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Why Silicon Valley Is Rethinking The Cubicle Office

Intel and Its Peers Aim To Use Space Better, Improve Productivity

By DON CLARK October 15, 2007; Page B9

Intel Corp. is often credited, or blamed, for popularizing the office cubicle. Now it is joining some prominent Silicon Valley peers in reconsidering the concept.

The chip maker, emulating experiments at companies such as Cisco Systems Inc. and Hewlett-Packard Co., is planning tests in three U.S. locations of new office layouts. Plans include tables where several users can plop down with laptop computers, multiworker desks, and lounge-like settings with armchairs -- all a far cry from the mazelike grid of tall gray cubicles in most Intel buildings.

Behind such tests is a growing recognition that classic, Dilbert-style cubicles have many shortcomings. For one thing, they tend to block visibility without blocking much noise from other cubes.

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1 CAST YOUR VOTE

In what type of office environment are you most productive? Vote in the Question of the Day.



TIME TO REMODEL?

For those considering trading in their cubicles, here are some lessons from Silicon Valley technology companies:

- Survey the work force. Would employees welcome a change? Talk to peers. Have other firms tried new office layouts? One style won't fit all workers. Some collaborate; others work alone. Offer drop-in spaces for road warriors and telecommuters. Consider "quiet zones" for concentration and confidentiality. Esthetics count. Natural lighting and pleasant colors can boost morale.

Sources: Intel, Hewlett-Packard, Cisco, Sun Microsystems, Autodesk

"It gives you this incredibly false sense of privacy," said Carl Bass, chief executive of software maker Autodesk Inc., who is pushing for more open layouts at his own company.

Cubicles can prompt odd behavior, people who have studied them said. It is hard to see if colleagues are busy, so some cube-dwellers will send emails to a neighbor about a simple question that could have been answered more easily in a conversation.

Some technology companies never adopted cubes. Microsoft Corp., for example, promotes quiet and concentration by giving most workers offices with doors.

That is costly. Chris Hood, a manager in what H-P calls its Workplace program, said contact and collaboration boost productivity for many employees. Rather than make isolation the norm, employers should provide quiet zones for when they are needed, he said.

Corporate bean counters, meanwhile, seize on the expense of office space that is often empty, as workers spend more time traveling, telecommuting or meeting with colleagues. At the same time, the rise of wireless networking has made it easier for workers with laptop computers to be productive while dropping in at unassigned desks or open tables.

Networking company Cisco, which began adding open-desk and seating options in 2004, estimated improved use of its offices has reduced space-related costs in remodeled areas by 37%. Sun Microsystems Inc. is particularly

aggressive about flexible work styles; the computer maker estimated that about 55% of its employees work from home or a remote office as many as two days a week. To accommodate these workers when they are in the office, Sun offers drop-in desks and places terminals in offices, cafeterias and other common spaces.

Intel, which helped promote wireless networking in laptops, would seem an obvious candidate for such offices. Cubicles are a part of its egalitarian self-image, like its philosophy against reserved parking spaces and other perks for top managers.

The result, in most Intel offices, is pretty grim, observed comedian Conan O'Brien, in a visit to Intel headquarters in May that turned into a popular Internet video. "It makes people feel that they are all basically the same, that there is no individuality, there is no hope," he said.

Before Mr. O'Brien's visit, Intel began considering changes as part of efforts to improve efficiency, said Neil Tunmore, the company's director of corporate services. In an internal survey, 50% of employees said Intel's cubicle scheme didn't promote innovation, he said. About 30% favored the cubicles; others voiced no strong opinion, he said.

Many workers said they wanted more common spaces, Mr. Tunmore said. Paradoxically, they also wanted less noise; in cubes, people are often unaware of how much noise they are making, compared with workers in open-seating plans, he said.



Intel is trying new office layouts to promote collaboration and flexibility.

A typical floor at Intel's headquarters building in Santa Clara, Calif., holds 500 workers and has 17 conference rooms. The rooms are often booked but empty, because the demand leads employees to reserve them if there is a chance they will be needed, Mr. Tunmore said. In one of its tests, Intel plans to add 32 small conference rooms to a floor for meetings of two to four people and a dozen "private audio rooms" -- for private conversations that aren't possible in cubicles.

As with most things inside Intel, there has been plenty of debate about the issues. Where people in jobs such as marketing tend to want open offices, for example, employees in product groups favor cubes, Mr. Tunmore said. There were noticeable differences of opinion among Intel sites, he added.

Intel stressed the tests don't mean it is headed for companywide changes. But Mr. Tunmore said: "What we are finding is we will never please everybody in the company."

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