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Composing Collaborative Workspaces

Collaboration is the top trend in furniture, according to Tim Ruffini, director of brand management at Spring Lake, MI-based izzydesign. He says the movement calls for “flatter, leaner, non-hierarchical structure that encourages collaboration amongst individuals” and also considers a more individualistic and mobile work style.

To manage, encourage, and contribute to the spirit of collaboration in emerging work environments, facility managers need to understand why and how the workplace is changing, and support tenants/occupants with appropriate furniture systems and office arrangements.

The Trend

“The changing dynamics of work style will demand a change to the historical mindset of ‘cubicle planning,’” says Ruffini. Mike Tennity, vice president of design and development at Green Bay, WI-based KI, describes the new collaborative workspace: “Divider walls are coming down in height, desks are more likely to be freestanding and adjustable, mobile storage and other items are more often shared, and components need to serve multiple purposes.”

Kristin Moore, LEED AP at DIRTT Environmental Solutions Ltd., Calgary, AB, explains what’s guiding the trend: “Mergers, new technology, outsourcing, telecommuting, and simple economics are just some of the forces at work.” She adds that, through expansion and contraction, “new team formations are easier and faster when the entire interior is agile, not just the modular furniture.”

What to Do

Most offices, of course, already have furniture systems in place with no budget for mixing things up. If that’s the case, work with what you have to foster a more collaborative environment. Think about strategically taking down



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a few walls. Place a few more chairs around offices, or purchase mobile storage units to remove clutter, add a small worksurface, and make room for impromptu meetings.

If you can redesign your interior, Ruffini says, “The best plan for an FM is to specify products that are collections based, allowing for easier moves, adds, and changes. Systems are just that – systems based – and are linear in thought process. The collections approach can take different angles and

layouts with a smaller kit of parts.”

Moore advises choosing layouts with movable walls that have horizontal support systems so furniture placement isn’t dictated by the base building. Ruffini agrees, saying, “The panels/walls can define the sandbox, and then freestanding, mobile furniture can play within these systems.”

Important Reminders

When specifying furniture and laying out interior spaces, don’t forget about the most important element: the employees. “The key is to recognize that there is not one solution that will work for all,” says Tennity. “Provide spaces that allow heads-down, concentrative work while also providing areas that encourage random interactions.” Collaboration doesn’t make sense for every worker, so be sure to get employee feedback before you make critical decisions. Moore also warns that furniture isn’t the only element you need to consider in a flexible workspace. “You need to look at agile power/data, walls, lights, and even HVAC to create a great collaborative space,” she says. ■

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Components of a Collaborative Workspace

While the elements of most offices are the same (desk, chair, cubicle walls, etc.), there are specific pieces of furniture that can promote a collaborative work environment through their mobility and range of uses.

1. **Movable walls.** Change up the size of a workspace on the fly, or re-orient an office according to its use.
2. **Height-adjustable worksurfaces.** Whether standing-room-only is a preferred work style or if a project requires sit-down focus, allow users to configure their

desks and surfaces to different, comfortable heights.

3. **Side chairs.** “Pulling up a chair” is the essence of a collaborative workspace.
4. **Mobile storage.** Doubling as storage and an extra worksurface, mobile filing cabinets and storage units can increase the functionality of your space.
5. **Collapsible desks.** As hoteling and temporary offices become the norm, make sure your employees have easy access to extra worksurfaces.