



# office space:

## 10 Tips From the Future

BY LIZ MASSEY

### 1 OFFICES ARE HERE TO STAY.

**The trend:** Despite huge technological advances and economic changes in the last generation, most businesses will continue to operate out of a large, centralized office.

**What it means:** Telecommuting expert Gil Gordon sees the traditional office continuing to dominate business life for three reasons:

- Businesses need a place to put their “stuff,” and it’s just as well to put it in one place.
- Having an institutional presence makes it easy for new hires (and new clients) to discover what the company is about.

- Many people either aren’t suited or don’t want to work from home.

“All of the options to the office are going to grow,” says Gordon, “but all of them will continue to complement the office, not replace it.”

**Taking action:** Get clear on how your office meets company objectives. Is its location providing appropriate visibility? Does the layout promote productivity?

### 2 IT’S THE ECONOMY, SMARTY.

**The trend:** Economic pressures are forcing businesses to become increasingly innovative and agile just to survive, and office design

will flow from this new mandate.

**What it means:** Daniel Pink, author of *Free Agent Nation* and *A Whole New Mind*, asserts that American companies must deliver products that can’t be outsourced, can’t be automated, and provide inherent aesthetic value if they want to remain competitive in the global marketplace. Workplace configurations that mimicked the linear workflow of the factory are giving way to designs that allow rapid changes in company direction or product line.

**Taking action:** No matter what your company makes or does, begin to look at your office layout through the eyes of getting

it done in a more innovative way. “And don’t necessarily wait for management to catch up with you,” says Pink. “The general approach here is to ask for forgiveness rather than permission,” he says, noting that some of the best office layouts are “temporary, ad hoc designs, created by people trying to get great work done.”

### 3 PUT THE RAINFOREST ON HOLD—SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT WITHIN YOUR OWN COMPANY!

**The trend:** Businesses will increasingly come to understand that successful workplaces are complex eco-systems that comprise a host of interrelated factors.

**What it means:** The view of an office as a living system, made up of interdependent elements is gaining credence among those charged with creating high-performance workplaces.

Barbara Armstrong, principal architect at Kahler Slater Design’s Business Environments Group, notes that her firm explores issues of “place” as one piece of a business’s healthy functioning, along with internal and external perceptions of the organization, the needs of the people who are its employees and customers, and the products the company produces.

**Taking action:** Don’t expect redesigned office space to be a cure-all. Remember, every office is a web of interrelated factors, including workspace, technology, corporate culture, and processes.

### 4 TO GET WHAT YOU WANT, MAKE FRIENDS WITH YOUR ENEMIES.

**The trend:** Human resources and facilities management employees, long used to competing with each other for status and resources, are uniting to build a case for new workspace strategies.

**What it means:** The Kahler Slater

Design team advises human resources and facilities management staff to band together to build a better workplace. “HR has become viewed as somewhat transactional and less strategic, and facilities management is often viewed as a necessary evil,” Armstrong asserts. “If you approach the [C-level executives] together, it’s much more powerful.”

**Taking action:** Look at resources beyond your own “silo” for support of your next workplace redesign project. HR types can

## All of the options to the office are going to grow, but all of them will continue to complement the office, not replace it.

— GIL GORDON

visit the International Facilities Management Association’s Website ([www.ifma.org](http://www.ifma.org)), and facilities managers can take a look at what the Society for Human Resource Management ([www.shrm.org](http://www.shrm.org)) has to offer them.

### 5 THE OFFICE OF THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THE DIGITAL NATIVES.

**The trend:** Baby boomer retirements will soon create a huge talent gap, and highly sought-after younger workers will remake the office in their own image.

**What it means:** Within a few years, as the leading edge of the baby boom generation retires, there will be 23 million more jobs available than there are people to fill them, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Mark Sekula, associate principal and senior facility strategist for Kahler Slater, expects companies to engage in “hand-to-hand combat” to attract and retain new talent.

Millennials (those born after 1980) won’t necessarily be drawn to traditionally

designed workspaces, and configuring workplaces to align with their collaborative, multitasking, work-from-anywhere habits “may be the tipping point in some cases,” he says.

