

COSTS AND BENEFITS OF INNOVATIVE WORKPLACE DESIGN

BY DR D J M VAN DER VOORDT / REVIEW BY SUSAN KECK, HDIPT, GDIPED, GCERTBA

The objective of workplace change is to stimulate new ways of working, as well as make “major cost savings (fewer workplaces, fewer square metres) without affecting job satisfaction”. Wim Pullen

Dr D J M van der Voordt's study, *Costs and Benefits of Innovative Workplace Design*, will be a welcome reference for the facility manager consulted to advise, plan or implement the conversion of a fixed office to a flexible workspace. The study aims to clarify the costs and benefits of workplace innovation and identify valid and reliable ways to measure them.

This study was commissioned by The Netherlands' Centre for People and Buildings and Centrum Facility Management (the Netherlands' FMA). Readers may recall that the director of the Centre, Wim Pullen, was one of the keynote speakers at Ideaction 2005. Originally written in Dutch, it has been translated into English to be published internationally because of the Centre's belief that the information contained has universal relevance.

Workplace change is attributed to the development of new information and communication technologies that are fast, powerful and mobile, to economic considerations such as low occupancy of expensive workplaces; to organisational developments of flatter, more informal, network organisations and part-time work; and to external factors such as globalisation and the labour market.

Dr van der Voordt identifies the primary reasons an organisation may wish to initiate workplace change as essentially to work in “a more effective, efficient and enjoyable way”. The innovative workplace is defined as “flexible working with the communal use of activity-related workplace”. The research presented, however,

addresses a variety of office types from single occupant to open plan. The issues of employee satisfaction, labour productivity and facility costs are all addressed in this small but comprehensive book.

Organisations have had to make decisions about workplace change in a context of uncertainty. Much of the research findings on workplace change are contradictory, which is not surprising considering the number of variables. A previous study by Dr van der Voordt identified 75 variables that affect the complex relationship between workplace innovation, performance and personnel.

For example, in this study he notes:

- a flexible, open office plan may improve productivity because of improved communication or it may reduce productivity because of increased distraction for workers who need to concentrate;
- younger workers appear to favour a flexible, open office more than older workers, but then so do more junior workers compared to senior staff; and
- savings through reduced space costs per worker can be outweighed by the costs of the technology that makes it possible. But does the improved productivity of each worker, in turn, outweigh the cost of the technology?

To limit uncertainty, the sound advice of this book is to ensure that the objectives of workplace change are prioritised, clearly defined and aligned with an organisation's needs, and desired outcomes anticipated and quantified before change is implemented. In addition, it is indicated that most effective workplace change occurs when senior management is

committed and genuine consultation with employees takes place as part of the planning process.

A particular strength of the book is the sections on ‘measuring and measurability’ in each chapter. They will be a useful filter for choosing the appropriate measures for determining the costs and benefits of your workplace change.

Whilst the book is basically an academic text and can be a somewhat dry read, the appendices that place office innovation and design in a historical and economic perspective are excellent and, at only 119 pages, it is manageable and well worth the effort. It is packed full of information, tight case studies, charts and diagrams. Terms and concepts are clearly defined and explained, and there is also a 14-page bibliography for those seeking further reference.

For those facility managers contemplating workplace change, this book is thoroughly recommended.

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Dr D J M van der Voordt, Delft 2003

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