

OFFICE SOLUTIONS | OFFICE DEALER MAGAZINES**IS YOUR OFFICE A DESIGN DISASTER?**

By: Chris Crytzer

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Small-business owner Diana Ennen admits to having an office design disaster. This virtual assistant, author, and publicist thought she wanted an L-shaped corner desk, which she said looked fabulous in the store. A corner desk is supposed to make great use of space by transforming an empty corner into an office setup. However, Ennen has had the hardest time making it work in her Margate, Fla., office. She said everything on the corner desk she purchased seems to be on an angle.

What's more, when Ennen puts her mouse and mousepad to her right on the desk, there's no room for papers- papers that she desperately needs to proof or type for her business. She needs to be able to proof not only her work, but also her clients' work. "With a corner desk, it seems almost impossible," she adds.

Make room

Ennen's solution was to buy a small filing cabinet and place it to the right of her desk. That way, she can put clients' files in the file cabinet immediately after she uses them, which keeps things off her desk. She also purchased a side desk, where she can spread out papers and proof her work. "It's small and totally separate from my desk, but at least it enables me to spread out papers and work," Ennen says.

According to Patty Kreamer, who serves as president of the Pittsburgh chapter of the National Association of Professional Organizers, when it comes to productivity, there are no bad people, just bad designs. She says her approach to office design assessments is from the left brain, providing a practical flair versus a creative one.

Working more efficiently

When Kreamer looks at an office's design, she makes sure that the furniture, equipment, and fixtures are placed logically in the room. For instance, she wouldn't recommend putting a file cabinet in a place that's difficult to access. Otherwise, the office worker would be less likely to file, and soon the files would become piles. Likewise, she recommends placing commonly used items in a handy location versus a top shelf.

In her work as a professional organizer, Kreamer uses what she calls the "Butt Rule." She explains, "Things that you use daily should be within easy reach. In other words, you shouldn't have to get up off your butt to get them. Things that are used less often - weekly or monthly - should be in areas that are easily accessible, but require you to get up off your butt to get to them. Things that are rarely used should go in the most difficult places to reach."

The biggest design disaster Kreamer sees is one that incorporates systems that aren't intuitive to the user. "Knowing how a person thinks plays a huge role in the success of a design," she said. For example, if a person is visual and needs to see active items out in the open, Kreamer wouldn't

recommend a slab of a desk. Instead, that person would need wall pockets, step-up folder holders, a rolling cart, clear storage units, and/or stack trays. These items would help the employee see what needs to be done.

Pack and stack

On the other hand, if someone likes to keep things put away and only have out the items he's currently working on, Kreamer suggests providing plenty of storage space in the form of filing cabinets, supply cupboards, and overhead cabinets. Kreamer's approach in transforming a design disaster is to understand the person who will be using the office. Without this knowledge, she says, the designer will be the only one pleased with the results.

By examining the user, Kreamer says she can determine the following information:

- how his day flows
- how his papers flow
- how he thinks
- what tasks he's responsible for
- if he's a visual person.

Business processes

The next step is to determine exactly what activities will take place in the office, as well as where. If the office employee handles fulfillment, pays bills, prepares postage, and uses a fax machine, stations should be set up that contain the necessary items within an area, Kreamer says. "Knowing the activities that will take place in the office is critical. With this information, you can design an office that is functional and efficient because the tasks have been mapped out and accommodated and are aesthetically pleasing to the user. After all, the user is the most important part of the design!"

Another option when dealing with a design disaster - albeit an expensive one - is to physically move the office. That's what Debbie Thompson, president of Strategy Solutions Inc., plans to do. "I work in an office that is a design disaster for us," she explains. "We are planning to move out of this office to be closer to another company that is a strategic business partner."

The company's current office has major dead space where there are areas that aren't functional because they can't be used in any way. This dead space adds to the cost of the office space and decreases the efficiency of Strategy Solutions' staff.

While moving may eliminate a design disaster, Thompson says her company's new office space won't be perfect. For one thing, the new office is going to be smaller than Strategy Solutions' current location in Erie, Pa. However, the new office will be more functional.

Thompson says design disasters happen when offices are too big or too small and not laid out functionally for the work to be done. "Rather than design the space for the workflow, often the space is designed for aesthetics or building efficiencies, and [the design] does not take into account what the people inside are actually doing. This makes for a nightmare," she adds. Throughout her work in

strategic planning, Thompson has observed that most offices suffer because they fit their furniture/work to the space, rather than design the space around the work.

Office design companies

Derek Hille, president of Office Space Planners in Portland, Ore., says growth is another reason for office design disasters. Per Hille, what typically occurs is that a company moves into an office with 20 employees. Eight to 10 years later, the company has doubled in size to 40 employees. New employees get placed wherever there's an empty cubicle - even if it's not near the department they're part of. What's more, Hille says, companies that have grown like the example just cited will place two or three offices in the space where one person used to work.

Hille explains that moving an office can be expensive. "Companies don't really think about the costs involved with moving," he says, to include the cost of movers and data cabling.

Planning, designing, and managing a physical workspace

Employees at Office Space Planners ask: What can we do to revamp the office and spend 1/10 of what it would cost to move? Hille said this process, which he calls a programming session, takes into account the following:

- adjacencies (what tasks are adjacent to other departments)
- filing requirements
- equipment requirements
- workstations
- conference room requirements.

Hille said his staff visits offices to determine what's wrong with the current space and what the companies would like to see. Then his staff documents this information and puts the existing furniture into a computer-aided design (CAD) plan. Office Space Planners provides two to three different space plan options to redesign the space. The final plan includes a full-scale drawing, which can be taken out to bid.

Compared to moving, Hille reports, the costs involved with using a planning company, such as his, are very inexpensive. "Once we have a plan, it's cheap to start moving stuff around in the computer."

There's no doubt about it, planning pays off when moving an office or redesigning an existing office.

Another resource is the International Facility Management Association (IFMA) (www.ifma.org), an organization that assists facility managers in developing strategies to manage human, facility, and real estate services. IFMA certifies managers, offers educational programs, and performs research. IFMA's mission is to provide products, services, and opportunities that support and advance the facility management profession.

Chris Crytzer's office is a huge design disaster. She could certainly use some professional planning assistance. A principal with Crytzer Communication, Chris can be reached at

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