



Eight Office Design Tips to Future Proof Your Business

An office redesign or refurb offers the perfect opportunity to take a step back and look at what you want from your business – not just now, but in the future. It's all too easy just to address the current issues which are driving the redesign, such as lack of space or the opening of a new department. However, there is a need to go beyond that and look not just at what your business needs now, but also what it will need in the years and decades ahead.

As you look to the future, the most important thing is to think flexibly. Workspace has seen massive changes in recent years and this is set to continue, because both the marketplace and workforce are constantly evolving. Growth of technology has had a huge impact on a wide range of industries, as have the explosion in flexible and part-time working and a greater use of outsourcing and freelancing.

To be ready to cope with the challenges of the future, an office needs to be designed in a way which takes all these trends on board – and leaves space to incorporate new trends as they develop.

1. Examine Needs and Working Patterns: Existing office layouts typically grow up over time, in a piecemeal pattern. As a result, many firms may have a lot of space which isn't being used properly. For instance, there could be desks which are empty much or even most of the time as people are working out of the office, out on the road or home-based for part of each week.

If this is the case in your organisation, you could consider whether it is possible for some staff to hot-desk or share desk space. It is important to consult staff on this and get their ideas on what will work in practice. You may also need to think about how to support staff who are working flexibly, or working from home some or all of the time. Are special areas needed for them to work in when they do call into the office, or do you need meeting rooms or video conferencing areas to maintain contact with these employees?

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As well as areas where desk space can be reduced, there may also be some parts of the business which need more space and extra desks, or provision for possible expansion in the future. Other needs to consider include workflow patterns, and which departments or areas should be sited close to one another to streamline work processes.

2. Use Your Space to the Maximum: Space planning is the vital first step to any office design or fitout. Rather than just adding elements to what's already there, the best way forward is to look at the whole office layout and how the space can be used.

Obviously you need to stick to building regulations regarding fire safety, provision of washrooms and many other issues. There are also health and safety regulations governing many aspects of an office fitout, including minimum space between desks. Nevertheless, because space is at such a premium in the current market, there is a growing trend in London and the South East to give each employee less individual space than in the past. There tends to be a greater density of staff in call centres in particular. This is partly a result of slimmer computer monitors, which mean there is no need for large desks built to support the older and heavier designs of a workstation.

However, this way of working needs to be properly thought out. It is not just a case of cramming in more desks. Designing space with multiple uses is an increasingly popular way of meeting the need to accommodate more staff in a smaller space. Modular office design and temporary office partitions can also help in this context, keeping things flexible and making it possible to adapt space quickly if needed without need for major building work or yet another redesign.

3. Consider Privacy: Privacy is important to productivity, since employees can often work better if they aren't disturbed by others, for instance through being distracted by other people's phone calls or meetings. Using partitioning can help to give privacy and is especially important in areas where staff are seated close together, reducing stress and distraction while still making economic use of available space.

In addition, when planning the space, it is important to think about noise and acoustics, which are especially important in siting kitchens, washrooms and other facilities which could create noise, such as areas with equipment like printers.

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Most modern offices are mainly open-plan, but staff will sometimes need to be able to hold confidential meetings or discussions. This means there may be a need to have meeting rooms, conference rooms and private offices built into the open-plan area. Again, using partitioning can make it easier to change the layout if needed in the future without unnecessary cost and upheaval.

4. Build in Communal Areas: Alongside smaller desk spaces for individuals in many workplaces, there has also been a growth in open spaces and communal areas where staff can get together for brainstorming sessions. A growth in collaborative working methods has meant there is more need for several members of staff to collaborate on one document. Although a lot can be done via technology and “in the cloud”, there is still a need for colleagues to meet up and discuss where they are going with a particular project.

This makes breakout areas more important than ever because they give a chance to hold informal meetings or just chat over coffee etc. Often ideas can result from these types of session, and these spaces are helpful to productivity, staff engagement and retention. Including communal areas in a new office design is another way to keep up with current trends and avoid workspaces quickly becoming outdated.

5. Include Flexible Space: Making best use of space doesn't mean filling every inch of the building with desks and equipment. A key part of future-proofing is to include some flexible space which can be adapted as needed – for instance, open areas where more desks can be brought in and space can be partitioned off as needed, perhaps if you need more staff for a specific project or at certain times of the year.

Think Technology and Build in Extra Capacity: When an office is being redesigned, it is an ideal opportunity to look at the latest technology and take the opportunity to update your facilities, since there is no point in shaping a new design around equipment which is already outdated.

This is also a good time to look at what extra capacity could be needed in the future in terms of power or technology, and to lay the groundwork now for extensions later. To prepare your office for the future, you need to be ready to expand technological provision as needed, rather than being held back by a lack of available power or data connections. It is much easier to make provision for this when an office fitout is being carried out, rather than having to add in whole circuits and systems later.

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6. Consider Sustainability: This element is something which needs to be involved at every stage of an office fitout or refurbishment, for the design to meet the demands of both the present and the future. The cost to the planet should be factored in at every stage along with the cost to you. A building which is not eco-friendly will quickly go out of date in a world where green issues are ever more crucial, and indeed are borne in mind by many prospective clients deciding where to take their business.

It is often possible to help your own budget at the same time as helping the environment, for instance by making your building energy-efficient or even installing energy monitoring, which will keep down your company bills and save on your carbon footprint. The same holds true for using natural light wherever possible, for instance through use of glass partitioning. You may also want to consider using sustainably-produced and durable furnishings and fittings, rather than items which will constantly need to be replaced.

7. Choose a Contractor Who Keeps Up with Latest Trends: In order to be sure your office fitout isn't quickly outdated, it helps to have advice from experts who keep up with all the latest trends in office design. You will be looking for a company which knows current best practice and also what the offices of the future are likely to look like.

Contractors with the right expertise can advise you on how to build future-proofing into every aspect of your office fitout, so that it is likely to last for years ahead, adapting to the changes and challenges of staffing and the marketplace.

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