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WORKSPACE FOR THE MODERN WORKFORCE

To thrive in Industry 4.0, companies need to be agile, efficient and very flexible **BY EUNICE OOI**

THANKS to the fourth industrial revolution, the traditional work model of 9-to-5 marathons is no longer en vogue. To thrive in Industry 4.0, companies need to be agile, efficient, and very flexible. This is an era where working styles have evolved from exhausting, day-long slogs to energetic sprints and rapid brainstorming sessions.

This new style of work prioritises outcome over time spent. This shift to a results-oriented work environment, or ROWE, means that workers now have more freedom to choose where and how they want to work – a coworking space, the office, their home, or a mix of all these and more.

Though flexible work arrangements have been around for years, Industry 4.0 has reignited discussion around this topic.

During these changing times, enforcing that work be done in the office could be a step backwards. Instead, businesses should adopt a forward-thinking mindset by addressing outdated perceptions about physical offices and imbuing them with new purposes and functions.

The question that business owners should be asking now is: “How can we design better offices that will empower employees to deliver the best work of their lives?”

Multiple studies show that well-designed offices can actually improve a company's bottom line. Just take a look at Google – its obsession with setting up fun, creative and empowering places to work in has led to a direct increase in productivity and profitability, and the company itself is consistently ranked by employees as one of the best companies to work in.

Companies that design attractive and conducive office spaces – where employees feel connected, engaged and appreciated – will not have to feel threatened by flexible working arrangements. Firstly, employees will be more productive in and out of the office, and secondly, employees will come in of their own accord.

Physical offices have plenty of tangible and intangible benefits. Below are four key ways that they contribute to a company's success, as well as some tips to design your own office to achieve its maximum potential.

1. A HOME AWAY FROM HOME CAN STIMULATE CREATIVITY AND FOSTER EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING

46% of professionals indicate that their existing workspace heavily impacts their productivity – and many unproductive employees cite poor office design as one of the reasons that they find it difficult to focus.

Employees need to feel comfortable in their office in order to produce their best work, but drab cubicles, stiff chairs and dull, poorly-lit walkways create the opposite effect as they are isolating and alienating.

A comfortable environment can significantly boost employee satisfaction, and that is good news for companies – a happy employee is 12 per cent more productive and engaged. Here are some key considerations in creating a welcoming office environment:

- **Basic (but essential) factors:** Before we get ahead of ourselves, let's get the basics that constitute a conducive workplace right. Ensure you have in place indoor greenery as it is found to boost productivity and satisfaction by up to 15 per cent; natural light to improve overall well-being as it is proven to result in an 84 per cent decrease in headaches and eyestrain.
- **Ergonomic furniture:** As employees find themselves confined to their chairs for longer hours, ergonomic office furniture – such as height adjustable tables and monitor arm – play a critical role in combating typical white-collar ailments such as carpal tunnel syndrome and eye strain from extended computer usage.

2. CELEBRATE INDIVIDUALITY AND DIVERSITY TO INSTILL A GREATER SENSE OF PURPOSE

Do not underestimate the impact of the ability for employees to express their individuality. A study published in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* states that employees working in generic, undecorated, and low-privacy spaces experienced the highest levels of emotional exhaustion.

On the other hand, those allowed to personalise their workspaces – through photos, children's drawings and small knick-knacks – felt a greater sense of ownership and control, enhancing mental resources and improving resilience. A simple touch of personalisation can increase productivity by up to 25 per cent.

Putting aside discussions around gender diversity, we want to shine the light on another form of diversity that is becoming increasingly prevalent. Today's workforce comprises baby boomers, Generation X, Y and Z. Having such a diverse workforce means that the workspace needs to create cross-generational bridges that caters to different needs – from wellness corners to recharge, to healthy snack bars in the pantry and nursing rooms for mothers.

3. ENGINEER SERENDIPITY IN THE WORKPLACE TO ENCOURAGE INTERACTION AND INNOVATION

In nature, watering holes serve as an oasis for herds to find nourishment and relax. Office spaces can be designed to foster collaboration and serendipity in pretty much the same way.

This should not be left to chance. Gone are the days of cramped, barely-stocked pantries. Today, meeting spaces can be designed to cater for both formal and informal group discussions within and between teams, or simply to maximise casual employee conversations.

A welcoming pantry that encourages team lunches can make a team more cooperative and efficient. Company leaders should think of their expenditures on cafeterias and eating spaces as investments that will pay off with increased performance and employee collaboration.

4. A MYRIAD OF SPACES THAT CATER TO DIFFERENT NEEDS CAN SUPERCHARGE PRODUCTIVITY

Office spaces should facilitate healthy, transparent discussions. Though conference call facilities are now much more advanced, almost nothing beats the experience of brainstorming in person with fellow colleagues and working together towards the same goal.

- **Agile office setup:** Flexible work spaces have risen to popularity and are increasingly relevant today. The modern workforce requires a myriad of work spaces as staff navigate different tasks and innovation processes. This includes the use of movable walls, partitions or furniture to tailor the spaces based on the task at hand. It can also be the addition of co-working spaces to an existing office venue to cater to client-facing teams that need to work closer to their customers, or even house teams that are working on special projects and collaborations. This will complement the agile style of working needed to succeed in the Industry 4.0 era.
- **Shared breakout areas:** Help employees relax and re-energise with

casual, comfortable areas that can be used at any time. These multi-purpose areas should be furnished with various seats and tables. They can also be great places to install a vending machine or a bookshelf.

- **Less formal meeting areas:** Middle and upper management often spend a significant portion of their time in meetings. Consider revitalising traditional conference rooms with unique seating options and more vibrant decor that is inclusive for people of all age groups.
- **Smart office technologies and collaborative tools:** The rise of telecommunication tools such as Zoom and Slack have eradicated the need to jump on a flight and meet in-person to close deals or nail that partnership. Video conferencing technology is now incredibly sophisticated – anyone can share a screen, record and transcribe audio and video, or host a presentation with others around the world. Make it possible for employees to take calls and host their meetings with great acoustics, robust hardware and software, and a strong Internet connection.

Taking it up a notch, technology-led companies have also leveraged smart office technology to improve energy efficiency, security and comfort. Technology here can be used to assess the space usage and occupancy, creating valuable data that can be used to improve existing office layout or make business decisions when scaling up or down.

Companies that want to thrive in Industry 4.0 need to become leaner, more agile, and much more creative. But they won't be successful in their transformation if their offices remain stuck in the past. This isn't the demise of physical offices. It's just time to redefine the meaning and purpose of work spaces, and how they sit within a company's growth and talent strategy. ■

The writer is the co-founder of spaceSense