



Rethinking the Office

After years of office design innovations, four lessons can help facility managers make the best choices for their spaces

By David Varner, AIA, LEED AP BD+C

Depending on the term you prefer, we now live in a social economy, a collaborative economy, or a connection economy. But as the economists and marketers hash it out and books on leadership in the new economy come out by the dozens, there is still a very important question on the table: How do our workplaces support this evolution?

We've torn down metaphorical walls around who holds the power in our changing world. But we're still very much inhabiting buildings, working inside of real walls. Even as our ideas about work/life balance evolve, we're still (for the most part) coming to work, spending our days there, and then leaving.

As we move forward, how does the overlay of connection and collaboration shape our

workplaces? Where have trends and initiatives already led us — and to what ends? In what ways has the intense focus on designing for collaboration and mobility — with less personal space for each employee and more shared space — been shortsighted in the past few years? And finally, where is the opportunity to truly merge progressive thinking about open work environments with what any given company and its people truly need?

These questions are architecture questions, which is to say they are questions about people, place, culture, and business objectives. Experience has taught four important lessons regarding these questions and the workplace design innovations of the past few years.

Above:

The new 30,000-square-foot headquarters of the American Red Cross San Francisco is completely open, with low partitions and no private offices

Lesson #1:

It's time to step outside of either/or thinking.

The totally open office has promised many things, including more creativity, better ideas through collaboration, and a higher level of employee satisfaction. The thinking was that more visibility, fewer closed doors, less spatial hierarchy, and more close quarters would breed all of these things. For the most part, it's a valid premise about organizational culture, the distance to power, and a generational shift to more organic groupwork.

However, once this concept caught on, many companies started adopting it, often without any consciousness of who they were, who their employees were, or how they did their work. It's not that it never succeeded: It did and it still does for many organizations. But there was a randomness about when it succeeded, especially with new companies seeking an identity and unique culture. And often, it didn't work well at all.

There was (and continues to be) a backlash by employees, ranging from specific complaints — such as the inability to concentrate — to larger problems, like feeling disenfranchised when their concerns were brushed aside in the name of “good design.” In fact, there's plenty of hard data that shows a great deal of employee dissatisfaction with the open office environment, even as the open office becomes more and more pervasive. Even *The New Yorker* ran a piece earlier this year about all the ways the open office hasn't lived up to its hype.

The lesson isn't that the open office doesn't work. The lesson is that it doesn't work for everyone, so consider the array of possible solutions and choose “the right tools for the

job.” More specifically, the either/or dichotomy is especially limiting. We live in a time when both/and can apply within the same company, too. In other words, the idea that you either need to be progressive with the open office or resort to an outdated model misses the boat in so many ways, which is really a shame because there are some truly great things about the open office concept.

Companies and building owners also have to step outside of the trap of thinking they either have to adopt a trend or fall behind. The reality is that companies need the right solution for their unique organization. And that solution doesn't begin with the end, the design. It begins with the beginning, which is defining who you are.

Lesson #2:

The most successful strategies for leveraging real estate begin with understanding the people.

Conventional wisdom says that for most companies, about 20 percent of cost is overhead, including real estate. So, if you can leverage the space to create an advantage there, the company could leap forward. But it turns out the opposite is true as well: If you mess up that smaller piece of the pie, you start affecting the other 80 percent — your employees.

Quite simply, the discussion about workplace design can't start with real estate. It has to start with people. Many companies today want an office that reflects who they are, how they work, and their vision for the world. Any number of them have excess real estate. They may want their clients, both present and prospective, to get a sense of who they are and how they work at the moment those clients walk in the door. The discovery process begins with defining the organizational culture and the very brand of

Opposite:

The new headquarters of the American Red Cross San Francisco supports a wide variety of space types, including huddle rooms with flexible furniture, informal lounge spaces, and open workspaces, giving staff a choice of spaces for the tasks they are engaged in.





Above:

The new work environment at Advisory Board Company's Austin office includes multi-use spaces like this one, where white boards behind the ping-pong table can be used for large group meetings.

the company. Increasingly, work is collaborative in nature. Openness is woven into how employees communicate and create.

Next, it's about the vision of the company—specifically, trying to align the vision with the culture. After the culture and vision are clear, it's about the programmatic stuff, such as discovering an ideal workstation, optimizing the number and size of meeting rooms, and incorporating the must-have types of spaces that reflect the company's own sense of itself on matters like work-life balance.

