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Work environment crucial to job satisfaction, productivity

DEREK PARKER The Australian May 27, 2011 12:00AM A+ A-   Share

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THE latest front in the battle to attract and retain high-talent employees and get the best out of them is workspace design, according to leading specialists in the field.

"Employers realise that if people don't want to be in the workspace, they won't perform well and will soon start looking elsewhere," says Sergio Pires, director of Valmont, a leading design, project management and construction company. "The trend is towards open-plan design, with the senior people being part of that, rather than isolated in separate offices. It reflects the move toward teams and activity-based work rather than strict hierarchy."

There have been no studies about workspace design and employee productivity in Australia but a study in Britain by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and the British Council for Offices found elements such as good lighting, airflow and access to natural light can reduce absenteeism by 15 per cent and increase productivity by up to 20 per cent. It also found that an employee's workplace is responsible for 24 per cent of their job satisfaction level.

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"I would say that the Australian picture would be much the same," says Pires. "One of our redesign projects, a company called iiNet in Perth, involved a before-and-after analysis of staff turnover, and it found that after the redesign there was a 25 per cent reduction. That suggests the savings available to the company."

A critical aspect of good design in an open-plan environment is spaces for meeting, whether formal, private meetings in purpose-built rooms or informal contact between colleagues. Increasingly, high screens are being replaced by low dividers, often storage units topped with planter boxes. Consideration also needs to be given to traffic flow around the office. "A common design error is to put offices on the outer edge of the workspace, which blocks any natural light to those on the inside," Pires notes. "Another issue is insufficient storage space -- this can lead to a sense of clutter and confusion."

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"A worker who has to [search] for what they need is not going to be very productive."

Pires says that smaller companies should plan for workforce growth and should look for design options that reduce energy

consumption and provide important benefits for the bottom line.

Steve Fitts, NSW director of design consultancy firm PTID Environments, agrees that good design can yield cost savings, adding that employers also have to think about occupational health and safety issues.

"Aside from wanting a healthy and safe workforce, there are liability concerns that can, if ignored, lead to big bills," he says. "One of the most important elements in the workplace is the office chair -- it's a vital piece of artillery in [occupational health and safety]." . Modularity is the trend in furniture, so the employee can design their own space. The current look is towards informality and openness.

"The active engagement of employees in the design process assists greatly in the ownership and acceptance of the design solutions," says Fitts. "It should be part of the agenda for companies seeking to transform their workplaces."

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