10 Questions to Ask When Designing Your Office

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The work environment is evolving at many companies these days, resulting in the need for new office design. At some businesses, for example, individual cubicles and offices are being dismantled in favor of a more open environment in which an employee's work station is wherever he happens to plug in his laptop.

Whatever the specific design, the emphasis today is clearly on being lean and flexible, says Alan Feltoon, managing principal at Washington, D.C.-based MulvannyG2 Architecture. He is one of three experts we consulted to come up with questions small-business owners should ask before designing or refashioning an office to meet the requirements of today's fast-changing workplace.

Do I want to encourage transparency and camaraderie?

More companies are knocking down walls and cubicles to create more open space. Now, top executives and managers may even sit in open areas with other employees. Feltoon recalls an office he designed for an investment bank, where he used glass instead of solid walls and provided open space for "impromptu get-togethers." The owner of the firm wanted people out in the open to convey an image of transparency to clients. An open design also can encourage team spirit. "When you open things up, all of a sudden, you have a vitality and transparency that encourages conversation, participation and learning," says Janet Pogue, principal at Gensler, an architectural firm based in Washington, D.C.

How do I provide privacy when necessary?

While you may want a more open office design, it's still important to provide spaces where employees can work quietly on individual tasks or simply have a private conversation. People spend about half their time in "focus mode," so the office needs to have a mix of "me spaces" for individual work and "we spaces" for group work, Pogue says. She suggests designing privacy rooms where there are no visual distractions.

How much space do I really need?

Office designers used to plan for about 250 square feet per employee, which included a walled workspace with a desk for a computer and personal items, such as photographs. Now that number has dropped to 150 square feet. The photos are on each person's laptop, which can move from home to the office and then to different locations within the office. Feltoon calls it a "'work from anyplace" mindset, and with an increasing number of companies letting employees work from home certain days, the office may only be partially occupied at any given time. "You don't want to pay for more space than you have to," he says.

What if some people often work from home?

As it becomes more common for employees to work at least partly from home, companies need to be concerned about home office design, too. Ergonomics is an important but often overlooked issue in home offices. "Being huddled over your laptop at the kitchen table is not the way to go," says Tom Polucci, senior principal and director of interior design for HOK, a New York City-based architecture, engineering and planning firm. The computer monitor should be positioned properly relative to your chair and desk height to avoid stress and strain on your back, neck, shoulders and eyes. You also need the right kind of lighting to reduce glare and eye strain. You might hire a consultant to help your employees set up their home workspace. Alternatively, "your health insurance provider might have information available to assist employees with home office set up," Polucci says.

How can I make my space flexible?

A young, growing business that is expecting to add employees and services doesn't want to be pouring precious dollars into reconstruction. Pogue suggests keeping your space as flexible as possible. You can buy desks and tables on rollers for easy movement to reconfigure a space on the fly and create "plug and play" areas where employees can take their laptops to work. Private offices can double as huddle rooms for group meetings, and you can use dividers to make conference room space as big or as small as needed.

How do I make my reception area warm and welcoming?

The reception area "is the first impression someone is going to have of the company," says Polucci. So, it's

important to create a comfortable and hospitable atmosphere. You can impart a feeling of warmth by allowing daylight to stream in and by making artificial lighting indirect and soft. Some designers suggest specific paint colors to convey a certain vibe: creams and beiges for sophistication, blues for honesty and loyalty, and greens for prestige. Finally, the overall space should not be imposing. "If it is a large lobby, for example, we create pockets of space within that volume for people to have a comfortable place to go," Polucci says.

What do I want my office space to say about my company?

Your office design can help communicate your corporate mission and image to both clients and employees. That can be especially important if you change your business model. Pogue uses the example of UBM, which with Gensler's help, redesigned its office to reflect its transformation from a century-old print media company into a 21st century online media firm. "Their San Francisco office was moved from a dated 1980s style cubicle farm into a bright, open and fully networked space that communicated the paradigm shift the company was undertaking," she says. "The space redesign not only clearly reflected the company's new focus and products, but allowed their employees to live the brand on a daily basis."

What kind of employee behavior do I want to encourage?

Your design can incorporate elements that will help you achieve certain results. If you want to encourage recycling, for example, you can install recycling stations throughout the office, providing easy access and clear instructions. Do you want more mingling between employees in different departments? Create a centralized coffee bar or printing station that will entice them to leave their immediate work area and share their thoughts with co-workers from another group.

Do I have comfortable places for employees to socialize and relax?

Popular spaces are cafes, pantries and other spots where people naturally congregate. Some businesses offer more elaborate amenities, such as fitness rooms, acupuncture/message therapy centers, dry cleaning drop-off points, and wellness rooms for everyone from nursing mothers to employees who don't feel well. "Creating spaces that allow employees to socialize and get some exercise or rest is important to create a sense of balance and well-being," Polucci says.

How do I make the space as green as possible?

Thinking in terms of sustainability is becoming the norm in office design, Polucci says. "We're designing every project with a sustainable focus, from mechanical and electric to lighting to recycled, renewable and reused materials. And we're to a point where many of the sustainable choices add no cost." For example, some overhead lighting will automatically grow dimmer as more natural light enters the space. Such a system can pay for itself in reduced energy bills within three years, Polucci says. Many "green" offices also use carpeting made of recycled content and wood harvested from sustainable forests.