

Facilities Management from A to Z

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ffice Design

Histories on the origins of the modern office usually begin with the work of Frederick Taylor (1856-1915), an American inventor and engineer who is known as the father of scientific management. More commonly called Taylorism, his approach used measurement and efficiency processes to increase productivity. While this approach still features in management methods today, the distinguishing aspect was the virtual de-humanisation of the workforce, reducing them to simply so many units of production.

This focus on efficiency and control led to the design of large offices with workers crowded together on small desks in uniform rows while overseers looked on from private offices or raised platforms much like on a factory floor.

Variations on this approach dominated office design until the late 1950's and the arrival of 'Bürolandschaft' from Germany. This used more egalitarian values to create an 'office landscape' in which supervisors and staff sat at furniture laid out in more aesthetically pleasing formations using partitions and large plants to create some degree of differentiation and privacy.

In response to this new philosophy, American furniture manufacturer Herman Miller developed a new office furniture product called Action Office. This was the first modular business furniture system with low dividers and flexible work surfaces and became popular extremely quickly. With built in partitions and storage the modular furniture concept became extremely popular and effectively created the next major office design phenomena, the Cubicle.

As the ranks of middle managers swelled, a new class of employee was created who were too important for a mere desk but too junior for a window seat. Facility managers accommodated them in the cheapest way possible, with modular walls. These became rows of cubes, Taylorist in their efficiency but without the intrusive supervisory oversight.

During the 1990's office designers like DEGW were advocating a more intellectual approach to open plan design putting the focus on work function and process rather than worker status and spatial efficiency. The 'New Office' design logic focused on different work patterns each requiring different design solutions. These were known as Dens for collaborative work, Hives for group processes, Clubs for knowledge sharing and Cells for concentrated study.

At the turn of the millennium, the revolution in work activity that was enabled by mobile technology and the internet created a new dynamic, the remote worker. This exaggerated the inefficiency of individual desk allocation leading to a host of initiatives such as hot-desking, hotelling and free-address and began a change in the function of the office itself.

Rather than the place where the work took place, the flexible office is becoming a hub for social interaction between workers who are increasingly able to carry out their tasks from anywhere. This shift in the nature of work has led some to challenge the idea of offices being required at all in the future while others have used the opportunity to redesign rather than downsize.

The history of Office Design can therefore be seen to directly relate to the nature of work and the prevailing management philosophies and as such will continue to evolve.

Among the many excellent books on Office Design are those by Jeremy Myerson and Philip Ross including The 21st Century Office (ISBN-10: 1856693945) and Space to Work (ISBN-10: 1856694569)