

Impact of the Changing Workplace on Site Selection

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Work has become more disjointed instead of linear, leading to interesting solutions.

By Rich Jordan

Google's new campus master plan will "explode" the whole idea of how buildings and workspace are designed and constructed, according to a Silicon Valley business publication. The company's futuristic 3.4 million square feet of projects intends to do no less than re-invent the work environment through a central theme of encouraging people to better interact.

This search engine behemoth knows, as did Bob Dylan, that "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." Now it's blowing toward where buildings and space are designed for collaboration, not stuck in yesteryear where people went to traditional office space and did their "heads down" work. It's about how people use the buildings, not an extension of the open office vs. closed office discussion that assumes everyone is in the office and fights over the type of seating. Significantly, not only is this future vision already taking hold, it is accelerating.



Corporate Relocation Model Morphing

Realistically, no relocation executives or developers will lose money in the long run by constructing buildings where businesses and people are geographically concentrated. Being at this vortex of activity, close to customers and suppliers, is a basic human desire. Thus, it's unlikely the demand for a cohesive workplace for an organization or company will go away. What is changing, however, is how people move around and how they collaborate.

The physical workplace is becoming a destination as opposed to a starting point, sometimes for groups working together regularly or other times coming together from different pieces of a project and collaborating on the pieces. Sometimes these places are contained within a traditional workplace and sometimes not. Also, critical events, such as a product launch or testing cycle, may occur at the same time and it's vital that enough space is available to accommodate all these demands simultaneously. Otherwise, the system or the company's business cycle breaks down and that is unacceptable.

Essentially, work has become more disjointed instead of linear. Previously, demand comes in and is taken through the different departments to see if the idea will work; if so, it gets done, goes to sales and out the door. Today's non-linear work practices, functioning differently, are running into a big obstacle where workspaces to support a linear practice are still being built and forcing companies to awkwardly jam people into existing space models.

Creating New Building and Space Solutions

Within these changing dynamics, interesting ideas and solutions are emerging. One involves continual co-location and dispersion, similar to insourcing/outsourcing. Currently, the work environment is in a distributed mode, with a need for a central area where larger groups of company people can meet, while a need also exists for distributed sets of smaller spaces for meeting or short-term office needs. That may require a central campus and satellite spaces dispersed around a metro area. Most likely the overall campus environment that gets built as a result of metro co-location will be smaller than the sum total of all space already in the portfolio at the outset.

Another relocation aspect not to be overlooked is security, which in the context of business expansion planning, is the need for specific business aspects to be undertaken within company walls so they are not exposed to outsiders. However, since it is not always critical for individuals to be contained within a secure environment, companies should not design space for a completely secure environment if it's projected to sit empty 75 percent of the time when secure-critical work is not being done. Instead, just provide space (but not a full office) where an individual can come in and be secure without creating a major demand on real estate. That design concept feeds into concepts such as the new metric gaining traction involving space utilization. Traditionally, a building is full when every seat has a person assigned to it but that does not mean every seat is being utilized properly. A person assigned that seat may only be coming in 20 percent of the time, so instead of looking at it as everyone having an assigned seat it is viewed as office space being utilized 100 percent of the time.

Now, when looking at the utilization metric, company executives can look at the rest of their portfolio and conclude "While we do have assigned people for each of these seats, they're only utilized 40 percent of the time. Why not take 20 percent of demand from another location and work it into that site? So we will not have to acquire a space specifically for the other site's 20 percent."

As a result, space is now better utilized without having to take down more space and still have the opportunity to meet demands of the company's business units overall for a secure environment.

Collaboration Changes Everything

Internally focused service staff has to constantly move around based on demand for their services within the company. That involves talking to different people and different organizations internally and externally, depending on the current project. Consequently, they have the flexibility to utilize different types of space as opposed to sitting in a rigid-space office. And the transient worker population may only come to the office for meetings or to talk to specific people. This demand is now manifesting itself as multiple types of collaborative environments, both reservable and non-reservable, large and small.

Thus, the architect must take an increasingly hard look at the kind of environment where people will be put in place instead of taking a cookie cutter number from past practice whereby the approach was, "We have 10 executives at 300 square feet and 100 junior people at 120 square feet," and working up a program based solely on those numbers.

Quite simply, office space is dramatically changing into space that can be configured on a more aggressive schedule, adaptable to changing populations, and nimble enough to quickly grow based on changing market requirements. The workplace's importance is not diminished but actually enhanced because it is becoming more of a key driver to maintain cohesion for a mobile workforce needing collaboration.

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