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Science + Technology Perspectives

Push and Pull: Designing Break Rooms in Hygienic Zones

Laboratory environments are hygienic zones... spaces that must be kept clean, dry, and free from contaminants, including allergens. These spaces should also be free of food and beverages and other sources of contamination. However, in these hygienic environments, designers must also consider some basic human needs that need to be addressed: How can you make it easier for your lab employees to access a restroom, take a lunch break, or even just get a cup of coffee to help them power through their day?

These competing forces are often challenging when completing a lab design, but in Hixson's experience, these three ideas can help:

1. Involve All the Right Stakeholders. Bringing in all critical stakeholders in the planning and decision-making process is a critical key to the success of the project. Stakeholders may include representatives from departments such as Human Resources (HR), security, management, Quality Assurance (QA), and safety. Why does this matter? Each department brings a unique perspective and set of priorities to the table, for example:

- HR may focus on employee well-being and convenience, advocating for accessible break areas to keep employees engaged and satisfied.
- Security will be concerned with regulating access and maintaining safety protocols.
- The QA team will emphasize the need for minimizing contamination risks in hygienic areas.
- Management will consider things such as overall operational efficiency and costs.

Without comprehensive team representation, decisions may not reflect actual needs, and the facility may not perform to user expectations.

2. Consider All Possibilities. When designing break areas in hygienic environments, it is important to consider all possible scenarios and their implications. One key consideration is how to efficiently facilitate breaks without compromising the hygienic integrity of the workspace. Do workers need to don and doff protective gear to use the restroom or grab some coffee? How far away is the break room from the workspace? Employees with a limited time shouldn't have to spend a majority of their break just to get to the break room.

In addition, planning must take the future into account, with flexibility built in from the start. For example, designing vestibules with the future in mind, making them large enough to accommodate an increase in the number of employees and all the PPE required. Once a facility is in use, it is possible that employee feedback may change how the facility needs to operate. For instance, a company may initially decide against allowing coffee in the facility but later reconsider. Therefore, designing with adaptable spaces in mind can save time and costs associated with significant redesigns.

- 3. Think From the Outside In.** One strategic approach to managing the dual demands of hygiene and convenience is to position break rooms and other ancillary spaces on the facility's exterior when possible. This design strategy allows external vendors, such as those delivering food or removing trash, to operate outside the hygienic zones, which can significantly reduce the risk of contamination. In addition, placing break rooms on the exterior may be a way to simplify logistics, creating a seamless route for the delivery of supplies directly to the break room without breaching the sterile environment. Plus, configuring break areas on the exterior may also reduce the need for employees to walk long distances through clean zones, saving precious break time and boosting morale.

Designing break areas in hygienic industrial facilities requires a delicate balance between maintaining strict hygienic standards and providing convenience and satisfaction for employees. Through comprehensive, thoughtful planning, facilities can create an environment that upholds hygiene standards while also promoting a positive and productive workplace culture.

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