Company culture, employee collaboration drive office interior design

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When it comes to designing workspace that is going to be effective for a diverse group of employee work styles and job functions, the first conversation has to be about the company's culture, according to a trio of Portland's leading interior designers.

Andrea Bainbridge, who founded her firm Bainbridge in 1983, says her team's design process begins with a discussion about the client's internal culture and demographics to determine what kind of image they want to project to their customers. Most CEOs and other executives have specific goals in mind, and the discussion fleshes out strategies for meeting those objectives.

"We always go out to visit them," she says. "We want to understand what their current situation is so we can see what is working, and we walk around and look at how people do their work."

Linda Czopek founded Czopek Design Studio in 1986 and says that while company culture has always played a role, it's become a key driver over the last decade.

"There are so many ways to do things and people don't just make arbitrary decisions anymore," she says, adding her firm provides concept packages consisting of website images from their manufacturer's catalog to help clients identify and express opinions about specific design elements. A recent client wanted an "urban chic" look, and the concept package showed the broad spectrum of options within that design style.

COURTESY: PETE ECKERT - *One of Bainbridges recent projects included designing office space for Bright.md.*

"We have a great conversation because we can hold up images and talk about different material types and color selections. People have lots of opinions on these things," Czopek says. "The programming phase includes a lot of questions and discussion, and it's much more refined now because the clients are more sophisticated and informed when they discuss what they want."

Jennie Fowler, director of interiors for Hacker, says her visioning conversations with clients are followed by "user group meetings" in which work flow is explored.

"We basically meet with every department within the company and learn everything there is to know about how they work and, aspirationally, how they want to work," she says. "With each client, we have a number of departments that work very differently."

Open spaces are better for employees who require more communication and interaction with others for their work, but other employees need space that is quieter and more private so they can concentrate without being interrupted by noise, Fowler notes.

Striking a balance

The trio agrees that collaboration is a common theme that arises during their conversations with clients, and most want workspace that fosters that. However, the open space trend is shifting a bit.

"Everybody had been getting on this bandwagon of open office spaces, but the distraction level goes way up. There has to be a balance between private space and collaboration space," Bainbridge says. Her firm has been designing more "phone booths" or "huddle rooms," where employees can meet to have private conversations or a quiet space to work.

"We create zones within the workspace so people know that if they are working in a certain zone where people are trying to concentrate, they need to take their conversation elsewhere," she says.

Czopek notes that workspaces are shrinking, in part, because of technology and other tools that reduce the need for larger space. The need for physical filing and storage space has diminished as more companies have cut down on their use of paper or gone paperless altogether, she says, adding computers have been the biggest factor in office space evolution.

As workspaces get smaller, the tradeoff is that they promote greater efficiency and often feature adjustable work surfaces so people can stand instead of sitting all day. And it's essential for employees to feel a sense of ownership about changes in their workspace, Czopek says.

COURTESY: PETE ECKERT - *The newly redesigned offices at Bright.md shifts away from the open floorplan trend of recent years and embraces a combination of open space and private spaces where employees can meet to have conversations or a quiet space to work.*

"That makes it a lot more palatable for people. We take site visits to look at other workspaces and showrooms so people can see actual physical examples and they aren't alarmed by the thought of smaller workspaces," she says.

Conference space is getting smaller as well, with demand growing for meeting space that accommodates smaller groups of people on a continuous basis throughout the day rather than occasional large gatherings.

Home away from home

Recreational spaces stocked with ping pong and foosball tables (among other amenities) are an interior design trend that emerged primarily within the tech sector. Fowler says companies that have incorporated these spaces are seeking to foster a healthy work environment, improve their ability to attract and retain employees, and help build camaraderie among team members.

"They get to recreate together, which kind of lightens the mood and allows some bonding to happen. The theory is that they tend to work better together when they get back to their desks," she says.

For other companies, recreation space seems indulgent and more traditional amenities are in order. Fowler's design work often includes biophilia, or building on people's connection with nature.

"That can be a challenge when you're doing (tenant improvements) in a high-rise, so we bring in plants, use nature scenes and replicate natural lighting when it doesn't exist," she says. "We find that the folks we do that for are really happy with the end product and feel more relaxed at work."

Bainbridge says that companies seeking more traditional upgrades may not opt for recreational space, but they do want larger lunch rooms that encourage employees to gather comfortably and interact during their breaks.

Czopek recalls the bullpens and old-school desks that dominated office space and predated cubicles when she began her design career. "I love that we moved away from that," she says, adding acoustics are an ongoing challenge but, overall, workspaces are more flexible and pleasant for employees. "It makes it really fun because it's not the same old thing anymore."

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