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Proactive management ensures successful facilities planning

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It is essential that management take a fresh look at the habits, attitudes and behaviors of their professional staff as we enter the brave new world of the Alternative Office. Advances in technology have transformed the business world. As a result, corporate executives are modifying their office environments to fit these new trends just as manufacturers refit their factory floors to accommodate upgraded technologies. The new reality is that the office is not necessarily where you go to work, but wherever the work occurs. In this new environment, the habits and routines that workers bring to their work will have a significant impact on the bottom line of a business.

Executives and managers do a good job of focusing on issues of site selection, space utilization, ergonomics and general human factors which comprise the "big picture". Yet, if equal attention is not paid to the "small picture" -- such as how the staff members will respond to the change-- the seeds of a nightmare will be sown while the seeds of opportunity are wasted. Often, the single most neglected issue in all of the planning for these new environments is the special needs of the individual worker. Human factors and ergonomics are important but generally don't adequately deal with the personal challenges of the new environment faced by the information worker. To cope with these challenges, management must take steps to address the habits, attitudes and behaviors of their professionals

1. The Technology Learning Curve - Management often introduce new computer programs and solution packages that are intended to increase productivity and expect that benefit to occur immediately. Experience shows that that is rarely the case. Indeed, productivity usually drops initially while the worker becomes familiar with the application. Most training offered by the Information Systems department or vendor is technical in nature and does not necessarily apply to the real world of the user.

Training on new technology is necessary, of course. It must be recognized however, that the technology is not the answer. The technology is the tool. One must also create a bridge between human behavior and the tool to ensure its optimal usage in meeting the business need. Bringing bad habits to great technology ensures that people will do bad things faster. Developing good habits ensures the best return on the investment.

2. New Work Processes and Protocols - Most information workers were not taught how to work. They were trained on their specialties (accounting, social work, psychology, etc.). Therefore, they developed methods of working to cope with their environments. When there is a change in that environment, some of those methods don't work as well anymore. In fact, some of those routines can become counterproductive. Being forced into a Team Cluster can be traumatic for a person who has been in a discreet office for years.

If a manufacturer upgrades the factory floor with a new process and new machinery, the workers are trained for that even if the product is the same. Professional staff must be coached in new routines and protocols to fit in their new environments as well. Establishing standards for how to utilize the new structural changes ensures that the processes work as planned

3. The Strategy / Behavior Paradox - Many companies yearn for the benefits promised by the implementing of their strategic planning. When those benefits aren't forthcoming as planned, one must look at how the behaviors of the staff coincide with those plans. Investing in e-mail doesn't pay back if people don't act on the messages (procrastinating at the speed of light); or if they use it as an electronic water cooler (the primary place for jokes). Buying expensive leather calendar systems doesn't pay off if they are used as junk drawers ; or if they are always out of sync with their electronic counterparts. Enforcing a smaller footprint doesn't work if most of your people are packrats and keep stacks of stuff on every available surface. Scanning and imaging all documents won't work if you can't find them afterwards.

In implementing strategic initiatives, care must be taken to avoid the Dilbert syndrome. If the "we have always done it like this" attitude is supported and rewarded, the strategy becomes moot, regardless of how well thought out it is. Worker attitude is a reflection of their learning the culture regarding rewards and punishments. Management must ensure that the tactical realities complement and support the official strategic direction.

4. The Trauma of the Move Whether you are moving down the hall, to another floor or to another building, the challenge is the same, "How do you make the move transparent to your customers and seamless for your staff?". In spite of intense planning and preparations as previously described, most corporate moves have moments of chaos. The breakdown is usually caused by the fact that the individual is rarely properly prepared for the move. If the worker has not been given time to plan their personal move, the overall effort is jeopardized. A key element for a successful move is allowing time, prior to the move, for the staff to purge old files. There is no value in moving outdated and never-used files. Eliminating them will save money by reducing the weight moved. Time must also be allowed for move planning. Having a clear picture of where they are going and where things will be helps staff accelerate the process of getting up and running in the new space.

The investment of resources in proactive attention to these issues brings significant return. Employees clearly see that the company cares for them as individuals and isn't just pushing them around. They buy into the process and do their part to making it a success. The change process is completed faster providing the seamless service that ensures customer satisfaction.

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