Finally, after all of this is on the table, it's time to talk about the design. A space that reflects a company's beliefs, style, and vision may well accommodate varying work styles, mobility, and project collaboration teams—all while being significantly smaller than previous space. Success depends on taking the time to discover what the company needs before entertaining design.

A good example: Advisory Board Company (ABC), a consultant and software provider to the healthcare and education sectors, went through this process in the redesign of their Austin office. What defined their culture was highly collaborative teams, each developing particular software products. As a result, it

was a natural design direction to create collaborative team spaces as the core of the office, with support and amenity areas closely arranged nearby. ABC, like many companies, has different sub-cultures within the organization, so various "neighborhoods" were created within the office, providing a variety of environments for different departments as opposed to a sea of open work stations. Each contains common themes of phone booths and soft spaces, all equipped with the right technology and appropriate team scales, but flexible for those teams to customize how to use their space. When walking through the different neighborhoods, some teams work with the overhead lights on, other teams prefer the lights off, it's all about what works for those individuals within that space.

Now that the space has been in use for a while, ABC's HR director reports that never before have they seen space be such a deciding factor in how much the person wants to work there: It's become a true recruiting tool. In fact, in Austin, the acceptance rate for new hires is over 90% since they moved in. Again, the success comes not just from the design, but also from tackling the important questions long before the design phase starts.

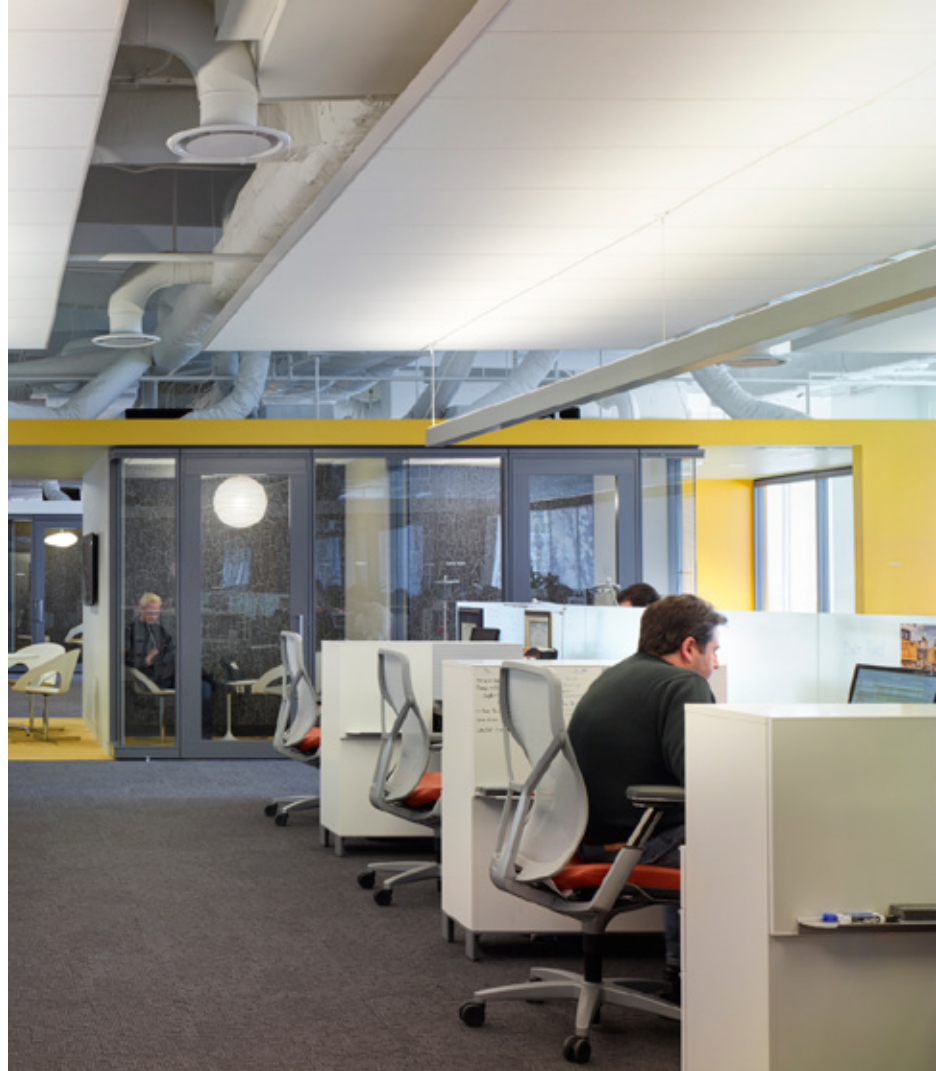
Lesson #3:

Space change doesn't work without true change management.

