



Offices are no longer simply a place of employment. They are now technology hubs, communities and a home-away-from-home. Stephanie McDonald reports.

CHANGING THE WORKPLACE DYNAMIC

DESIGNING COMMERCIAL SPACE is more than filling empty spaces with furniture. Office spaces have also become an extension of most companies' culture, goals and vision.

"[Companies] are trying to get their organisation to be slightly more collaborative, so they're emphasising the social spaces ... [and] heavily aligning that to their company strategy and their goals as an organisation," says Natalie Slessor, director of consulting, Australia at Woods Bagot.

The growth of generation Y in the workplace has also impacted on office space as staff retention becomes more important. This has been manifested in the creation of more 'comfortable' workplaces through employee engagement.

"They're engaging with new generations now, so there's new themes coming in for what people want. The theory goes that gen Y is slightly more demanding in some of those aspects ... so you [have to] respond at a cultural and a human resources level," says Dwight Torrevillas, senior designer, project management and construction at Lend Lease.

"You have to try and predict how that community will work together and how it will meet the cultural aspirations of the organ-

isation," says Matthew Yates, national engineering manager, project management and construction at Lend Lease.

Office design is being influenced by six factors – technology, floorspace ratios, sustainability, the global financial crisis (GFC), furniture and equipment and budgets.

TECHNOLOGY

Although technology is rapidly changing, it is the applications we use at home, such as Skype, that are having the greatest impact on workspaces.

Previously, video teleconferencing was cost prohibitive. Skype, however, enables users to engage in face-to-face conversations and teleconferencing on a simple and inexpensive basis.

Some companies have already invested in advanced teleconferencing facilities, such as video conferencing with hologram vision. However, this type of technology is unlikely to become mainstream due to its prohibitive cost.

This type of video conferencing often requires the creation of meeting rooms that allow this type of technology to be operated. It won't, however, necessarily mean enclosed offices will make a comeback.

"It's just that existing meeting rooms will have technology installed that accommodates teleconferencing," says Rodney Timm, director at Property Beyond.

Meanwhile, wireless technology is also improving, including wireless internet networks and wireless lighting.

Wi-fi technology allows employees to work remotely within their office building – for example, in a café on their laptop or mobile phone. It also means cables are getting smaller, so electrical covers are becoming less obtrusive.

FLOORSACE RATIOS

With the growth of electronic data storage and less emphasis on paper storage, physical space has been freed up in the office.

Although recovered space from storage might seem minor, every bit of real estate in the office counts as companies attempt to squeeze more people in.

"I think you'll probably be fairly close to what's comfortable, even if you started sharing spaces. The major space savings have been made and, yes, there are savings to be made across a large portfolio, but there'll be less so," Slessor says.



KEY POINTS

Organisations are attempting to be more collaborative, prompting more social spaces

Wireless technology and hot desking are allowing employees to work remotely and flexibly, and offices to become increasingly 'paperless'

Technology costs can be prohibitive, so general programs and systems used at home are also being used in the office

The GFC led to some benefits, but post-crisis, clients are not necessarily ready to spend up big

Timm says, "I think workstations are getting smaller and smaller and storage at desks is getting smaller and smaller, but you get to an optimum point where you can't get any smaller, and I think we're rapidly reaching that."

Density levels are falling to as little as 8sqm per person, but Yates says configuring that type of density can be hard.

At the new Commonwealth Bank building, Darling Walk in Sydney, Yates says the move to more efficient spatial use, which translates to fewer dollars in rent, reinforces a slightly different culture.

For the bank, this has meant embracing activity-based working, which was originally practised in the company's Martin Place office. Now it is rolling out the concept over 80,000sqm of floorspace in its new building.

Lend Lease is seeing clients request case studies for one in 8sqm and one in 10sqm scenarios "just in case".

"But in general, the delivery for large commercial organisations would have been around the 15sqm mark down to around about 13-12 [sqm], at a stretch," Yates says.

Large space users such as the Federal Government will only fund projects that work on a specific sqm rate per occupied work point. Accommodation costs above that won't get funded, "so you've got to find another way to pay for it, so that will change behaviour," Timm says.

However, the concept of the paperless office largely depends on the profession. For example, IT and computer-related industries can work more easily in storage-free offices.

"However, in traditional paper-based industries such as law firms, engineering firms and insurance firms, paper is still kept en masse. It's necessary for them to keep paper records for a certain number of years, so the traditional filing storage is still requested," says Jacqui Esdaile, marketing and creative director at design and construction firm Valmont.

