

The Benefit of Staying Put

How Office Space Redesign is Changing the Work Place

BY ALEX WITHROW

With the economy fluctuating on a daily basis, many businesses are content with merely staying afloat. Those eager for change, however, are often tempted with the notion of starting over in a new, fresh workspace.

If the fallout of the 2008 recession taught American businesses one thing, it was the importance of making do with what you have. So instead of opting for more square footage or closer proximity to Washington, D.C., many businesses are discovering the benefits of simply staying put.

Staying Where You Are

While familiar in concept, the practice of office space redesign has risen drastically since America's economy began getting its footing back. Instead of buying more, businesses are opting for less.

"If a business can find a new building for cheaper than what they're currently paying, most of them want to move and start fresh," says Jim Williamson, a principal at global architecture and design firm, Gensler. "But sometimes moving just doesn't make sense. Whether for financial or location reasons, businesses often decide to stay where they are."

One of the biggest reasons offices aren't moving is because of the actual moving itself.

"The infrastructure for an office is what concerns many companies," says Elizabeth Blunck, director at DBI Architects, an interior design firm based in Reston and Washington, D.C.

Office renovations currently account for a quarter of DBI's business, and for most of their clients, Blunck said, the cost for moving equipment and servers is too great to bear.

"If a company wants to be fully operational up until the weekend that they move, they have to buy all new equipment for their new server room," Blunck says. "So for large companies with huge data centers, to move a room like that is very costly."

One of DBI's clients, Herndon-based technology solutions firm, iDirect Government Technologies, said that their location has helped define who they are.

"A lot of our employees were hired because of our location," says Marlene Farrar, a Facilities and Maintenance manager at iDirect. "We have a tremendous amount of travelers, both in our company and the clients who visit us, so our close proximity to

Dulles Airport is invaluable from our perspective."

Once a business decides to stay at their current location, determining how much to spend on renovations proves equally as important in determining how those renovations can better serve the work they do.

The Changing Workplace

"When you think how people worked 15-20 years ago, it's such a departure from how people are working now," Williamson says. "It used to be that you came to work, sat at your workspace all day, maybe went to two meetings, and went home. Now, most forward-moving organizations have meetings for half of the day, so much of the interactions in offices are happening outside of the individual workspace."



Photos by Beverly Denny

iDirect downsized its cubicles from 8'x 8' to 6'x 8' to accommodate more workers.

The most popular trend among modern office renovations, Williamson says, is the prevalence of open workspaces. Williamson, who works out of Gensler's K Street office, said that 70 percent of the renovations he's currently working on involve less space for the individual and more for the team.

Instead of giving everyone their own cubical or office, companies are putting several employees in one open area. In addition to saving space, open workspaces can keep employees motivated and on task.

"These communal spaces challenge a person's inability to focus," Williamson says. "You see everyone else working around you, so it motivates you to keep working. There is definitely a desire to have employees work closer together and to interact. It's all about focus and collaboration."

The majority of DBI's clients are following the same trend. "This is obviously done on a tier system," Blunck says. "For

example, if a handful of people have the same title at a company, they may all share a large, open workstation. This is definitely an ongoing trend: moving people to open workstations as opposed to closed offices and cubes."

iDirect, however, has found success by going against the norm. Instead of eliminating cubes and offices, the technology company is simply making them smaller.

To accommodate their rapid growth, iDirect recently bought 17,000 additional square feet in their building, which they plan to fill, in part, with smaller cubes than what they currently have.

"We realized that our growth was going through the roof, so we downsized our cubes to create a new footprint for us," Farrar says.

Farrar is currently replacing iDirect's 8x8 cubes with 6x8 workspaces, a change that has garnered positive feedback from iDirect's employees.

"We've gained about 150 new work stations by downsizing our cubes," Farrar says. "If we had put 8x8 sized cubes in our newly acquired space, we wouldn't have the headcount we were hoping to get. But the favorable feedback we received from



employees made as realize that [the smaller cubicles] were absolutely acceptable for a workspace."

And while Farrar said that iDirect is "growing like crazy," having hired roughly 60 new employees so far this year, changing the size of cubicles is only one part of their renovations.

"This is a very involved process," Farrar says. "Our mandate is to not buy new furniture, so we have to find furniture that is of decent quality and currently available on the used market."

There's no one way to redesign your office, but no matter the motivation or execution, most businesses going through an office space redesign agree that less is more.

Sleek Is In

"The design most companies are going for in general is much sleeker, much cleaner," Blunck says. "Sometimes [our clients] just want to rebrand themselves. A lot of companies spend the money they have redoing their upfront lobby and reception area, as well as their conference rooms. Basically, wherever their visitors may be when they come to that office."

Williamson said that because most companies are aiming for an aesthetically clean look, they are saving money by purchasing fewer parts.

"Just look at a television in the lobby of an office," Williamson says. "You used to have a large TV with a cabinet and wires and receivers everywhere, which wasn't clean at all. Now, you can mount a flat screen on the wall and hide all the wires and equipment that come with it. Things have become simpler and more streamlined to suit technology."

Gensler is currently renovating the GSA headquarters in Washington, a building that takes up nearly one city block in downtown D.C. The GSA renovations, Williamson says, accommodate the popularity of open, clean workspaces, while keeping with the latest trends in technology.

"Essentially, we're creating a city-block mobility center," Williamson says. "People will come in, work, and leave when their work is done. It isn't a place for focused, individual work; it's all large, open team areas. I think as new generations of workers come up through the ranks, you're going to see a lot more team workspaces, and a lot less offices."

The Future of Office Redesign

As open workspaces become more prevalent, Williamson said

the next big shift in offices will be the reduction of loose wires and cables. Roaming interactivity will eliminate the need to be tied down to one particular area.

"Most of the meetings I sit in with clients, I look around and there are cables everywhere," Williamson says. "WiFi has helped a lot to resolve this, but in the next few years, I believe you're going to see a greater dominance of conductive work surfaces."

A conductive work surface is, effectively, a flat surface that charges devices. Instead of plugging a device into the wall, a conductive work surface would wirelessly charge whatever battery was resting on top of it.

"Essentially, these

conductive stations allow you to set your laptop or phone on its surface and have it charge automatically," Williamson says.

While a handful of manufacturers are currently working to make the practice of conductive work stations mainstream, those stations, Williamson says, are just the start to the evolution of the modern office.

"In 10 or 15 years, or even less, everyone's desk is going to function like a very large iPad, much like a large, touch sensitive drafting board similar to what architects use," Williamson says.

Imagine that the surface of your desk is a giant computer desktop. No CPUs or monitors to plug in or laptops to carry around. With security access, an employee could pull up their desktop from any work station in their office.

"Making way for open work stations and a cleaner design is only the start," Williamson says. "The elimination of visible wires, batteries that last for days, conductive surface desks; it's complete interactivity within your workspace. What's happening now is only the beginning." **NVE**

Alex Withrow is a freelancer writer based out of Richmond. He is the recipient of numerous Virginia Press Association Awards.