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In its quest to improve workspaces, making them more convenient for everyone, the CN Group remains abreast of new trends in corporate furniture and business accessories, both locally and internationally. This article provides insight into hot-desking, a growing phenomenon also known as location-independent working.

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The rise of flexible working environments

According to Sabrina Lind, business development manager at CN Business Furniture, hot-desking is one of several new terms coined in the '90s to describe an innovative set of working practices. The term is believed to have originated from old naval practices called 'hot-bunking', where, when working on shift, sailors would rotate limited bunk space.

The practice of desk sharing, as opposed to employees having their own fixed workspace, is that of allocating workspace when employees are required, or on a rota system. Ultimately, it is the sharing of a desk/seat/workstation arrangement by more than one member of staff. This enables employers with employees whose shifts do not overlap or who are frequently out of the office, to make better use of the available resources.

The new office

First impressions remain a key consideration when planning the layout of an office, hence the emphasis on reception design. This is one area where a company can show its true colours, creating a sense of its professionalism and culture. Bear in mind that with the huge advances in communication technologies, for some companies the need for a conventional reception area is lessened.

Regarding modern offices, where a large amount of employees work from remote locations, this is often reflected in their design. Of course, internal office design also acknowledges the nature of a company's work, with a design that breaks down the traditional office hierarchy of row upon row of workstations crammed together, while senior staff are allocated roomy offices that are underutilised. This conventional

► According to World Wide Words, hot-desking is best suited to firms in which staff spend a lot of time out of the office, so that space doesn't have to be kept permanently allocated for them, which reduces overhead costs. The system is heavily dependent on technology.



In order for hot-desking to be effective, a selection of work environments and the necessary technology need to be provided

practice has become increasingly impractical and, as a consequence, touch-down spaces are set up for employees (for example, sales people and beat reporters) where they can plug in their laptops to connect to servers. Regarding larger work spaces, a booking system is implemented to ensure efficient use of resources as they are needed.

Adopting a flexible working environment is also becoming commonplace in many companies, as the concept is designed to promote staff interaction. For example, desks can be grouped together as needed for teams working on specific projects. The trend is moving away from that of large workstations with high divisions, to modern workstations that are more compact and have lower divisions, which helps in shifting the focus from that of a cubicle environment.

This kind of office planning allows for more space for breakout areas – a significant feature of the ‘new office’. Areas such as the boardroom and meeting rooms are now centralised, connecting them to the office environment, which means that by way of operable doors, each space can either be closed off for private meetings, or opened up to create a multipurpose room with ample functions.

As businesses today are dynamic evolutionary entities, it is often not possible to predict exactly what size a business will be a year out, let alone in five years.

People’s work habits are also changing. Nowadays, employees may work at the office, from home, in a coffee shop, from their hotel rooms and at airports. Businesses, however, need a fixed physical space from which to operate and the people within require furniture to create favourable workspaces. On the other hand, it’s no longer always necessary for individuals to have a workspace that is dedicated solely to them.

The concept of hot-desking requires that the employer furnish a permanent work surface, be it an actual desk or even a terminal link, made available to those who need it, when needed. There is no personal domain pertaining to a particular employee and physical facilities are used as and when needed. These types of workstations are often referred to

as mobility centres. But regardless of what they’re called, companies need to move to making ergonomic plans for office furniture, which will then allow for an operational change to hot-desking in the office environment.

Enablers of flexibility

Most companies have unused desk space, created by people out on the road, on holiday or in meetings. As the knowledge worker of today becomes increasingly mobile, the workspace and required number of desks is actually much less. This, however, is somewhat misleading, so say the experts on hot-desking. What the concept actually does is it improves the intangibles in the workplace, bringing into play factors such as attracting and retaining staff.

With hot-desking, employees enjoy increased autonomy, can make decisions more quickly and are empowered to manage their time according to their needs. This protects the intellectual capital of companies and encourages mobility and accessibility.

