

The Productive Office

By: Terry Finch - Director, Artlink design Associates Limited in Shanghai Branch



Modern office design is in a state of transition, and while in Asia the pace of change is probably lagging the US and European markets, changes are gradually becoming obvious. The internet, laptop computers, PDAs and mobile phones have made the world a much more mobile place, which has in turn affected office design.

In China, companies in the major cities relocate their offices frequently as new, better-built commercial buildings become available. This provides ample opportunity to improve the workplace and create more efficient and productive environments.

Unfortunately, because of the short-term approach to leases in China, there is often a short-term approach to office design. Companies may not feel it is necessary to worry much about the space planning and design, or spend the money for a well-designed office if they expect to relocate in a year or two. However, that approach can, in the end, actually cost more in terms of lost productivity and staff turnover.

One case in point was the office of a major public relations agency. The old office featured drab colours and standard L-shaped workstations with high panels that kept everyone in his or her "box." When the lease came up for renewal the managing director saw the opportunity to create a better, more productive office.

The new office featured interesting shapes and warm colours in the public area, while the general office area used cooler, brighter colours and featured flowing workstations with low panels which were set up in teams to facilitate communication

amongst the staffs. The managing director spent a lot of time with the design team on the front end to help ensure the resulting design accomplished his ultimate goal.

In a matter of a few weeks, the managing director reported that productivity amongst his staffs had increased. There was much more communication amongst the teams, and between teams as well. Staffs were working more efficiently, but even when overtime was required, they were much more willing to stay in the office.

Another element of productivity is the image perceived by visitors and staffs. If a client visits an office that is disorganized and dreary, he or she may form an image of a company that is disorganized and not dynamic, even if the company's sales people have been telling them differently. If the public image of the company is cutting edge, or it is trying to establish a reputation for outstanding customer service, the office environment should reflect that.

An illustration of this is a major communications company in Shanghai. Selling themselves as a leader in providing next generation telecommunications networks, their corporate office was the epitome of



the traditional office with heavy wood furniture and fittings, many enclosed offices and staffs who had few opportunities to interact.

Senior management determined that to fulfill its mission and convince its clients and its staff that it was who it said it was, a new design was required. The result of much collaboration between the client and designer was a fresh, bright open plan environment with enclosed offices only for the most senior people.

Numerous small meeting rooms, equipped with videoconferencing facilities were provided, as was an open, casual pantry area where informal gatherings could take place over a cup of coffee. Open workstations featured 1.3 metre high panels so staff could have privacy while seated, but easily achieve eye contact with others at standing height. Managers were equipped with a small movable table that can be stored beneath desktop, but easily accessed for a quick meeting with a colleague without leaving their desk.

The result: a cutting edge image for a cutting edge organisation.

So how does one create "The Productive Office"?

Working with a designer, the company should determine its precise needs. It can do so by asking itself a lot of questions, even before selecting the premises.

How many people need to be accommodated and what sort of work spaces do they need? How many meeting rooms and areas for equipment, pantry, filing and storage, IT and other ancillary services are needed? What special needs are to be accommodated?

Is the office still traditional, with senior managers in enclosed offices, secretaries outside their doors and staff in standard workstations, or has the organisation evolved to a more open environment with few enclosed offices. A more open plan may not necessarily save space, as fewer enclosed offices generally mean the need for more shared meeting areas, but such a set up can dramatically impact the dynamics of the office.

Does the organisation include a large sales force which does not (or should not) spend much time in the office? If so, smaller workstations, or the idea of shared desks, known as "Hot-desking" or "Hoteling", may be implemented to reduce the overall square metres needed for the office.

How do people work within the organisation? Are they set up as teams who need a high degree of communication? Who interacts most frequently with the managing director or general



manager? Who has the most visitors from outside? Will the operation be enhanced by casual meeting areas that lend themselves to brainstorming and creativity?



Do people use desktops or laptops? Do visitors need access to internet connection? Do visitors and staff need to access their email from various locations within the office rather than just from fixed locations? Do staff need to access their email from remote locations?

What is the company image? What aspects of it should be reflected in the office design?

Because of technology, today's offices are much more complicated than before our lives revolved around 24-hour communication. Even as recently as the early 90s. Work, for the vast majority of employees, was done in the physical surrounding of the office. Today a large percentage of the work force needs the flexibility to work from multiple locations, and the design of the physical office impacts and is impacted by that need.

By now it should be evident that there is much more to setting up a productive office than building a few walls and putting in desks. Good office design combines art and science to create an aesthetically pleasing environment that helps stimulate and motivate the work force. As such, office design should not be neglected, even in the short term.

For more information about space planning or interior design please visit our website www.artlinkdesign.com or contact our Guangzhou Branch michelle@artlinkdesign.com (8620) 8376 6033 and Shanghai Branch terry@artlinkdesign.com (8621) 6272 8213.