



New work order

The cubicle has been banished for good. Modern office design revolves around employees coming together to collaborate in inspirational settings

With the onward march of technology, the way we work is constantly evolving – and office design trends are racing to keep up. Old-style space layouts involving large corner offices, heavy, industrial furniture and, dare we even say it, cubicles, are finally taking their leave, and the buzzwords today are collaboration, interaction and communication.

“While the principles of business remain the same, strategies and execution have changed dramatically, requiring office interiors, furniture and space plans to adapt accordingly,” Siddharth Peters, managing director, The Total Office,

noted. “The concept of cubicles has long become a thing of the past, with collaboration and teamwork now dictating a lot of the office ‘lingo’. Psychology plays an important role too. With internal branding on furniture echoing the company vision, paint choices displaying corporate colours and the fit-out embracing CSR values, modern workspaces have more to offer organisations than ever before.”

NO PLACE LIKE WORK...

As home lives have become compressed and working lives lengthened, one major design trend is that offices are evolving into cosy imitations of the home, filled

with comfy sofas, ‘break-out’ zones and posh coffee machines, along with other domestic accoutrements.

“We see a lot of the materials and applications known from domestic environments being introduced to office furniture,” said Kaj Helstrand, design manager, Gemaco Interiors. “Soft seating is not only for waiting areas and lounges, but used in meeting spaces too.”

Another key trend is mobile working. Thanks to wireless technology, laptops and mobile phones, today’s employees are no longer required to be chained to a desk for eight hours a day, meaning that the practice of ‘hot-desking’,

1. The Nokia Siemens Networks office in Dubai has embraced modern working techniques.



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whereby employees share desk space, has become prevalent.

“Hot-desk scenarios were introduced based on studies showing that actual desk occupancy was rather low, and that sharing desk space made a lot of sense,” Helstrand explained. “Technology today allows tasks to be carried out away from the office and working from home is part of the global trend.”

With actual desk space becoming smaller, modern office layout has much more room for what is termed as the ‘break-out’ area – spaces where employees can meet up to brainstorm, chat, collaborate and generally communicate with each other, in an informal setting.

“These areas are characterised by their relaxed atmosphere, encouraging

the kind of spontaneous and informal communication that takes place at random places of encounter, such as in the cafeteria, at the water dispenser or in the common room,” explained Thomas Bene, board member, Bene.

Bene recently teamed up with British design studio, PearsonLloyd, to produce PARCS – a set of unconventional furniture pieces specifically created to fulfil the need for productive communication and informal exchange in the office. The various components can be flexibly combined and configured to create a large variety of working landscapes.

A CHANGE OF MINDSET

But despite such advances in office design, there is still some way to go

before this region fully catches up with global trends. Local office designers comment that in order for office interiors to adopt a more modern style of design, a major change in mindset from some of the region’s top decision makers would first be required.

Office spaces based on status and hierarchy, rather than interaction and collaboration, are still common in this part of the world, and the large corner office for the CEO is not an uncommon feature. “My advice for decision makers in the Middle East is that management should consider being part of the team in an open-plan work space,” said Gilbert A. Griño, marketing manager, Bafco. “Space should be managed as an asset, not as a reflection of authority.”

2. Break-out areas are essential.

3,4&5. Modern solutions by Officeland.



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Another barrier to overcome is perceptions of mobile working. “In our opinion too many companies and managers still think that if you are away from your desk, you’re not working,” said Tom Lloyd of PearsonLloyd. “It takes an enlightened attitude, a sense of reality and progressivity to recognise that someone sitting on a sofa can also be creating value for the company”.

According to Helstrand, this progressive attitude is still largely lacking in the local market. “Mobile working and hot-desking makes sense in many directions,” he maintained. “One clear advantage is saving on transportation and fuel consumption, and, of course, it is environmentally friendly. However this seems to be a tendency that is lacking in the UAE market.”

THE FUTURE OFFICE?

With office design trends changing rapidly as our needs evolve, how do the experts picture the office of the future?

6. The Ares office
from i4Mariani.

A MODERN OFFICE: NOKIA SIEMENS NETWORKS

The Nokia Siemens Networks (NSN) office in Dubai Internet City is a highly innovative workspace designed to support a new way of working that focuses on networking, mobility and team interaction.

The new design came out of an extensive workplace investigation into the work styles of company employees. Employees were classified into three categories, mobile, campus mobile and desk-based, and were allocated space according to function.

Cathy Ingram, senior design manager at Bluehaus, was responsible for the project. “Through research, NSN discovered that the emerging way of working is varied and not as rigid as in the past. People are now working when and where needed, performance is measured based on results, mentoring and coaching are encouraged, teams can be virtual and individuals are highly mobile. Previously, space was designed based on hierarchy and status, but in the modern office, space is designed based on functions and tasks.”

“NSN discovered that, on average, workstations were occupied 47% of the time, with people spending one third of their day in meetings. In an office designed on hierarchy, 10% of the staff own 20% of office space. A CEO, for example, may be given a large office, a PA, private meeting room and lounge. What NSN found was that these people are actually the most ‘mobile’, spending significant time out of the office in meetings or travelling, and therefore floor space is not being used to its capacity,” Ingram explained.

“In the changing economic climate, office space is becoming premium. If you can save money by looking at how much space you really need, companies can really make a difference to their bottom line.”

In practice this means that desk sharing is implemented and every workstation is cleared at the end of the day so that it can be used by anyone the next day. With desk space reduced to a bare necessity, there is space for hot desks, phone rooms, meetings rooms, informal breakout spaces and lounges where staff are encouraged to meet and work collaboratively.



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“In 50 years time, the physical office will primarily be used as a collaboration hub,” predicted Griño.

“We will not be tied to our desks as, using touch-sensitive and holographic screens projected from wearable computing devices, we will be able to work anywhere. This is mobile working in its true form. I see offices in the future designed like a modern hotel lobby.”

Griño also predicts that office spaces will evolve to become far more ‘green’ in the future, providing a healthier environment tailored to suit their inhabitants.

“Intelligent offices will become the norm. Offices will be equipped to adjust to personal needs, including temperature, light, air, smell and touch, with a central device managing what is optimal


for the health, safety and wellbeing of employees,” he said.

Mohammed Abdul Muktadeer, sales manager at Officeland, has a similar vision – that the office of the future will be a place where employee wellbeing is top of the agenda.

“The future workplace will be a place to be appreciated. It will be designed in such a way that it is appealing and tempting. After all, a happy employee will always be a productive member of the team, generating more revenue and success for the organisation,” he said.

For Gautam Bhatia, senior interior designer at Marlin Furniture, mobile working will be central to the office of the future. “The office of the future will be in our pocket. Ten years into the future we

will all be sending correspondence and progress reports through our mobiles. There will be no need for office space, except in manufacturing industries. If this happens then I will be doing my work either in my car or at home.”

Peters from Total Office agrees that technology will drive change. “Technology has been the driving force for change in every workspace. Offices may end up being virtual rooms where business executives holographically log in from their homes or a place of their choice. It may not be physically possible to be everywhere at once, but it will be technologically possible! Offices may end up being virtual spaces in the online community where visual design can be as infinite as the imagination.” 

7. The Dolmen
office from
i4Mariani.