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Offices moving to smaller, brighter workspaces

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If it feels like walls have shrunk around you, but it's also brighter, welcome to the modern office.

The new thinking -- and reality -- driving office layout is that workers can do well in smaller spaces and will collaborate more easily if cubicle walls drop and they are face-to-face with co-workers. They'll also lower their voices as they realize their colleagues are so close by.

A recent report by the International Facility Management Association says the typical office worker today has less space, even though office space vacancies are high..

Specifically, workers get about 75 to 95 square feet of space, the association said. Years ago, corporations allocated almost five times that amount per worker. Middle managers today fare only slightly better, at 120 square feet.

What gives?

With real estate still the second highest cost after employees for many companies, space is shrinking and cubicles are getting smaller or disappearing altogether in favor of open layouts. Corner offices for managers also are shrinking.

In addition to costs, the trend may be driven by the smaller footprint of office equipment in the laptop and smart-phone age.

"The average worker today is far more efficient than the average worker before because of all the devices that are available: computers, cell phones and electronics," said John Lichtenwalter, general manager of Turner's Special Projects Division, a division of New York-based Turner Construction.

His firm just moved into new offices in the Two Alliance Center in Buckhead.

"Most folks like the smaller, more open atmosphere. They can collaborate, see out a window and see people walking by. But for people my age, in their 40s to 50s, there's been a tough transition with that," he said.

The firm's purchasing department insisted on having more privacy, though, because of the nature of their work, he said.

According to the IMFA, space saved in redesigns and from corner offices is being turned into conference

rooms and “huddle areas,” or tables and chairs strung about for meetings. It’s also going for amenities such as “mother rooms,” where women can go to nurse, storage space, fitness and daycare centers.

Offsetting the loss of space for the average “cube rat” is more natural light. Having low walls, no walls or glass walls lets in daylight and a view to the outside world.

Christian Jacobsen, manager of WinterSPACES, a division of Winter Construction, said his firm recently moved from offices in Midtown to the 191 Peachtree building downtown.

“We brought down the height of the furniture, and the offices have glass walls but no doors,” he said.

“When we first moved in, there was an obvious transition and questions about how it would feel to talk on the phone with people around me. But we realized it was here to stay, so we had to adjust.”

In the firm’s new space, only two employees don’t have window views.

“This really is the workplace of the future,” he said. “But no one has asked to go back to that old design. The economy sucked at our old place, and it sucks now, but we feel better about ourselves now.”

The shift may be counterintuitive, given that real estate costs are at historic lows and acres of empty floors seek users.

After cutbacks, some companies are giving back unused space to landlords and concentrating remaining employees in less space. Some move all employees onto fewer floors of the same building, a phenomenon called “restacking.”

Kevin McDowell, a senior vice president of projects at Jones Lang LaSalle, recently led a “restack” for a corporate headquarters.

“The goal was to not take on additional space, but to allow for growth in the organization,” he said.

After shrinking cubicle space from 8 x 6 foot to 6 x 6, the company added room for 175 more people over nine floors without leasing more space, he said.

Steps to offset the smaller space included replacing computer monitors with hanging flat screens and using overhead bin space for storage.

When it comes to noise, McDowell said, some businesses such as call centers use white noise machines to reduce the impact of loud phone conversations. The machines emit a noise similar to air conditioning blowing, he said.

Environmental concerns also come into play.

Jacobsen’s firm achieved a LEED gold certification from the U.S. Green Building Council for sustainability for its new office space, winning points for access to windows and natural light and open space, he said.

The changes aren’t popular with everybody. Some workers prefer working in lower light, and the loss of privacy rankles some.

How does a supervisor have a tough conversation with a worker, for example, when the office walls are glass and everyone can see the worker gesturing or crying?

Raj Choudhury, managing director of Engauge Digital, recently moved the 110 staff members of the ad agency from the 17th to the 22nd floor in Promenade II at 1230 Peachtree Street. His firm went from a more traditional office environment to one with see-through glass walls and small, low-walled cubicles.

"I remember when I told the staff we were doing it, I got a lot of mixed reactions. They were so used to being in cubicles, closed off, with no one disturbing them," he said.

Thorin Hanson, an innovation engineer for the agency, said the change was a "culture shock" but added he has gotten used to it, as Choudhury had predicted.

The noise can be distracting, he said, "But . . . we put our head phones on when we really need to concentrate."

The brighter light gives him more energy and focus, he said, and he loves the views of Atlanta.

Ironically, it's Choudhury who sees the need for a bit more privacy behind the glass walls of his office.

"If I'm having a hard meeting with someone, it's hard to do it," he said. "There is a practicality part of it. The only closed rooms are the server rooms or the mother's room. I think one closed off room, fully-isolated, would have been good."

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