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Learning from Corporate Interiors

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Open-plan configurations of workstations with lower panel heights allows for more transparency and collaboration among coworkers. A lower percentage of staff is assigned to enclosed offices. Photo courtesy of Tom Crane Photography.

It is all too easy to focus on the complex, technical aspects of a laboratory while not recognizing that the laboratory is also a work place. As a work place, there is much that laboratory design can learn from the trends that have arisen from corporate interiors over the last 10-plus years. So how do we learn from Corporate Interiors? How do we take the needs of highly specialized laboratory spaces with precise technical requirements and combine them with the need for workspaces that function well for people - people that have the same needs for collaboration, social networking, and teaming as their corporate counterparts?

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The trends that have taken hold in the corporate arena – 24/7 flexible work spaces, more computer connectivity, greater concern for security, more teaming, a more diverse work force, and international collaboration - are all trends that we see in laboratories too. Currently in laboratory building design we have seen a shift from earlier figures of 20 to 30% office space in lab projects, all the way to a 50/50 split now, with many projects falling in the 40% range. As the trend in laboratory design of having more office space takes hold, the work place lessons become even more influential and relevant.

Scientists spend more time in their offices than they used to. Laboratory equipment has become more self contained and “forgiving” in terms of surrounding environmental criteria. Additionally, laboratories are drier than they used to be, so laboratory furniture can be more like systems furniture. While it is true that the speed at which science advances drove the need for laboratory layouts to be reconfigurable without major construction projects, some of the impetus for flexible labs grew out of the success of flexible office systems furniture in the late 1980’s. A concern for ergonomics and the realization that workers come in all sizes helped to push flexible systems furniture, and this, in turn, influenced the design of flexible casework systems.

The iconic photo of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Johnson Wax Company interior conjures images of a “Stepford Wife”-like work environment, that recalls the earliest organized interior planning in corporate America. With this said, the

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basic concept of flexible workplace initiated through systems furniture is not too far from what graces the workplace of today, providing a flexible work environment to house knowledge workers. Yes, aesthetically and stylistically the workstation as we know it today is different, but conceptually it is the same.



Over the past forty-plus years, the individual components that comprise a workstation have evolved into the trends that we see today: lower panel heights, minimal overhead storage, mobile elements, transparency, and smaller workstation footprint; all of which support the collaborative workplace that has taken the corporate interior by storm. As processes become mainstreamed through advancements in technology,



The individual workspace has declined in square footage but the workstation is now designed to support collaboration. Photo courtesy of Tom Crane Photography.

the individual workstation no longer needs to house giant monitors. This “found” space could then be dedicated to support shared concepts through teaming and collaboration rather than individual workspace.

Now that a “one-size-fits-all” workstation concept has become common, the individual workspace has seen a steady decline in square footage. Based on benchmark data, the common workstation of the Nineties was an average of 80 NSF per workstation. Current metrics indicate that the reduced workstation of 48 to 49 NSF per workstation is more common, supported by the advancements of technology.

Just as the workstation has declined in dedicated square footage, the private office has also decreased in size. The single private office metric of 140 NSF per office seen as the norm in the Nineties has been reduced to a square footage of 110 to 120 NSF per office as the new trend. The demountable partitions that are part of many manufacturers’ laboratory lines now have as their predecessor the office partition. The demountable wall system allows for another level of flexibility in the planning of work environments.

Within corporate workplaces, the ratios of workstations to private offices continue to increase – placing more staff within open plan configurations rather than closed offices. In corporate America, it is not unusual to see 90% of an office environment be open plan with only 10% of the staff assigned to enclosed offices. This trend is harder to find in the scientific world, just as it is in the legal world, as advanced degree professionals still demand the entitled private office assignment. Only time will tell if this metric will begin to shadow corporate America once the Generation Y workforce gains numbers in advanced degrees.

