

using technology

to create and support flexible work environments

By Rick Boyink, PeopleCube

Creating a flexible work environment can be one of the best ways to increase employee satisfaction beyond simply issuing a bigger paycheck. Family friendly workplaces are becoming more prevalent

QUICK LOOK

- ➔ Seventy-three percent of Fortune 500 companies offer “hot desking” or unassigned workstations, and 60 percent of companies plan to introduce “drop in” spaces in the near future.
- ➔ Mobile workers may make up as much as 40 percent of the entire workforce, or 50 million people.
- ➔ Creating a successful hoteling environment requires organizations to understand how employees work, with whom they like to work, and how the workplace can be set up to support needs.

as employers seek to entice the best and brightest talent to come on board. Workers with young children or elderly parents, Baby Boomers who are beginning to consider retirement and may be interested in scaling back their office hours, or employees who want to job share to free up time for family or health issues appreciate having the option to conduct some or most of their business from home.

There are many types of workers who don't need dedicated office space all week long. Companies are eager to create flexible workspaces that meet the needs of these employees, while reaping the cost and energy savings that can be gained by reducing the corporate real-estate footprint.



There are many names for flexible work environments wherein employees share offices as needed instead of having a permanent, designated space: alternative workspace, hoteling, office hoteling, virtual offices, hot desking, flexible workspace, free addressing and shared assigned spaces.

Office hoteling continues to gain momentum in large enterprises within the United States and Europe. In fact, according to CoreNet Global's Research Center, 73 percent of Fortune 500 companies offer "hot desking" or unassigned workstations, and 60 percent of companies plan to introduce "drop in" spaces in the near future. The popularity is expected to grow at a steady rate, with 10 percent to 25 percent of workstations in the United States and some European countries expected to be part of an alternative workspace environment by 2010.

Flexible Works Environments Bolster Recruiting Efforts

Virtually any flexible work option you could devise will enhance the employee talent pool available to your company, while at the same time potentially saving money by reducing the requirement for office space and associated costs.

Because innovative work plans that contribute to a flexible, family friendly workplace help attract and retain qualified employees, they are especially beneficial to companies in industries with limited talent pools or in areas of the country with shortages of skilled labor. Offering a telecommuting option can make a job at your company more appealing than a comparable — or even somewhat better-compensated — position at a competitor.

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Even companies with workers whose roles don't lend themselves to being conducted from home might benefit from setting up a satellite office close to where a pool of candidates is located, such as in a town or city with one or more institutions of higher learning, so employees' commutes can at least be shortened, if not eliminated.

Enabling the Mobile Workforce

Family or lifestyle considerations aside, the boom in mobile technology also lessens the appeal of working in a traditional office. When mobile employees can take and place phone calls, read and send e-mails, and view their calendars without ever going near their office, they appreciate being given the opportunity to conduct business elsewhere, and they are more apt to search out companies that facilitate this kind of work environment.

A study from industry analyst firm Yankee Group estimates that mobile workers may make up as much as 40 percent of the entire workforce, or 50 million people. Businesses today need to prepare for and accommodate the needs of this large and growing mobile workforce, and alternative workspace is a part of that preparation.

Of course, there have always been employees in roles (e.g., direct sales) that required them to spend considerable time out of the office. Some companies establish policies limiting the amount of time they spend in the office and use technology to implement and monitor the policies

to encourage such employees to spend more time in the field.

Success Depends on Forethought and Usability

While the alternative-workspace approach offers many benefits, it is not free from challenge. Creating a successful hoteling environment requires organizations to understand how employees work, with whom they like to work and how the workplace can be set up to support needs like the ability to work near people in their department and to sign up for the office space to which they are accustomed.

Unless companies create and enforce policies that ensure that the alternative workspace program runs smoothly — including an easy and fair method for scheduling office space — alternative workspace programs either won't

be embraced by employees or won't run efficiently.

It's critical that employees feel confident that adequate workspace and resources will be available when they need them. Otherwise a squatter mentality may emerge, with employees arriving ahead of time (or sending assistants in advance) to line up for the best office space. When employees feel territorial about space and are preoccupied about getting the resources they need, it is hard for them to focus on real work.

