

# In the zone

Contemporary office design is about identifying what your staff really need the work place for

by PETER JOHNS

O

FFICE DESIGN in 2011 is as varied as the design of buildings into which the offices are fitted. Priorities and motivations vary between developers, tenants, and architects.

Large companies have recently been moving into squat 'sidescrapers' in newly opened up areas of cities. This shift towards campus-style accommodation is driven as much by lower land prices as the will to increase communication by putting more people on each floor, according to Nick Fowell of Graham Nicholas design. Recent instances include NAB and ANZ in Melbourne's Docklands, and SA Water in Adelaide. All are character-

ised by central atriums, which bounce light down into the large floor plates, and increase 'vertical connectivity' between staff.

Fowell thinks the ideal area per floor is hovering at about 3000 sq m, which suits these new wide-berthed buildings. Robert Backhouse, managing director at Hassell Architects, agrees that a good floor area is somewhere between 2000 and 3000 sq m. This will easily hold about 150 people. Andrew O'Keeffe, from Hardwired Humans, a management consultancy that designs people strategies based on human instincts, thinks 150 people to a floor is a good target. O'Keeffe's research into animal behaviour

suggests our hard-wired need in the office is for an immediate work group of about seven, and a wider 'community' of about 150 on the floor. "More than that and we start to feel like strangers in our own workplace," he says.

Bigger floors could be thought to present a problem for existing slender buildings but this isn't the case. Architect and design group Hassell is working on a refurbishment in a tall city building that cuts 'pocket voids' in between floors so that multiple floors can function as one community. The recently opened premises of construction company Isis, in Melbourne's Queens Road, has a large intra-tenancy stairway that achieves a 2400

sq m space spread over two floors. Floors separated by just a lift and fire stair just don't permit the level of internal communication now desired.

## WORKING ACROSS BOUNDARIES

SA Water combined its three metropolitan sites in Adelaide into one purpose-built central city building in 2009. The new building was to be completely open plan, and embody their new culture of communication, collaboration, and working across boundaries. Because the fit-out was being designed at the same time as the shell, it benefited from an "inside out" approach, meaning that Hassell

could design the building around the desired interior. For Backhouse, the culture change process ideally starts before the building does, so that the design can then be the perfect avenue for expressing, "what the future of the business should look like".

Jacki Done, acting organisational development manager, was working within change management at the time, introducing employees into the new building, and the new business culture. She says the change management involved "educating people on how to use the building, how to use the space, change their behaviours, workplace protocols, and training in the new technology that's availa-

ble in the building". The change was managed incrementally, first with a pilot of about 30 people, and then several major moves in the following six months. Done thinks the success of the move was due to the level of planning that went into it. This included workshops prior to the moves, where employees could be introduced to the public transport required to get into the central city, and where concerns could be addressed.

Employees were often worried to learn that they would no longer have their own office. It was explained to them that "it wasn't just about them, it was across the whole organisation ... no one was going to have an office".

Campaign Monitor wanted offices that reflected the company culture: quiet offices, a large dining area and ping pong.

## The rise and rise of the office

1850

Otis safety elevator goes on sale

1864

First metal-framed glass curtain-walled building: Oriel Chambers

1873

Remington produce a QWERTY typewriter

1902

Willis Carrier launches an "Apparatus for Treating Air"

1911

F.W.Taylor's *The Principles of Scientific Management* published

1915

Modern Efficiency Desk pioneered – a flat top with drawers below.

1918

First multi-storey carpark, Chicago

1950s

Quickborner Team's organic open plan "Office Landscape" movement

1964

Herman Miller Action Office system, precursor to the cubicle

1973

Jack Niles coins the term "telecommuting"

1981

IBM Personal Computer 5150 launched

1983

WHO defines "Sick Building Syndrome"

1985

Microsoft Windows 1.0 goes on sale

1993

Mosaic graphical web browser released

At SA Water everyone sits on the same types of chairs at the same types of workstations, and most managers and team leaders sit with their teams.

Over a 12-month period, 700 employees toured the building while it was in construction. Each undertook training at the new building before the shift, so that when they did finally move people were quite familiar with how the building looked and worked. Most were unpacked and working by 10am.

### COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION

Fowell says that one of the key shifts in the last two decades has been the attempt to build better collaboration within an office. Physical signs of this have been an increase in use of the open plan, increased transparency, better grouping of people working on common activities, and an apparent flattening of hierarchies. Frequent use of adjectives like "non-territorial" and "non-hierarchical" pervade descriptions of these new workspaces.

The technological advance to flat screen monitors has allowed corner workstations which accommodated bulky CRT monitors to be straightened out, and partitions have lowered or vanished. It is now common to see rows of desks with people working side by side. Superficially they may resemble mid-century typing pools, but where the pool grouped one strata of workers together, now everyone is there. This hierarchy flattening is meant to contribute to a "we're all in this together" team spirit, and reduces barriers to communication across a team.

Everyone at SA Water, except the top level of management, shares the same light and airy spaces, with external glazing on one side and a bright atrium on the other. Backhouse remarks that with open plan, "the key thing is that you aren't building a run of offices with great views and all the natural light, and everyone else is sitting in the dark."

