SOM
THE PERFORMATIVE WORKPLACE
In today’s economic climate, every company is seeking to use resources more efficiently. But an ever-changing market requires that businesses strengthen their competitive advantages at the same time. Peter Drucker once observed that “knowledge-worker productivity requires that the knowledge worker is both seen and treated as an ‘asset’ rather than a ‘cost.’”¹ The challenge for many businesses today is to adopt new work processes and new models of organizational culture without making major investments in real estate.

In response to these seemingly contradictory imperatives, the design of office environments is undergoing a major paradigm shift. By adopting more strategic office designs, forward-thinking companies are transforming their physical environments into active instruments for achieving their goals.² A better layout and infrastructure, for example, can enable employees to do more with less space by directly supporting their work patterns. Modular systems afford the tactical flexibility to adapt seamlessly to radical organizational change. Healthy office environments lead to fewer sick days, reduced health care costs, and better performance.

The modern workplace was born in the mid-twentieth century of a desire to make offices more efficient and knowledge workers more effective. As management realized that human capital is the key to business performance, they sought new environments designed to help people work better. With the economy in transition once again, companies are feeling a renewed imperative to get the most out of their employees and their real estate. Yet the context of work is more diverse than ever:

² For example, the U.S. General Services Administration’s WorkPlace 20/20 initiative recognizes that an office environment “has the potential to increase individual productivity, and more importantly, it has the potential to help improve organizational effectiveness.” “Workplace Matters” (U.S. General Services Administration, 2006), 7
Some employees require multiple settings for different tasks, while others may work primarily from home or from the road. The most successful workplaces today are designed to support the specific kinds of innovation, collaboration, and focused work that employees do. Like urban environments, they offer density, a sense of place, and the infrastructure to encourage productivity.

As a design partner at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP (SOM), I have helped both major Fortune 500 firms and small start-up companies create new workplaces and revitalize obsolete ones. My clients have seen benefits ranging from dramatically lower real estate and operating costs to placing among Forbes’ top ten Best Companies to Work For. This white paper discusses some of the key components of performative work environments geared for today’s business environment.

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The office workstations for Global Hyatt’s Headquarters are based on a comprehensive study of employees’ time utilization, access to resources, and work processes. SOM developed three alternative schemes, testing them using video walkthroughs and physical models.

Instead of the typical stratified organization of an ordinary office building, Global Hyatt’s Headquarters features a connective cascading atrium that promotes interaction between employees, reinforces brand image, and provides a front-of-house space to welcome visitors.

**Precision Diagnostics**

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for the workplace. The scope of the project can be as simple as a three-week replanning to optimize the office layout and recommend basic infrastructure improvements. A more comprehensive 12-week investigation might include blocking and stacking studies, cost/benefit analyses, and a pilot office.

Either way, an office revitalization can only boost performance enough to justify its cost if it is tailored to the business’s specific needs. It is essential that designers study space usage analyses, benchmark comparisons, employee surveys, and growth projections. Digital models can be used to establish precise environmental technology criteria. A systematic needs assessment pinpoints which components of the workplace could be working harder.

**Planning for Radical Change**

A lean business needs an office tailored for the specific kinds of work its employees do. Financial, legal, consulting, and creative work processes often require different types of workspaces, each with unique spatial and technological needs. By tuning the design to respond flexibly to the correct mix of meeting types, SOM created an environment that hums with activity.
firms each have unique spatial requirements. Technology-savvy knowledge workers may require less support space and personnel, allowing a corporation to adopt a more efficient layout. By calculating the ideal size for workstations, designers can reduce a company's footprint by 25% or more. In turn, if individual heads-down space becomes smaller, a modest increase in social and team space often boosts productivity by stimulating collaboration.

Of course, it would be a mistake for any company to design with only today's needs in mind. Agile corporations need to plan for multiple futures, making office design an open-ended problem. Designers should favor "looser" workplace models that can be adapted without costly architectural reconfiguration. For example, bench systems provide greater elasticity than cubicles because they can accommodate varying numbers of workers doing different kinds of tasks. Single- or multi-floor neighborhoods of related employees can be designed to expand or contract rapidly if the company needs to reorganize.

Strategic Infrastructure

Every component of a high-performance workplace should be conducive to the task at hand. The office's environmental infrastructure should be viewed as a strategic armature that creates ambient conditions conducive to work and makes it possible to reconfigure modular components easily. Calibrating this workplace model is a critical step in the design process, and may require testing multiple solutions or building a pilot to fine-tune the system.

For example, well-designed lighting can reduce eye strain and fatigue, substantially boosting productivity. In a performative workplace, natural light provides primary illumination, with photosensors automatically controlling blinds and supplementing changing daylight conditions with electric light.

