

Think tank tests 'user friendly' meeting area

By Penny Wright
special writer

CAN CERTAIN office environments block the work activities of employees? "You bet," say office design experts. They point to the growing corporate trend of removing the obstacles from the work environment and making offices more "user friendly."

General Motors is a good example. In an attempt to free executives from the mind constraints of the everyday work environment, General Motors has created a new "think-tank" meeting facility in the Sheffield Plaza office

building in Troy. In this specially designed, frustration-free setting, GM managers collectively plan the company's future.

"PEOPLE WHO have used our meeting space want to bring this type of experience to their own organizations," said David Bess, organization development consultant with the North American Vehicle Systems Activity (NAVSA).

The group oversees operation of the conference facility. "We are getting requests from all around the corporation to hold meetings here."

Here is how the 10,000-square-foot meeting space encourages creative thinking and idea production.

- The futuristic environment features unconventionally shaped meeting equipment.

- All meeting spaces and furnishings emphasize flexibility and can adapt to the whim of any group or individual.

- While facility users meet together most of the day, advanced design work stations adjacent to the conference rooms are available for individual work activity.

- Modular offices are stocked with personal computers, communications equipment and other updated technology to provide users access to their own home office systems when necessary.

"THE GOAL here was to facilitate individual and group creativity," said Bess. "We wanted to create an environment where company executives could get away from distractions and would be stimulated to look at things in a new way."

Bess said the recent restructuring of the GM divisions necessitates doing business differently. The company created the NAVSA group to help facilitate the new thinking that must accompany the restructuring.

While the GM facility may be ahead of the times, the concept of quality work environment is gaining attention.

"I DEFINITELY think the trend is to design work environments to accommodate the needs of the users and facilitate certain special types of behavior," said architect Carl Roehling of Offits/Hoyem Basso.

Roehling, whose firm designed the NAVSA facility, noted that before the think-tank was available, GM personnel met in makeshift spaces around the Detroit area.

"They were just kind of vagabonds; the space they rented didn't reinforce the behavior they needed. They had to overcome the space to make things work. Now the space supports them," he said.

The architect said the work environment can reinforce the company culture and support the way a company conducts business. He uses his own office as an example.

"Our present physical arrangement doesn't reinforce our philosophy of operation, namely teamwork aided by casual communication," Roehling continued.

"Our principals' offices, while near their staff, are spread away from each other. When we redo the office, we will move principals closer together to increase informal contact."

'We used to try to fit people to the furniture. Now we fit the furniture to people. . . . If we can increase the comfort of the employee, we can increase their job satisfaction and work efforts.'

— Gloria Coffin, manager
Officer, Furniture and Accessories

THE MOVE to make the office environment more attuned to the needs of the office worker originated during the 1950s and '60s with the postwar information explosion.

As computers and specialized office machines entered the business world, and new types of office jobs were created, people still worked in offices designed for an earlier age. The productivity and effectiveness of the white-collar worker became a serious concern.

During the later part of the '60s and early '70s, "ergonomics" — the study of man's relationship to the physical environment — became the buzzword for designers of office systems and furniture. They linked increased worker productivity with comfortable and worker-adaptable office environments.

ROBERT SNYDER, an administrator with Herman Miller's Facility Management Institute, offers some cautionary words for office environment planners.

"Beware the large claims!" he said. "Computer people and furniture people will make unrealistic claims about increased productivity. Big numbers are dubious. Little numbers such as 2 percent to 3 percent increase in productivity are more realistic."

"Nice surroundings may increase job satisfaction, but may not necessarily increase productivity."

According to Snyder, researchers are

having a hard time defining productivity in the white collar setting. "Is it longer memos? Longer meetings?"

ON THE OTHER hand, Snyder said it is easier to identify inhibitors or obstacles to production. He named a few:

- Long rows of private offices with doors closed.

- Too much noise, separation and isolation of staff members.

- Status symbols — making office space a factor of status rather than function.

"The key is to not let the office environment become an obstacle to getting the job done," emphasized Snyder.

"WE USED TO try to fit people to the furniture. Now we fit the furniture to people," said Gloria Coffin, manager of Officer, Furniture and Accessories in Bloomfield Hills.

"If we can increase the comfort of the employee, we can increase their job satisfaction and work efforts." A key element to creating comfortable office environments is well-designed office furnishings, said Coffin.

"With Ethospace we have created an adaptable workspace that should give an individual the flexibility to change the space at will," said Bonner. Ethospace work stations are being used at both the NAVSA facility and the new Domino's Pizza Headquarters outside Ann Arbor.



STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

Executives attending sessions at GM's North American Vehicle Systems Activity in Troy are able to keep in touch with home offices using

computers, telephones and other technical equipment in this area.

Focus:HOPE offers training as machinist

Focus:HOPE has announced openings in its eight-month machinist training program.

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