The challenge for designers is to make that storage as unobtrusive as possible.

SUSTAINABILITY

One of the biggest impacts on office spaces has been sustainability.

Although some companies were quick to throw as much technology into a building as possible to make it more 'environmentally friendly', sustainability is being pared back to more basic design principles.

"The smarter the buildings get, the harder they are to build. But in the end, what the client sees and what the occupant sees won't be a lot different," Yates says.

"But inevitably there's not a quantum change in sustainability because 10 years ago we were working in two-star buildings and now we're working in six-star buildings. Is there a lot of difference there? Probably not, but it does change slowly."

Paul Reidy, principal and director of design at Rice Daubney, believes the impact of sustainability will manifest as the focus increases on the internal impacts on occupants, for example, indoor air quality and greater access to natural light.

"Certainly, if you look at buildings in Australia compared to Europe, access to natural light in European buildings is an awful lot higher. The buildings are narrower and smaller, so you get better access to light and views," Reidy says.

"I think you'll find over the next decade, [trigeneneration] and [cogeneration] will become much more important elements in base buildings."

THE GFC

Now that the effects of the GFC are diminishing, the business case for new projects has to be even more finely tuned. Clients are reluctant to spend big on projects that may look nice but have no value for the company's business.

This has meant a move away from extravagant features and more planning on future proofing buildings for downturns.

"In the short term, people kept things as similar as they possibly could. In the longer term I think people are thinking about how much more flexibly they can use their space," Slessor says.

"As their businesses grow again, [they need to ask themselves], do they really need to have a desk per person ... or can they think a little differently and use their IT systems to maybe change the way their office might be set up?"

Not all of the effects of the GFC were negative. Reidy says as a result of the crisis, innovation in commercial spaces increased.

"Producing something standard into a market where people were being relatively conservative and not wanting to move around too much, you needed an extra lever to attract people out of their existing space," he says.

Into the future, Reidy says this will be most evident in existing office spaces.

INNOVATIVE APPROACHES

As desks have become smaller and individual space has decreased, public spaces within the office have grown, with more of the budget being spent on kitchens and breakout areas.

Reidy says it is becoming the driving force. "You're starting to see the expansion of the lobby coffee shop into a kind of meeting room."

More money is also being spent on amenities. Whereas once a few bike spaces and showers in the basement sufficed, those amenities are now taking on a golf club quality.

"They're becoming much more of an attraction to tenants ... and, as such, people are very focused on the quality of those facilities," Reidy says.



Good design, however, will continue to be a strong element of office spaces.

"Part of how you design and present your offices is part of the message you're giving your workers and also helps them to understand the values and the vision of the company," Timm says.

"There's been a lot of talk about breakout areas, cafeterias, cappuccino machines, showers and all those kinds of things, but once again, in the leading-edge private companies, that was done five to 10 years ago. Some of them went to an extreme. Some of them had video games and all that kind of stuff ... and they've sort of come back."

FURNITURE AND EQUIPMENT

The major change to furniture and equipment has been a shift to 'hot desking', which works on the basis of shared desks. Macquarie Bank employed the strategy at its new office at One Shelley Street in Sydney

and several other banks also use it.

"It's very dynamic [and] it reduces siloing ... and it leads to more innovative workspaces. It means people have to become less reliant on storing bits of paper and reports and rely on their electronic storage needs," Yates says.

"That puts pressure on companies to have proper workflow for all of those things."

Hot desking also means furniture must be more flexible and adjustable due to the different number of people using the one desk.

"Then the ability to plug-and-play technology is [having an impact] ... Ideally you just plug in and go ... So I think what we put on the desk is becoming increasingly important for those that are working in this new way," Slessor says.

Timm says the concept of hot desking is not new and is quite common in "leading edge companies". He believes the challenge lies in when old, staid companies and government will accept the concept.

The evolution of office spaces will be slow – change in the property industry is rarely revolutionary. "Sometimes it might look like a big rush forward because you've got a client that wants to do a lot of stuff and put all the ideas in, but in reality, for those ideas to be put in takes a fair while because the nature of organisations is inherently conservative," Yates says.

The future office Reidy envisions is a narrow building with greater access to natural light. The façade may open up and tenants will be able to opt in or out of the air-conditioning system.

"The trends that are in office interiors will overflow into base buildings and you'll find more multi-storey spaces and much more interconnection between spaces in the building," Reidy says. "I think [existing buildings] will be a place of innovation because people have to be different and innovative because they will be locked into existing scenarios that will need some creative thought." ■