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FEATURE: THE MODERN OFFICE



Merging technology

WIRELESS CONNECTIVITY IS COMBINING WITH SUSTAINABILITY TO SHAPE THE OFFICES OF THE FUTURE, SAYS FIDA SLAYMAN

The days of clock-watching employees buried behind cubicles, sitting at desks cluttered with a tangled mess of cables and wires, are long gone. Wireless technology has freed office

workers from their desks, and has resulted in more open office spaces that encourage collaboration.

A focus on sustainability, meanwhile, has pushed this technology to the forefront, paving the way for innovation

in design and flexibility in working conditions. "The difference between office furnishings and office technology has almost completely disappeared," noted Jill Gordon-Keep, business development manager of furniture

Shannon McGrath

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and services supplier, Buro 45. "A long time ago technology was something that you'd put on the furniture, like a computer and a fax machine, with all the cables, but now the desks themselves are becoming more technologically advanced," she continued.

The company's Bordonabe range of office desks, which incorporates cables into the desk structure, is "industry standard for a product of this level and quality", she continued. "All the cables and electrical mechanisms are actually housed under the work surface.

"It's a simple system with very subtle, easy-access sliding cupboards, which has custom sockets depending on the needs of the individual – you just don't have any wires out at all."

1
An office by
Clive Wilkinson
Architects, interior
design architect,
and Woods Bagot,
executive architect.

2
Marketplace
by Teknion.

WIRE FREE

Wire management solutions have also extended beyond desks and computers, and currently take advantage of wireless technologies such as Bluetooth and wi-fi to keep offices free from the tangled mess of cables. European office supplier Bene incorporates

a wide range of technologies into its furniture. Integrated wide-angle projectors, for example, eliminate the need to fix machines from the ceiling, or to place them on a desk where they can inadvertently be knocked.

Likewise, LCD monitors sealed into a desk allow the user to electronically raise the screen when it is needed, and lower it back into the desk when it is not. "We cannot have a completely wireless office yet," said Ahmed Kandil, Bene's managing director for the Middle East and Australia, "but having these different types of connections allows designers and the office furniture industry to minimise the need for bulky wires."

When the wireless office does finally come into existence, it will be in no small part due to wireless electricity. Siddharth Peters, managing director of Dubai-based office furnishings manufacturer, The Total Office, believes that wireless electricity is not for the future, but the present. "We've been dealing with wireless internet, data, voice, you name it, and we've had a lot of clients joke with us, asking:

'What's next, wireless electricity?' Well, we are already there.

"The technology itself is not new, but the application is," he continued. "Wireless electricity works through a Powermat, a platform which sits flush on a worktop, and through its corresponding communication kits, can charge iPhones and iPads, Blackberries, cameras, laptops and even desktop lamps.

"We're demonstrating this to all our existing clients and we believe that in two years at least 20% of all larger companies will have this within their workspace, especially in collaboration areas, where people want to have a quick discussion but don't want to bring all their wires with them."

In time, wireless electricity will also influence the nature and design of shared workspaces and meeting rooms. Desktop-based conferencing, for example, is on the rise, taking away the need for the large and imposing video-conferencing rooms of old.

Heidi Demunck, sales manager for Summertown Interiors, explained that more and more people



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3 “are requesting a desktop conferencing connection for their computers, so a lot of the time now meetings are happening in smaller interview rooms or multi-functional rooms”.

SPATIAL AWARENESS

As offices have become more space efficient, the configuration and use of office desks, enabled with wireless technology, has also undergone tremendous change. “In some cases an office is almost like a hotel lobby,” said Gilbert Griño, marketing manager, Bafco.

“The old concept of the office, where there are standard desks, is gone,” he said, referring to the growing trend of hot desking. “There are a lot of interpretations of hot desking, but essentially it’s about having empty workspaces which are completely connected. People come into the office to connect with what’s happening, so design shouldn’t push frigid or standard furniture.”

Using a host of wireless technologies can also make a company more dynamic than its competitors, said Gordon-Keep. “All these technological advances make it much easier for them to form and reform when they have to restructure, or as the organisation demands it. Technology-led design can be very flexible and responsive to how the nature of work is going to change,” she added.

The notion of employees each having their own permanent desk is becoming an antiquated one, admitted Amanda Stanaway, senior associate at Woods Bagot. “Some of the projects we’ve been working on have been modelled on an activity-based working model, which is where no one has a particular desk but there are different varieties of settings, depending on the task,” she explained.

Technology has driven design, she continued, in that “everybody in the office is given a mobile phone and a laptop, which means they can actually work anywhere within any environment”.

This, in turn, has presented new opportunities for designers to create offices that are sustainable. After all, “when a building’s occupants are able to work anywhere, it becomes an incredibly efficient, sustainability model”, Stanaway explained.



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INGRAINED EFFICIENCY

So, when tasked recently with designing office space for a company employing 3,500 people, Woods Bagot created a building able to accommodate 2,700 at any one time. “It’s an activity-based office, which is a very different approach to how you work within an office, and we were able to put the sustainability aspect of that into practice,” said Sarah Kay, principal and interior design leader at Woods Bagot.

“This model takes into account the fact that most office buildings have an occupancy rate of 60% to 80% at any one time, considering sick leave, people moving, or the type of work they do. So, you can use that remaining 20% to load

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the floor with 20% more people," said Kay. "Technology is the only way we are able to do this," she continued, referring to the iPad and other lightweight touch-screen devices, which allow people to work away from their desks with ease.

"In terms of spatial efficiency, it's an incredibly sustainable footprint in any energy consumption model. That sort of workplace looks drastically different to another type of workplace because it's not just desks within a space – it's much more active, there are many more people walking around, the technology looks different, even the fittings look different," Kay continued.

Catering to clients who place sustainability high on their agenda is



3,485

Wire-free solutions from Forma 5.

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Open, informal spaces by Summertown Interiors.

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An office by Clive Wilkinson Architects, interior design architect, and Woods Bagot, executive architect.

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becoming a priority for the region's major suppliers of office furnishings and design services. Design and manufacturing firms such as Bene, The Total Office, Bafco and Buro 45 comply with international green building codes such as LEED, ISO and BREEAM, and encourage their clients to also prioritise the environment when choosing designs and furniture.

Many companies in the Middle East, however, are far behind their European, British and American counterparts in recognising the importance of sustainable practices. "Clients don't really put in specific requests to have materials sustainably sourced, but as a manufacturer it is our responsibility," said Griño. "If the cost of producing our products

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Office solutions
by BAFCO.

the eco-friendly way is the same, and it is, then we may as well do it the correct way," he pointed out.

If any effort is put towards being sustainable, Kandil added, it is mostly for marketing and public relations purposes. "In all honesty," he said, "I see some of our local clients, and they just want to have LEED certification; they don't actually care about the environment. To be sustainable, it requires lots of money, and in the Middle East we find it difficult to find clients that pay proper money for proper projects."

Gordon-Keep, meanwhile, believes that the economic downturn has stunted the region's progress in demanding sustainably-sourced furnishings. "It's about spend at the minute. If a larger

company is doing a refit, then they have a budget allocated, but smaller companies are moving out of necessity, more often than not. They don't know what the future holds and how long they're going to be in a space, so they don't want to overspend."

Kandil, however, remains optimistic that local companies and government departments will change their attitude. "Organisations here are far behind, yes, but they are on their way."

As advances continue to blur the lines between progressive workplace design, wireless technology and environmentally sustainable practices, the region's most efficient and productive workplaces will be those that seamlessly merge all three. □



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