

Workplace Trends

Open offices require thoughtful implementation

The open office concept is a desirable option in today's competitive office real estate market. It enables companies to maximize costly space with an efficient solution that supports goals for consolidation and density. But research also shows that many open office plans will fail without intentional design and proper implementation. Successful open offices are driven by strategic thought about how people use space to work.

To experience some of the deficiencies of open offices, particularly in terms of noise and privacy, look no further than some of the newly popular, high-trafficked coworking spaces. In an attempt to facilitate a variety of different work tasks and create social spaces – like cafés and bars – in the same space, these open offices can cre-



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ate a more closed-off atmosphere than if walls were present because workers retreat inward to create quiet space for thought.

Research confirms more and more workers in open offices are activating the fourth wall – using noise-canceling headphones or prioritizing chat platforms in place of face-to-face interactions. These behaviors run counter to the goal of open offices and can lead to a disconnected workforce, which can hurt culture and thwart the health and well-being of employees.

Companies need to be able to lever-



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age the spatial benefits of open office design without negatively impacting the way people feel about working in close and open proximity to their peers. Elevations Credit Union faced this challenge in designing its new administrative building and mortgage office in Broomfield. The

renovation of the 140,000-square-foot, four-story facility aimed to unify various departments in one central location and maximize space for up to 450 employees.

■ **How to thrive without walls.** The company selected the open office concept to enhance collaboration, engagement and connectivity between leaders and the teams. The credit union turned to our team to design and build a space that would accomplish three objectives: promote open and organic human interaction, safeguard privacy concerns for people working with sensitive information, and minimize employee dependence on the fourth wall to encourage a more open, integrated culture.

Several principles successfully guided the process.

■ **Company culture.** Open offices are best designed and implemented with a deep understanding of company culture. Open offices are not a one-size-fits-all solution. Every organization has unique needs, based on established values, habits and norms. Decision-makers need to carefully consider workplace culture to ensure open office

design is an appropriate option. For Elevations, privacy and security were central to its culture, having significant impact on operations; with 13 branch locations along Colorado's Front Range, it also was difficult to integrate teams or departments. Collaboration required advanced planning and travel between locations, or frequent use of digital meetings. The firm wanted to introduce a new way of working that would provide more opportunities for face-to-face interactions, which they knew would create stronger relationships across teams and departments. A new, open design ended up working well because the credit union introduced this culture shift – to be a more open, integrated and collaborate workplace – which the design then could support and activate.

■ **Human interactions.** Human interactions that organically drive the work should drive open office design, not the other way around. Without walls, the dynamics of work will change. Many studies have disproved the idea that open offices naturally lead people to be more open to conversation and interaction. These interactions, which organizations often are anxious to facilitate, result when open office designs support the natural flow and rhythm of work. Consider all aspects of work: what interactions are mandatory, and between which individuals and teams; how often and in what context are people interacting; what the preferred channels and methods are for that interaction; and whether there might be some behaviors and interactions to correct. Elevations considered these and many other questions to evalu-



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The fourth floor of Elevations Credit Union's office space includes an area for personal quiet time, including quiet work areas.

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influence on creative office space set to deliver in Denver is exemplified in the following projects:

- One Platte, a Nichols Partnership development that recently broke ground, considers creative design for its future tenants. Located at 1701 Platte St., One Platte will include large floor plates, a ground-level restaurant, café and retail spaces, an exterior courtyard, plaza, a rooftop amenity terrace and a pet-friendly atmosphere. The project will feature the largest floor plates of any building in downtown Denver and offer views of the Denver skyline with floor-to-ceiling windows.

“One Platte will be an urban campus offering scalability, strong corporate identity and unmatched amenities for the 21st century workforce,” said Randy Nichols, president and founder at Nichols Partnership. “With high competition for employees, it’s important to offer the amenities workers desire. One Platte also is improved by the surrounding downtown neighborhood, where Denver’s professionals live, work and play.”

- Jordon Perlmutter & Co.’s Paradigm River North also proposes highly amenitized offerings to appeal to the technology sector in the River North Arts District. “We wanted to create an environment that was appealing to the

area’s young, educated and ambitious workforce, as well as to their employers looking to attract top talent,” said Sean Perlmutter, head of real estate acquisitions and development at Jordon Perlmutter & Co.

Plans for the new development include a coworking-inspired lobby, a high-end tenant lounge with on-site coffee services, a 12,000-sf restaurant/retail space and a landscaped outdoor lounge to host after-hours networking. Additionally, the property will offer secure on-site bike storage with private lockers and showers, electric car-charging stations, on-site valet parking and full building access through the use of a smartphone app,

replacing the dated and sometimes forgotten keycard.

This shift in office preferences has made a lasting impression, challenging owners and developers to focus more than ever on design, the use of common space and building amenities, as they are central factors to the success of an office development. It is easy to see why tech firms are locating to central business districts for more collaborative and highly amenitized space that helps them target a desired workforce. The built environment, both in terms of carefully selected locations and curated space, has become a company’s most powerful recruitment and retention tool.▲

Forrest

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ate how employees work, and the response to each ultimately helped inform the design of its Broomfield office.

- **Perspective.** Engage a trusted partner to provide fresh perspective on your organization’s inner workings. Working off assumptions is one of the biggest mistakes to make in this industry, which is why engaging a trusted partner can be so valuable. We have a longstanding relationship with the credit union, established on trust built over the course of several projects. This is why they came to us with their vision of this project not only as an upgrade in facilities but also as an opportunity to support a cultural shift. Our team was able to engage and support Elevations in the “how” to make it happen. We highlighted organizational subtleties and processes that would require some degree of change management to function in an open office design. The close partnership helped build consensus for the design at all levels.

- **Education.** Education and inclusion are powerful tools to highlight the benefits of change. Every organization is going to have a contingent, however small, that will resist change, even past implementation. In the case of Elevations, focusing on this group’s concerns first helped make implementation successful. The company created a “ReLo” committee to provide a resource for departments to voice concerns as well as to share updates and design ideas with the company. The committee was the bridge between our team and the roughly 350 staff members at the Broomfield office. We also shared third-party research on the benefits of open office design and involved all levels in the visioning process for the design. As people saw themselves in the project, they felt more connected to its success. Mitigating concerns early, through education and inclusion, made the change feel more manageable.

The Elevations Credit Union Broomfield office was successful because we explored all corners of



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Throughout floors 2-4, the dropped wood ceiling helps identify the conference, huddle and focus rooms.

the business in concert with the design. Designing successful spaces requires understanding the way an organization operates, down to the

human elements of the work. This understanding supports design that, in turn, helps the organization thrive through the success of its people.▲



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