**Taking action:** Arrange worksites with areas where informal interaction is encouraged and laptops can be transported from station to station. Also, let workers wear their MP3 player headphones when doing “heads down” work at their desks. Sekula says, “In an open office environment, it signals their door is shut” in the absence of a door *to* shut.

### 6 WORKING TOGETHER IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN WORKING ALONE.

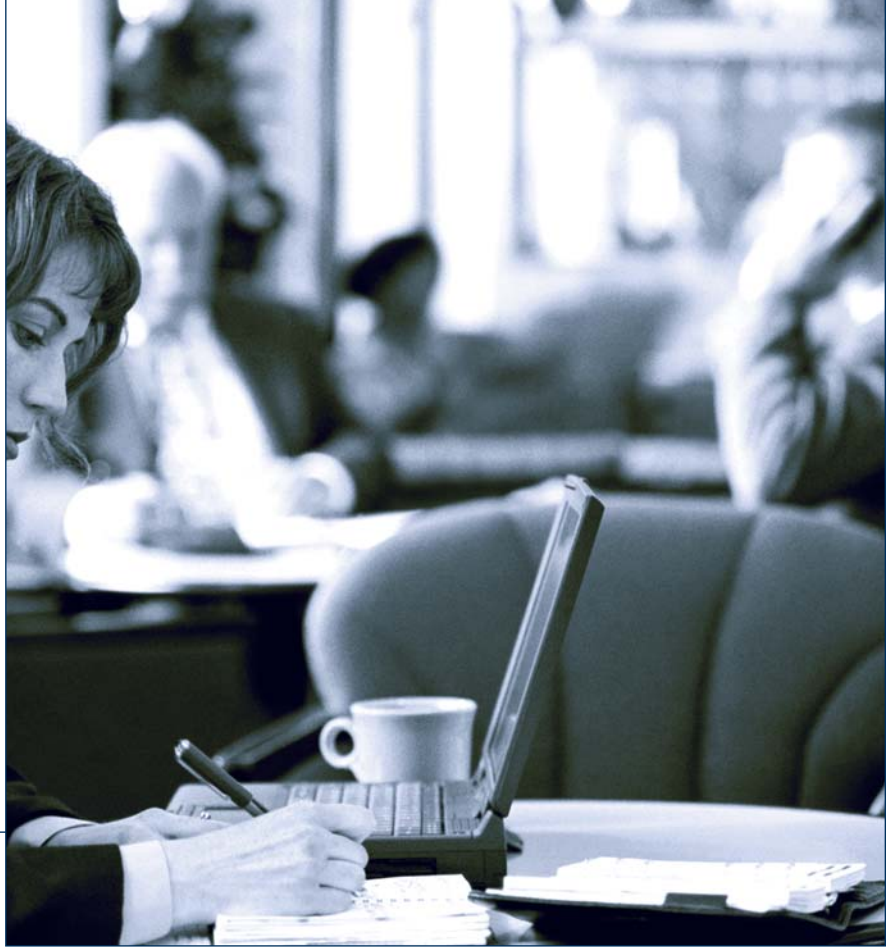
**The trend:** Ample collaborative space is a necessity in the new business landscape.

**What it means:** Privacy-rich corner offices may be disappearing, but the real challenge in the modern workplace is to blend spaces that promote concentration with those that invite ongoing collaboration.

Cornell’s Becker, chair of the Department of Design and Environmental Analysis, sees a trend toward what he calls “activity-based planning,” which provides employees with a series of work settings to use throughout the day or week, instead of just a single office or cube and maybe one meeting room to share with others. “This is very different from 25 years ago,” he says, “You’ll find not a single setting for workers, but a range, depending on what people need at the time and how the individual chooses to work.”

**Taking action:** Plan your office setup with the idea that work-related socializing is something to encourage. Group work areas can be separated from zones where individual concentration is crucial by creating “moats” around them with large office equipment or by deploying temporary barriers, such as movable walls.

Places never intended to be offices, such as coffee shops, libraries, and airport lobbies, have emerged as increasingly popular places to get work done.



