Workplace Programming

The Critical Path to Project Success

There is tremendous buzz in our industry about “workplace change” these days. Countless essays have been written explaining the forces converging on the workplace that are creating the need for office environments that work harder and smarter. Yet, little attention is truly given to just how an organization should actually go about planning for potentially dramatic change. The solution lies in a thoroughly executed design programming process.

Programming, at its core, is defining the problem that needs to be solved. Properly identifying the problem is the first step in beginning to look for solutions. In the got-to-have-it yesterday world of the facilities management professional, all too often there is a temptation to minimize the programming phase of a project by rushing into design solutions and construction. In taking this approach the organization risks making costly mistakes from late-in-the-game changes or delivering built projects that underperform, ultimately compromising the organization’s bottom line. Investing the appropriate time and effort into a thorough programming effort that explores the true needs of the organization and then translates those into the right mix of space usage will ensure more positive results in your workplace project.

A complete programming effort should consist of several well defined phases including; Visioning, Observation, Benchmarking, Space Needs Identification and Scenario Planning. The extent to which any one of these phases is emphasized depends on the degree of workplace transformation that the organization is undertaking balanced with a realistic time frame for project delivery and costs.

The first phase, Visioning, is more than just creating a bullet list of boilerplate goals. It is an exploration that seeks to align the built environment with the company’s work processes, brand and culture so that it can support the employees while providing a competitive edge for the organization. Take for example the popular yet vague goal of *“Implementing a collaborative environment that foster’s innovation and creativity.”* Most organizations recognize something to effect is an imperative in today’s business climate, yet most have taken very little time to truly understand what facilitates collaboration and creates best practices within the context of their organization. Through a Visioning Session your team can begin to articulate what form this should take specific to the project.

Observation and Benchmarking are tools to further discover how workplace transformation might take shape. Observation is the deliberate visual investigation of how current space is being used in the course of a workday. It can provide irrefutable evidence not illuminated in a typical programming questionnaire and interview process. Noting actual employee locations, team behaviors and determining the utilization of existing spaces can reveal the true nature of the firm's collaboration patterns. Just because the sign on the door declares it a "Collaboration Room' will not ensure that collaboration will actually happen there. Observation will reveal both obstacles and enablers toward the goal.

Benchmarking other facilities through research or participating in on-site tours can reveal best practices and 'lessons learned', aiding the project team in visualizing how solutions might be applied to their workplace. It is also critical in equipping the team with a common vocabulary and experiences when it comes time to translate these goals into design solutions.

The Space Needs Identification phase seeks to formulate a concise listing of spaces needed to accomplish the stated goals. Most are quite familiar with this phase of the programming process. It is critical, however, when trying to achieve a significant workplace transformation that this effort does not simply become an order taking sessions where department managers try to maintain their workplace as they know it. Input from these leaders, however, is critical to understanding how their groups function and what hinders their productivity. Their input should be balanced with a Scenario Planning phase that seeks to model several alternatives of space distribution to determine the overall effectiveness of possible space allocation. Space planning prototypical layouts at this phase can allow the team to fully understand the qualities and potential characteristics, as well as the probable costs of each possible solution supporting better decision making for the project.

Performed correctly, with adequate time to fully gather, synthesize and analyze the data and test solutions, programming can yield positive results that optimize your facility and create lasting value to your organization.

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