Question of the Month: Can you apply reason to interior design? There is a reason for everything - part 1

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If you own or manage property, how can you add value to your investment? There are certainly many answers to this question - signage, landscaping, upgrade of building systems. But let's look at how the experience and knowledge of an interior designer can influence your bottom line.

While interior designers participate in the development of all types of spaces, this article will address the benefits of including an interior designer on the team assembled for workplace design.

Employers all agree that employee productivity is vital to their success. What can be done to attract and retain talented employees? How can employee productivity be improved? Studies have shown that effective workplace design directly correlates to improved business performance. Surveys reveal that between 50% and 60% of work spaces do not support job function or creativity. A supportive workspace has the potential of increasing productivity by 19% which can translate into millions of dollars in overall profits each year. This increase translates into huge gains in profits.

Involving an interior designer in the initial phase of a project ensures comprehensive programming. This phase is the information gathering portion for workplace design and can be as simple as understanding the interrelationships and space needs of a small office, or as complex as the reorganization of departments, divisions, and even buildings within a company campus. The designer asks management key questions to identify corporate philosophy, mission, future growth and business goals and asks employees to quantify communication requirements, work space configuration, and storage needs. By gathering and analyzing information specific to the client, the interior designer can identify adjacencies and prepare a phasing plan that minimizes construction and workday disruption. The designer will develop solutions that address functional, spatial, and visual requirements that will result in an effective, efficient and beautiful space. Opting to hastily address each issue as it arises instead of utilizing the careful analysis and planning of the programming phase can result in a confusing and inefficient hodgepodge of layout, eventually requiring an expensive reconfiguration of the entire workplace. Programming lays the foundation for solid design solutions and reduces the need for multiple schematic revisions.

Large complicated projects may require major relocation of people and equipment. The most cost effective way to approach this type of reorganization is preparation of a master plan. Master planning is detailed programming focusing on a client's anticipated corporate direction and growth and how that impacts the existing workplace. Interview analysis, adjacency charts, office and workstation sizes, plans, phasing steps, and other data are compiled and presented to the client as a standard for all future corporate workplace development.

One of the most important concerns of owners and managers is also the designer's primary focus in workplace design - the safety, health and comfort of the people who work there. An interior designer's knowledge of and adherence to life safety and fire codes is essential. Egress doors, wall

and door construction, and clearances for stairs and corridors are some of the obvious areas of attention. However, flooring material, wall, ceiling, window treatments, furniture, and fabrics must all meet numerous fire and safety standards. Interior designers are well versed in these regulations and through relationships with vendors and manufacturer's reps, industry seminars, and continued research interior designers stay current with product. All specification of product must meet the national, state, and local safety guidelines for its intended use. Only finishes and furniture that pass rigorous tests for fire, smoke, slip resistance, wear, and more will be considered. "Do-it-yourself" interior finishes can result in tragedy as evidenced by the infamous Rhode Island night club fire.

An effective workplace affords people the opportunity to focus on individual tasks as well as collaborate and even socialize with fellow workers. Interior designers have extensive knowledge about lighting, acoustics, ergonomics and indoor air quality, all factors that affect health and comfort. Failure to address any one of these can undermine employee performance and result in health issues.

Part 2 will discuss such physical properties in the workplace and the role that the interior designer plays in enhancing the work environment and improving employee productivity.

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