



By Stephen Swicegood

The 24/7 Learning Environment

A thoughtfully designed work environment can foster creativity and the exchange of ideas.



This page Coca-Cola's Executive Cookie Bar where the company's leaders exchange ideas (and eat cookies).

Opposite page The think-kitchen for wired collaboration and informal banter at Armada Venture Group.

This page Unique geometry of space, materials, and color at Hewitt Associates.

Opposite page The entrepreneurial-thinking space at Assurant Group.



Environmentalists use the term *ecotone* to describe the area where two adjacent ecosystems overlap. An ecotone has an ecology all its own and supports forms of life not found in the adjacent systems. The U.S. cultural equivalent of an ecotone is between the old economy culture of industrial production and the new economy culture of information exchange. In that uncharted territory, the need for employee learning and development has never been greater. But people process information differently than they used to.

As the economy moves from creating things to creating knowledge, the ecosystem, an ever-changing organic network, serves as the model for a healthy organization filled with spontaneous growth and complex, dynamic human interaction.

The health of an organizational ecology is measured by more than its financial performance. The Balanced Scorecard developed by Robert S. Norton and David P. Kaplan suggests at least these key dimensions of business performance:

- customer positioning
- work-process effectiveness
- employee learning and growth
- financial strength.

With respect to employee learning and growth, *idea|span*, a design firm based in Atlanta

www.idea-span.com points to these key success factors: ideas, people, and spirit. Ideas are the currency of the future. They break down barriers, create opportunities, and enrich lives. At *idea|span*, we believe that the workplace, the physical working environment, can be a powerful tool for employee development. A thoughtfully designed work environment touches employees and influences their behavior all day, every day. We also think a physical work environment fosters creative idea generation.



The ideas

There's no such thing as sustainable competitive advantage. "Everybody knows what everyone else is doing. If you've got a lead, the competition will be right there with you three months later," says Kevin Roberts, CEO of international advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi. "Only those companies capable of creating industry revolutions will prosper in the new economy."

Creativity is a phenomenon that's poorly understood. Many people think it's a gift exclusive to geniuses and eccentrics. In fact, creativity rarely involves completely new or original ideas. Most creative work integrates existing information into unusual syntheses or juxtapositions, with only minimal novelty.

Another myth about creativity is that inspiration comes in a blinding flash after a long, solitary pursuit. In actuality, making associations across conceptual boundaries is more often the product of collaboration: several people looking at a problem from different perspectives. So, the work environment needs to foster interaction. A great way to get people interacting in a relaxed manner is around the rituals of refreshment. At the venture capital firm **Armada Venture Group**, that meant combining a think tank and a kitchen into a "think-kitchen" with wired lounge chairs for extended collaborative work as well as a counter for informal banter over morning coffee.

Coca-Cola, a 100-year-old institution, also gets the idea thing. "We're coming out of the dark ages at Coke," says Coca-Cola Americas president Jeff Dunn. "Innovation is what's going to help us turn around our business and our culture."

Coca-Cola Enterprises's executives remark that they often learn more about what each other is doing at work while sharing a snack at their assistants' desks than in structured meetings. idea|span's response was to design an Executive Cookie Bar where Coca-Cola leaders could get together regularly without hovering over their assistants, who have work to do, after all.



Creativity also requires flexibility and openness to risk taking and a willingness to adopt unconventional points of view. An organization's work environment can send a powerful message about convention. If you doubt that, just say, "Dilbert" and see what kind of world comes to people's minds. When a company provides a soulless Dilbert environment, creativity and innovation won't be forthcoming. In contrast, when **Hewitt Associates**, a leading human resources consulting firm, decided to create a workplace expressly to stimulate creativity, it purposely threw away the rulebook. The company's new geometry of space, materials, and colors are decidedly unconventional in order to send the message, "It's OK to think outside of the box here!"

Some insurance companies are getting creative. For **Assurant Group**, a **Fortis company**, idea|span created a space designed to get people thinking like entrepreneurs. Industrial light fixtures hang from a raw slab



Left The tractor-trailer represents the distribution aspect of sales.