Another emerging workplace trend with regards to individual workspaces is the ratio of people to number of seats or “butts to seats” as it is commonly referred to. Traditionally, facilities have located one staff to one seat, equating to a one to one ratio, however this trend is starting to shift. As organizations are introducing and adopting alternative officing opportunities through flex-time, telecommuting, and shared job programs, traditional planning is seeing an increase in workplace vacancies. To take advantage of these vacant workspaces, organizations are maximizing their real estate holdings with reduced square footage by increasing the ratio of staff per workplace seat. Such programs are currently being piloted within many corporations to qualify, quantify, and warrant their utilization which will then ultimately lead to formal Alternative Workplace Strategy (AWS) policies.



While individual workspaces are decreasing in size, more square footage is being dedicated to common amenity spaces such as coffee bars. Illustration: KlingStubbins

For conferencing needs, closed conference rooms distributed through the workplace remain a program mainstay. In fact, current conference room benchmark data supports one seat per every three staff people with a trend nearing two, yet statistics show that more than 75% of office interaction last for less than 15 minutes. This statistic supports the emerging trend of collaboration and informal

interactive zones that found a way to share conference support functions. Scattered throughout a floor plan, clustered near natural places of significant foot traffic, coffee bars and cafés - these support those brief, informal interactive moments that otherwise would be lost opportunities spent behind a workstation panel, a computer screen, or a closed conference room door. These collaboration zones are designed with tools such as writable surfaces, lounge seating, and mobile tables, which, in turn, foster new ideas, brainstorming, and creative thinking – all with the common goal of supporting the bigger picture of an organization’s business objectives.

Although individual workspaces, both workstations and offices, have shown a decrease in size, overall gross square foot per person (GSF/P) metrics have been at a steady constant. So how come there is no realized space saving as a result of the decreased personal space? This question highlights another trend: an increase in common and amenity spaces.

Organizations are allocating a larger percentage of the square feet of the facility to these common and amenity functions. Shared amenities and collaboration zones have earned a place as important programmed functions required to support a building and/or campus setting. Therefore, space previously utilized in larger individual workstations and offices is now distributed throughout the facility in common areas utilized by all.

Of common and shared amenity functions, food service has risen to the top of the list as the most requested amenity. Food service is no longer just a cafeteria. Food service has taken cues from retail establishments offering a varied menu and a variety of dining accommodations, ranging from cafes, coffee bars, branded food markets, as well as the standard cafeteria. The elevation of food service has occurred for numerous reasons, not least being that keeping staff on site at lunch time is more efficient. The dining facilities are also often seen as an important place for community gathering opportunities, such as town hall meetings within an organization. Some of the other important amenities and special spaces are training / conference centers, fitness centers, and medical suites. In addition, corporate campus amenities such as dry cleaning, hair salons, concierge services, and banking services are common place. These accommodations allow for a better life / work place, which is another trend seen in the corporate world.

The “Greening of Corporate America” is a trend which is gaining more importance with each passing year. The earlier embracing of sustainable materials within corporate interiors has made it easier for corporations to feel comfortable with sustainable materials in their laboratories. This has allowed for the discussion of sustainability in laboratories to reach beyond energy issues and look at materials (such as bamboo casework) and finishes (such as low VOC coatings) too.

There is much to learn from corporate interior design that is of value to us as laboratory designers given that there is a history of laboratory buildings having been influenced by corporate interiors in the past. Some of the take away items are flexibility, ergonomics, collaboration, and sustainability. Now that offices in lab facilities are more important in terms of numbers and time spent in them, and that labs are not as wet as they used to be, it is more apparent that collaborative spaces are necessary and amenities such as food service are no longer extravagances. Large pharmaceutical firms always speak glowingly of the “energy” that the biotech companies have. It stands to reason that if we can tap that energy – which some designs do – we are on the right path, because being housed in a great facility contributes to a laboratory’s success.

Regardless of what metrics a workplace adheres to, whether it be a laboratory or corporate environment, there is no set prescription. Each workplace should be a reflection of the organization’s individual culture and should respond to how their people work. Yes, there are special concerns present in laboratory design that don’t exist in the design of a corporate interior, but if the design considerations discussed here are good for work productivity, they are good for laboratories. Remember: laboratories are workplaces too.



Opportunities for employees to gather in informal teaming areas is gaining in popularity. These collaborative zones are designed with tools such as lounge seating, mobile tables and writable surfaces that foster the exchange of ideas and brainstorming. Illustration: KlingStubbins

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