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Office layout can relieve pressure

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News
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In trying to identify the workplace pressures that can cause stress, we often overlook the obvious one that is staring us in the face all day - office layout and design - or lack of it.

Company bosses and their architects need to appreciate that the size, shape and ergonomics of our workspace, the office environment, (including temperature and noise), and the general ambience of the surroundings, can impact greatly on job satisfaction and productivity.

It is very much one of our 'conditions of employment', even though it is not something we always remember to bring up during our job interview or when negotiating such conditions. This may be why employers have traditionally been slow to see the hard benefits of creative space-planning and office design, and reluctant to invest in it - perhaps relying on the fact that dissatisfied employees may grumble but not actually resign.

However, one London web-hosting company has had a different experience, and this could be symptomatic of a wider change of attitude. In this particular business, clients placed a high premium on continuity of service, and felt uncomfortable with high staff turnover. The management commissioned a full-scale environmental review, in which human needs were analysed and the recommendations then fully implemented. The effect on staff morale and retention was so favourable that clients wanted to visit the office to see how it was done!

Often, employee satisfaction comes down to replicating a sense of privacy in the age of the open-plan office. In a world without walls, you need 'dignity savers' - for example, noise-masking from the adjoining desks. Workstation areas should not only have sufficient space, but should be arranged in irregular formations (less efficient, but more effective) to avoid a 'battery-hen' atmosphere. And then, preferably within sight, you need the break-out room, where staff can meet over coffee or snacks, or read a newspaper. The point being that with today's long working hours, you cannot keep people in strict duty-mode without a break.

There has to be a recognition that there is an element of social activity even in the workplace. In addition, modern offices that are of open-plan design usually have provision for one or more private meeting rooms - which can often be booked for meetings or private conversations.

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One significant indicator is that office design is now more often classified under HR, rather than facilities. In London, the number of office design companies just never stops growing. Latest office designs have included one laid-out like the shells of a prawn and another carpeted in green Astroturf!

In prosperous Dubai, the opportunities for ambitious and creative space-planning and the consequential improvement in staff retention, seem to be limitless.

Key points: Designing workplace

- Bad office design and a cramped layout is a recognised cause of stress.
- Open-plan offices need break-out areas.
- Environmental improvements are shown to boost morale and staff retention.

- *The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.*

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