



BY LINDA CZOPEK

## Contemplating the Office of the Future

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Ten years ago, my space planning and interior architecture firm Czopek & Erdenberger assisted a large organization with identifying and moving toward a new way of looking at its office environment. The project, the result of the organization's vice president reading an article about the “office of the future,” was punctuated by buzzwords such as “hoteling” and trendy phrases such as “cave and commons” and “universal plan.”

Fast-forward to 2005. Do we have any better understanding of what the future workplace might look like?

Technology, globalization, workforce diversity and sustainability have presented new challenges over the last 10 years. Hoteling, cave and commons, telecommuting, open office versus closed private office debates, non-territorial offices, wireless capabilities, cubicle jokes, virtual offices and the popular “team environment” do not define the office environment. They are strategies for addressing business concerns when planning for the future. What will future generations expect as they do the work of their time?

While we cannot predict everything, we can address changes we know are coming based on current workplace situations and trends. After personnel, the office environment is typically an organization's second largest cost. While technology costs are rapidly moving into second place, real estate remains substantial.

We must also realize, however, that despite all of the changes taking place on what seems to be an almost daily basis, there still exist some workplace criteria that have weathered the test of time.

As first glance, those two conditions may seem to conflict. But in the best-case scenario, they can also dovetail to provide valuable guidelines for designing an office space capable of serving current needs while also offering the potential to grow to accommodate future changes.

While the scope of those guidelines may vary based on the type of industry a company is involved in, there are some basic ones that every company should start with:

- **Prepare a strategic plan and goals for the office environment that meshes with the organization's mission.** Analyze the match between the physical environment and way of working. Organizations are dynamic entities. Shouldn't the environment they support be the same?

- **Share the organization's vision, values and mission as a basis for creating the appropriate work environment.** Those organizations with the clearest vision of who they are, and who communicate it openly, create the most successful long-term office environments.

- **Concentrate on function over hierarchy and image.** Develop

environments that support the work of the organization.

- **Recognize the culture.** Organizations vary dramatically in their missions and goals. Workplace design should take that into consideration.

- **Expect and plan for change.** Build in flexibility and adaptability to change over time. Provide for contingencies with space that easily accommodates change. Consider backup plans and alternatives in advance.

- **Provide for workforce diversity.** There are more women, a broader range of ages, and more ethnic backgrounds and non-traditional schedules represented in the workplace. Diversity brings challenges and opportunities for managing human resources, and for providing environments where individuals contribute their best.

- **Create an environment where people want to be.** It is difficult to quantify how this affects productivity and the bottom line, but my firm has often received feedback on how improved function and a pleasing workspace have a positive impact.

- **Provide opportunities for employee involvement.** Offer choices in a range of situations from being regularly included and updated on workplace issues to setting up individual workspace and support areas.

- **Provide a variety of spaces, for individuals and for groups, to support the work of the organization.** As technology provides better links between personnel working in different locations, provide areas for interaction as well as focused work. Provide for different work styles and functions, a challenging yet critical component in a fully functioning environment.

Ultimately, the future of office space will not be defined or created by “experts” – professionals, researchers and educators – although they will certainly be partners in the process. As design professionals, we will need to become proactive in formulating and integrating ideas and solutions that are innovative and that stay abreast of technological changes and improvements in the office environment – all accomplished with energy and enthusiasm. That is our part of the discovery process in defining the future work environment.

The challenge is to change the focus – from specific solutions, which address what we know and do today, to broadening the discussion of the workplace and its role in responding to the workforce of the future. ■

*Linda Czopek is a principal at Czopek & Erdenberger Inc., a Portland firm specializing in space planning and interior architecture. She can be reached at 503-242-0956 or at [linda@czopek.com](mailto:linda@czopek.com).*