Don’t Get Too Comfortable at That Desk

By STEVE LOHR  OCT. 6, 2017

First there were individual offices. Then cubicles and open floor plans. Now, there is a “palette of places.”

New office designs are coming to a workplace near you, with layouts meant to cater to the variety of tasks required of modern white-collar workers. Put another way, it means people don’t sit in just one place.

It’s partly a backlash against the one-size-fits-all mind-set, not to mention the corporate penny-pinching, embodied in the move toward pure open floor plans that packed more workers into less and less space. That idea was supposed to drive collaboration, but many experts agree it often went too far, with row upon row of desks and workbench-style seating more likely to generate ennui than efficiency.

“When used as a generic answer for work space design, it’s terrible,” said David Lathrop, a researcher at Steelcase, a big office furniture maker.

The new model is largely open, but not entirely. Under the revised thinking, breaking down walls to bring people
Privacy is also good, particularly for tasks that require intense concentration, the thinking goes. That doesn’t mean a return to the glory days of private offices, but it does mean workers have more space and more places to seek solitude than in the neo-Dickensian workbench settings. The new designs often include “isolation rooms,” soundproof phone booths, and even lounges where technology is forbidden.

And it’s meant to be tweaked as needs change. “This continues to be iterated,” said Frank Cuevas, who is working on a major redesign at IBM — and whose use of the word “iterated” hints at the kind of start-up mentality the changes are intended to evoke.

“It’s not something we’re going stop and say, ‘This is it,’” he said.

The corporations setting the new standard are not young Silicon Valley companies known for free food, slides and foosball tables at work — or for carefree spending, as at Apple, whose new corporate mothership cost a reported $5 billion. Nor are the designs one-of-a-kind projects that veer toward eccentricity. Salesforce’s new skyscraper campus in San Francisco, for example, has areas on every floor for meditation, partly inspired by the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk.

Instead, the companies behind the emerging new norm in workplace design are a lineup of more staid companies across a range of industries, and they may spend heavily but also systematically. They include Microsoft, IBM and General Electric. Certain workspace innovations may surface first at Google or Facebook, but the older stalwarts are combining and refining them for mainstream businesses.

“These workplace ideas are beginning to be adopted across all industries,” said Arlyn Vogelmann, a principal at Gensler, an architecture and design firm whose clients include Facebook and G.E.

The new designs are not about looks. They are an attempt to adapt to the spread of internet-era digital technology — and its hurry-up ways — into every industry. Space drives behavior, experts say, and the goal of the new
designs is to hasten the pace of sharing ideas, making decisions and creating new products. They are also meant to appeal to millennial recruits, many of whom are more comfortable working in a Starbucks than in a traditional office.

The new model eschews the common dogmas of work life: Everybody gets an office, or everyone gets a cubicle, or everybody gets a seat on a workbench. A diversity of spaces, experts say, is more productive, and the new concept is called “activity-based workplace design,” tailoring spaces for the kind of work done.

“Office geography matters, and it can be a key managerial lever to increase communication and the cross-fertilization of ideas,” said Christopher Liu, an assistant professor at the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto.

One of the most aggressive makeovers is happening at Microsoft, a change forced by business necessity. The company faces a new wave of technology, as the market has shifted to software delivered and constantly updated as a service over the internet cloud, as opposed to being loaded onto individual computers, with the code often stored on compact discs and sold as a product every few years. To compete, Microsoft has had to adopt a faster pace.

“You have to collaborate more,” said Michael Ford, Microsoft’s general manager of global real estate. “We absolutely have to change.”

For decades, the company, based outside Seattle, housed its software engineers in secluded offices, thinking that the privacy helped employees focus while writing computer code. But in 2010, Microsoft started testing open designs with a quarter of a floor, and then expanded. Since 2014, it has opened 10 renovated buildings without offices, including four this year.

Microsoft, Mr. Ford said, has taken a test-and-learn approach. It learned, for example, that its early designs were too open plan, with 16 to 24 engineers in team-based spaces. Engineers found those spaces noisy and distracting, and
concentration suffered. Too much openness can cause workers to “do a turtle,” researchers say, and retrench and communicate less — colleagues who retreat into their headphones all day, for example.

