

Two Key Principles Help Companies Maximize the Impact of Office Design on the Bottom Line

Experts advise integrating design into overall strategic plans and using redesign to support changes in the office culture

(WASHINGTON, October 20, 1998) -- Leading management consultants and interior designers say there are two key principles that designers and their clients can use to enhance the impact of office design on the bottom line. The principles emerged from interviews done in conjunction with a survey conducted for the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID). The survey is a component of a major research initiative by ASID and three of its industry partners: Armstrong World Industries, Collins & Aikman Floorcoverings and Steelcase.

First, consultants and interior designers concluded that interior design must be integrated into the overall strategic plan. Second, they suggest that office redesign facilitates cultural changes that are needed when implementing new work processes and policies.

Principle 1 - Integrate Design Into the Organization's Strategic Plan

Integrating facilities design into the overall strategic planning process helps companies improve their competitiveness and adapt to changing market conditions. Interview respondents also emphasized the need for interior design to be addressed early in the strategic planning process and revisited throughout the plan's development.

"On a regular basis, companies must ask themselves if their office design still supports their strategic goals and, if not, what changes need to be made to get it back in alignment," said Gary Wheeler, FASID, former ASID national president and managing director, Perkins & Will Chicago. "In fact, companies should ask this question annually."

The consultants and interior designers suggested three steps to help companies integrate design into strategic planning:

1. Involve employees when making office design decisions,
2. Work with an integrated team of professionals, and
3. Plan for flexibility and change.

When beginning the planning process, involve employees who are affected by the project. Design team members must obtain employee input, share it with management and incorporate it in the resulting design.

"When you're dealing with change, we encourage buy-in from employees into the process," said Kathy Ford Montgomery, FASID, former ASID national president and director of interior design at Klipp Colussy Jenks DuBois Architects, P.C. in Denver. "We show employees and managers all the possibilities to build understanding and consensus."

"We ask employees about the physical work environment - what does or doesn't work, and what needs to be done," Wheeler said. "We have group meetings with management and employees to create a common language and a common vision."

Companies can assemble an integrated team of professionals by including internal personnel such as a facility manager, human resources director and department managers that would be affected most by interior design changes. Interior designers also are critical team members. This cross-functional, team-based approach helps improve communication and coordination to ensure everyone involved in the process is on the same page and focusing on the same goals.

"As interior designers, we commonly ask human resources professionals for their input on projects," Wheeler said. "They know what employees want and what employees complain about the most. Their input helps us do a better job creating facilities that will support companies' efforts to recruit and retain qualified employees."

To keep up with the speed of business, companies need to plan for flexibility and change. This concept is called "futureproofing." Competitive pressures force companies to be flexible. As work patterns evolve and new technologies emerge, adapting workspaces to change becomes even more critical to reducing operating costs and decreasing the costs and stress of churn, whether it means staffing changes or reconfiguring the physical work environment.

"Our clients' needs are changing, and so are the needs of their customers," Montgomery said. "The design of their offices needs to keep up with these changes. Companies that pay attention to futureproofing today will be better equipped to deal with the changes tomorrow will bring."

Principle 2 - Support Cultural Change Through Redesign

Office design is also evolving to reflect changes in corporate culture. Some companies are using design as a "change agent" to help produce cultural transformation. As a result, today's interior designers have evolved to be part designer and part management consultant.

"Corporate culture can be slow to change, but today's offices are focusing less on who people are and more on what they do," Wheeler said. "Status is becoming less important as companies and employees are changing the ways that they see themselves. As these views change, office design must support and reflect the changing culture."

"Training is a critical component of culture change," Montgomery said. "If you don't help staff members become comfortable with redesigned office space and new equipment, they won't know how to use these tools and productivity will not improve. You can't assume people will 'get it' without training."

The consultants and interior designers interviewed suggested four steps companies can follow to help ensure redesign helps support cultural change:

1. Reflect changes in leadership styles,
2. Promote communication and teamwork,
3. Create task-based workspaces, and
4. Improve employee satisfaction.

As part of the effort to support overall cultural change, redesign must reflect changes in leadership styles. Transforming a company's culture requires changing the way executives manage and how they interact with employees and each other. Office design can play an important role in communicating that the company and its executives are committed to real change.

"Leaders want to be more interactive today, and workspaces must allow for that," Montgomery said. "Being in a workstation near the rest of the employees rather than in a closed office makes it easier for managers to interact and work with teams."

In many cases, changing the culture also means that companies must promote communication and teamwork. Communication and interaction are important in today's fast-paced work culture. Increasingly, employees work together in teams to increase performance and speed up the work process. As a result, office design must provide team members with easy access to each other and to resources.

"A growing number of companies are providing special areas in their offices that are fun and comfortable, and they are encouraging employees to meet in these areas for quick, informal information sharing and brainstorming," Wheeler said. "This type of office design helps companies develop a creative environment that will aid their efforts to = recruit and retain talented employees."

Designers and their clients can better support employees when they create task-based workspaces that meet the needs of particular tasks to be accomplished in them. To achieve this goal, office design must reflect an understanding of the work individuals, teams and departments do and how they do it.

"People work in a variety of ways, and they need the flexibility to work in different types of spaces as their tasks change," Wheeler said. "They may need private or 'cave' space for concentrated or confidential work, semi-private space for heads-down work on computers and public space for teaming and collaboration."

Companies can improve employee satisfaction by using office design to ease the transition to new work styles. Removing disruptions and providing employees with comfortable, attractive surroundings that support their needs can transform attitudes about work and the workplace, fuel employees with corporate pride, and increase performance and efficiency.

"Functional, comfortable and attractive offices tell employees they are valued by management," Montgomery said. "This improves morale, and many studies show a correlation between improved employee satisfaction and better job performance."

ASID and its industry partners have developed a professional paper providing additional information on the impact of interior design on office performance. For a copy of "Productive Workplaces - How Design Increases Productivity: Expert Insights," call ASID at (202) 546-3480 or visit ASID on-line at <http://www.asid.org>.

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