The open plan has its benefits but it does lessen privacy. Rather than have the boss in another office, he or she is around all the time, able to monitor how everyone works, not just what they achieve. Large upright screens convey in an instant what some-



SA Water designed its building around the desired interior.



Campaign Monitor has closed-plan offices to help staff get 'in the zone'.

one is working on to whoever happens to be passing. Does this lack of privacy increase stress and decrease quality of work? In 2009, Dr Vinesh Oommem of the Queensland University of Technology's Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation thought so. "In 90 per cent of the research, the outcome of working in an open plan office was seen as negative, with open plan offices causing high levels of stress, conflict, high blood pressure, and a high staff turnover ... It has been found the high level of noise causes employees to lose concentration, leading to low productivity, there are privacy issues because everyone can see what you are doing on the computer or hear what you are saying on the phone, and there is a feeling of insecurity."

Backhouse thinks this is less of an issue if the work style of the organisation favours collaboration. He cites statistics stating that at any one time; around 50 per cent of employees are not at their desks. "People aren't necessarily sitting at their desk, processing, in the way that they were 20 to 30 years ago." They now have a greater choice in the workspaces that they can use during their day.

The move to collaborative work styles has led many companies towards hot desk or "hotelling". Used well, hot desking gives workers a choice of multiple spaces in multiple places, in addition to their own desk. Used as a way to reduce cost and space, it can deprive permanent staff of a place and people to call their own. Backhouse says: "It does work if it's done for the right reasons. But when the client comes forth and says, 'OK we've got 3000 desks, we'll give them 3000 lockers' ... you find resistance and you find problems." He believes solutions need to be, "really carefully researched and explored", preferably allowing for small pilot projects to test the waters and allow feedback into the design process.

Each of SA Water's business groups, ranging from four to 30 people, was allocated a number of workstations. What the group chose to do with its space was largely up to them. Hot desks, where they are used at all, are indistinguishable from permanent workstations, and are located in the midst of them.

This model understands that groups and the individuals within them all have their differ-

ent needs, and increases the likelihood of employees feeling that they belong. Project spaces on every floor allow for gatherings of up to 10 people and are shared by the units.

Sick days at SA Water have reduced substantially in the new building. Improved air handling and lower fit out toxicity may have assisted this improvement. But it is possibly the change in work style under the new business culture, from a sedentary cubicle environment to a more active and engaged way of working, has helped too.

They are also finding that graduate interest in the company has skyrocketed – the new building and company image have helped them become a favoured place to work.

### WORK PLACE HUBS

The Victorian state government is looking at extending its own activity-based model to the next phase: a flexibility-based model, where the model is literally pushed out of the building. Whole-of-government "hub" offices in the suburbs and regions will allow travelling or home-based staff to occasionally visit a workplace that is theirs without having to trek into the central city.

Simon Whibley from RMIT's Design Research Institute and Antarctica Group, says this stems from an acknowledgement that fewer people spend the day at their desks; more are highly mobile during the day, and

now technology will allow it to happen.

Government is also realising that it is sensible to allow employees who move house or whose circumstances change to continue to work for them – the workplace can move with them. The hub model is based on overseas commercial examples – Deloitte and Rabo Bank in particular – so we may see business cultures adjusting further here to allow this kind of remote working.

### DIFFERENT NEEDS

The open plan doesn't suit everyone all the time. Post-occupancy evaluation surveys at

*People aren't necessarily sitting at their desk, processing, in the way that they were 20 to 30 years ago*

ROBERT BACKHOUSE  
MANAGING DIRECTOR  
HASSELL ARCHITECTS

SA Water report that they have work to do reducing background noise and interruptions from neighbouring staff. These two common open plan issues are enough to send some companies back to the closed office. Software companies, for example, require space for each worker to focus on complicated thinking with minimal interruptions.

David Greiner, co-founder of email newsletter service Campaign Monitor, writes that, "you get in the zone and solutions start presenting themselves." Even the quietest open plan office is too noisy for this. The Sydney-based company recently moved into a new office with a short brief to the architects: closed offices for all, a large dining area, and room for ping pong. So its new premises were retrofitted with perimeter offices, a large central dining area and ping pong.

They have simple rules to encourage communication when it is warranted: "If my door is shut, don't interrupt me." Greiner believes that the best communication happens over food, so they have a dining room providing free catered lunches.

Achieving the best solution for any workplace relies on someone with the ability and drive to determine what will best suit their company, and the individuals in it. Visionary HR, teamed with knowledgeable designers, engaged staff, and a realistic budget should see a result that will survive the fads. **HRm**

SA Water's old fit-outs

**45%**  
area open plan cubicles

**20%**  
interactive or support spaces

**18%**  
closed offices

**17%**  
circulation

SA Water's new fit-out

**49%**  
interactive or support space

**31%**  
open work space

**20%**  
circulation

These figures illustrate the extent of the shift towards interactive spaces in the new business culture at SA Water.



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