

A Little Design Goes a Long Way

A corporate design expert talks to us about how to achieve a productive, comfortable and effective work environment

By Nadine El Sayed

Forget about financial forecasts, profit expectations or expansion plans; if your employees aren't working in the right space, you can safely kiss all your intricately detailed business plans goodbye.

For your staff to be productive, they need much more than a good salary and motivational speeches — of course, a raise every now and then wouldn't hurt. Workspace is important to the productivity and overall performance of your business, be it a small office with only yourself and your partner, or a large corporation with hundreds of employees.

A recent study conducted by the American Society of Interior Designers (ASID) ranked the design of workspace among the top five elements contributing to productivity. So before you go ahead and squeeze in as many cubicles, chairs and tables as you can into your office thinking you have just achieved the ultimate design, take a few minutes to learn from the experts.

Founder and head designer of Human Nature, Ramzi Makram-Ebeid, who is specialized in corporate design, shares his trade secrets with *Business Today*.

Picking The One

Picking the right designer can be tricky, but Ebeid believes the client and designer need to be on the same page for the relationship to work. So don't go about choosing the funkiest designer when your corporate identity is a rather classic one. Look at their portfolio and see whether their work really does reflect their client's corporate identity and whether their style fits yours.

Branding: It's in the details

Ebeid believes branding needs to be strong, but subtle. While a designer might work with you to tweak your

logo and colors, he might also come in at a later stage. But throughout, Ebeid explains that the office needs to reflect the corporate identity to instill the brand to visitors.

For an internal meeting room, like the one Ebeid designed for Link Development, the colors don't necessarily need to match the logo. "You already know where you are, so it isn't about branding," Ebeid says. "But if there are going to be a lot of external meetings and clients coming over, you really want to push the branding [on] the client."

The logo needs to be seen in the office, but it doesn't have to be repeated throughout every room of the space — people get it already. So instead, the colors used can reflect the brand identity, whereas the logo can be displayed only once at the front of the office, for instance, Ebeid advises.

He adds that little details, like coasters, dishes and ashtrays, can also aid in instilling the corporate identity.

Open workspace

Open workspaces, Ebeid believes, are energizing and motivating, and they are all the rage in corporate design worldwide. For a bit of privacy, you can use small, glass divisions — not cubicles — but maintain an open space for better flow and a vibrant ambiance.

An open workspace doesn't necessarily mean no privacy; Ebeid suggests always keeping a couple of rooms for when someone needs alone time, needs to have a private meeting or even crunch some numbers. A phone booth might also come in handy for salespeople or someone who needs to have a quiet conversation over the phone, he adds.

To add a little personal touch to an open workspace, you can install general lighting and then task lights for each individual to fit to their own liking.

The open plan doesn't quite work for some professions requiring extra privacy, but you can always find a middle ground. For instance,



a large glass sliding door can be installed to separate an office from the open plan for when the manager needs more privacy.

Comfortable, not cozy

"I like the word comfort, not cozy," says Ebeid. "I don't think an office should be cozy — cozy makes me feel like watching television, having a cup of hot chocolate and chatting, it doesn't make me feel very productive."

He advises his clients to make that distinction between a home and an office, they are two different places visually and functionally. So use white lights, not warm or yellow lights, to give the place an energizing kick.

Make sure the chairs are comfortable enough for your employees, this is one thing Ebeid strongly advises you do not cut costs on. "You can cut costs on a table, but the chairs affect your posture and your comfort," he says.

Too comfortable for productivity

Also, make sure that the workspace is in sync with the employees. Some professions can't do with too much comfort and need a slightly more rigid space to be productive. "I work in an office that is all grey flooring and white walls and the only colors in the room are behind me so that I don't get distracted," says Ebeid.

So before plopping those beanbags down, make sure your employees can handle it. "Too comfortable is a bad thing as well in an office," he adds.

Keep it short

We know how meetings can drag on, and it isn't exactly productive to spend three hours in a meeting to talk about business for three minutes and politics for 12. Ebeid explains the trend now is to have standing meeting tables for informal, short meetings. "If you're standing you are not going to have a three-hour meeting," says Ebeid.

Similarly, Ebeid has just installed three high tables in one client's office kitchen without any seating, to avoid long chats — not to mention political debates — when employees only go in for a bottle of water.

Little things matter

Ebeid believes that the smallest things, like using liquid soap instead of soap bars, can make a difference to employees to make them feel comfortable at a place they spend eight or nine hours of their day at. He suggests something like lockers to give employees comfort.

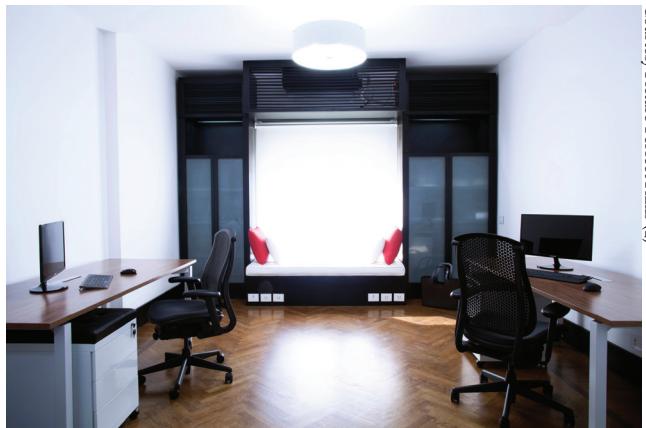
Making it fun

An office needs to be conducive to work, but it can also have quirky fun elements for employees to blow off some steam for a few minutes every day. "I love an office that makes you feel youthful [when you] walking in," says Ebeid.

Ebeid suggests a chill-out, or break, room with games, even a lounging area with a wide bench to sit comfortably for a while.

When short of cash, approach the newbies

Ebeid advises employers to always use an interior designer when designing an office as he believes it is a science that will affect the productivity and overall environment which will affect performance. So if you are on a limited budget, Ebeid suggests to opt for a fresh graduate.



Courtesy Picture Perfect Films (2)

"The youth are really impressive; this new generation who just came out of college," he says. "It isn't because education here has improved, but because they're mostly self-taught and they have access to be self-taught; the internet, the movies, [...] magazines[...]."

Ebeid adds that discipline and passion need to be self-taught and add to a college education. They are also good indicators of work ethic. So opt for a fresh graduate who can show you, not necessarily a portfolio, but even college projects. Then pay attention to the questions the designer is asking you, if he's going to do a decent job, he should be asking lots of questions. "They should be asking you about your daily routine in the office, your requirements, the number of people in the office and how many they will be in at least two to three years ahead," he adds.

Also ask for a free proposal, a general concept and some sketches to get a feel for the direction he's going with. **bt**

About Ramzi Makram-Ebeid:

Ebeid is the founder and head designer of Human Nature, an interior and furniture design firm he established in 2007. He is specialized in corporate and commercial design and has received a design degree from the University of California in 2006 and an international business degree from George Washington University in 2011. He has worked on various projects, including Link Development's meeting room, Accelero office and Flat6 Labs.

He describes himself as "modern, minimal, functional, earthy and a little bit quirky." You can reach Ebeid on info@humannatureblog.net

