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Environment-friendly workspaces gain popularity

Dhanusha Gokulan / 19 May 2012

We try and make sure we switch off lights and cut water consumption at home after use. But, as soon as we hit the office, we are all about printing 10 copies of everything and keeping computers on throughout the day just so the boss thinks we work hard.

Every year despite thousands being spent on educating people on sustainability and living in a green environment, how much of it do we practice at the workplace? Statistics suggest that an average worker spends 70 per cent of his time in the office, leading up to almost 40 per cent of CO2 emissions from usage of power. As a solution to this problem, in came green office spaces. With increasing efforts on behalf of the UAE government and several private organisations, more and more sustainable offices are springing up in all emirates across the country.



Geoff Black, Craig Carter, Ben Corrigan, and Scft Whittaker at the seminar in Dubai.
— *KT Photo by Shihab*

“Sustainability lost some momentum for cost reasons when the global economy was hit with recession, but things are looking up,” said Ben Corrigan, principal designer and partner at Bluehaus Group, an interior design consultancy. Corrigan and other experts spoke at a panel discussion taking note of “Local Perspective on Sustainable Design” at the Office Exhibition, which took place last week. The Office Exhibition, in partnership with research company YouGov, surveyed 1,172 CEOs and directors from across the MENA region, to find out the extent a supplier’s office setting influences their procurement decisions. According to the findings, untidy, smelly and poorly designed offices cost Middle East companies, on average, Dh2 million in revenue.

Also speaking at the panel discussion, Geoff Black, Operations Director at AK Designs said: “There is an increased awareness for sustainable structures here in the UAE. The current challenge is not to get the client on board with environmental issues, but it is to make them more aware of the selection of useful energy saving materials and devices.”

Meanwhile, CEO of another design consultancy Craig Associates, Craig Carter, said: “Clients are of two types- informed and uninformed. Some have their own environment manifesto. What is needed is more education to clients on future operating and maintenance costs.”

Some of the experts suggested that legislation could play a huge role in pushing for green offices. “Environmental legislations are important. If there is a strong environmental regulation, people will know they have to do it,” said Scott Whitaker, executive director and founder of Design Worldwide Partnership (DWP). Adding to it, Corrigan pointed out that the need for a sustainable building must

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be driven by the employees of the company. "The power should come from the people, employees must demand for a green space."

The experts added that levy of taxes and staff incentives on use of energy can contribute as well.

Quoting an example, Whitaker said: "We did a fit out for a banking client and they had 40 photocopiers in the building.

We cut it down to two. As a result, employees were walking more, leading them to be a lot fitter and they met a lot of people on the way as well."

Black said that passion and the drive to want to do it, and keep legislations simple and uncomplicated should do the trick to implementing green office spaces.

Social media and design

Global demographics and technology have drastically changed architecture and design over the last 10 years. According to Cheryl Durst, executive vice-president and CEO of the International Interior Design Association (IIDA), a younger world and social media are transforming how people think about their relationships to work and the office environment must respond accordingly.

"The world is getting younger and the youth are more visually literate than their older counterparts. Lighting and colour are design priorities; as is speed. This demography consumes their information in 15 second news feeds. Design must not only look great, it must function quickly," added Durst. "Work can happen "anywhere" because of technology, but increasing work/the workplace, has become a hub of "social activity and interaction". This is a challenge, because designers need to create spaces that facilitate both work and social interaction," she added.

Tumblr, Pinterest, Instagram are visual interfaces and clearly

make design a more "immediate" concept for most people – giving them access to design. Clients/consumers have become more discerning about what they want because of this access/exposure and designers are working with much more sophisticated clients who are exposed to a universe of information about design. While architects and designers have always been trained to create spatial environments in the context of the end user's experience, IIDA says the influence of design in commercial environments is more pervasive than it has ever been.

Durst added that the fundamentals of workplace design remain unchanged. "Ultimately, design is about people. It's not just a facade or decoration. We will always need to consider the whole end user experience and so space, security and privacy are basic needs that a designer must always meet," she said.

Companies that took the leap

Take independent branding, print, marketing and web design consultancy North 55. In 2008, they revamped their office space. Drab desks were turned into a colourful creative 'green' workspaces, which reportedly boosts creativity among its employers. The company spent a whopping Dh1.5 million for the fit-out.

Craig Falconer, creative partner of the agency, said: "As an agency we see a lot of waste being created, especially in the print sector.

We strongly believe that the marketing industry, along with its clients, can make a difference by thinking about how they market their brands.

We are committed to educating our new and existing clients on how they can help combat climate change through their marketing initiatives."

Also, North55 is a member of the 'Design Can Change' initiative, which encourages designers to consider the environment through their working practices. "The Design Can Change initiative shares the same values as North55 and that's why we decided to take the Design Can Change pledge. We implement sustainable practices throughout the entire design process: design strategy, execution, production and distribution. We also discuss sustainable practices with our suppliers, to help create a cleaner world for the future," added Falconer.

General Electric (GE) redefined the concept of sustainability with their new office at Sowwah Square in Abu Dhabi. Spread over 3,500 square feet of pure 'greenness', the office houses over 300 employees.

The office has state-of-the-art lighting equipment, demountable and reusable glass partitions, recycling bins, several energy efficient equipment, daylight sensors and AV equipment controlled by an iPad. "Overall, the new office environment exudes a fresh, open and contemporary ambience, aimed at promoting creative thinking. In fact, environmental and 'green' considerations have always been part of GE's work ethic, as underlined by our ecomagination commitment to imagine, build and deliver innovative solutions that solve today's environmental challenges and benefit customers and society," said Samer Mahdi, construction project services leader, GE Capital.

In 2009, the Dubai Chamber became the 1st LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified existing building in the Arab world, demonstrating that buildings in this region can be greened without major investments.

Since then it has renovated its offices utilising green building standards, which has led to further energy and water savings.

It has also doubled productivity per square metre and helped increase staff satisfaction from 72 per cent on the old floors to 93 per cent on the new floors.