Below Georgia Pacific's high-tech sales center displaying the products it sells.







This page The architectural curves at Porsche suggest the high-performance cars in the photos.

Opposite page Illuminated billboards at General Motors.

to simulate a garage. The walls are covered with tackable panels, and movable easels everywhere support visual thinking. Creative toys strewn throughout remind people to approach business problems as if they were kids trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle.

Add the people

No matter how creative your work environment is, however, innovation won't flow without the right people. In a less-than-robust economy, companies are searching urgently for new ways to foster old-fashioned loyalty and commitment. That means identifying the traits of model employees, figuring out what they want in a job, and seeing that they find it at your company. Compensation, benefits, and advancement potential remain fundamental, but the best and brightest work-

ers can find those elements in many places. So, how does a company differentiate itself?

Many high-profile companies think that to lure talent, they must brand themselves to employees with an intensity previously reserved for customers. Branding means figuring out what you're about and then communicating who you are and what makes you special in everything you do. If you're not in love with your business, why should your employees and customers be? It has to be real, not a motivational poster. Employees know when you're faking it and will do their best when you've captured their hearts, not just their minds.

When **Georgia Pacific** decided to take its building products sales function out of the lumberyard and into a high-tech sales center, it was concerned about



Interland's electronic bulletin boards show news alerts and the company's current work.

keeping it real. So, idea|span created museum-quality exhibits that not only communicate the company's message, but are also made out of the products being sold. Sales involves distribution—trucking materials from the factory to customers—so why not build a tractor-trailer into the space? idea|span did.

Cars are a most potent symbol of modern life, as idea|span discovered in two recent assignments. At **Porsche**, one of the most evocative brands in the world, its North American headquarters has pictures of such products as engines and high-tech bicycles. But the design goes further, to a subliminal level, by incorporating the sinuous curves and sleek materials that evoke the mystique of performance cars. **General Motors** feels it is selling less of a product and more of an experience, so its workplace includes large, illuminated billboards that remind employees of the ways people's lives are enriched through the use of GM vehicles.

Summon the spirit

Sociologist Bruce J. Shulman, in his book *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*, wrote: "In the 1970s, America changed its attitudes and behaviors in profound ways that created contemporary culture."

People who grew up in the seventies are now in their years of prime productivity, and they have a unique set of expectations regarding their work experience. They're a generation that's at once materialistic and bohemian. They're fiercely independent, to the extent that participation in clubs, schools, and community organizations is at an all-time low. And they tend to be committed to having the best of everything whether it be \$4 lattes or \$10,000 flat-screen TVs.

All of those characteristics can coalesce around the workplace. People of this generation don't want just a job; they want to be maverick crusaders, strik-

ing out into uncharted territory to build a better world. They want thinking, creative work that feels like an expression of their own desires. For this generation, entrepreneurship, lifelong learning, and self-development are core values.

The work environment for this age group has to feel as cool and hip as their loft condos. It has to be a highly social environment because, as the *New York Times* observed, "A traditional office, despite all of its problems, has become one of the last, best places to find a community. The reason many Americans are content to 'bowl alone' is because they can receive from nine to five all of the social interaction they need to be happy and productive." The good news is that innovation, pivotal to the knowledge economy, is fundamentally social. But how can the work environment go further to capture the zeitgeist, the spirit of the age?

Well, if innovation is the key, then information is its lifeblood. Older people have also moved beyond being engaged by static information. Nearly everyone

multitasks. To keep people engaged nowadays and stimulate their creative juices, you have to layer information into their environment. At the Web-hosting and design company **Interland**, electronic bulletin boards suspended throughout the workplace alert people to breaking news and display the company's current work.

Workers in the 1980s felt proud and confident to walk into their workplaces through a stately, gleaming lobby of marble and exotic woods. But now it's much cooler for companies to spend money on large flat-screen displays and plenty of bandwidth.

Take a good look at your workplace when you walk in tomorrow morning. Think about the messages you want to send to your people and then look at the messages that are being sent. You'll know what you need to do next. TD

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