



The Evolving Workplace

New Collaborative Spaces Require A Variety Of Flooring Solutions

The American workplace evolves continually. Each decade, technology proliferates and younger workers replace previous generations, giving rise to new work styles and preferences. And in recent years, growing competition among employers to attract and retain the brightest and best workers has placed a greater premium on corporate design. Flooring plays an increasingly important role and provides a wide array of solutions to help designers meet the ever-changing demands of the modern workplace.

Generational Shifts and Technological Advancements

Millennials, who now occupy more than one third of the U.S. labor force, overtook Generation X last year to become the largest segment of the workplace, according to the Pew Research Center (Fry, 2015, para. 1). Baby Boomers, representing more than half of all workers just six years ago, have since dropped to around one quarter, and they are retiring at an astonishing rate of 10,000 people per day (Cohn & Taylor, 2010, para. 1).

This rapid shift in demographics has been prompting major changes in the office environment. Because Millennials are by far the fastest growing segment of the workforce, employers increasingly design facilities to attract and retain them. Statistics show that Millennials tend to change jobs more frequently than previous generations (Meister, 2012, para. 1), so the work space not only needs to look attractive, it must also function in a way that suits their work habits, which vary greatly from those of their parents and grandparents.

Baby Boomers hail from an era of individual offices, when office size was proportionate to an employee's rank. Modern technology consisted of touchtone phones, electric

typewriters and mainframe computers. Business was conducted almost exclusively in the office, and meetings were held face to face.

Generation X came of age along with the personal computer, fax machines, beepers, cellular phones and the Internet. Office space began to open up slightly with prevalent use of cubicles, and email became a major mode of communication, allowing employees to instantly share detailed information and documents across the campus or across the country.

Millennials ushered in the mobile workplace with their wi-fi enabled smart phones, tablets and laptops, equipped with everything from virtual meeting apps to seemingly limitless document storage. Never tethered to a desktop computer, Millennials are accustomed to working anywhere and everywhere. They prefer to work collaboratively and require less personal space.

Flexible Space Planning

Evolving technologies and shifting work preferences have led to a variety of new spaces in workplace design. In general, today's corporate offices tend to include more open design concepts, with lower profile benching replacing high-walled cubicles. The open floor plans are more conducive to informal, spontaneous conversations among employees, flexibility that appeals to Millennials who—more than any previous generation—like to work collaboratively.

To further increase flexible use of space and to facilitate collaborative work, designers have begun incorporating casual huddle spaces, small breakout rooms and project rooms in addition to open work areas. These spaces encourage idea and information sharing and promote team building.

Access to more flexible workspaces may actually help boost employee productivity. According to Gensler's U.S. Workplace



Survey 2016, titled “Creating an Innovative Ecosystem,” top performing employees “spend less time at their desks, instead collaborating and socializing from conference rooms, open meeting areas, and café spaces. (p. 3)”

Employers have expressed growing interest in employee welfare, both in the interest of increased productivity as well as employee retention. Biophilia, the idea that humans are innately drawn to nature and natural elements, and evidence based design have become major buzzwords in the corporate design community. Studies show that workers with access to sunlight and outdoor views report better health, attendance, productivity and overall well being (Kallianpurkar, 2012). In response, designers tend to place open office spaces and common areas on the perimeter near windows, while moving individual offices and conference rooms toward the center of the building.

To attract young talent, many employers also offer recreational amenities. Cafes, gyms and even game rooms can be found in many modern offices. Millennials utilize these spaces not only to relax and socialize, but also to enhance productivity. They might brainstorm while fueling up with a cup of coffee or a snack, trouble shoot over a game of ping-pong, or run on the treadmill to increase blood circulation and brain function during an afternoon slump.

Although employers are courting Millennials, many also have long-term relationships with Gen Xers and Baby Boomers, whom they don’t want to alienate. Designers often bridge the generational gap by offering a mix of modern and traditional spaces within the workplace. Along with open collaborative spaces and recreational amenities, for instance, they may incorporate areas with traditional cubicles or closed-door office spaces for individual work, along with conference rooms for more formal meetings.

Even Millennials need quiet areas to do heads-down work or to talk privately with clients. In an article from CoreNet Global, an international association for corporate real estate, Vice President of Strategic Communications Richard Kadzis pointed out, “Just as we have escaped the ‘cube farms of Dilbertville,’ some employees may start to feel that the open-space pendulum has swung too far, at the expense of a worker’s ability to concentrate without interruption or distraction.” (2013) The article goes on to suggest that the

collaborative space bubble may soon burst.

