

Five Workplace Myths

by Christine Barber

The 21st century has begun, and the office is still here. A new research study conducted for Knoll, Inc., by the independent market research firm DYG, Inc., revisits some of the myths promulgated in the early 1990s by futurists and others who predicted the demise of the office by the year 2000. Here's what a national survey of 350 full-time office workers revealed:

Myth No. 1: 'The Office Is Going Away'

The notion of the "virtual office" – the ability to work anytime, anywhere – captured our imagination in the early 1990s, when portable computing and wireless telephony took the workplace by storm. Promising freedom from drudgery and from the confinement of bricks and mortar, advertisements portrayed workers in luxurious outdoor settings leisurely typing on laptops and talking into cell phones. Times have changed. Today's ads demonize the very technology they once exalted: Witness the ringing cell phone tossed through the air and sinking in a lake. As with most myths, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. After all, what kind of road warrior could possibly survive without cell phones, PDAs and portable computers? According to the Knoll/DYG research, however, people who spend most of their time out of the office represent a relatively small percentage of the working population – about 7 percent – while those saying they spend most of their time in the office represent a whopping 73 percent. Further, only 16 percent said they spend so little time in the office that they don't care about its size or furnishings, and only 1 percent of company employees say they work exclusively out of a home office. As we enter the 21st century, even some staunch futurists admit that the workplace will consist of both "bricks and clicks."

Myth No. 2: 'Technology Is King – Who Cares About The Space?'

While it is true that technology is king – 81 percent of office workers surveyed said that having state-of-the-art technology is absolutely essential to their productivity and satisfaction – only a small minority, 34 percent, agreed that as long as they have all the equipment and technology they need they really don't care how large their workspace is or how well it is furnished. In fact, running a close second, 79 percent of office workers felt that having ample storage space for work-related items would make them happier and more productive at the office.

In the last decade, many companies invested heavily in technology while minimizing their investment in real estate. What they didn't realize was that the office, as it turns out, does more than simply provide a physical loca-

tion for people to work in. An office that fosters job enjoyment and self-esteem plays a proven, positive role in encouraging innovation and accelerating worker productivity. Women are more emphatic about this issue than men, with 65 percent of women versus 53 percent of men agreeing that a nice workspace is one of the key things that help people feel better about their jobs and enjoy them more. In the 21st century, it will be increasingly important for companies to attend to the symbolic and psychological messages that are transmitted by their physical environments to workers, prospective workers, and even customers. The quality of the office space tells workers whether they are valued and respected, and whether or not they want to work at the company. Therefore, employers who invest all in technology at the expense of space, do so at their peril.

Myth No. 3: 'The Paperless Office'

You might call it pulp fiction. Are you paperless yet? Do you know anyone who is? The myth of the paperless office has been bandied about for the last two decades, since the advent of the first personal computer. The thinking is logical: now that we have all these PCs, why do we need paper? But, alas, it appears that the more technology we use, the more paper we produce. It should come as no surprise, then, that workers say having ample storage for work-related items is second only to state-of-the-art technology for improving productivity and satisfaction in the workplace.

Myth No. 4: 'Status Is Dead'

In the past, the size and quality of office space assigned to workers reflected their rank within the organization. The more important the worker, the bigger, better, nicer, and more private the space. And, as workers moved up in the organization, space and amenities were linked to the company's promotion strategies. All that changed in the 1990s. Downsizing, reengineering, collaboration, and teamwork all prompted companies to rethink the effectiveness and practicality of the pyramid approach to office planning. But have workers' attitudes changed along with corporate strategies to eliminate the association of status with the office? Fifty-five percent of office workers strongly agree that the workspace someone has relates more or less to his or status within the organization. And, while there are no significant differences between men and women on the issue, workers in larger companies (1000 +) are much more likely to see someone's workspace as a status symbol than those who work in smaller companies (40-999).

The good news for employers is that most workers feel bigger is not necessarily better. They are not demanding large corner offices. The research suggests a new kind of status: giving workers the tools and equipment they need – including the office – to get the job done.

Myth No. 5: 'One Size Fits All'

Perhaps it was a knee-jerk reaction to the "space as perk" concept that prevailed in the 1970s and 1980s. But when the floodgates of downsizing and reengineering opened in the early 1990s, along came the notion that everyone in the organization should have the same space and the same layout, no matter who they were or what they did. Universal planning is a one-size-fits-all strategy that is intended to reduce real estate costs and facilities churn costs. While this static and rigid approach to office planning

may work for some occupations and can lead to cost reduction and efficiency, it is not necessarily good for people and productivity. In the Knoll study, workers were asked to identify workspace characteristics that would make them more productive and more satisfied at work. The ability to personalize space to their individual workstyle was cited by 73 percent of office workers who said it would make them more productive, and 76 percent who said it would make them more satisfied. With the focus today on attracting and retaining employees, companies would do well to consider giving workers more freedom of choice and greater control over their work environments.

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