What are Flexible Workspaces?

Flexible workspaces have interchangeable components that can be tailored to the needs of the user. In this electronic/information age, work teams form and reform to meet organizational needs, technological innovations, and changing business relationships. Buildings and interior spaces need to be flexible to anticipate and support this changing nature of work.¹ Disassembly, deconstruction, and demolition are important considerations for managing resources and the waste stream when creating new building environments. New construction should emphasize reusable parts and easy access to infrastructure, plumbing, and wiring as well as planning for recycling or reuse of leftover materials.² Within the past few years, designers have sought to create a new generation of flexible buildings and workplace environments that have infrastructures and structures that fully support change while sustaining new technologies. For a typical office building, it is estimated that 45-50% of occupants will change their location or require an upgrading of their computer and/or telecommunications connections every year.³

How to Implement Flexible Workspaces

Flexible workspaces should provide workspaces with interchangeable components that can be customized and easily adapted. Offices of the same size with flexible functionality are not tied to a corporate hierarchy, which means less frustration and office movement when employees change positions. Universal spaces also support hoteling for employees who are not frequently on site (sales staff, virtual employees, part-timers, et al). The same holds true for open spaces: adaptability is important. Conference rooms serve a variety of functions such as hosting scheduled meetings and presentations or for an employee who needs a quiet space to work. When equipped with Wi-Fi, lunchrooms and common areas can also be productive work and meeting spaces. Flexible office design allows the space to evolve with the company.⁴

To implement flexible workspaces, it is important to:

- Provide flexibility for delivering power, voice, and data.
- Provide distributed, vertical cores, satellite closets, and generous horizontal plenum spaces with movable, user-based services to ensure technical, spatial, and environmental quality in the rapidly changing electronic office.
- Provide systems that are controllable and adjustable by the users without

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burdensome reliance on outside contractors.
- Incorporate sustainable design principles, which can help achieve flexible spaces.  

Table 1. Drivers, Solutions, and Issues for the Changing Workplace

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Drivers</th>
<th>Workplace and technology solutions</th>
<th>Issues and concerns</th>
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| Increased use of teams and cross unit work; more pressure for communication and information flow | o Greater variety of meeting spaces (open & enclosed, large & small)  
o More open, smaller, and unassigned individual workspaces  
o Greater interior visibility to support awareness  
o Mobile supports (phones, laptops, PDAs, wireless)  
o Personal video, instant messaging, desktop team software  
o More use of project rooms  
o Displayed information and work progress  
o Lockers for personal belongings | o Increased noise  
o Increased distractions and interruptions  
o Potential for "over communicating"  
o Cultural barriers to behavioral change  
o Individuals working longer hours to compensate for lack of time to do individual tasks  
o Expectations that workers are always available |
| Greater use of dispersed work groups—often global | o Increased use and need for video conferencing, computer-based team tools  
o More reliance on conference calls  
o Use of facilities beyond normal working hours | o Expansion of the workday to accommodate geographically dispersed team meetings  
o Loss of opportunity to develop trust through face to face interaction  
o More difficulty managing and coordinating  
o Very high dependence on technological reliability |
| Continual reorganization and restructuring | o Flexible infrastructure to support rapid reconfiguration  
o Mobile furnishings | o Acoustical problems with loss of good enclosure  
o Potential for reduced ergonomic effectiveness |
| Reduced costs/more efficient space use | o Shared or unassigned workspaces  
o Centralized filing system  
o Reduced workstation size and increased overall densities  
o Greater overall spatial variety to enable different kinds of work to be accommodated at same time | o Increased distractions and interruptions  
o Increased noise  
o May meet with employee resistance  
o More difficult for paper intensive work |
| Improved quality of work life and attraction of new workers | o More equitable access to daylight, views, and other amenities  
o More equitable spatial allocation and workspace features  
o Amenities for stress reduction and quiet relaxation | o Resistance from those who support hierarchical space allocation |

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6 Adapted from Whole Building Design Guide. [http://www.wbdg.org/resources/chngorgwork.php](http://www.wbdg.org/resources/chngorgwork.php)
Benefits

- Reduces need to alter infrastructure
- Enables low-cost reconfiguration
- Promotes productivity and efficiency
- Optimizes investments in modern technologies
- Reduces real estate costs (by de-linking physical space consumption from occupant headcount)
- Improves organizational flexibility and agility to respond to current and future workforce demands

Costs

To keep up with the speed of business, companies need to plan for flexibility and change. As work patterns evolve and new technologies emerge, flexible workspaces provide efficient and effective interior spaces that can help reduce operating costs and decrease the cost and stress of change, whether it means staffing changes or reconfiguring the physical work environment. Designing flexible workspaces can minimize costs associated with reconfigurations as technology and office environments change.

Resources

Whole Building Design Guide – Design for the Changing Workplace
http://www.wbdg.org/design/design_change.php

UC Berkeley Center for the Built Environment
http://www.cbe.berkeley.edu/underfloorair/benefits.htm

http://www.wbdg.org/resources/chngorgwork.php

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