Moving from a traditional space to a totally open space is a big change, and the failure to carefully and actively manage this is one of the biggest culprits of employee backlash. Even when an open office plan is in line with the culture and the vision of the company, there is still another X factor as to whether or not employees adapt and thrive, and it's around change management.

It's about understanding the scope of the impact, how different groups of employees will be impacted in different ways, and then creating an open dialogue, feedback, and educational process about the future. Helping employees make personal behavioral shifts can make the change to an open office plan successful — things like how to use your voice, where to have conference calls or personal calls, how to store your stuff, and where to eat. Instead of merely reacting, it's about anticipating employee concerns and issues and working to make subtle shifts in the culture, so that it feels like a natural progression, versus an overnight change.

One of the most appealing aspects about the open office is that everyone can see each other. It flattens the hierarchy and equalizes that Mad Men-esque sense of real estate entitlement. However, if the leadership hasn't bought in, no one else will really buy in for the long term. For example, if the boss doesn't use the phone booth, respect the various cultures of the "neighborhoods," or eat in the same places as everyone else, it sends a message that the hierarchy really is still there and the design is just for show. But when the leader takes the reins and engages in the design process, it gives people hope and opens up the opportunity for a more open and inclusive culture.



Leaders can help set the tone early in the design process — for example, by making it clear that they will get desks that are identical and interchangeable with those of everyone else in the office and that they will take advantage of touch-down areas and pervasive technologies. Change management happens at all levels — including the very top. The smallest things that leaders say and do (or don't say and don't do) can wind up making a big difference.

When the American Red Cross San Francisco moved into their Bay area headquarters, they shifted from a downtown setting with private offices and cubicles into a totally open environment with low partitions zero private offices — a big change their organizations. "When we moved the walls and took people out of offices, I expected it would take time to 'get used' to the new environment," said Joe Lund, Regional Director of

Above:

In the Austin office of the Advisory Board Company, the redesigned space has become a recruiting tool in the competitive software industry. The new space features collaborative team spaces as the core of the office, with support and amenity areas closely arranged nearby.

Operations, Gateway to the Golden State Region. “To my surprise, our employees quickly adapted and our culture has become more open. People can now see their team and colleagues, whereas in the old space you might not see someone all day. The team-building that the new space allows is really phenomenal.”

Lesson #4:

The right building is a key to creating pride of place.

Another important aspect to designing a high-performance workplace: the choice of the right building. Things like amenities, column spacing, ratios for egress and plumbing fixtures, and even the quantity of outside air supply can shape good choices for the office-hunting process. The older building stock that tends to be in the desirable urban center areas isn’t always perfectly aligned with contemporary tenant design strategies. But this is where the true opportunity is — because unique challenges are what lead to unique design solutions.

Back to the American Red Cross. Site and building selection were key considerations to their mission. The building they purchased was originally constructed in 1921 as a multi-level parking garage. Throughout the years, the building has been used for retail, schools, and a church.

During the first visit to the site, the owner was inspired by the soaring open trusses, daylighting, massive windows and the beauty of the board-formed concrete walls. These things triggered their acquisition, because they knew that these characteristics would support a wide variety space types, such as offices, open workspaces, huddle rooms with flexible furniture, and informal lounge spaces. These provide a rich array for staff to choose from for whatever task they are engaged in and have the potential to adapt to new missions without rebuilding everything. Expansive windows provide spectacular views of the vibrant Market Street neighborhood for the staff while providing the public with a view of the Red Cross’s working process.

Building owners have the authority and the obligation to challenge the designer to explore all myriad of solutions — because ultimately, that will keep their facilities leased longer. Weed out the design firms that you don’t see working with their clients to answer these increasingly important questions.

This new office design endeavor that we’re all engaged in is a complex one. But the key lessons in identity, culture, and leadership are the right components to making it come together most successfully.



By David Varner, AIA, LEED AP BD+C

*brings over 30 years of design expertise to his role as Workplace Practice Leader at **SmithGroup**. David’s work includes private-sector and developer-driven solutions for base building construction, build-to-suits and mixed-use projects, in addition to tenant workplace design. He can be reached at david.varner@smithgroup.com*