

Third Places: The Social Side of Work (Excerpt)

The following is an excerpt from the Herman Miller Research Summary: Office Environments: The North American Perspective (©2002).

“New planning approaches

The need to be competitive, to support new structures and ways of working, and to attract and keep a skilled work force contributes to the need for new approaches to office planning. In response, two new streams of space planning and management have sprung up: the development of free-address offices and the evolution of space concepts for collaborative groups.

Free-address spaces

Just-in-time, nonterritorial, temporal, hoteling—and particularly freeaddress—are terms that all refer to a similar office concept: a collection of work spaces (fewer than the number of potential occupants) not occupied continuously by the same individual but used on a reserve or first-come, first-served basis.

The move to free-address spaces began with the observation that work spaces are unoccupied much of the time when “one person/one space” practices prevail, and it has been fueled by the desire to reduce both the amount and the cost of space. Firms report that they can both upgrade work spaces and gain more than a 20 percent saving in space costs. Yet, this free-address approach is more of a space-management technique than it is a unique planning model, because these spaces may be planned using private offices, open plans, or bullpens.

A free-address approach has been used in a variety of situations—for shift workers, seasonal workers, part-timers, and job-sharers. Also, the pressure to keep more people in the field, closer to the customer, and the choice of others to work outside of the traditional office have contributed to its use among professionals.

Andersen Consulting in San Francisco has established a free-address arrangement for its management consultants and has reduced per person office costs from nearly \$10,000 to about \$2,700. Each of 70 consultants has a portable PC and a locker for files and personal items: They reserve one of 13 unassigned private offices for “in”-hours work.

Unless initiated thoughtfully, however, free-address arrangements may provide more benefits to the organization than to the individual worker. Moving from their own space to shared free-address areas may make workers feel less valued and less a vital part of the company. How well employees accept such arrangements depends on comparisons between their old and new work spaces, including how well the new one supports their work processes. Going from a private office to a small, open-plan free-address space, however, is not likely to provide the same sense of status or well-being as the reverse situation.

Third Places: The Social Side of Work (Excerpt)

Businesses that have tried a free-address approach find it can be an effective solution for workers and management alike if it is not driven by cost-savings alone, if facility quality and work support tools are improved, and if those affected are actively involved in the planning and have local control of the facility. While free-address offices are not panaceas, they do offer new possibilities.

Collaborative spaces Organizations of the 1990s rely increasingly on group-based work and work in multiple locations. Successful office environments for groups help them achieve the core business performance criteria for serving the customer—high quality, speed in getting to market, and value for the customer. In addition, the requirements for continual organizational learning and change have exploded the need for more effective education, training, and conference settings. Effective solutions for collaborative work are not likely to yield a single model, for the needs are as varied as those of a three-month project assignment and a three-year R & D project. Nor are they likely to result in space savings; if anything, greater space needs are likely. People involved in multiple cross-functional projects may benefit more from having several small individual work spaces near other members of each of their teams than from having a large office in their functional unit. The net effect in group-intense organizations is likely to be a reallocation of space from individual to group uses.

Having generous, well-organized space, including the possibility of several work areas for individuals and groups, may play a vital role in increasing productivity and reducing the time to market. These outcomes are likely to yield a greater return to the organization than direct savings on space.

For the complete text of this research summary, please CONTACT Thomas Interior Systems.