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Offices open up for transparency

By Sangeetha G. Aug 29 2012

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For better utilisation of scarce commercial space, many companies are adopting the concept of open office as it is more flexible



It is about more openness, transparency, efficiency and less of hierarchy – the new age offices are increasingly becoming more open in terms of utilisation of space. The concept of open office architecture was initially popularised by multinational companies, but now, most offices have become more open.

Openness in office is about

having large open spaces and less number of cabins. The cabins too,

are mostly enclosed with glass for transparency sake.

"In traditional offices, there are rooms for different departments. People of different levels in the hierarchy do not sit together and there were enclosed spaces for the top-level management. When it comes to an open office, majority

of the staff will be sitting and

working in a large open space,"

said Dameem Ansari, principal architect, Ansari Architects, Associates and Interior Designers.

"It has been proved that the ambience plays a big role in the freedom of thought and expression. In any space, people have to feel good to perform well. An open office makes the organisation look like more transparent and bosses more approachable," said Sheila Sriprakash, founder and chief architect, Shiipa Architects.

Most of the IT and ITeS companies with large number of entry and mid-level employees were the first ones to go into the open. Nowadays, most of the banks and similar institutions have open offices.

Each employee will have a separate workstation or cubicle and there will be cubicle clusters for different departments. "These cubicles provide enough privacy within the open space when people sit and work, and when they stand up, it gives a sense of openness and belongingness," said Sriprakash.

For meetings, there would be one or more conference rooms or meeting rooms and cafeteria, all of them largely enclosed with glass.

"While providing a common space to work for large number of people, there are a few things that have to be kept in mind. Contrary to the common notion, noise levels do not go up too much in an open office so as to disturb others in the room. But the footsteps of people might cause distraction. For this, usually the floors are carpet-laden," said Ansari.

Over-usage of power for lighting and cooling is an issue with large space. As offices go green, they try to use LED lights and apart from a central air-conditioner, fans too are used to lessen the load on air-conditioning, he

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said.

Most of the cubicles or workstations have enough storage spaces for individual employees. As most of the offices have gone paperless, there is no need for huge racks to store files. For important files and other documents, storage rooms are provided separately.

According to Ansari, open offices are more flexible because the number, shape and size of cubicles and workstations can be altered easily according to the number of employees. The office looks clutter-free and, hence, maintenance is easier. While interior designers try to experiment with cubicle shape and sizes and different colour schemes, some offices have gone a step ahead in doing away with hierarchy.

In its office in Mumbai's Santa Cruz area, Berggruen Hotels has tried to make use of the space optimally by going totally open. The office does not have any assigned space for any employee, including the top-management officials.

"Usually, half the time of the year, the top brass of any company will be travelling, leaving a major chunk of the office space vacant. This can be criminal wastage of space in cities like Mumbai where real estate prices are sky-rocketing each passing day," said Sanjay Sethi, managing director of Berggruen Hotels.

The 2,000 sq ft office has five different areas. A work café – a place to have lunch as you work on your laptop or invite a visitor for a meeting over a cup of coffee. The work lounge is a small seating set for working in a more casual atmosphere or for having an informal meeting.

Those who like to have a more organised work area can use six workstations as per availability. In addition, there are two work cabins for meetings that require privacy. These cabins can be used by anyone in the office as per requirement.

There is an eight-seater conference room for more formal meetings. Further, there are lockers and cupboards to store important documents and other official materials. Employees can also make use of lockers to store their belongings and personal documents.

The office has around 30 staff and at any point of time, it can accommodate at least 40 people, including visitors.

"We tried to avoid barriers in between spaces and this has improved eye-contacts and communication among the employees and obviously better communication results in better productivity, Sethi said.

According to him, hierarchy is needed in the decision-making processes and beyond that, hierarchy need not be manifested in physical premises.

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