Getting a Rise Out of Productivity

By Kelly Sterk

Adapting to the changing worker

While organizations look for significant productivity gains from knowledge workers, facilities can help with that goal. Supporting the new generation of worker in order to maximize their value will become vital to an organization's welfare. How can workers and work processes best be supported by the work environment? Muscatine, IA-based Allsteel has conducted several research projects specifically focused on what workers are looking for in their workplace and how the workplace is changing.

The new workplace is noticeably more flexible, with less 8-to-5 structure, less hierarchy, and more options being used to recruit and retain qualified employees. This is happening in a business environment marked by intense global competition, the drive to reduce real estate costs, and demographic changes that are unprecedented. Today's organizations are exploring more alternatives to traditional space, such as collaborative spaces, virtual offices, hoteling, flex space, and home offices to appeal to today's worker.

A major storm is on the horizon when the early edge of the Baby Boomers begins entering retirement in the next few years. Recruiting and retaining Gen-X and Gen-Y workers will become of paramount importance. Facilities will and should be an aspect of the overall human resources strategy in order to both maximize and retain these valuable human assets. At the same time, trying to provide facilities that appeal to and support four generations of workers will be a growing challenge.

Another major trend that will challenge facilities managers in the next few years is trying to have more open and collaborative environments yet maintain a workplace that allows for distraction-free work or private conversations.

Productivity is the goal that makes these facilities-related issues important. Worker satisfaction is an important marker of facilities success, despite the lack of empirical evidence tying it to productivity. Surrogate markers such as satisfaction, turnover, and absenteeism are linked to productivity because of the difficulties of measuring productivity, especially in creative or knowledge work.

Workers today do not feel particularly satisfied with their workstation. For facilities, the ability to positively improve satisfaction, recruitment, and retention is one way to show an impact on the organization's performance. The "Evaluation of Workstation/Office" chart (*below*) shows how workers feel about the performance of various areas of their workstation/office. The areas of lowest satisfaction center on disturbance-free work areas, concealing wires, and availability of smart/efficient storage. The next-lowest areas are storage space, storage security, and visually appealing workspace. Although the highest scores were attributed to the ability to personalize space and lighting, even these scores were not particularly impressive.

What can be done to maximize worker satisfaction with the work area? When asked what would make up an ideal workstation, the items that are most important in a workstation/office were adequate natural light, sufficient worksurface space, adequate storage space, and the appropriate temperature (*see "Ideal Workstation/Office," below*).

Areas that score particularly low and that are often discussed are workers feeling that they don't have enough or effective storage, as well as the distraction-free/privacy issue. Unfortunately, as the industry has moved to smaller workstation sizes, both of these issues have intensified. In addition, as companies have moved to open plan workstations, privacy and distraction issues have intensified.

Privacy

The paradox that many organizations face is to have an open environment yet provide distraction-free, private work areas. Supporting privacy needs of teams and individuals, both acoustical and visual, is another important worker need. Existing workstations do a less-than-stellar performance, as indicated by the relatively poor performance in the "Evaluation of Workstation/Office" below.

Organizations have tried many of the following options to make a more distraction-free/private work environment:

- *Taller space dividers that utilize glass or translucent materials.* Some organizations have actually raised panel heights in an effort to increase privacy, but have kept the openness.
- *Private areas or kiosks.* These can be very popular and useful if easily accessible and located near open-plan workstations.
- *Dedicated collaboration areas.* Project work, conference calls, and gatherings can produce distractions for other workers, so dedicated collaboration areas provide private areas for group work that won't disturb other workers.
- *White noise.* If done correctly, white noise can work well. Unfortunately, it can cause more distractions if done poorly. Other sound inhibitors could include acoustical ceiling tiles, panel materials, carpet, and fewer hard surfaces.
- *Office protocols.* Encouraging appropriate behaviors for the given the environment helps with distraction-free work.
- *Easily adapted teaming areas.* Many workstation configurations offer teaming areas in addition to amenities such as sliding doors; therefore, employees can work privately - or within teams - by simply sliding a door.

Collaboration and Communication

Among today's companies, there is a push for collaboration, creativity, and ideation to generate "useful knowledge." It's very important that these forward-thinking organizations allocate dedicated space for this.

Don't feel blocked in. There are various types of collaboration: planned, spontaneous, formal, and informal, to name a few. In many cases, the work environment needs to support all of these interactions. Suggestions for fostering collaboration include:

- Dedicated teaming and collaboration space in combination with nearby individual work areas.
- Space that is able to utilize technology, such as virtual teaming, video conferencing, and high-speed data access.
- Understanding and using circulation patterns to facilitate spontaneous and informal communication.
- Areas that support project work by having mobile furniture, whiteboards, tackable surfaces, etc.
- Informal areas that are easily accessible and excite rather than dull the senses.

Growth opportunities also exist for areas such as cafés, informal gathering areas, and recreational areas. Common characteristics of such spaces include flexibility, idea stimulation, color, whiteboards, and ease of accessing and displaying information.

Not to be forgotten, however, is the individual workspace. Allsteel research reports that people still spend two-thirds of their workday working individually. However, workstations that foster both the individual working alone or with others is an important element of fostering collaboration. Consider workstations that invite, rather than repel, visitors. The shape of the worksurface, presence of guest chairs, and flexible monitor display options are possible solutions.

