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Workplaces need more than trendy amenities

Millennials make up the majority of the U.S. workforce, surpassing Gen Xers in 2015, according to Pew Research. As a result, workplaces are adapting to the needs of a new generation. Without throwing out the rule book, companies are looking at new ideas for workplace design in order to appeal to and support the wide range of working styles and preferences that make up today's modern corporate environment.

Apart from paying more attention to what appeals to this new generation generally (e.g., flexible schedules and meaningful work), many companies – some of which have existed for decades – are taking a fresh look at how the design of their office spaces may be affecting the productivity, intergenerational collaboration and growth of their workforce.

By viewing the work environment in a more strategic way, both employees and the bottom line can benefit.

• **Listen to employees' needs.** Established corporations often stand the test of time by taking care of their employees. A couple of generations ago, it was a common understanding that a company would take care of you, if you took care of the company. That same sentiment is true today, but with a slightly different approach. What was once tackled through pensions and 401K matches is now communicated through a commitment to sustainability, flexibility and work-life balance and by creating a sense of purpose and camaraderie among employees.

Today's employees are looking for work environments that offer community, collaboration and agility – they want a workplace that can keep up with the speed of technology. Take FirstBank, for example. When its corporate headquarters in Lakewood underwent a massive expansion, the company engaged its employees to create an environment that could attract and retain top talent. As the architect of record for the project, we devised a holistic design process to include employee feedback on how the space would look, feel and function.

As the Denver market continues to become more and more competitive for top talent, FirstBank knew that a traditional bank office design was no longer a good fit. With changes in how people use banks, the company now views itself less like a traditional bank and more like an IT company that specializes in banking. Its space needed to reflect that tech feel, while still facilitating traditional bank functions.

Employees were shown rendering and finish boards in addition to mock workstations with sit/stand capability, task chairs and options for lighting. Since individual workstation



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space was being consolidated, it was important to help staff understand they were actually gaining more high-quality workspaces and collaborative zones. Engaging employees throughout the entire process helped with the change management of the project and allowed the

people who would be using the space every day to establish a sense of ownership.

• **Improve health and well-being through sustainability.** Sustainability is no longer a “nice to have” in office design. It's a standard. Not only does sustainable design demonstrate environmental responsibility, but also the right design and material choices can improve the health and well-being of employees, which can save employers time and money.

Take lighting, for example: Strategic use of natural light and daylight harvesting can make a world of difference in terms of energy consumption (and costs) as well as employee well-being. A growing body of research points to the role of natural light in supporting employee health and productivity by mirroring their natural circadian rhythms. In FirstBank's new headquarters, windows surround the majority of the new work areas. Combined with an open-concept design for workspaces, this means that most employees now have a view to the outside.

Daylight harvesting also reduces the need for electric light consumption. Designed to offset operational costs, RNL installed a sophisticated lighting system that can read the amount of natural light within a given space and adjust electric light as needed, providing a comfortable, safe and efficient work environment.

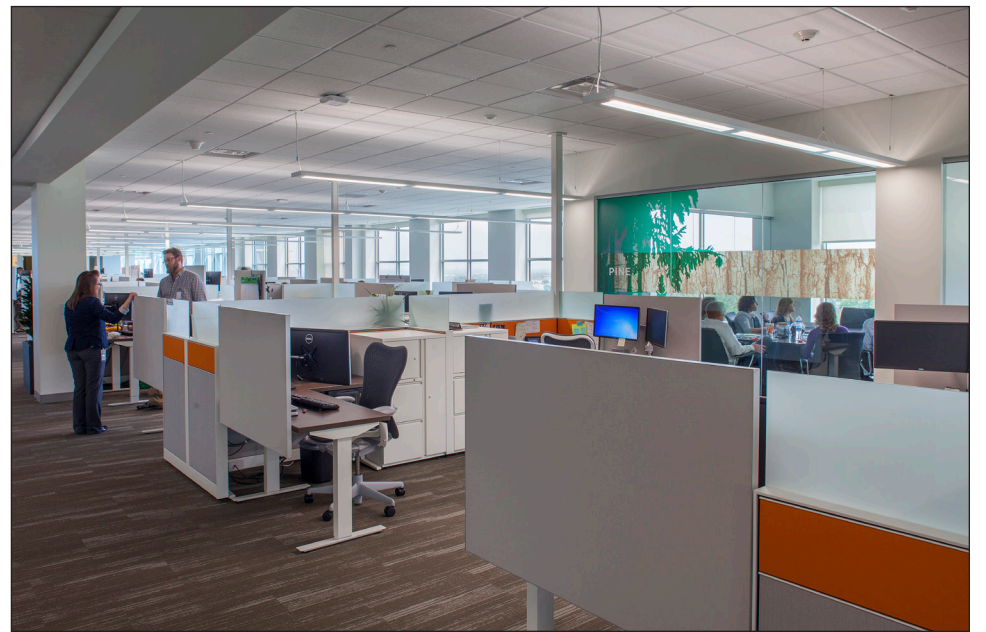
Other key sustainable features of the FirstBank headquarters include an advanced heating, ventilating and air-conditioning system that maximizes energy efficiency and ensures employee comfort with the use of natural ventilation. The design includes the addition of a first-floor café that opens to an inner courtyard with a bocce ball court and putting green, as well as a rooftop deck with ample seating and landscaping that frames views of the Front Range.

• **Design a space where people want to work.** Corporate culture often dictates how engaged employees are, and – when done well – an office's design can enhance and communicate that culture. With so much of the day spent at work, it follows that the more appealing you can make the space, the



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The rooftop deck amenity offers panoramic views of the Front Range, is enjoyed by employees and offers a great spot for FirstBank events.



RNL Design

The open plan with limited perimeter offices allows employees daylight access and views outside.

better.

The office floor plates at FirstBank's headquarters focus on open, flexible layouts designed to enhance collaboration between employees. Cubicles have low walls, and employees have the option of getting up and working in quiet focus rooms, taking a private call in a telephone room or gathering in a tech-enabled collaboration space in addition to working at their own desks. Conflicts in common space scheduling are a thing of the past with digital touch boards that provide a readout of all scheduled meetings in those spaces.

Given the site's suburban location and lack of nearby restaurants and amenities within walking distance, it was important to add conveniences and amenities to the campus environment. Workplace wellness was a driving factor in selecting amenities such

as a fully equipped fitness center with exercise classes along with a game room filled with pool, pingpong, foosball and video game tables.

Ultimately, the design became a hybrid between the fully open-concept office and more traditional space plans to meet the demands of FirstBank, which employs and serves people of all ages from all walks of life. The final result creates a sense of community and equity in the office space, encouraging collaboration and improving productivity.

As companies build and remodel new office spaces to keep up with their continued growth, they need to think strategically about how the design of that space can not only improve their operations, but also reinvigorate corporate culture and encourage employees to become the company's biggest advocates.▲