

How to Build a Better Office

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According to a recent survey by Gensler, the prominent corporate architecture firm, half of all employees say they would work an *extra hour per day* if they had a better workplace. So why do so many companies maintain dark, cramped, ugly, or poorly designed offices?

Studies show that a well-designed office is one of the easiest and most cost-effective ways to retain workers and make them more productive. General Electric, Microsoft, and major West Coast insurer Group Health are just a handful of major organizations reaping the bottom-line benefits of smart, worker-oriented designs. Read on and we'll explain how companies of any size can use a remodel or relocation to pump up performance and profits.

Things you will need:

- Between \$3,870 per person (open office design) and \$6,447 per person (closed office design) to outfit an empty building, according to the International Facilities Management Association.
- Reengineering an existing office may take a few months, but it can take five years to orchestrate a major corporate headquarters move.
- **Hard data:** Study how and when workers use office space and where space is going unused or is poorly used. (See Step 1 for how to collect data, and "Technically Speaking" for average space estimates.)
- **Qualitative data:** Gather workers' feedback on what they like, and don't like, about their workspace.
- **Projections:** Office redesigns should allow for future needs, too. Create a roadmap for future work patterns.
- **Persistence:** Changing workers' space may create resistance — especially if those affected include the CEO. Explain the rationale for changes, and workers will begin to appreciate the maneuvers.

A yellow sticky note icon with the text 'step 1' written on it in a handwritten style.

Size Up Your Current Space

Goal: Understand how well — or poorly — you're using the existing floor plan.

Bad office layouts are made, not born. An office configuration that suited the way business was done even five years ago might be irrelevant now. Gervais Tompkin, a vice president in Gensler's San Francisco office, says the best way to find out if your office is dysfunctional is to conduct a formal study. His firm creates an "activity portrait," a drawing of traffic patterns around the office, by shadowing employees for several days in a row. Whether you conduct an in-house study or hire a design consultant, Tompkin says the three key methods for gathering information are shadowing employees on their paths through the office; visiting conference

rooms and desk areas every half hour to determine how they are being used; and asking employees to track their own movements and report back on how they spend their time.

Here's what to look for:

Space Layout

Study whether the layout of the building is helping or hindering employees in the quest to get work done. Shadowing workers for a few days will reveal wasted motion and inefficient organization of space.

Red flags:

- Collaborative spaces are bunched at the far end of the building
- People whose jobs are highly collaborative do not naturally come into contact with colleagues during the workday
- Employees spend a lot of time in transit to meeting rooms, printers, copiers, and fax machines

Space Usage

Find out how often people are using existing spaces. Check in on what's happening by stopping by cubicles and conference rooms every half hour.

Red flags:

- An area is always empty
- An area is overcrowded
- Workers are competing for certain furnishings or equipment and not using others

Workarounds

Look closely at whether workers are using their space, furnishings, and equipment as intended. Does the environment support their process, or have they been forced to circumvent it?

Red flags:

- Employees meet at a coffee shop because they can't find common space
- Workers use drop-in space on another floor because the area around their desks is too loud
- They bring lamps from home to avoid harsh fluorescent lighting

If your study reveals a number of red flags, it's time to hire an architect and find out how a redesign can improve the efficiency of your space.

Case Study

A Customer-Driven Redesign

At GE Commercial Finance, a 2006 study showed that poor use of office space was actually hindering the company's relationship with customers. Sharon Garavel, vice president of global operations and quality at GE Capital Solutions, says business clients were unhappy with how much time loan processing required, so the financial conglomerate launched a study of how the process worked.

The study pinpointed a major problem: the physical location of key employees. Loan approval required 22 different handoffs and two miles of walking, which meant loan approval dragged out for months. Franchise-lending operations were spread across two buildings, with different teams — legal, sales, closing — situated on different floors. "Much of this was due to the fact that we'd been organized by department," Garavel says. "We decided to organize the business differently."

Instead of isolating employees in single-function departments, GE created new, cross-functional teams so workers no longer had to walk or send documents back and forth between departments. After physically reassigning employees, loan processing time dropped to less than a month and required only seven handoffs.



step 2

Involve Your Employees in the Process

Goal: Find out what they need up front, and keep them in the loop to avoid backlash.

Involving employees in a redesign is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it's vital to know how they operate in order to create a space that's more conducive to their work. On the other, asking them what they want can lead to unrealistic demands. As you gather input, be clear that you will try to address all concerns but that no one design can be perfect for everyone.

