

# Changing spaces

## Office cubicles becoming museum items as firms favour casual gathering places for their workers

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Farewell office cubicle.

The workspace environment is changing, and soon the individual office "pod" will be replaced with interactive spaces where employees will have all the tools to work collaboratively.

This might take the form of gathering places that resemble lounges or cafés, says Allan Guinan, managing partner of the workplace design company, Figure 3.

"We're designing oases, cafés, almost lunch-counter types of environments for people to touch down at," says Guinan, who spoke last month on the workplace of the future at the IIDEX/NeoCon Canada design conference.

"People now meet in more social and casual environments versus very formal meeting spaces or workstations."

This is happening because within companies today are a mélange of work styles based on different generations and new technologies. Plus, there are different ways of working, says Guinan, whose company focuses on "user experience."

The users Guinan and his colleagues must understand in their drive to create an ideal workplace might at different times want to work collaboratively, in a focused manner, to learn or even to socialize.

How can a workplace be designed to fit all these needs? After extensive surveys to understand the user experience, Figure 3 develops recommendations that marry the goals and philosophy of the organization with the number of people and their needs. From this comes the concept which says: "here's how you want people to feel working in this environment."

One of the reasons for this change, he says, is that client response time has increased, and so people must be more adaptable.

"There is a greater diversity of activity now than ever before, plus technology is driving us to multi-task."

In addition, many companies are giving employees more mobility, allowing them to do focused work at home or in another type of environment. Hence the need for working spaces where employees can inter-



act when they come to the office.

The other factor is space, which is a strategic asset.

"Space tends to be the second most costly expense and they need to utilize their space effectively. Also, they want their space to represent their brand," Guinan says.

Take the project they have completed for IBM Canada at King and Bay. In this company, everyone works in a mobile environment, so the company realized they would need less real estate if they utilized the spaces they had to their full capacity.

Employees are often in training or working outside the office, and when Figure 3 did their assessment, they realized the employees were only utilizing their spaces 40 per cent of the time. Now, when employees need to come in, they book online to reserve a workspace.

"When we did the original project, they wanted to see if they could support 500 people on the site with 150 seats," Guinan says. "They're tracking people now and realize that more than 1,200 people have come through this location in the last six months."

Not every company can do this, though.

"What's really key to this, and what IBM particularly has done, is to establish the readiness of an organization, because you want to foster the culture, not destroy it."

At IBM, employees were given the technology and supported if they wanted to work off-site. Family photos that once adorned the office cubicle are now on the laptop or phone, the mode of work that travels with the user.

"You see people working in airports and coffee shops; work is really anywhere."

The flexibility of a space is dependent on the needs of employees, and sometimes on the urge for innovation undertaken by the company. At the RBC Centre at Wellington and Simcoe, a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Gold green certification was the driving force to reconfigure the interior of the space as well.

"These principles allowed for a more open environment, where in order to leave the space open to lots of light the panels on workstations had to be lowered," Guinan says.

In this environment Figure 3 developed spaces that could be reconfigured, say from meeting room to breakout room. No longer is there one solution for every problem, Guinan says. "Now the world is about intelligent solutions for each organization."

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