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21st-Century Space Planning

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A couple of years ago, at a private meeting with a group of our corporate sponsors (then called the *Future of Work Consortium*, now the *WDC Private Client Network*, or PCN), the director of workplace services for a large international manufacturer made an interesting observation:

You know, we're still planning and allocating space in our facilities exactly the same way we were when I started in this business, back in the 1970's. Back then we had a pretty good idea how many people would be assigned to a facility, and we knew that most of them would in the office every day.

Today, of course, everyone is moving around. Some people work here three days a week, some four. But you never really know from day to day who's going to be in the building. And to make matters worse, when they're here, they're hardly ever in their assigned cubes. They're in conference rooms, or sitting in someone else's office for a small meeting, or in one of the informal lounges.

And did I mention that on any given day, we usually have several dozen contractors and consultants wandering around looking for a place to sit down and get online?

How can we possibly anticipate how much and what kind of space we need? Yet building out or redesigning a facility is a months-long project, and we can't just re-do it the day it's finished.

As you might imagine, that observation set off a long, high-energy conversation. More importantly, it provoked us to dig around looking for more effective space planning tools and methods. Unfortunately, we haven't yet found the golden egg, or anything even approaching it.

In today's mobile, location-independent economy determining how much and what kind of office space an organization needs is an almost overwhelming task.

As our client observed, employees (and the many customers, consultants and contractors who wander in and out of an organization's facilities on any given day) are constantly moving around, both inside and outside the buildings. They split their time among many different work areas, sometimes working alone and sometimes with others in collaborative settings of all kinds.

The fact is that organizations can no longer simply build out and maintain *a* workplace; they must provide many kinds of spaces to support the many different activities we call “work.”

Because most knowledge workers now spend significant amounts of time in many different places, by definition they are only physically present in any single facility a small part of the time (even when it is their “assigned” office). In fact, our own research has consistently shown that a full *two-thirds* of knowledge work activity in the United States takes place outside of traditional corporate office buildings.

And even when employees *are* in the building they usually need several kinds of work spaces over the course of a day or week: a private space for concentrated “heads down” work or conference calls, conference rooms for periodic group work, and informal gathering places off and on throughout the work day.

And to complicate matters even further, the basic way work gets done is also evolving. For example, many companies are embracing more collaborative work and placing a premium on connecting with external partners. These changes in basic business practices also require a different kind of workplace.

We’ve certainly seen some very creative partial solutions to the interior design challenges. Hewlett-Packard is becoming widely known for creating “neighborhoods” in its facilities that include a mix of private spaces, small and large conference rooms, informal lounge areas, and even areas that look like a college campus library, with quiet zones and study “carrels.”

We’ve seen several other similar designs in a wide variety of organizations, in both the public and the private sectors. At HP we understand that employees are now assigned not to an individual workspace, but to a floor in the building; their “office” is the whole floor, in the same sense that your home includes many different kinds of rooms that you move in and out of as your needs and activities change.

SCAN Health, a not-for-profit Medicare Advantage company we’ve worked with and written about for several years, worked with several furniture manufacturers to develop what the company has come to call “townhouses.” An office townhouse resembles a super-sized cubicle but is actually filled with moveable tables, chairs, filing cabinets, and other furnishings and can seat four to eight people comfortably.

(For more information about SCAN, see “[Getting Real: Transforming the Workplace at SCAN Health](#),” and be sure to look at the video posted publicly on YouTube, at this link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1A9AdVd0Ks>).

To further complicate things, employers typically do not own or have any control over many of the places where their employees actually get work done (we’re thinking primarily of the coffee shops, libraries, and hotel lobbies, to say nothing of home offices).

This new reality creates massive challenges for space planners and facilities managers; it is not enough to count the number of employees based in a given facility, multiply that number by an average square foot factor, add in conference rooms and circulation space, and come up with a space requirement or a floorplate design.

Facilities professionals today have to treat workplaces more like hotels and airplanes with variable demand, rather than as traditional arrays of assigned offices and cubicles along with reserveable conference rooms. They must think in terms of space demand probabilities, and be able to reconfigure workplaces to reflect changing workforce needs for space on almost a daily or even an hourly basis.

We're convinced it's past time to reinvent the "science" of space planning. The profession needs a basic paradigm shift and an entirely new generation of planning tools and techniques. And we're getting ready to launch a special project aimed at doing just that.

If you are interested in participating in the project, please [contact us](#) right away, and we'll be more than happy to tell you about the journey we're about to take.

Note: a slightly different version of this article appeared in the July 15 2010 issue of the RealCommAdvisory Newsletter, at the following link:

<http://www.realcomm.com/advisoryweb.asp?aid=432>

[Please send your comments directly to us](#), or post a comment on the blog version of the newsletter. We look forward to learning from you.

About the Work Design Collaborative and *Future of Work Agenda*

Future of Work is a global network of resources – practitioners, thought leaders, researchers, and senior consultants – who are committed to building and implementing physical, social, and technology-based work environments that are cost-effective, socially and environmentally responsible, and personally satisfying.

We are focused on defining the future of work and helping our members and clients achieve new levels of workforce and workplace productivity. *Future of Work* produces and distributes management tools, surveys, benchmark databases, white papers and technical reports, conferences and workshops, newsletters, books and articles, and public presentations on the changing nature of work. The Work Design Collaborative, LLC, provides leadership and infrastructure services for the *Future of Work* community.

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