

FIVE OFFICE-SPACE INSIGHTS THAT WILL CHANGE YOUR COMPANY



These five trends will turn your workplace into a place that works

BY HOWARD ECKER



Silicon Valley and San Francisco are not the only urban centers that have office workspaces completely different than those that existed just a decade or two ago. Thanks to tech behemoths like Facebook and Google, companies across the U.S. are seeing a fundamental shift in workspace. Traditional space users—law firms, accounting groups, ad agencies and so on—are now looking to edgy tech companies for inspiration in completely redesigning their offices. It is changing companies, neighborhoods and cities like Chicago.

What's changing? For one thing, dedicated offices and oversized square footage are old news. Even traditional firms want more open space and flexible configurations. Companies now want space that reflects their culture, their ethos and their values, much like Facebook.

Why the shift? Businesses now understand that they will need to adapt to remain economically viable and to attract talented employees. It is as simple as this: If you remain behind the times, it will reflect in your employee attrition and in

attracting top talent, and ultimately it will hurt your bottom line.

There are some great big changes that are taking place, signaling a very exciting culture shift. The five shifting trends I find most interesting in my work with both larger, established companies and smaller startups are the following:

1. THEY ARE THINKING SMALLER.

Many traditional businesses are reducing their overall office square footage and using space more creatively. The design of space also continues to evolve. In a recent interview with a client who just moved into his new office space, a reporter asked him about the importance of the depth from the window wall to the corridor. My client looked at me quizzically. My answer to him was that it was not even a consideration in our building search, as his open plan layout did not dictate that dimension as meaningful. For 40 of my 45 years in the commercial real estate industry, planning modules have been a key driver in the design of office space. That is real estate jargon. In simple words, is the space built to accommodate 10x10 offices, or 10x15

or even 15x20? Today, this is not even a consideration for many of the fastest growing firms because “typical” offices are not a priority or may not even exist.

2. THEY ARE PLAYING “MUSICAL CHAIRS.”

Forget the typical cubicle and the private office. New workplace configurations are encouraging more communication and camaraderie among co-workers. Everyone has suddenly become more physically accessible. Some forward-thinking companies are even taking it to the next level. Traditionally, groups that work together were always adjacent to each other to facilitate communication. Today, departments might be randomly located throughout a space, with no adjacencies for those groups that work closely together. Why does this happen? Management of these firms value communication across the entire company, with very little thought to hierarchical considerations. Companies like Kayak.com are taking it yet a step further with micromanaging (in a positive way). They believe that where an employee physically sits helps foster collaboration and efficiency, and often this entails an employee moving his or her workspace on a regular basis.

3. THEY ARE BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN WORK AND PLAY.

At its best, an office can help represent a company’s core values, encourage work-life balance and even help recruit new employees. Just look at Facebook’s newly planned employee villages, where staff will live close to the office. This may even be more than a work-life balance—it is a cultural shift that says that the boundaries between work and personal life are blurring because when you love your job so much, what is the difference between fun at home and fun at the office? Because of this rejuvenation, career-minded young workers might put in more hours at the office. So why not create an environment that speaks to the happiness of the typical worker, and that encourages them to come in, work hard and play hard? This is generally seen with spaces that offer amenities such as

yoga, doggy day care and bike parking, for example, reflecting a healthy, active work-life balance. In a way, what we are seeing harkens back to the days of “company towns” or “working above the store.”

4. IT IS ALL ABOUT THE CULTURE

In the 1980s and 1990s, companies unfortunately backed away from a workplace that reflected the values and culture of the company. Today, when you walk into a startup or a traditional company that embodies this new startup ethos, they want you to immediately get a feel for who the company is, including their values and culture. For example, at Manifest Digital in Chicago, you see the projects they are working on all around you, displayed on electronic screens, written on the glass office fronts and on whiteboard walls. According to Jim Jacoby, Founder of Manifest Digital, “Space is culture is not just believable, it’s true. When you live in a space every day, you become that space and that space becomes you.”

5. WHAT IS OLD IS NEW AGAIN.

Instead of traditional Class A office towers, old buildings in Chicago and across the U.S., are being repurposed in new and creative ways. Some great examples of this are the Twitter headquarters in San Francisco, located in the former San Francisco Furniture Mart; Google’s New York headquarters in a former Port Authority industrial property; and Zappos’ former City Hall headquarters in downtown Las Vegas. With innovative architecture and interior planning, great historic buildings will help to invigorate downtown markets in cities nationwide.

Traditional companies that can embrace any of the above trends have the ability to soar above and beyond those that choose to stick with the antiquated ways of running an office. With more innovation and collaboration, the sky literally is the limit, and these companies will see an impact not just in the bottom line but in the overall worth of their company. ➔



Howard Ecker founded Howard Ecker + Company in 1975 as the first real estate company in Chicago devoted exclusively to representing tenants. From working on one of the original leases in the Transamerica Pyramid in San Francisco in the early 1970s to currently representing national accounting firm BDO USA, Ecker’s 40-plus-year career has included many significant projects. Ecker works with business leaders to align office location thinking with the long-term fiscal and cultural needs of their business, connecting the worth of the company to its brand, culture and environment. Ecker is a member of the Board of Directors for Chicago’s Adler Planetarium. He graduated from Tulane University in 1966 with a bachelor’s degree in Russian History and attended DePaul Law School. For more information, visit www.howardecker.com.



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