other, at multiple locations. Since that is the company's particular need, we create such big spaces for them. For ourselves, we are creating individual pods.



the effect of 21st century digital work

Digitization has had a major effect on workplace design. In our offices—we have a Delhi office and a Bengaluru office—all our computers have a headset attached. Part of the team working on a single project could be in Delhi, and part of it in Bengaluru—despite working from two different locations, they work seamlessly. Technology today allows the team members to sketch simultaneously on the same drawing. They can even have face-to-face conversations if they wish to. In our studios, we have a series of screens where the two offices are beamed live to each other. This means teams divided by geography are always in sync. Technology has allowed people to work across cities as though they are sitting next to each

other. Instead of having teams work on different parts of the same project at different times, you can now have teams in different cities collaborate in real-time on the same thing. This has made it quite easy for companies to open up offices in multiple locations, rather than growing larger in one, single location.

On one hand, it is becoming easy for people to work when mobile; on the other, it is also reducing the amount of travel actually being undertaken, since all physical meetings are being transposed by digital meetings. Not just across cities, but even within a city, having digital meetings saves us a lot of time. It has also allowed us to add local people from other cities such as Mumbai and Kolkata to our team. When on vacation in America and Mexico, all I had to do to stay completely updated was an hour of FaceTime with the relevant people in the office. It allowed me to manage work well even from half way around the world. Also, I no longer had to go to a meeting room for a conference; I was doing it while sitting on a beach. For three people from three different places to have a meeting, no one has to block even a single boardroom at any location.



Design is an endless solution. What needs to be understood is what is desired by the firm to increase efficiency.

boosting productivity

Understanding what ‘productivity’ is considered to be, and how the existing structure allows for it, varies from firm to firm. For example, in a high-type organization, there are clusters that are highly united and have a lot of privacy. Conversely, efficiency may be dependent on how much digital work can be done. It has to take into consideration the type of work done and the actual efficiency desired. At the end of the day, the designer’s project is only as good as the client; and the client is only as good as their ability to understand their own workplace, and their ability to express it. Design is an endless solution. What needs to be understood is what is desired by the firm to increase efficiency.

common oversights

By and large, whenever I go to an office I see that people do not make enough provisions for growth. And by growth, I do not mean leaving 500 square feet vacant for adding more tables later on. People do not leave enough room to believe they will ever work in a way other than how they work at the moment. Workplace dynamics are constantly changing—what is considered good today may be commonplace tomorrow, or perhaps even redundant. For example, digitization has made a lot of earlier ‘greatness’ redundant. I also feel that sometimes a disproportionate amount of attention is paid to the opulence of the materials rather than to the actual design of the space.

Building a space is quite an expensive affair. People are usually inspired by something, but they will also see how it works for them. For example, an accounting firm or a legal firm will not be able to work in the same workspace

as Facebook does, no matter how amazing Facebook’s workspace is. People can appreciate and admire all different kinds of spaces, but ultimately, it is up to the designers to determine what, from the inspiring design, can be adapted for the client. This is one reason why a lot of input is expected from clients. We are always inspired and fascinated by certain things which may not be the right fit for us, as is. And that is where the conversation between the client and the designer has to ascertain what the client truly likes—do they like the overall feeling of the office? Do they like something about the ambience? Do they like the youthfulness of the design? Once ascertained, we can somehow try and adapt that energy in a way that is right for the client.

what next for workplace design?

Earlier, workspace design dictated that everyone should work in individual boxes. In reality, unless the firm absolutely has confidentiality issues, you should work in an open-plan space. The move to open-plan format was done quite conclusively over the past two to three decades. Now, because of digitization, people are working from various locations and are always communicating with each other. The ‘workspace’ has become much more of a ‘soundspace’—there is a lot more talking involved. There was a time when people would go quiet when the boss entered the room. Today, that is a redundant concept because everybody always needs to talk to someone to get work done. There is a lot of communication, digital and verbal, going on. In terms of design, we need to address this state of constant conversation. We also need to figure out a way how people can be in isolated pods, while still being a part of larger groups. We have spent the last 30 years trying to figure out how to arrange people within a large, built space. Now, we have to understand how people are spread across various built spaces, the digital networks that connect them, and the spatial impact of these networks. ■

*http://www.hassellstudio.com/docs/hassell_research_workplaceattachment_webversion.pdf