
Record: 12**Title:** Called to order.**Subject(s):** CONGRESSES & conventions -- Technological innovations**Source:** Executive Report, Jul94, Vol. 12 Issue 11, p27, 4p, 1bw**Author(s):** Sawka, Raelin**Abstract:** Discusses technological improvements in the holding of business conferences. Changes in conferencing practices; Renovation of conference rooms; Videoconferencing; Installation of computers, telecommunications equipment and multimedia systems in meeting rooms; Improvement of interoffice communications; Capitalizing on chance encounters.**AN:** 9410050423**ISSN:** 0279-1382**Database:** Business Source Elite

Section: UPDATE OFFICE SYSTEM

CALLED TO ORDER

Some companies are doing away with traditional conference rooms and creating new unconventional meeting spaces.

As we change the way we do business, our surroundings -- offices, conference rooms, reception areas, training rooms -- must also change. Architects, space planners, and furniture and electronics manufacturers are responding to the changes in American business practices with designs that emphasize teamwork, creativity, social interaction and collaboration.

Whether called downsizing, rightsizing or reengineering, it all means the same thing to the company's architectural firm -- new designs and space plans to encourage management's new objectives.

"The changes in the way we do work are trending more toward people getting together and exchanging ideas," says Roger Kingsland, AIA, of Kingsland Scott Bauer Havekotte Architects. "We're throwing out the term 'conference room' and substituting 'meeting space' . . . and it works best when the meeting space evolves from the user's management objectives. Today's objectives are more communications and more teamwork."

Martin Powell, AIA, of The Design Alliance agrees. "The old model of isolation doesn't work. Architects need to capture the new methods of work and provide the architectural settings," says Powell.

Today's designs include semiprivate, open offices with built-in mini-meeting areas and several meeting rooms designed for collaborative work sessions.

The huge, wood conference room table encircled by chairs is giving way to modular furniture that is arranged as a theater, round table or classroom. Traditional easel flip charts and roll-down screens are being replaced with presentation walls made of interchangeable tackable surfaces, dry erase white boards and copiers, fold-away flip charts, and shelving and display racks. Projectors, VCRs and televisions are being overshadowed by built-in computer multimedia and video teleconferencing that allow people to simultaneously change documents directly on the computer.

Conference Room Evolution

Apart from the company's traditional room reserved for annual board of trustees meeting and other formal functions, smaller conference rooms in many buildings are being renovated as meeting spaces intended to allow people to work together on projects.

TDA redesigned Alcoa's and Equitable Resources' executive offices to facilitate management's new objectives that focus on collaborative decision making, seamless communications and, most importantly, interaction.

At Equitable, TDA places the executive offices along the outside of a corridor surrounding a common meeting space. The common meeting space includes a large meeting room equipped with computer electronics and equipment that facilitates work group meetings. Smaller meeting rooms are interspersed among the offices, and the traditional conference room with the big round table is tucked away in a corner.

Intended for work sessions, the main meeting room table is specially equipped with hidden data jacks and power outlets for laptop computer. Equitable staffers simply plug in their computers and they can share documents with anyone in the room via a large projection unit. All those plugged into the network can then manipulate the displayed document, making and saving changes as they review the materials. Shared documents could range from spreadsheets containing financial forecasts to CAD models of new products for manufacture.

At Alcoa the design emphasizes working together. The new office includes cubicle-like partitions and open areas intended for group meetings.

All of the designs include interchangeable furniture that contain hidden receptacles for telephone, computer and other cables for a cleaner, less cluttered look; adjustable pieces for more comfortable work surfaces, and multi-purpose wall centers containing boards, fold-away flip charts, projection screens and display racks.

David Ross, AIA, of TDA says that new demands on meeting room furniture have caused furniture manufacturers to research the needs of today's "information workers" and to produce equipment for their specific needs. "Pounding out desks and chairs isn't going to cut it anymore," says Ross.

Depending on the original condition of the space and the amenities specified, the cost for meeting rooms equipped with electronics, modular furniture, presentation walls and computer multimedia capabilities can run from a few thousand dollars into the millions of dollars. In the construction of new buildings, however, creating such adaptable meeting spaces adds very little to the overall budget, says Ross. He stresses that companies quickly recover the initial materials cost of such improvements through productivity increases.

Enter Telecommunications

At KSBH, meeting room design emphasizes telecommunications and bringing geographically dispersed locations together. An expensive option in the past, videoconferencing is affordable today. At about \$1,000 for a roll-around unit, many companies are able to cut travel costs by holding meetings across telecommunication lines, says Mark Valenti, director of operations for Synergistic Technologies Inc. STI often collaborates with KSBH on designs involving computer electronics and telecommunications.

Videoconferencing not only allows real time conversations in voice and video, but the computer system also provides document sharing and shared video white boards to express ideas. With the introduction of affordable desktop videoconferencing, telecommunications systems can connect meeting rooms with private offices.

