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Reworking workspace: Even corner offices are changing

Posted: 6:35 am Thu, February 14, 2013

By Nancy Crotti

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Instead of giving corner spaces to the executives, the Minneapolis branch of Reinsurance Group of America reserved them for a lunchroom, an informal meeting space and two conference rooms when it relocated to Washington Square in downtown Minneapolis. (STAFF PHOTOS: Bill Klotz)

Workplaces, like work styles, are changing. Companies are opting for more open space for collaboration, break rooms that double as casual meeting spaces and reconfigured storage space.

The Minneapolis branch of Reinsurance Group of America (RGA) is a prime example of a company that took advantage of a move to update its dated office layout. In 2010, ING Group sold the portion of its business that included a 91-employee Minneapolis unit to St. Louis-based RGA.

RGA's local leadership decided to cope with the changes wrought by the acquisition before considering a move. After two years, RGA moved the branch out of its 23,000-square-foot space in 20 Washington Ave. S., where ING is the sole tenant.

The move, completed one year ago, took the company across Marquette Avenue to 100 Washington Ave. S., part of the iconic, modern Washington Square complex that includes 20 and 111 Washington Ave. S.

The short move made a big difference. RGA now occupies 25,394 square feet on the 14th floor and 3,745 square feet on the 13th floor of 100 Washington Ave., with commanding views of the city from the building's four corners. Instead of giving those corner spaces to the executives, the company reserved them for a lunchroom, an informal meeting space and two conference rooms, all named after the views seen through their windows,

such as Target Field and St. Anthony Falls.

Debra Barnes, vice president and director of interior architecture and design at Minneapolis-based HGA Architects and Engineers, was principal and project manager for the office redesign. Barnes said lighting was a challenge because the 22-story building has what she called “tiny little slits of windows.”

RGA asked the design firm to situate its enclosed offices at the building’s core to maximize natural light throughout the office. The company also wanted lower cubicle walls and more collaborative workspace. It now has 26 enclosed offices (versus 15 in the old space) and nine conference rooms of varying sizes. It also has two rooms where employees may make private phone calls and a room for nursing mothers.

Most employees still work in cubicles, but the padded partitions are now 50 inches tall and topped by 15-inch glass panels to transmit exterior light. Those who work along heavily traveled passageways have frosted glass panels for privacy, a compromise with employees who were accustomed to working in cubicles whose walls were 72 inches tall, according to Jeff Birkholz, senior vice president of operations for U.S. Group Reinsurance at RGA.

Birkholz said he couldn’t recall the size of the old workstations. The industry standard for cubicles used to be 8-by-8 feet with 60-inch panel walls, according to Deanne Erpelding, a certified interior designer and a project director at Studio HIVE Inc., a Minneapolis architecture and interior design firm. The new workstations are 9-by-9 feet or 9-by-7 feet.

Rather than use space in each cubicle for storage, RGA now uses rows of back-to-back file cabinets to separate sections of cubicles. The cabinets have tiny workspaces at one end with barstool-height chairs and pendant task lighting.

RGA is following a nationwide trend that took hold on the East and West coasts before spreading to the Upper Midwest, according to Barnes. HGA’s clients lately have been asking for individual workstations that work better for them and general workspace that allows for more collaboration.

“What we work with our clients on is, ‘What does that mean to you?’ There is not one solution,” Barnes said.

Not every solution is greeted with open arms, either. RGA decided to have clear glass walls along the interior offices and the conference rooms. These spaces face into the open room of cubicles and have sliding glass doors to take advantage of the natural light.

“There were mixed reactions to that initially, but I think that generally people have grown to like it and embrace it,” Birkholz said. “We could put frosting on some of these glass panels, too, but there’s a real reluctance to alter that kind of open environment that the whole design has tried to create.”

Noise was another concern, given the lower cubicle walls. RGA added white noise to mask sounds. Employees who were accustomed to speaking loudly in their high-walled cubicles have learned to lower their voices, Birkholz said.

A couple of factors play into the latest wave of office redesign, according to Erpelding. The recession led some companies to scrutinize their space to reduce costs, which to some meant simply retrofitting existing furniture, she said. Others decided to create a comfortable, ergonomic space to enhance creativity, workflow and collaboration by buying new furniture systems.

“Companies looked at ‘How can we work smarter, more efficiently, more compactly?’ ” she said. “That certainly has caused a trend in people re-evaluating, ‘If I have this today, do I really, really need it?’ ”

Erpelding thinks that employers should take care to communicate their design decisions to employees, including their goals and objectives, before beginning any redesign work.

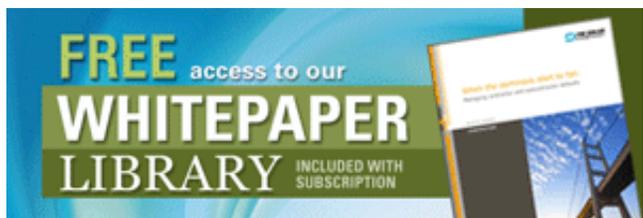
“When you have a company [whose employees are in] an 8-by-8, 60-inch-height panel and they are moved into a 6-by-6, 42-inch-height panel, change is hard,” she said. “We found it to be a lot of apprehension beforehand, but once they’re in it and they’re working through it, we’ve had a pretty good hit ratio of success where people are happy.”



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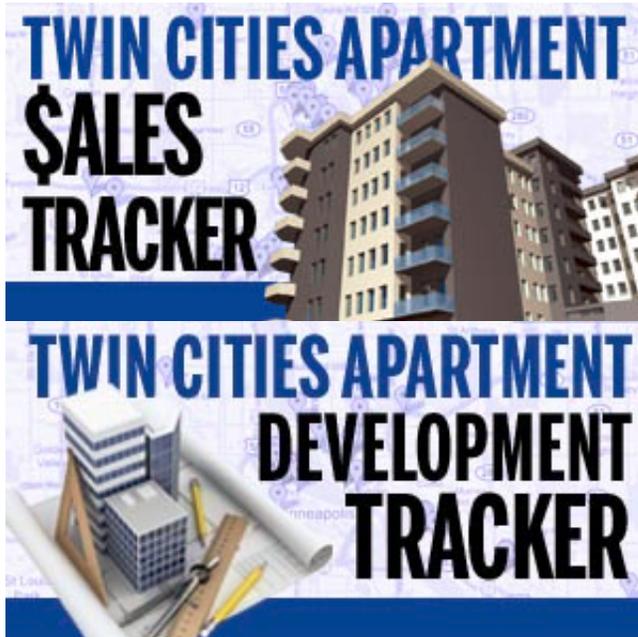
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