However, it must be taken into account that for hot-desking to be successful the space issue must be considered with due care. Simply packing desks into an office space and supplying the necessary connections is not a proper hot-desking solution. But, having an assortment of desks – some with connections and others with computers – and selected areas for formal and informal meetings is the real solution. Collaboration is often hastily pinched for reasons such as there never being a free meeting room. hot-desking promotes interaction and requires that all employees realise the projected goals of the concept, right from the start. A strategy is necessary before commencing with concept implementation. And for any organisation doing it to ‘save space’ – it will not be a success.

Wireless-based networks are key enablers of hot-desking. Understandably, an office equipped with the necessary technology will facilitate the seamless use of a computer, from any location. It also does away with the need of having to ‘plug’ into and out of the network and is

► **Space audits** by Flexibility have shown that desks are actually used about 45 to 50% of the time, while field workers have a desk utilisation of only 38%. This is because people are on holiday, sick, in meetings, out of the office, or there are full-time desks for part-time people.

perfect for those employees who rely on wi-fi hotspots in café and airport lounges, for example. The 'follow me' type of phone system is, however, the most important enabler of hot-desking. No matter what device is in use – be it mo-

Flexible working environments are being increasing commonplace, as the concept promotes staff interaction

bile, fixed or wireless – all that is required with a 'follow me' system is that of logging onto the relevant network and then 'hitting' a few buttons, and all calls to direct lines of employees are automatically redirected to them, worldwide, no matter the location. Regarding customers and clients, they need only remember one number with which they will be able to communicate with respective employees, be they at home, on the move, or in the office. To the client, it will always seem as if the employee is at his/her desk.

Applications for HR

As the costs of doing business accumulate with negative impacts on profits, productivity and the environment, companies need to make critical assessments about the way they work. Therefore, it may be that, as a paramount solution, the time has come for hot-desking. Clearly, while the concept can help a business to save money by reducing the number of desks and the cost of leasing office space, it is not the most productive approach.

According to Lind, it's believed that hot-desking is best received by employees when introduced in conjunction with more flexible working practices – a consideration for the HR practitioner.

"Hot-desking can be an effective way for companies to manage their overheads, and is clearly popular if employees are also given a chance to work from home. hot-desking is a cost-effective way for businesses to maximise their return on investment. Our message to employers and HR departments is to consider whether a hot-desking policy is really going to increase efficiency, or if it could leave staff feeling alienated and out of the loop. If that risk is apparent, companies will then have to work on their internal communications procedures to prevent it from happening.

"It would be a mistake to introduce this solution if employees find it stressful and inconvenient not knowing where they are going to be sitting when they arrive at work each day. That said, just two years ago a flexible working schedule with the prospect of occasionally working from home, was probably one of the top three benefits sought by office staff who had a need for private office space – seldom even on the list. It's becoming less important as the ability to support staff outside of the office improves and as the commute to that private office space gets more difficult and expensive. And so the case for hot-desking grows stronger," says Lind. **35**

MANAGING RISKS

There are a number of issues that need to be resolved in order for flexible working practices, such as hot-desking, to function effectively and to benefit the employees involved. The London Borough of Southwark has successfully implemented a hot-desking system in numerous public buildings and provides this overview of potential problems and solutions:

- **Environment:** The environmental conditions for hot-desking are the same as for a regular work area, including proper ventilation, lighting and a clean workplace.
- **Hygiene:** When a workstation is used by various people, there is an increased risk of contamination and the spread of disease. A hand-washing station and a supply of antiseptic wipes should be made available.
- **Workstation:** A workstation must be adjustable to suit all staff members who are likely to use it. Adjustable equipment should include a monitor arm, chair and desk.
- **Laptops:** Ideally, a docking station should be provided for a laptop, with a full-sized monitor and mouse to prevent eye and wrist strain.
- **Storage:** There must be a secure area for staff to store the necessary support equipment, such as stationery, files and mugs. Replacement equipment should also be readily available.
- **Training:** Staff need to be trained on how to set up the workstation, use the software and the telephone system.



For staff members who use laptops, a docking station with a full-size keyboard and mouse should be available for ergonomic and health reasons