



# CHANGE IS GOOD

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It seems just about every positive endeavor that has happened in the past few years has been the result of the combined efforts of a “task force,” “multi-disciplined team” or some other collaborative group. Whether it’s a decision that involves nations or an internal solution within your own organization, the new protocol to get things done is to involve everyone concerned from the start. The combined knowledge of various disciplines coming together in a timely manner is the basis of today’s working environment.

To put it into traditional business language, knowledge is the product of today’s organization, and information is the raw material from which that knowledge is produced. The process by which information is translated into knowledge is unlike the work process we have known in the past. The new system demands high levels of interaction and manipulation, which means it also demands a new work environment.

The physical space that allows these new interactions to happen is far different from the confining floor-to-ceiling walls and six-foot-high systems panels of the past. The current alienation of supposedly interactive employees with high panels and—even worse—walls is the very thing that slows down the flow of vital information. The new office is based on the idea that timely and accurate communication is critical to business success. It is an open working environment that supports several team members. The sum of information within that particular cluster creates a combined knowledge base that would otherwise be stifled by barriers.

In early planning meetings with clients, I often ask how many “hall meetings” their organization has. In most cases their response is that the majority of their informational meetings happen in the hall and, in many cases, are unplanned. Apparently in many organizations employees go to get a cup of coffee and after a three-minute meeting in the hall return with the most important information they’ll receive all day.

Your organization may, indeed, be working in this sort of format today but, in many cases, your physical environment is not keeping up with space necessary for this new way of working. As a result the existing inappropriate space layout literally impedes your work process.

It isn’t like it used to be. One size or layout doesn’t fit all. In order to plan physical space for today’s dynamic organization, designers must have a thorough understanding of the company that occupies a particular space. What are the processes the individuals and teams utilize in the assimilation of information (usually from many different sources and venues), and do they have the appropriate space to enable this process to happen? Does that space contain the communication tools that will be required to share, discuss and document purposed information materials?

The late Michael Brill said, “Real teamwork is a focused work mode that needs two kinds of spaces: [one] to support sequestered, group/collaborative work and [another] providing

distraction-free space for individuals to do concentrative work". That statement leads me to the second distinction between new office planning and the traditional method: No matter how well you plan the space an individual will work in, chances are that, for any given part of the workday, that space will be inappropriate for the type of work that needs to be done. The only logical way to address this issue is to provide shared alternative space that can be utilized by any individual or team relative to immediate needs. This sounds like something that would require a major addition to overall square footage, but through a process called strategic thinking and planning, you can often leverage your existing space to meet the overall needs of everyone who may use it.

One of the largest hurdles to overcome in strategic office planning is understanding and accepting these new work modes and their corresponding space requirements. You cannot change work processes and expect your associates to respond positively in an inappropriate space. In fact planned space actually enables the transition and utilization of these new processes. Strategy has become the most important element in design thinking and quite literally can make the difference between effective solutions and merely cosmetic "improvements."

In the early 1970s, the "open plan" systems approach to office design faltered and almost went away because it could not account for new use demands. It was several years before the intellectual phase of the design process caught up to the demands of work process. In much the same way, today's office layouts are not keeping up with the new ways work happens. One major deficiency is neglecting to plan spaces that accommodate the social aspects of human communication—be it face-to-face or technology-aided communication.

It truly is about the people. For years office space has been perceived as a stagnant, conditioned area that keeps employees together and out of the elements. Office space has seldom been thought of as functional beyond work surface and file storage, and its cost has been viewed as merely the cost of doing business. But today organizations are realizing that the planned work environment can often be a major contributor to effective work processes and the overall effectiveness of the group.

Business owners must rethink and thoroughly understand the way people work in order to create a space that best enhances their work performance. They must ask if employees have the environment required to research, present, respond and produce to the best of their abilities. Various work modes require unique work settings, from closed or semi-closed enclaves with various amounts of privacy to highly active team areas in which information is combined to create a tangible product in the form of knowledge. This is not an easy task and must be developed in a candid, open-minded way. Tom Peters would say, "Tear down the existing model, and start fresh. None of the old paradigms hold any credibility anyway!"

The issue is not just that work has changed over the years, it's that work now changes by the hour. The good news is that, even though it's impossible to know what changes are coming, it is possible to plan an environment that will be ready to respond to almost any change.

Create an office atmosphere that allows teams to gather at a moment's notice. Provide a space that encourages collaborative and interactive thinking with all the tools necessary to bring multiple ideas to fruition. Be the change. □