## 7 INTERACTIVITY IS THE NEW "CONNECTIVITY."

**The trend:** Emerging technologies will enhance the ability of teams and individuals to collaborate at a distance the way they do in person.

**What it means:** Few connective tools have replicated the experience of meeting face-to-face until now. Researchers Jim Ware and Charlie Grantham of The Work Design Collaborative consulting group are carefully watching developments in haptic interfaces, where individuals meeting in two different locations can view, manipulate, and reshape "virtual" objects using computer-embedded gloves and special screens.

Grantham, Ware, and Becker also expect videoconferencing's popularity to remain on a "steep upward slope" over the next decade, as high definition cameras and greater bandwidth solve some of the medium's current limitations.

**Taking action:** Keep up-to-date on

advances in virtual meeting technologies. If your industry isn't ready for full-on "virtual reality," try replacing some in-person project meetings with videoconferences, which are already accepted in the business world as a way to reduce unnecessary travel.

## 8 WORKING AWAY FROM THE OFFICE IS A MUST-HAVE STRATEGY, NOT JUST A NICE IDEA.

**The trend:** Encouraging employees to work outside a central headquarters office is maturing from an HR panacea into a strategic imperative, especially in an age of terrorist attacks and natural disasters.

**What it means:** Businesses are painfully aware—post-9/11—of the vulnerability of offices to disruptions caused by terrorism, natural disasters, or illness pandemics. "The redundancy of many workers laboring in many locations, equipped with clear action plans about how to function if their main office is hit, can save a company," says

Grantham. "Redundancy is a good thing ... if you're dispersed enough, you can't all be hit at the same time."

**Taking action:** If you have a telecommuting program, focus your data collection on how the initiative meets mission-critical objectives such as data backup and continuing standard levels of service in an emergency.

## 9 TELECOMMUTING AGREEMENTS ARE OUT; "MOBILE WORKING" IS IN.

**The trend:** Working away from a central office will be measured in terms of performance-based factors, rather than enforcing expectations of "good citizenship."

**What it means:** Concerns about measuring the productivity of teleworkers have faded, according to Gordon. As a consequence, rigid contracts tying a worker to a set number of days at home per week are also becoming less common. Becker believes this trend is part of a larger one in which all work

arrangements are becoming judged by performance and bottom-line results. “Almost no one wants to work from home 100 percent of the time,” says Becker. “I don’t hear much about telework per se any more—it’s just becoming part of how people work ... part of a greater mobility.”

**Taking action:** Enable employees to work from whatever locations enhance client/customer contact and allow greater productivity.

**10 THE MOST “SUSTAINABLE” OFFICE MAY BE THE ONE YOUR COMPANY DOESN’T OWN.**

**The trend:** Places never intended to be offices, such as coffee shops, libraries, and airport lobbies, have emerged as increasingly popular places to get work done.

**What it means:** Improvements in technology have made work possible in environ-


ments that would have been unthinkable for more than occasional use a decade ago. This is generally good for corporations and their employees, but may have a downside for the locations that “host” the office workers.

Even when one sidesteps the obvious question of how to manage facility issues for a space a company neither owns nor rents, Becker thinks that this trend may eventually hit a saturation point, based on the needs of cafés and other spaces to turn a profit.

“In Ithaca, I can’t sit down at the coffee shop I go to anymore because everyone there is working,” he notes. “It may evolve into a fee-for-space situation, [but] at some point you have to have an underlying business model.”

Grantham and Ware are optimistic about the development of what they term “business resource centers” to take some of the pressure off cafés. They’re tracking a dozen such

centers, which cater to workers who are seeking social interaction and access to office equipment or technologically enabled meeting rooms, but have no need for a full-time office.

**Taking action:** If you have a large number of “café employees,” consider setting up “corporate accounts” for use at businesses that need their tables to turnover rapidly to continue making a profit. If you have teams of widely distributed workers, consider facilitating their participation in a business resource center. 

**Liz Massey is a freelance writer and editor who writes frequently on career and workplace topics. She lives in Phoenix.**