

# Comfort is just as important as style in office design

by Randy McGinnis

Good design and function are not the only considerations when designing office space. Natural products and a relaxed atmosphere are equally important.

A minimalist approach with a more sleek appearance and a back-to-nature kind of look are more of a trend in offices, said Donald F. Prochaska, president of Prochaska & Associates.

While offices or cubicles can shut out distractions or provide acoustical privacy, they also can stifle much needed communication between co-workers, said Jennifer Glawatz, interior designer at Encompass Architects.

Whether a business has an open floor plan or is partitioned really depends on the type of business, said Anita Wiechman, interior designer at The Interior Design Firm.

The importance of an effective layout is critical for the success of a business, said Lisa McCoy, architect and interior designer at D3 Interiors.

Natural fibers and renewable materials like bamboo, birch or willow products and plants which can be replaced rapidly are the new trend in office interiors, Prochaska said.

The green movement, which emphasizes the environment more than ever before, is a driving force to promote health conservation and reduction of toxins in the air.

"We are always pushing the message to



The conference room at the Bahr Vermeer Haecker Architects' office in Lincoln's Sawmill Building.

design with conservation in mind," he said.

Wood floors and areas with shelves for personal belongings as well as individualized spaces with photos or plants are popular choices that incorporate versatility and good looks using renewable materials. Using as much natural lighting as possible not only conserves energy, it also adds to the natural feel of the work spaces, Prochaska said.

Designing of space since Sept. 11, 2001, is going toward homey, natural and comfortable materials that play into

the design of furniture.

Everything, including the equipment, must be Energy Star rated, meaning it will use much less energy, Prochaska said.

Open offices are a current trend, Glawatz said.

"Although individuals might be more productive in a closed office, they may not be in sync with the team with which they are working," Glawatz said.

Open offices provide opportunity for much more communication, but a more common

recent solution is to create a combination of an open and closed office environment. Incorporating glass or translucent-walled offices or partitions so workers can see in and out will still provide privacy and acoustical separation.

Other ideas are simply lowering cubicle height, providing common areas for group discussion, and segregated conference rooms for private meetings or conversation.

If an office opts for an open layout, grouping workstations to form collaborative teams proves to be beneficial, Glawatz said. For these teams, versatile furniture should be selected. For example, stations should have moveable tables so that certain pieces can be moved from individual workstations to form a larger work surface.

Another idea is to have a large common workstation where several people can pull up chairs and have a discussion. This area should be permanent and located between teams so that it is easily available for use, Glawatz said.

Businesses such as attorneys' offices need private spaces, while those who do similar types of jobs or thrive on open communication find the openness conducive to business as well as more cost-effective, Wiechman said.

For companies looking to update for the least amount of money, Wiechman has a few suggestions.

"The least expensive way to dress up, freshen up, change the feel of office space is adding a new coat of paint," she said.

Try placing area rugs over worn carpeting in seating areas so all the carpet doesn't have to be replaced.

Laminated counters in storage areas take care of files and cabinetry that don't match.

Updating lighting with new fixtures, different light levels and task and ambient lighting is an inexpensive way to update the space without spending a lot of money.

"Adding accessories such as new artwork and fresh flowers really makes the space more relaxing and appealing," Wiechman said.

Every function operates in a sequence, and if the layout does not support this it truly can be devastating to the bottom line of a business, McCoy said.

An effective layout begins with thinking about how the business operates. Factors to consider are the function of the space and business practice, how the design can affect the efficiency of employees in the work environment, and the adjacency of departments and how they work together. When all these factors are taken into consideration, you end up with an effective layout.

"Lately I have seen a combination of both divided and open spaces, depending on the nature of the business," McCoy said.

When offices have more privacy constraints, people feel more comfortable in the surroundings and are willing to discuss private issues. On the other hand, advancements in workstations are allowing for a more private feel while keeping the open office concept.

The layout of a space is solely derived from the function for which that space is going to be used. Team atmospheres, private offices and workstation clusters all tend to be used. Some businesses may have a combination of several, but it depends on the function of the business, McCoy said.



Prochaska



Glawatz



Wiechman



McCoy