

## Space for Culture

By Traci McMillan Beach | Correspondent - Friday, June 30, 2017

Redesigning an office space can be overwhelming — especially when sizing your company up against “cool hip” offices like young technology firms that get lots of attention.

But making decisions on office space shouldn't just reflect the next big trend. Those decisions should all be tied to the culture of the company, say Tom Wilkinson of Florida Business Interiors and Mike Furnari, a territory sales manager for Haworth Inc., one of the world's biggest office furnishings manufacturers.

Everything from colors to lighting to smells can play a role in space and the kind of culture at a given company, according to the duo. “Some companies bake cookies every day,” to provide an inviting smell, Furnari says. The pair, who together tout more than 50 years of experience in the furniture industry, recently hosted a Tech Talk at the Microsoft office in Tampa. They went into detail about the link between office space and culture at the event. Edited excerpts of the session follow:

**Define the culture:** “It's the visible and invisible things that create a personality of a company,” Furnari says, “the attitudes, values, behaviors that get the job done when the boss ain't looking.”

**Engage employees:** At least 82% of the costs of the average company is people, and 70% of American workers are disengaged, according to a Gallup study quoted in Furnari and Wilkinson's presentation. This is because of lack of a culture that fits the company's mission and vision. Space can play a huge role in developing that culture, the duo says.

There are four types of culture, according to “Competing Values Framework” by the University of Michigan's Ross School of Management. Call them the four Cs: collaborate, create, compete and control. “Every one of these cultures has a space plan implication,” Furnari says.

**Do it right:** There are several examples of companies in the region that do a good job meshing culture with function, say Furnari and Wilkinson. “A lot are in the works right now,” Furnari says.

Metrohm USA in Riverview is a good example, as is Mettler Toledo in Pasco County and Front Burner Brands Inc. in Tampa. These companies stand out because all of them have commissioned culture studies, and top executives are involved in HR looking into how to make the space works best for their culture, he adds. The alternative, says Furnari — “trying to shove a 10 pound bologna in a 5 pound bag” — is far worse.

**Never assume:** The furniture experts say their biggest challenge is to get people to see space as a way of managing employee engagement, Furnari says.

The easiest way is to show people a lot of pictures of different office environments and ask them to guess which one is the most hated company. That's when people realize they are making assumptions about the company by looking at the layout of the space.

**Change is hard:** A common issue the pair is asked to address when designing office spaces is to transition to the open plan and eliminate private offices, says Furnari. And that usually goes back to managing change.

“You need to have a clear idea of the business reason for doing it — instead of just reading an article about Google,” he says. For example, you are transitioning to an open plan in order to spur innovation, and you can’t do that behind closed doors. Adds Furnari: “You have to communicate clearly and be transparent about it.”

On Trends: Furnari says the big trend remains the move from private offices to an open plan. In addition, there’s been a move to more choices in collaborative space. That kind of specialized space in offices has increased almost 20%, Furnari adds.

On the flip side, traditional conference rooms are a dying breed, say Wilkinson and Furnari. “What we’re doing is we’re taking them back and giving them back to employees,” Wilkinson says.

Offices, instead, are opting for smaller huddle rooms, for just a few people to meet. Traditional large conference rooms are some of the most wasted space in offices today, Wilkinson says. Companies have also started to switch to smaller privacy rooms, where employees can make calls. Other trends, says Furnari, include touch down areas for mobile workers and space for brainstorming or sharing technology.

Be proud: Tampa restaurant giant Bloomin’ Brands Inc. was one of the first companies to move to a more collaborative environment, lowering office panels during a redesign seven or eight years ago, Furnari says. That’s one of several career highlights.

American Strategic Insurance in St. Petersburg was another good client. Executives there were able to build collaboration in an administrative building. It was a refreshing move for an industry associated with a lot of heads down work, Furnari says, being open minded to doing something different. Adds Furnari: “They wanted people to talk to each other.”

Finally, the Special Ops Command and Central Command redesign in Tampa was a career highlight project. Not necessarily from an aesthetic perspective, because the military tends to be pretty “cookie cutter,” Furnari says. But he’s proud of the work because the logistical effort and technical expertise that went into designing the wiring and other specs was a good challenge.

History lesson: Most of the trends in modern office design, such as open plans and increased collaborative spaces, come from trends in college or education spaces, says Wilkinson. “People learn and teach in different ways,” he says.

The same goes for transferring and sharing knowledge in the workplace. For example, when ExxonMobil put a \$100 million investment into a furniture redesign, the company was focused on just that — creating a collaborative space for oil drillers in their 60s to offload experience to new graduates. The space had to work for both groups and assist this knowledge transfer, “embedding senior folks with juniors,” Wilkinson says.

Butts in seats: The best advice the office furniture gurus have for executives who seek to make a change in office space or furnishings? It’s a rather easy task: “Spend some time to get a great chair,” Wilkinson says. “It is the most personal thing you can give to a person and yourself.”

But most of all, invest time in understanding your culture. “Culture happens whether you are paying attention to it or not, whether you are managing it or not,” Furnari says. Then, build a space that encourages a culture that will best support your business. Says Furnari: “If you are a defense contractor trying to attract the next hot engineer — if you are competing with Google and Apple — you better have more than ‘we’re near the beach.’”