The key is to design these infrastructure components as integrated systems, scientifically analyzing and optimizing each component. Using Building Information Modeling (BIM) technology, designers can study exactly how much natural light can be harvested. The effects of different air conditioning systems can be simulated to compare effectiveness and operating costs. Digital tools allow the design firm to hone the workplace for peak performance like a meticulously-engineered product.

Strategic Infrastructure

Inside Chicago's landmark Inland Steel Building, SOM designed an integrated workplace for businesses that need to facilitate radical organizational change. The infrastructure includes active chilled beams, triple-glazed windows, and low-glare lighting.

These lighting components can be integrated into modular ceilings with fire protection devices, acoustical control surfaces, and other building systems. Power and communications can be distributed under lift-out floor modules. Air can be distributed under the floor, too, saving energy and increasing indoor air quality by delivering clean, conditioned air close to employees.

Tactical Reconfiguration

Within this infrastructure, an agile organization needs to be able redeploy office components rapidly as needs change. Many companies work hard to minimize churn, or the movement of workers within the organization. After all, in a conventional workplace, a furniture move—in which the work area is substantially reconfigured—costs about four times as much as a simple box move from one desk to another. Yet the ability to make radical changes in team structure may be vital for a business's success. The workplace should be designed to facilitate tactical reorganization by adapting seamlessly.

This degree of flexibility is possible through the use of modular systems. A kit of parts of lightweight, acoustically-insulated partitions and workstations with spring-loaded connectors allow the layout to be changed on the fly. Bench systems can be designed to adapt to different work modes. Flexible components allow the interior to be reconfigured without wasting time or resources, so teams are not tied down to a single location, size, or configuration.


SOM worked with a furniture manufacturer to develop a system of thin, movable partitions with a Sound Transmission Class (STC) rating of 32. A kit of parts of modular furniture and environmentally-conscious finishes allows offices to be rearranged or expanded quickly and cleanly.
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Healthy Environments, Healthy Employees

A workplace that promotes employee health can contribute dramatically to an organization’s success by boosting job performance and cutting health care costs. The same architectural strategies that promote employee health tend to be good for the environment. Better mechanical systems and increased exposure to daylight lead to healthier environments and healthier workers—and help the company’s bottom line.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recognizes Sick Building Syndrome (SBS) as acute discomfort associated with a building and typically caused by inadequate ventilation or air contaminants. Studies have found that poor indoor air quality can diminish productivity by as much as 6-9%.

To solve this problem, use non-toxic finishes, such as paints that are low in volatile organic compounds (VOCs). To further boost employee hygiene, some forward-thinking companies are adopting innovations from the design of healthcare facilities, such as interior surfaces treated with silver ions to kill harmful microbes.

Companies can secure public recognition for their environmental initiatives through Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED®) certification. This program, developed by the U.S. Green Building Council in 1998, now includes a benchmark specifically for commercial interiors. Using environmentally sustainable systems and materials often saves money in the long run, when life cycle costs of materials and building systems are factored in.

Conclusion

As the design of the workplace comes to be viewed as an integrated product capable of supporting employee work patterns, adapting to change, and responding to its environment, it is taking on greater importance as a tool for increasing organizational effectiveness. Tuning an office for this level of performance requires an understanding of how people and information flow through a contemporary work environment.

Inland Steel is one of the first commercial interior projects in the United States designed to LEED® Platinum specifications, with an active chilled beam system to save energy and a green leasing model that eliminates the wastefulness of interior demolition. The sustainability master plan includes a double glazed facade, motorized shades, 3 different green material palettes and personal control of light, sound and air.

W.J. Fisk and A. H. Rosenfeld, “Estimates of Improved Productivity and Health from Better Indoor Environments” in Indoor Air 7 (1997), 158-172

David Wyon, “The Effects of Indoor Air Quality on Performance and Productivity” in Indoor Air 14 (2004), 100

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It requires an ability to consider not just space planning but furniture design, materials selection, and technology. And it requires sensitivity to organizational culture. If done right, a workplace revitalization yields tangible results, making a company’s real estate part of the solution by providing maximum value and bringing out the best in people.

The U.S. Census Bureau Headquarters features flexible neighborhoods of employees and amenities based on top corporate workplace designs. Automatically-dimming lights and healthy drywall, paint, and ceilings help the building earn LEED® Silver certification.

SOM designed custom PVC-free, biodegradable carpet tiles use reclaimed materials and dyes with minimal environmental impact. The carpet promotes employee health and earns the maximum LEED points in its category.
Since becoming a Design Partner at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP in 1995, Stephen Apking has been instrumental in broadening SOM’s multidisciplinary design practice with an emphasis on innovation in interior architecture. Through his global portfolio of award-winning office designs, Mr. Apking has created and continues to advance the concept of the Performative Workplace. His projects have been featured in BusinessWeek, Architectural Record, Contract, Interior Design, Interiors, Metropolis, and numerous others.