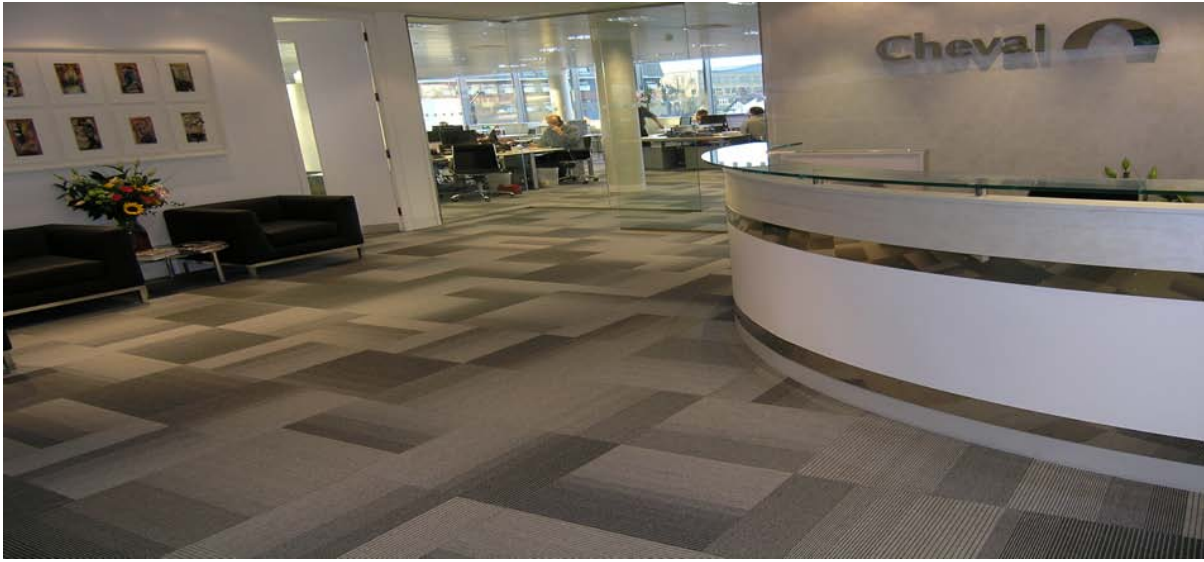


How To Improve Productivity Through Office Design



For a large number of companies, the office is the engine room of their business – a place where people, equipment and space interact in order to get work done. The way the office is designed can have an impact on how efficiently people can work: providing people with the right environment can improve productivity, but the wrong environment can hold people back.

Of course, the success of a business isn't just about office design. Other factors are important too, such as clarity of objectives and management style – but the physical design of the office can either support or undermine these.

Here is our guide to achieving workspaces that not only look good, but support your business operations and allow your people to do their best work.

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1. Support Workflows

This is probably the most important consideration of all, and involves understanding what tasks go on within the office and how people need to move around the office to achieve them.

For instance:

- Do people need access to paper files, records or reference material? If so, is it occasionally or frequently?
- Does the task involve talking to other people in the office? If so how often? And how private do those conversations need to be?
- Are tasks carried out by individuals working alone, or by teams?
- Are the tasks carried out roughly the same every day, or do tasks vary at different times?
- What equipment do people need in order to complete their tasks?

Translating this understanding of tasks and workflows into a successful office design requires expert space planning, to ensure that all types of task are fully supported by the way the office is laid out.

Support for workflows is helped by involving current office staff in the space planning process, by talking to them about their everyday work within the office, and involving them in reviewing plans. Engaging an office design contractor with experience of carrying out space planning helps to ensure that this vital aspect of office design takes place at the outset.

2. Enable Organisation

Organisation is the key to the efficiency of any office, enabling people to quickly and easily lay their hands on the files and resources they need, without having to spend time looking through piles of paper or walking significant distances to access equipment.

A well documented filing system is vital, of course, but can fail to deliver efficiency if, for instance, there is not enough space in filing cabinets and cupboards to hold necessary files, or if filing cabinets are so far away from workers' desks that they end up keeping hold of files instead of returning them.

In terms of basic office efficiency, most people will work better in an uncluttered office. So a new office design needs to ensure good levels of both public and personal storage, to enable people to maintain a tidy environment.

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3. Tame the Technology

Computing and networking are essential to most modern offices. While some businesses need only email and word processing, other businesses use specialist software in order to perform their work. So in addition to desktop PC's, an office may contain printers, photocopiers, file servers, additional laptops for mobile staff and perhaps even smart phones and tablets running business critical applications.

