

Office design is key to employee productivity

By **JASON HUGHES**

Monday, July 2, 2007

Office space design is much more important to businesses than just being a budget-line item if we are to believe a recent survey of office workers conducted for one of the largest architectural firms in the world.

A survey of 2,000 office employees from different industries and professions at every level within their respective organizations reported that nine out of 10 of those surveyed believe that the quality of their workplace affects their attitude, job satisfaction and productivity and that good workplace quality makes a company more competitive. Such responses are so intuitively obvious that you have to wonder what the one out of 10 dissenting respondents said about the importance of workplace environments.

The study conducted by D/R Added Value for Gensler also reported a striking discrepancy between how workers and their employers value workplace quality. Nearly half of those surveyed, 46 percent, said their employers do not see high-performance workplaces as a priority and two out of three respondents said their employers were more interested in minimizing costs or maintaining the status quo in designing innovative office space for their employees.

Productivity is so often an unmeasured commodity -- not so in this case. Employees who participated in this survey said a better-designed office environment would boost their respective work outputs by as much as 21 percent. They further quantified that assertion by indicating an optimum office environment would encourage them to add an extra hour to their workday. Think about the impact that would have on a company's bottom line.

Office tenants need to stop thinking about their office space merely as the cost of doing business and instead view it as an asset that can enhance productivity and therefore add value. Gensler noted high-performing work settings are not just about wrapping a physical envelope around a set of business functions. In reality, such venues are the best way to support a company's assets that literally walk in and out of its doors every workday. Look at the success Google has achieved, in large part due to its highly creative and flexible workplace settings.

I fully agree with how one Gensler executive summarized the workplace design trend: "The ideas in people's heads are what add value in today's Creative Economy. As a result, the emphasis is shifting from left-brain metrics, such as square-feet per person, to right-brain metrics that focus on how the workplace enhances people's ability to generate compelling new services and products.

At our company, we put this trend into practice; with Gensler's help, we discarded many of the old ways of designing space in favor of a new, more productive and communications-friendly environment. At the same time, we needed ways to maintain confidentiality while encouraging open meetings and discussions among staff and to be able to do so without the design creating distractions. We wanted to use materials that felt strong, rich and created warmth, while conveying modernism and an emphasis on technology.

The results, frankly, have been nothing less than fantastic. The partners, associates and our clients love our office spaces, so much so that we've uploaded pictures of our space on our website, www.irvinghughes.com.

While it seems obvious that "creative" firms need to have creative spaces, the same holds true in other more pedestrian industries where company and organization owners need to evaluate optimum office space design. Simple ideas such as opening up a lunchroom area into an office, rather than a small hole in the wall, can do wonders in enhancing morale.

I've preached in the past and will do so again and again about the need for tenants to be well-represented in their leasing negotiations with landlords; today I want to emphasize to company owners and managers how important it is to use a good architect or space planner to plan office space with maximum employee productivity in mind.

Resist the temptation to relegate the design of their offices to a tenant improvement contractor with orders to get it done as cheaply and quickly as possible. In reality, office space is as much a tool to enhance productivity as the latest and best computer technology. And, a productive office environment is a happy one, filled with efficient employees who want to work and wouldn't think about leaving for other pastures.

In the end, maximum employee productivity is a commodity no employer can afford to be without.