A hybrid workplace environment, therefore, with both traditional and modern space use, may prove to be the most productive, especially in offices employing multiple generations. Gensler’s survey findings, for example, showed that the most successful employees were “five times more likely to have workplaces that prioritize both individual and group work.” (p. 3)

Shrinking Footprints

It is interesting to note that although the number of amenities and the number of employees per company is steadily increasing, the average square footage is actually decreasing. A 2013 survey conducted by CoreNet Global found that “the average amount of space per office worker globally has dropped to 150 square feet or less, from 225 square feet in 2010,” and the numbers are expected to continue to fall. (para. 1)

This trend is fed in part by the decrease in assigned individual spaces. The move to mobile devices connected through wireless technology has minimized the typical worker’s need for individual desk space. More than 80% of the employees surveyed in the CoreNet study reported that their companies had adopted space plans with more collaborative areas and fewer individual spaces (para. 6).

Technological advancements in virtual meetings and digital file sharing have also led to increased telecommuting. According to Gensler’s 2016 survey, employees reported working away from the office for 14% to 26% of an average week, further decreasing individual space utilization (p.3).

Employers tend to support plans for smaller facilities as well, due to significant decreases in real estate, construction and operation costs.

Modern Flooring Solutions

Flooring serves many important functions in the modern office, enhancing branding, aesthetics, space delineation, flexibility, acoustics, comfort under foot and sustainability. In decades past, office flooring consisted mainly of good-better-best options of low-pile loop broadloom in



several shades of beige. Today, advancements in flooring manufacturing, coupled with the desire among employers for corporate branding, have opened up a whole new world of flooring options for workplace designers.

With office walls disappearing to create open spaces, and others replaced by glass to promote daylighting, flooring has become an increasingly important design element. In many corporate environments, the floor is now the largest and most prominent surface for designers to infuse color, texture and pattern.

Influenced by a wave of branded campuses for technology groups like Apple and Google, companies today want their spaces to reflect their individual brands. This trend has led to the use of a greater variety of colors in corporate design, including bold, customized hues to correspond with a company's logo.

According to the Mohawk Group, designers often utilize vibrant brand colors to help delineate areas within large offices (Murray, 2016). If there are multiple groups working within a floor plate, the flooring color can be changed to designate individual departments within the open space.

In response to the new role of flooring in the workplace, manufacturers have greatly expanded their offerings and often provide custom options. The Mohawk Group reports a rising number of requests from designers for fresh approaches to color, shape, scale and movement within product lines (Murray). Patterns with bold lines or strong geometrics can transform a floor, while natural colors with small pops of color and soft textures can lend an authentic look to the space. Many of the new flooring styles are influenced by the hospitality sector in an effort to energize and personalize corporate spaces that in the past may have felt cold and generic.

The Mohawk Group also notes the expanded use of a mixture of soft and hard surface materials to create interest and break up the vast open spaces found in many of today's offices (Murray). A hard surface like LVT (luxury vinyl tile) or ceramic tile might be specified for perimeters or walkways, with islands of coordinating broadloom or carpet tiles used to set off workstations. Large geometric patterns can be created with different colors and styles of modular flooring as well to bring visual interest to an oversized space.

The use of carpet tiles and LVT also offers designers and end users endless flexibility for future space allocation. Modular carpet with adhesive tabs and LVT with click systems can be installed to create floating floors. If a company adds several employees and needs more space for benching, for example, a lounge area could be removed to accommodate desks, and the modular carpet easily reconfigured to outline the new furniture grouping. Similarly a company might reflow an LVT pathway to enlarge the workspace for a growing team.

Companies today want their workplaces to reflect the brand's culture and commitment to employees. According to the Mohawk Group, brands encompass more than they once did—they're about much more than just a logo (Murray). Out of concern for employees' well being, for example, many companies are investing in adjustable desks that allow workers to shift between sitting and standing throughout the day for increased comfort and blood flow. Designers now have the option to specify carpet with attached cushion, offering workers additional comfort underfoot when standing at their desks.

Flooring choices can also provide solutions for acoustics. In open concept offices, noise can be a major distraction, negatively affecting workers' productivity. Flooring designed to absorb sound can significantly improve office acoustics, dampening noise and allowing employees to focus on the work at hand.

Employers want their brands to be associated with environmental sustainability as well. Once again, the floor is one of the biggest surfaces in a building, so carpet made from materials like recycled water bottles or programs that allow discarded flooring to be reclaimed are growing in popularity. Many companies are lifestyle focused, and flooring can help people work-live better, notes the Mohawk Group (Murray). That's how branding has evolved today.

While open offices with a variety of workspaces and amenities are gaining in popularity, ultimately workplace designers focus on individual companies and their employees' needs when developing corporate design. Whatever a company's brand, culture and nature of work, designers can find personalized flooring solutions to create an environment that allows employees to do their best work.



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