Once the new design has been chosen, let employees know what to expect, especially if the change will be significant. Make sure employees understand why the company is making each specific change. For example, if you're moving people out of offices and into cubes, remind staff that the office now offers other perks: a souped-up dining area or benefits like concierge services, showers in bathrooms for lunchtime workouts, or a better cafeteria.

Gensler's Tompkin says two types of redesigns create "cultural revolt": a move from closed-door offices to open office space, and a move in which two companies are merging and creating a new culture. With an office-to-cubes situation, companies need to up the ratio of conference rooms from one conference seat per three people to one conference seat for every two people. With a merger, managers should remind employees of their role's

significance, reassure them that their importance continues, and then offer a rational business context for why they may have to move desks or cede space.

Big Idea

“If the physical environment is bad — it’s cold, smells, or makes workers distracted — then employees won’t work well. No amount of organizational shoe-shining will change that,” Tompkin says. “It’s Maslow’s pyramid — Psychology 101.” Tompkin refers to the hierarchy of human needs as outlined by Abraham Maslow in 1943.

According to Maslow, humans seek to satisfy a hierarchy of five types of needs, starting with the most basic physiological needs and ascending through a sense of safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. If workers feel unhealthy, Tompkin asserts, they won’t be able to tap their higher selves in the office. For more on putting Maslow’s theories to work in business, see our Book Brief video “[Peak: How Great Companies Get Their Mojo From Maslow.](#)”

step 3

Decide What Your Goals Are

Goal: Make a list of the top priorities you want your redesign to address.

Once you’ve identified your biggest issues, decide which ones you want to attack. Both Tompkin and Bill Olechnowitz, director of interior architecture at Michael Willis Architects, recommend that companies evaluating an office redesign project identify four or five priorities to tackle, such as increased collaboration, improved productivity, or more efficient use of space.

At Group Health, a Washington-based insurer with 10,000 employees in more than 50 buildings, an in-house study quickly illustrated what the company’s design goals should be. The firm enlisted its employees to track their habits and found that at any given time, 40 percent of all cubicles or offices were sitting unoccupied. Many workers were in conference rooms or down the street at Starbucks, where they could more easily meet in teams. Others were toggling between multiple buildings and facilities. William Biggs, executive director of administrative services, asked his assistant to track his whereabouts. It turns out he spent less than 5 percent of his time at company headquarters.

“This was an epiphany for a number of company leaders,” Biggs says. “Our work had moved from individual to team-based. We needed to loosely pull groups together and then dismantle them, but that was difficult in our space.” Based on the study, Group Health defined three design goals: First, the office needed more conference space. Secondly, cubicle sizes could shrink somewhat since workers were increasingly spending time outside of them. Finally, mobile workers like Biggs needed “touch-down” space where they could check their e-mail and make phone calls when visiting different divisions of the company.

Essential Ingredients

New Ideas in Office Design

Architects and designers constantly reexamine the changing workplace to solve problems and accommodate needs. Some of their innovations have played better than others. Here's the latest thinking on what works and what doesn't:

- **If your goal is worker retention and productivity:**
- **Out:** Corner offices for executives
- **In:** Executive offices on the interior, worker bees at the windows

Rather than giving bosses all the views and natural light, put executive offices at the center of each floor, and seat rank-and-file workers — those who spend more time at their desks — in open spaces by the windows.

- **If your goal is spontaneous collaboration:**
- **Out:** Random seating and collaboration areas
- **In:** Enclosed mini-conference rooms

When collaborative areas are scattered between clusters of cubes, the noise prevents cube-dwellers from getting work done. Instead, allocate small spaces with doors — sometimes called “iso pods” — for informal meetings. Workers can quickly huddle without having to leave their immediate area or reserve a conference room.

- **If your goal is a mobile workforce:**
- **Out:** Traditional, uniform-sized offices
- **In:** Satellite and drop-in office spaces

Not all workers need the same size office — this is especially true of those who spend a lot of time at other sites. Make offices smaller to allow room for “touch-down” or “hotel” workspaces for visitors from other offices.

- **If your goal is balancing privacy with collaboration:**
- **Out:** Open desk spaces with minimal dividers
- **In:** Lower cube walls

Traditional cubes are too isolating, but the “open desk” system that grew popular in the dot-com boom — separating workers with only the tiniest partitions — proved to be too noisy. Companies can simply lower cube walls from six feet to four, affording just enough privacy and plenty of visibility.