Designing an office for maximum productivity needs to factor in space and resources for all this equipment in such a way that the equipment is assisting your workforce to do its job – instead of competing for space and making your staff less productive. For instance:

- Is there enough physical space for required equipment, or does it end up taking room on someone's desktop, resulting in cramped working conditions and constant interruptions?
- Are there enough power sockets for all items of equipment, and a good number of spare sockets for mobile technology such as laptops, phones etc – or do people have to keep swapping plugs? As well as being a time waster, constant plugging and unplugging can have disastrous consequences (e.g. turning off vital equipment by mistake).
- Can all devices be easily connected to the network? Wireless connections tend to be slower and less reliable, with obvious impact on productivity. Physical wiring (e.g. Cat 5 or Cat 6 Ethernet) is faster and more reliable, but can everyone connect to the network easily without having trailing cables everywhere?

It is important that all these aspects are designed and integrated into the office design at the same time as thinking about workstation numbers and positions, rather than as an afterthought. To achieve this, it pays to choose a contractor that can deal with power and networking aspects, rather than simply supplying furniture.

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4. Manage Noise

Unwanted or intrusive noise can have an extremely damaging effect on productivity. The level of acceptable noise will vary according to the type of work being done and should be noted as part of the task analysis work before design begins. One simple rule of thumb is to determine whether current noise levels are a problem, or are at acceptable levels – and to specify whether the noise levels in the new office need to be the same or lower.

Noise can be effectively managed through the use of noise absorbing materials on walls, ceilings and floors, as well as screens and partitions. This may include simple, movable baffle boards to help absorb sound; or fully soundproof partitions to create quiet spaces within the overall office area.

However, space planning also has an important role here too. For instance, if your people sometimes need a very quiet environment in which to concentrate on written or numerical work, and sometimes need to talk to others, then consider including meeting rooms and breakout areas (with appropriate partitioning) to allow meetings to take place without harming the productivity of others.

5. Heating and Lighting

Glare from windows, draughts and extremes of temperature all interfere with someone's ability to focus on the task at hand. As well as making concentration difficult, these issues will distract people into constantly trying to find solutions to make themselves more comfortable – such as bringing in heaters or fans from home or finding ways to manage light levels. These problems can often lead to conflict between other occupants (which will obviously be detrimental to productivity) and can even mean that workers find excuses to leave their workstations altogether.

As well as providing comfortable working conditions, incorporating the latest lighting and climate control systems can often produce long term energy savings too.

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6. Save Time

A key element of any drive towards productivity is to ensure that as little time as possible is wasted during the working day. Office design and fit out decisions can help to eliminate sources of time wastage, for instance:

- Having to walk significant distances to get to filing cabinets, printers and so on, or walk to another floor of the building to find a washroom
- Having to leave the office/building to get a drink, have something to eat or to have a private meeting

While facilities such as new washrooms, kitchen areas and private meeting rooms may seem like luxuries, they can have a profound effect on the time devoted to business tasks, and are well worth planning in to your new office design.

7. Send Work Signals

As well as enabling people to concentrate on their tasks, it is also important that the office sends strong signals that this is a place for work. This atmosphere can be created to a great extent through office design, including choice of furniture and fittings and through aspects of decor.

It can also be enhanced through branding, such as the use of company colours or company logos on walls and partitions – all helping to remind workers what they are here to do.

Provision of allocated social space, such as kitchen areas or informal meeting spaces, also helps to avoid blurring the lines between work and social activity.

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8. Provide Control

Work psychology studies show that lack of control within the working environment contributes to higher levels of stress, which results in reduced task performance and, hence, lower productivity. Over time, lack of control can have a negative effect on morale and motivation, leading to disengagement and problems with staff retention.

So, when considering overall office and workstation design, it is important to give staff a sense of control over as many aspects of their working environment as possible. Being able to adjust temperature, air conditioning and lighting (e.g. through zoned lighting) are important, as are the provision of, for example, quiet work areas to escape to when noise levels get too high.

At individual workstations, features such as optional task lighting, adjustable chairs and window blinds, and lockable personal storage, all help staff to set up their own personal space to suit their preferences.

9. Allow Flexibility

Flexible workspace design allows people to configure the space for their individual and team needs. Depending on the type of work being supported, this might involve the use of movable or sliding partitions, movable workstations, meeting rooms and informal work areas that can be used in a variety of ways (e.g. a quiet workspace during part of the day and a venue for team meetings at others).

10. Set Standards

Employees will, consciously or unconsciously, pick up messages from their working environment about the company, its values and the standards that are expected from its workforce. A cluttered office with tatty, cheap or mismatched furniture sends a message that it's OK to be disorganised and that standards don't matter. By contrast, a tidy office fitted out with sleek, modern furniture sends the message that this business is organised, professional and takes pride in its work.

In this way, the design of an office can have a subtle but profound impact on productivity, by affecting the general approach to work and the overall culture of the organisation. You can help to send the message that your business cares about the quality of the work it does by choosing high quality, durable materials that will be easy to clean and stay looking good for years to come.

Thames Contracts can assist businesses to build all these factors into their office design or refurbishment, from initial space planning through to innovative use of materials and integration of vital services, to achieve an office design that can actively help your business to succeed.

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