Valenti says his company installs about four videoconferencing projects a year, including a current project involving two-way communications among six individual offices and a large conference room. The client hopes to improve communication among the offices' executives and with other employees. Using teleconferencing, it should be easier to hold spur-of-the-moment, impromptu meetings even though the individual members of the team may be in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles.

Valenti says that the computer and telecommunications equipment for corporate, auditorium-like meeting rooms with interactive videoconferencing can run as high as \$2 million, but smaller setups for 15 to 20 people can cost \$20,000 or less per room. Videoconferencing expenses, however, go beyond the required computer equipment. Lighting, wall coverings, furniture, acoustics, heating and ventilation noise and other environmental factors have to be considered. Although retrofitting a meeting room to accommodate videoconferencing can be expensive, Kingsland says original construction adds very little to the space cost. He estimates that environmental treatments cost approximately \$20 to \$50 per square foot, with retrofitting doubling and sometimes tripling that amount.

Other computer uses in the meeting room today include desktop PCs configured to run multimedia software useful for product demonstrations and presentations. Mark Vincent, president of Computerland Pittsburgh, says that many companies are purchasing multimedia computers and other equipment to make multimedia an element in their meeting rooms.

"Multimedia is snazzy and sexy. It keeps people's attention. It's most useful for sales and marketing," says Vincent.

Multimedia computers and equipment allow for the mixture of data, images, sounds, music, video and animation all in an interactive, responsive format changeable with the click of a mouse. Multimedia is especially useful for demonstrations of products using animated models and video.

Multimedia computer systems usually include a Macintosh Quadra or a PC compatible with a 486 or Pentium processor. The computer has installed sound and video boards, large storage space on hard disk and no less than 8 MB memory, as well as color monitor and speakers. Low-end systems can run \$2,500, with high-end systems costing as much as \$7,000, says Vincent.

Into the Corridors

While technology, including video-conferencing and multimedia, has played a large role in meeting room design for clients of The Design Alliance, most of TDA's attention has been on improving interoffice communications through architecture of the space. In their renovation efforts at Alcoa and Equitable and at Legent's newly constructed Pittsburgh headquarters, TDA has taken meeting spaces beyond the boundaries of the conference room itself. In these recent projects, the meeting space has expanded to the coffee room, intersections of cubicles, the cafeteria and even the corridors.

This concept, coined the "village well" by TDA, provides employees with materials and technologies to help improve the work often conducted during chance encounters in the workplace. Applying the same principle to their recent designs, KSBH refers to the scenario of chance encounters as "caves and commons," where the caves represent individual work spaces and commons refer to coffee areas or the

watercooler.

Whatever the metaphor, the intent is the same -- to capture the spontaneity and energy of chance encounters and turn them into meaningful work sessions. Powell refers to this as "encouraging enlightened serendipity," and he remarks that "chance meetings are important. In many companies, it's like business is done on the fly, like a pickup basketball game. Many times very important work gets triggered by lucky encounters."

At Legent, TDA designed corridors and offices around a street metaphor with intersections supported by such communal facilities as mailboxes, vending machines and copy machines. Powell says these areas attract people, especially the food and drinks. To make the most of these often-visited areas, TDA placed tables, chairs, white boards and other equipment nearby.

TDA's design grew out of months of focus groups with Legent employees and management.

The largest spaces are separate internal and customer training rooms for groups from five to 30 people as well as large conference rooms seating 12 to 15 people. All of these rooms are stocked with electronic and computer equipment, including data ports and videoconferencing equipment.

At the smaller end of the scale are lab-like work rooms with computers for work-together sessions and smaller five-to six-person meeting rooms equipped with standard white boards and flip charts. On the more informal side, most larger offices include "breakaway" end tables that pull away from the desk into a common area for smaller meetings right in the office or cubicle intersection.

While meeting rooms accommodate many types of encounters and work group sessions, Legent's new building also provides many informal areas intended to encourage the teamwork atmosphere, including a cafeteria, outside terraces, exercise rooms, library and even volleyball courts. Powell said that meetings can happen anywhere, and most do happen at unscheduled, unforeseen encounters.

At the Alcoa and Equitable buildings, TDA took their "chance encounter" concept a step further by designing unconventional meeting areas where executives can gather informally. In the center of the offices, adjacent to the meeting rooms, is a lounge-like area using video walls of information to attract passersby.

Televisions displaying weather, stock prices, news and even internal corporate reports play continuously as people wander in and out, catching up on the latest stock prices, chatting with co-workers and grabbing a cup of coffee. While these meeting spaces are new and the results are yet to be seen, TDA believes that most of the corporation's future work will be carried out in these informal meetings.

"It seems quite new, but really it's everywhere already. We're understanding what they [corporate executives] want to do and we're using communications and architecture to reinforce how they do business," says Ross.

Most architects agree that one state-of-the-art conference room equipped with multimedia computers, videoconferencing and floor-to-ceiling media centers can't help employees work together if it's never available. "New meeting spaces" does not necessarily mean technology and more of it, but instead it means more spaces and opportunities to work together, even if that space is the top of filing cabinets in the middle of a corridor.

ILLUSTRATION

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By Raelin Sawka

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