Transition Tips
One of facilities professionals' most frequent problems is transitioning workers from private offices to open-plan workstations in the pursuit of a collaborative environment. To ease this transition, consider the following helpful tips:

1. *Communicate early and often.* The more people know what is going on and are allowed to give input, the more likely they are to agree. You don't need everyone to provide input, just representatives who are able to communicate the basic needs for their job function. This communication needs to happen throughout the change, not just after everything has been decided. Those companies that receive input before, rather than after, experience the best success.
2. *Upgrade materials.* Having updated or new materials on a workstation and/or chair can help increase the positive (and decrease the negative) feelings about the transition. By adding veneer to trim or storage pieces, or by adding a leather chair, those managers who feel slighted may be more agreeable about the move.
3. *Provide private areas.* Probably the biggest issue that open-plan workers have is the lack of privacy and distraction-free workplaces. Distractions can be massive time wasters, especially for knowledge workers. One way of coping with this is to provide heads-down private work areas close to their open-plan workstation.
4. *Try to understand the real reason for resistance.* Some workers, particularly from the Baby Boomer generation, view the private office as a status symbol. Substitute other status symbols - a high-functioning task chair, veneer trim, a door on the workstation - as a way in which to help overcome that resistance.

Efficient Storage

The search for more storage by workers can often seem like a never-ending battle. As companies lower panel heights, areas such as traditional overhead storage areas and three- or four-high lateral files put restrictions on how low some of the panels can go. As a result, overhead storage can cause other issues, such as reducing the amount of natural light available in the workstation - another top priority for workers. Pedestals can also cause issues around accessible under-worksurface areas.

One possible solution for the storage dilemma is to have integrated storage, which is basically the dual idea of storage as a space divider as well as storage. This further helps to conserve yet maximize the use of limited space. Providing storage that conforms to an individual's specific tasks also helps - both in providing the right type of storage for the right type of storage needs, as well as giving an individual worker a certain degree of control over his or her work surroundings.

Ideal Workstation/Office
(1=Least Important, 5=Most Important)

Category	Importance
Adequate Light	4.3
Personalize Space	3.9
Easily Accessible Storage	3.9
Size of Workstation	3.9
Space for Personal Items	3.5
Sufficient Worksurface	4.3
Appropriate Temperature	4.3
Visually Appealing	3.4
Sufficient Storage Space	4.0
Storage Security	3.8
Efficient/Smart Storage	3.8
Concealed Wires	3.3
Disturbance-Free	3.9

Source: Allsteel

Maximum use of inaccessible areas becomes more important in a smaller workstation. For example, most technology equipment is currently located on the worksurface (in fact, industry research points to 36 percent of worksurface space being taken by computers, monitors, and other electronic equipment). To free up valuable tasking space, relocate those items (computer equipment, peripherals, paper, and files) off the worksurface.

A significant amount of items can be moved to accessory tool rails, below-worksurface storage, or other storage areas. Vertical space also helps to utilize what is usually wasted space, making areas more easily accessible to workers.

Another consideration is that flat panel monitors are rapidly becoming the norm rather than the exception, which can have implications on needed worksurface depth. People with a flat panel monitor do not necessarily need a 24-inch worksurface. However, flat panel monitors, especially 15- to 17-inch screens, can cause problems with overhead cabinets.

All proximal storage and work should be within easy-seated reach. The 7 percent of worksurface consumed by books, binders, and reference materials can be moved to storage areas that are easily accessible to the worker, thereby freeing up even more valuable worksurface.

Remember when people had visions of the paperless office? Even with all of the technology advancements we've experienced, there is generally more "stuff" in the workplace - particularly technology gadgets. Unfortunately, worksurfaces become a storage solution; in fact, only one-

fourth of the office worksurface is actually available for tasking. And the increasing use of electronics means workers need more places to plug in and more room to store these devices.

Supporting Multiple Generations at Work

Workers from different generations do work differently; however, most work performed by both younger and older generations is on an individual basis. Younger-generation workers prefer to work in a multi-task situation. Gen-X and Gen-Y workers also enjoy working in collaborative teaming areas such as project rooms, cafés, and informal teaming centers.

Alternative work strategies are other work environment ideas. Telework, job sharing, and part-time work are all ways that help provide a more ideal work environment for the younger generation (who desire a work/life balance), as well as the older generation (who are changing the meaning of "retirement").

So how can a facility appeal to all types of workers? One way for facilities professionals to make a workspace more ideal is to allow workers more individual control over their workspace to fit their personal tastes and desires: workstation height, lighting, temperature, layout, colors, etc. As the workforce gets older, consider the following design factors:

- Furniture that is easy to get in and out of.
- Less congestion, wider hallways.
- More color contrasts (aids in visual acuity).
- Chairs with high seats and strong unpadded arms.
- Increased ambient and task lighting.
- Wider walkways around offices (easier mobility).
- Furniture with rounded corners.
- Sensors that turn lights on automatically.
- Lighter, smaller, shallower, firmer furniture.
- Adjustment knobs and levers that are easy to hold/manipulate.

Individual Customization

Another challenge that affects worker satisfaction is how to bring the comforts of home into the office without chaos. Avoid the resulting inventory nightmare that could be a result of individual customization by providing workers with some level of control around a *few* - vs. all - areas of their workstation. Individual customization might include adjustable task chairs, various storage options, personal accessory options, task lights, worksurface shapes, height-adjustable tables and worksurfaces, movable tables, and individual HVAC control (in environments that use underfloor air distribution through raised floors).

The days of workers isolated from others in the same beige cubicle are moving into the past. Replacing these work environments are the collaborative and flexible areas that help to stimulate creativity. Continuing to adapt for the individual, as well as the team, can help make a facility a valuable strategic asset.

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