Usability greatly influences how users respond to the program and the likelihood that they will embrace it. Only if the processes supporting an alternative workspace are usable will the workspace meet the needs of the user community and, ultimately, the company.

Face-to-face contact and collaboration are also essential. As functions within an organization become more interrelated,

many businesses rely on the collective power of teamwork and the collaboration of people across departments to move the organization's agenda forward.

If a company doesn't address the collaboration needs of its mobile workforce, it may find that employees seek to compensate by spending more time in the office, building the connections themselves and taking up office real estate that's not required to do their

Employers Who Offer Telecommuting:

- Enhance employees' work-life balance
- Improve chances of attracting and retaining top talent
- Reduce real-estate requirements
- Decrease energy consumption.

job and that could be put to better use by other employees.

Technology Can Help Ensure Your Program's Success

Forward-looking companies take advantage of currently available resource-scheduling technology to accommodate the needs of workers and establish fair and effective office-hoteling policies, so employees buy into the concept early and contribute to its success.

When choosing technology to solve the issues intrinsic in flexible office environments, companies should look for solutions that make scheduling office space and resources as easy as possible, from anywhere at any time. A resource-scheduling system should be able to address the following needs:

- **Reserve necessary space and equipment.** Employees need to be able to self-reserve fixed workspaces, as well

as any resources they might need, such as loaner computers or special equipment. They must also be able to reserve group workspaces, such as conference rooms.

- **Booking space in advance.** Employees should be able to find and book workspace remotely. The system should accommodate the use of a variety of mobile devices for employees on the go.
- **Convenient on-site booking.** Users who arrive at the office unexpectedly need to be able to reserve shared workspace on site. Companies can handle this by staffing front-desk personnel or a centralized booking agent. However, sophisticated resource-scheduling systems go a step further and make it possible for companies to set up kiosks or terminals in the main lobby that enable users to sign into an available room, in some cases simply by swiping their security badge.
- **Automated reminders.** The most effective resource-scheduling systems remind users in advance when their reservations are approaching. Reminders can be tailored to fit corporate policy, such as ensuring that users have an opportunity to cancel booked reservations more than 24 hours in advance.
- **Tracking favorite locations and spaces.** Employees are not inclined to follow procedures that are difficult to use, so companies should choose scheduling systems that store users' most-used and favorite workspace for quick and easy booking.
- **Protecting secure areas.** Corporations that maintain secure spaces that are off limits to some employees should be sure to implement a resource-scheduling system that limits access to authorized personnel only. Virtually every organization has at least some areas that should not be available for general usage, such as HR offices that contain personnel files.

- **Providing details about available workspaces.** Ideally, the resource-scheduling system will enable employees to view details about available spaces. This might include snapshots of the space, a listing of amenities included, phone numbers for assistance, and maps displaying where often-used amenities are located (e.g., faxes, printers, meeting rooms, eating facilities and administrators).
- **Locating co-workers, rooms or events.** Companies can promote collaboration among staff members by enabling employees to find other users' reservations easily and to locate events taking place within the organization.
- **Facilitating meetings.** In addition to reserving individual offices, resource-scheduling technology must support employees' efficient arranging and facilitating of meetings. For example, when an employee schedules a meeting, the system should automatically send out invitations and reminders to meeting participants. This is especially beneficial when there are changes in rooms, resources or meeting times.
- **Supporting services.** Beyond reserving the meeting room and alerting attendees, the system should enable employees to reserve resources like audio/visual equipment, catering and room setups. In the ideal implementation, when a user submits requests for these services, the resource-scheduling technology automatically notifies the relevant departments. It should be noted that the listed capabilities are not simply a "wish list" for future reference, but are currently available in commercial resource-scheduling systems that have been fielded at customer sites.

Enhanced Productivity and Loyalty

Alternative workspace is a smart idea whose time has come. It enables

companies to create the kind of family friendly and flexible workplaces that enhance employee recruitment and retention, while maximizing productivity by ensuring that resources are available when and where they are needed.

Savvy companies are leveraging resource-scheduling technology to accommodate the needs of their workers, put effective policies in place, and ensure that scheduling office space and resources is as easy as possible. These forward-looking companies are enjoying the productivity and employee-loyalty benefits that alternative workspace offers, while creating a more sustainable office environment and potentially achieving greater bottom-line savings. 

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