Today, there are more private spaces, and the team areas hold only eight to 12 engineers. “That’s the sweet spot for Microsoft,” Mr. Ford said.

The company thinks it is working. Microsoft’s Azure cloud software business has surged in the last few years, as has the company’s stock price. Mr. Ford said about 20 percent of the workplaces have been redone on Microsoft’s campus in Redmond, Wash., and the surrounding area. Within five years, he said, he expects the renovated share to reach 80 percent.

Offices, he said, will not disappear entirely, but they will be reserved mainly for people who regularly have confidential conversations, like lawyers and top executives.

Companies renovating their work spaces often tap into a growing body of research on building design and worker well-being and productivity. Research at the University of Oregon concluded that exposure to sunlight and outdoor views correlated to about 6 percent fewer sick days than those without. Research done by Craig Knight, a British organizational psychologist, concluded that “empowered offices” — in which workers can choose their conditions — can increase productivity on cognitive tasks by 25 percent or more.

And at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, scientists found that well-ventilated offices can significantly improve a person’s ability to perform challenging tasks like developing strategy or responding to a crisis.

But companies can also save money, by using a little less space than conventional offices do.

Worker space is now about 150 square feet per person, down from 225 square feet in 2010, estimates Tim Venable, senior vice president for research at CoreNet Global, a commercial real estate association. But the hybrid...
design saves less than entirely open designs, which usually have workbench settings and in which the amount of space can drop to as low as 60 square feet per worker.

“There can be huge value to people coming together, but the real reason a lot of corporations have gone to bench seating is money falling to the bottom line,” said Mr. Lathrop of Steelcase.

Another space saver has been getting people to work from home, a trend for years in corporate America. But that trend is reversing, as companies recognize that offices can be creative clusters.

IBM, for example, recently called 5,000 of its at-home employees back to offices, though one in five workers in North America still work from home full time, the company said.

Since 2014, IBM has spent $380 million renovating its work spaces in the United States, which now bear all the hallmarks of the new hybrid design — open spaces, whiteboard walls, no offices, sit-or-stand desks, huddle rooms and phone rooms.

IBM, said Mr. Cuevas, vice president of real estate strategy and operations, offers employees up to 10 different space configurations. In January, the company also remade its headquarters in Armonk, N.Y., with senior executives departing wood-paneled offices for smaller, side-by-side glass ones without doors.

While G.E. executives wait for the company’s new headquarters to be built in Boston, they are working in temporary offices nearby, designed according to the new principles. The contrast with the cavernous offices and silent hallways of the old headquarters in suburban Connecticut could scarcely be more striking — open spaces, sit-or-stand desks, and no parking spaces. (Workers are urged to take public transportation.)

Face-to-face conversations have replaced endless email chains, so decisions are made faster, said Ann Klee, vice president for the Boston development and operations. Still, openness has its limits. Sometimes, she concedes, you do
have to ask colleagues to use their “indoor voices.” More quiet rooms are being added to the new headquarters design.

The Boston Consulting Group has also adopted the new design, with two goals in mind: prompt people to come to the office rather than avoid it, and encourage more “casual collisions” that might spur workers to trade ideas and build relationships.

Its old Midtown Manhattan office was a traditional space with offices housing one, two or four people each. “Lots of doors, lots of pillars, nowhere to really hang out, and people had lunch delivered to their desks,” said Ross Love, a senior partner in New York.

The new space, in the Hudson Yards development on the Far West Side of Manhattan, is a hybrid open design. Since the firm moved in last November, most consultants have been coming into the office substantially more often than they did to the old building.

To measure informal interactions, Boston Consulting hired a start-up in the emerging field of workplace analytics, Humanyze, a spinoff from the MIT Media Lab. It monitored workers’ physical movements, meetings and patterns of communication.

Two tests were conducted of about 100 employees, before and after the move. In the new space, workers spent an additional four to five hours a week in short, unplanned interactions. And they spent less time in formal meetings.

In surveys, the company’s workers say they are getting more done, faster in the new space. But the payoff, Mr. Love concedes, is difficult to measure so far.

“It’s like increasing the clock speed of a computer,” he said. “If you rev things up, you ought to be able to do more.”

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