Ask Yourself If It's Time to Move

Goal: Weigh the merits of a redesign or “restack” versus relocating to bigger digs.

Once you've identified where your workplace lacks logic, it's time to assess what can be done. Depending on the scope of your problems, your imagination, and your budget, the next thing you'll have to decide is if it's better to reinvent existing space or move.

“Typically companies try to stay where they are as long as they can. It's very expensive to move,” says Charlotte Wiederholt, creative director at Tangram Studios, a California-based office-furnishings design firm that has helped develop headquarters for companies like Red Bull and NeoPets. When companies are bursting at the seams, Wiederholt says the solution is often a “restack”: reorganizing cubicles into smaller spaces — such as a six-by-six instead of eight-by-eight — in order to fit more people onto a floor.

Of course there are downsides to extensive redesigns. They're often so invasive, noisy, lengthy, and messy that a company may need temporary space during the design's execution, which is why some companies decide that moving to a preconfigured space is easier than living through a reconfiguration. Wiederholt says that today companies that know they're in growth mode often are able to secure short leases — meaning that leaving a crowded space is easier than in the past.

So when should you go? Experts say that if after a restack you still don't have an extra five to 10 percent of unused square feet, you may need to move. Similarly, says Tompkin, the Gensler architect, if a building is unsuitable at the most basic level — temperature control, air quality, or lighting — and a company rents rather than owns, moving may be the only way to address those concerns.

Technically Speaking

How Much Office Do You Need?

Here are recent guidelines from two facilities experts — a professional association and a consulting firm:

International Facilities Management Association

- Executive office space: 241 square feet (down from 291 square feet in 1987)
- Senior professional: 98 square feet
- Call center employee: 50 square feet

Corporate Facilities Group (Cambridge, Mass.)

- President/CEO/Chairman: 250 to 400 square feet

- Vice President: 150 to 250 square feet
- Executive: 100 to 150 square feet
- Employee: 80 to 125 square feet
- Conference room: 25 to 30 square feet per person (conference seats); 15 square feet per person (theater seats)
- Lunch room: 15 square feet per person for dining, and a food-preparation space roughly one-third of the dining area
- Reception area: 150 to 350 square feet

step 5

Keep Tweaking

Goal: Improve upon your design over time by continuing to ask for feedback and make adjustments.

After an office remodel, it's easy for companies to sit back and rejoice that they're "done." But larger challenges may need to be hammered out over time. If employees don't take to a new design after several months, you can't force it. The eventual solution may be to rejigger unused areas for other purposes.

The best approach is to acknowledge such issues and explain how you plan to handle them. Remind employees that this does not mean the design was a failure: That's the attitude that begets the need for a big, expensive overhaul in five or ten years. Continual adjustment is a saner, cheaper, and more flexible way to keep spaces up to date.

Some adjustment difficulties, of course, are psychological rather than physical. This is especially true if the company's office redesign or relocation came on the heels of a merger or acquisition — a time when the combination of changes in cultural and physical space can unsettle employees. Human resources may need to get involved, architect Olechowitz says, in order to massage egos accustomed to bigger or more luxurious spaces.

Checklist

A Clean, Well-Lighted Place

In a recent report titled "Innovative Workplace Strategies," the U.S. government's General Services Administration offered a list of "Hallmarks of the Productive Workplace." If you're overseeing a redesign post-mortem, or if you plan to take a periodic look at how the workplace continues to function in the coming quarters, here is a list of elements the GSA recommends examining:

Spatial equity: Do workers have enough space to accomplish tasks?

Healthfulness: Does the workplace offer clean air and water, sufficient artificial and natural light, and freedom from distracting noises and smells?

Flexibility: Can the workplace be rapidly adjusted to respond to industry-related challenges?

Comfort: Can workers adjust light, temperature, furnishings, and acoustic levels to their preferences?

Connectivity: Can on- and off-site workers share the same networks and data and communicate easily? Is there connectivity for workers who change work modes often — such as working from home and rotating among offices in “hotel” cubicles?

Reliability: Are technology systems and physical plant systems (heat, cooling, water) reliable and consistent? Are upgrades necessary as an expanding office pulls on resources?

Sense of place: Does the workplace decor and atmosphere mirror the company's brand or mission? Does the workplace create a culture appropriate to the work done there?