Six Ways to Innovate: Building the R&D Center of Tomorrow

SUMMER 2020

Every area in your building is important, whether it's a highly functional lab space or a welcoming and engaging lobby. In fact, did you know that sometimes the spaces between and near these main areas, e.g., coffee stations, stairwells, huddle spaces, can actually matter MORE? It's true. Many times, these typically uninspiring spots offer the potential for collaboration and conversations that can spark innovation.

The lowly coffee station is a great example of this. A Harvard Business Review article from a few years ago offered a case study about a pharmaceutical company who wanted to increase sales. The company ran a study which proved that sales went up when employees spent more time engaging and interacting with each another. As a result, they modified their coffee stations as well as their cafeteria. The result? Sales increased 20% after the changes were made.

Like this company discovered, collaboration is essential to becoming a successful R&D center of tomorrow, but it's just one aspect. Let's look at collaboration, and six other elements that can improve the possibilities for innovation and provide positive stimulus for your organization:

1. **Space to Collaborate.** To date, most of the design emphasis for R&D centers has been centered on enabling employees to do focused individual work. Today, however, new ideas on collaboration, socialization, and even innovation are migrating from traditional corporate workplace design into the lab environment. Companies are beginning to create work zones outside of the lab itself to accommodate different work modes, since regulations and the high cost of lab space can make it cost prohibitive to include these spaces in the lab. Yet there are multiple ways that companies can provide strategic locations to encourage interdisciplinary interaction and the exchange of ideas:

    - Social areas or connection points, such as open grouped seating, located at or around circulation points (e.g., corridors, and communicating stairs). These can be informal areas for employees as they migrate throughout the space, or they can be more purposeful, designed as a destination.
    - As mentioned, access to food and beverages is a big deal. Consider having coffee bars and food stations distributed throughout the building. Think about re-designing the cafeteria to allow multiple seating arrangements. This can provide employees with spaces to gather outside of mealtimes for team meetings, celebrations, and other needs.
    - Activity-centered options such as fitness centers or walking paths, where meetings can take place while moving.
    - Virtual collaboration enabled through technology, including video conferencing, net meetings, electronic visualization, and virtual reality.

experience in brief

Did you catch Hixson's webinar "Optimizing Your Lab Facility: Removing Roadblocks to Success?" The one-hour webinar will help you learn to recognize barriers to high-performing lab spaces and what to consider when designing new or upgraded labs. View anytime at: https://bit.ly/3eWQOHM

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2. **Flexibility in How You Work.** A company and a workplace that recognizes both the physical and mental needs of their employees is almost certain to get the best from them. In fact, researchers at Cornell University studied 300 small businesses and found that companies who granted employees the ability to work, the way they want to work, actually grew four times faster and had one third less turnover. Whether they are scientists, lab techs, or business and marketing personnel, employees tend to be more effective when their work environment complements their personal work style, preferences and needs. Flexible workspaces allow R&D personnel to customize spaces the way that works best for them, stimulating creativity without losing sight of overall corporate culture. Some ways that this can be implemented in a lab environment include:

    - Quiet rooms. Almost all of us need a few minutes away every day just to clear our thinking and to reset the day. Quiet rooms located throughout a building help support the individual, focused needs or privacy requirements of each person. Such areas are most effective when they are inviting, comfortable, and relaxing. They are great for de-compression and innovative thought. At the same time, technology can be deployed to turn glass opaque, or mask the sound of the room so that privacy is assured.
    - Stand-up meetings. Research says that 70 percent of meetings at standing high tables are faster and more efficient than at a seated table.

3. **Access to Daylight.** Daylight can have an extraordinarily positive effect on productivity. However, labs have typically been positioned in the middle of buildings to take advantage of centralized mechanical systems, with offices located around the perimeter. However, because scientists are supposed to be in the lab more than not, very little time was spent in these offices. Just like the shift occurring in the workplace sector, private offices are being moved to the center, with shared workspaces, such as labs, moving to the exterior to capitalize on lighting and environments.

4. **Get Moving.** In addition to accommodating the various modes of working, it is also important to consider movement. For the employee, the ability to move throughout the day contributes to productivity. Moving helps blood flow, which promotes clearer thinking.

5. **Efficient Workflows.** Improving workflow to reduce wasted motion through the office is another goal of many R&D re-designs, with replenishment materials a big part of that issue. While no one wants large amounts of expensive compounds sitting out in the lab, neither do scientists want to constantly have to leave the lab to go to the supply closet.

6. **The "WOW" Factor.** Best practices should include creating a workplace that delivers function, "state of the art" work and display tools, and well-designed, interesting architectural features that unify and inspire employees and visitors alike. The "WOW" factor of materials, equipment and other components can help with employee retention and enhance client perception of the company as a whole. In addition to the "WOW" factor, durable materials for R&D spaces should be selected to help the facility continue to be fresh and innovative for at least a decade or more.

Whether developing new products, flavors, packages or other projects, R&D ventures require many factors to coalesce for success to be achieved. Re-thinking the work setting – from labs to offices and all points in-between – and including the innovative design ideas for collaboration, socialization and more, will help your company attract and retain a best-in-class R&D workforce.