

What Matters in Workplace Strategy

Goal: Efficiency

Fourth in a series of papers about workplace strategies and what goals they can and should successfully achieve: Efficiency is using space, capital, or any other asset wisely, with as little waste as possible. Agility, the notion of "future-proofing" the workplace to easily adapt to change will be covered next. Alignment – ensuring that the workplace reflects the unique context of a given organization; and Effectiveness – focused on the performance of the workforce were described in the second and third papers, respectively.

If you've been reading between the lines in the earlier papers in this series, you've picked up on our belief that using workplace strategies just to save space is at best short-sighted and at worst downright dangerous. Having said that, let's look more closely at opportunities for efficiency (we're going to cover those that are primarily spatial) within broader workplace strategies.

In doing so, let's assume we've already uncovered the business results the organization is seeking. We've identified the job functions that make up the organization. We understand workers' activities and needs as individuals and groups over time, and have considered organizational and personal goals.

With this all-important information, we have a clear picture of the where, what, when, and how – the kinds of spaces people need for the variety of tasks or activities they do, and the ways they use them – and can demonstrate what benefits could be derived by the organization and the individual. We can now use this knowledge to identify opportunities to use individual, group, or support spaces or any other asset more efficiently.

Space utilization optimization strategies can fall into at least three categories: simply smaller spaces than before; spaces that accommodate multiple users; and spaces that accommodate multiple uses.

Smaller

We've already touched on the meaning we assign to space as a manifestation of rank or achievement, so changing the rules of who gets how much requires diplomacy. Moving to fewer standards for individuals' areas, though, can create the opportunity to also make each one smaller. A former client, for example, went from eight rank-based sizes of offices and open workstations to two – a 10' x 12' office, and an 8' x 8' workstation. They then used their knowledge of work practices to design more functionality into those offices and workstations. Other organizations have balanced their knowledge of current work practices with what emerging technology makes possible to justify reductions in surface

and storage and therefore in the overall size of a given workstation.

When offices line an exterior wall, the modularity of the vertical window mullions may set the width of those offices and make it infeasible to make them narrower. Transitioning to interior offices is one option that removes that constraint. The same client I mentioned before also set a "big rule" that no office would be placed on the exterior so that natural light and views could be enjoyed by the majority of the occupants. These new interior offices have clear glass front walls to allow light to enter.

The last issue concerns what's practical and feels acceptable. Sun Microsystems has used what feels to me like the smallest possible private office size – 8' x 10' – and carefully designed the furniture components in it to find the right balance between worksurface area and open space. It feels like a well-designed kitchen – extremely efficient, well-proportioned, and functional. They, too, have used glass fronts and/or glass sliding doors.

Multiple Users

The most familiar example of multiple users is "hoteling" where a number of workers can share a smaller number of offices or open workstations because they are only in the office for brief periods in between assignments that take them elsewhere. Another form, used by many call centers, is split shifts.

Other strategies that don't always net huge space savings, but are typically better allocations of space, are those that redistribute space from large, individual areas to shared spaces like phone areas, quiet rooms, project rooms, or open team spaces. This is the thinking behind approaches like "group address" or "activity settings" where a group is assigned to a variety of space types, and people move between the areas that support the tasks they need to do. Behind Sun's adoption of their smaller office size was the reallocation of the space they saved to more group work areas.

Other organizations have merged more aggressive group address practices with hoteling concepts and found significant space savings.

Multiple Uses

An example of multiple uses might be a room devoted to a new project that may start out as a formal conference room and, later, be converted into workspace for a half-dozen people in the project's development phase. Or a lab might expand into an adjacent project room during the testing phase of a project, then return to its original size.

Other Efficiencies

There are several other strategies to improve efficiencies, including a "kit-of-parts" approach to space and/or furniture components, and ways to reduce the costs of ownership. We'll cover making change easier in the next article, but we will spend a moment on "kit-of-parts."

For those that haven't heard that term, the idea is to utilize the fewest number of components that can satisfy the breadth of ways they need to be assembled. Another former client learned that modest changes to the workstation design they'd developed across multiple locations would reduce the parts needed to build workstations from 41 to 14. Those 14 parts – 3 panel sizes, 4 worksurface sizes, 2 pedestals, 1 file, 1 bookcase, 2 overheads, and 1 storage tower – could be configured into 11 different layouts for 5 different sizes.

Space efficiency is a worthy goal but best tackled once organizational goals and work practices are thoroughly understood. Other efficiencies, like reducing the costs of inventory or reconfiguration or re-purposing, can also make the organization more agile.

This paper is adapted from an article that first appeared on the CoreNet NYC Chapter website in 2008.



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