SITES & FACILITIES

The Great Set-Up:
Furnishing Your Call Center for Optimal Productivity
The Great Set-Up: 
Furnishing Your Call Center for Optimal Productivity

BY JENNIFER WAY

Depending on which study you read, the people side of the call center business represents about two-thirds of an organization’s operating expenses. With so much of the industry’s cost and energy concentrated on this area, it makes sense that the center’s facilities should be designed with people and productivity in mind.

Regarding the productivity of workers in call center design, there are many issues that come into play. A few are addressed here, including workstation design, traffic flow and the ever-important ergonomics.

An important aspect to consider when designing a call center for optimal productivity is workstation design. Workstation designs for supervisors, call center agents and even administrative workers can greatly facilitate productivity.

When designing a workstation for supervisors, a recent trend is to place the supervisor at a standing or stool height on the end of a bank of agent stations. A supervisor at a higher height than a traditional workstation allows greater visibility. At a higher height, a supervisor can quickly see when an agent needs assistance and can supervise workers’ activities.

To greater aid the supervisors, a popular design in agent workstations is to have agents angled into the workstation and directed toward the supervisor. This configuration allows supervisors to be able to see the faces of agents versus their backs.

Complementing the direction of the agent stations is panel heights. A panel height of approximately 42 inches allows for the greatest visibility. If a taller panel height is desired, there is an option for a clear or decorative acrylic.
A recent trend in call center break rooms and cafeterias matches the public’s increasing thirst for specialty coffee drinks. Coffee bars are frequently seen in call centers, as is the matching décor. Café tables with stools are replacing standard square dining tables of the past. As with any profession, new agents spend many hours in training. Training rooms are moving away from cramped tables with messy wires running along the floor and are switching to workstations that represent the real work environment. Workstations with computers that house wires and cables and have plenty of room to work are standard. Sample configurations are a classroom set up, or placing the workstations along the perimeter of the training room.

Typically, call center floors are open spaces with little to no privacy for discussions between agents and supervisors. Small rooms, often called Huddle Rooms, have increased in popularity. A Huddle Room is a room that contains tables and chairs where the supervisor can take the agent to discuss performance in a private setting.

Ergonomics is undoubtedly one of the most important aspects of worker productivity. It has been proven that attention to ergonomics can reduce repetitive motion injuries and costs associated with absenteeism and productivity.

Although incorporating ergonomic accessories can be seen as a sizeable investment, it is a fraction of annual labor or employee expenses. Thus, the investments made in the stations and equipment to make the employees more comfortable and productive is a good investment with an excellent return.

One of the most important ergonomic accessories is an adjustable keyboard. Keyboards are an essential part of the ergonomic work environment. It is commonly known that correct keyboard positioning and use can help to decrease carpal tunnel syndrome and make working at a computer workstation more comfortable.

If you have ever sat in an office chair for hours at a time, then it will be obvious that selecting a comfortable ergonomic chair is an integral part of a workstation. While working at a computer, proper posture is that the back should be fully supported by the chair while reclining slightly to minimize back discomfort.

Another, often overlooked, ergonomic accessory is an adjustable monitor arm. An adjustable monitor arm allows the

Panel addition that will allow the agent more privacy, but still allow for visibility by the supervisor.

Administrative workers are more apt to be productive when they have easy access to the tools they need. Including items such as a desktop organizer in the workstation design will keep the phone and supplies in easy reach of each individual. Workstations should also incorporate plenty of storage for important documents and personal items. Organization and easy accessibility is key for administrative areas.

Various studies have shown that color plays a part in workers’ productivity. There are several ways to make a statement with color while keeping the furniture system and surroundings generally neutral. Make an impact with colorful chairs, bold workstation accent panels and paint. These items can be updated at a lower cost over time while allowing higher-cost items such as carpet and the furniture system to remain in place. Consideration of color when designing a call center will ensure that the center will look updated and sophisticated for many years to come.

Another aspect of productivity that is often overlooked is the traffic flow of the call center floor. When considering floor plan options, take into account the entrance of the building and the location of training rooms and common areas. Have an idea of supervisor-to-agent ratio and general workstation design before beginning to plan the space.

A good floor plan will have ample aisle space for supervisors to easily reach agents when they need assistance, clear paths to training rooms and easy access to break areas and restrooms.

At the minimum, a 6’ aisle space between workstations is recommended for rows of agent stations and even more aisle space is recommended for the main paths to common areas.

Due to HIPPA regulations, some clients may require that agents have a taller panel height when working with sensitive customer information. Knowing these regulations and having designated areas for these clients can help with the flow of the space.

Sometimes the best way to determine the ideal floor plan and flow is to try a variety of different floor plan options to maximize the available square footage while still providing an effective flow for the call center floor.

Search for a furniture provider that will provide space-planning services at no additional charge. Also keep in mind that a furniture provider that specializes in call centers will have more insight and recommendations when designing the floor plan for the call center versus a furniture provider that may adapt its furniture to a call center setting.
user to properly use the other ergonomic accessories. A properly adjusted monitor allows the user to sit with the back fully supported by the chair, and the arms and wrists in the correct position to use the keyboard.

Adjustable height workstations have also become more popular over the past several years. Having this option can greatly increase the price of a station. Another, perhaps easier way, is to use a keyboard tray and monitor arm with enough adjustment to be used while in a standing position.

Other ergonomic accessories that make a workstation entirely adjustable are footrests and task lighting.

Often overlooked, footrests are an important ergonomic tool because they can help increase circulation problems that can happen due to long periods of inactivity.

Although the best source of office illumination is natural light, the use of task lighting can reduce eyestrain, headaches and fatigue. Task lighting should be used to reduce contrast ratio between the computer screen and other tasks as low as possible. An excessive contrast ratio between tasks can lead to excessive eye dilation or eyestrain. An added benefit of task lighting is that it gives employees some control over their environment.

When it comes to ergonomics, the key part that many companies miss is the training on how to use the ergonomic equipment that is provided. Having improperly adjusted ergonomic accessories can hurt workers as much as not having the equipment at all.

There are two parts to training workers regarding ergonomic equipment. The first is how to adjust the equipment and the second part is how to adjust the equipment properly for each user. One of the best resources for free ergonomic training is OSHA (the Occupational Safety and Health Administration). OSHA offers an Ergonomic E-Tool on their Web site for Computer Workstations. The E-Tool page gives instructions and shows images of proper positioning for the entire body while working at a computer workstation.

Investing in ergonomic equipment and employee training is a win/win situation for the employer and the employee. The employer will have reduced costs associated with workers compensation premiums and absenteeism and the employee will face less health risks from spending many hours daily at a computer workstation.

With regard to productivity, the importance of creating a pleasant work environment should not be underestimated. Incorporating designs that maximize efficiency and increase aesthetic appeal, space-efficient traffic patterns and ergonomic accessories will increase the overall productivity of the call center. Productivity increases when the most important investment, the employees, work in a comfortable and safe environment.