

# Culture by Design

Lessons From Today's  
Tech Workplaces **By Sascha Wagner, IIDA**

**T**oday's cutting-edge office interiors for technology companies—open, creative, and amenity-rich—seem to be universally envied. This new paradigm perhaps even signals the future for traditional fields, like banking or law. Before accepting the tech office trends as the de facto basis for every future workplace, it is worth pursuing which features provide meaningful enhancements to well-being, culture, and productivity and which are just passing fads.

## How tech companies really work

To understand the way tech spaces work at both a functional and cultural level, we first need to look at the drivers that have gotten us to this point in office design. Everything changed with the smartphone. Having a pocket-size supercomputer liberated the workforce from desks and office buildings. For tech-enabled workers, and indeed for most of the first-world population, the problem is no longer getting access to information or connectivity; it is filtering massive amounts of interactions.

Other drivers for tech workspaces are new collaborative and information-sharing models, including open-source product development, coworking, virtual or augmented reality, and rapid prototyping—all of which are influencing the pace of innovation and the way teams need to work now: fast, smart, connected, and collaborative.

The design of built spaces has already been influenced by Millennials' preference for democratic team structures, so it's not surprising that the individual workspace is less of a status symbol. Mark Zuckerberg famously sits in the



open among Facebook engineers, and many other tech CEOs don't have assigned desks. Tech companies also use different ways to measure performance. Netflix, for example, empowers employees to largely manage their own time, provided they meet their job responsibilities. It's what you produce, not where you are, that matters.

## Effects on the built environment

Workspaces need to reflect the priorities of those within the workforce—engaging them with meaningful encounters, motivating them by creating a sense of belonging, and encouraging their personal development—and tech companies currently seem to understand this better than others. Obviously, not every organization wants to work like a startup, but many of today's tech spaces can teach us a lot about creating a positive culture at work.



Here are some common features in the design of tech offices that can engage knowledge-based workers in any industry:

- **Start with activity-based planning.** Offering a multitude of flexible settings to support the variety of work modes that employees use during a day is essential. Not everything is done at a desk, so an open office must be augmented with meeting spaces, heads-down work areas, and places for private phone calls. Also, unless everyone spends the day with headphones on, that industrial-look exposed ceiling may lead to acoustical issues for vocal teams.
- **Prioritize “we” space over “me” space.** A high value should be placed on the spaces where groups gather, especially for informal meetings. Research suggests that knowledge sharing often increases in settings other than conference rooms, such as lounges or cafes. Employees do still need a place to call their own, but the expectation is no longer that it will be large or private. Ultimately, if the communal spaces are ample and well-designed, this trade-off for personal space will not be considered a loss.
- **Embed your brand.** Beyond integrating images, colors, or logos, the right space can support a company’s mission and values. At Xoom’s San Francisco office, a small detail like window film tells the company’s story by depicting icons representing money moving through the international markets that Xoom serves.
- **Facilitate bonds between staff.** A strong connection with colleagues is one of the primary factors for employees’ job satisfaction. Any workspace should authentically reflect and support the culture of its users, not only in the

Author Sascha Wagner is president of Huntsman Architectural Group. His firm has designed some of the latest workspaces for tech and other industries, shown here. The office of Kaiser Permanente’s Thrive group features media units (above) that support video-conferencing on one side and display company news and initiatives on the other. Repurposed produce crates form a decorative ceiling detail (opposite, top) and improve acoustics in a break area at Xoom’s San Francisco headquarters; flexible work areas (opposite, bottom) support their informal meetings and brainstorming or training sessions.



way it looks but also in the behaviors it promotes. A company should know what motivates employees to connect with one another, and a workspace interior should be designed with that in mind.

- **Provide well-chosen amenities.** If one can work anywhere, why come to the office? Rarely used gimmicks (playground slides, climbing walls, tree houses) are largely a thing of the past. But great coffee, free snacks, and even laundry service are attractive ways to engage employees. Keep fun amenities authentic, though: Don't just add a foosball table if employees are not interested in foosball. Most importantly, adoption of any amenity starts with the company's leaders actively using it.

- **Connect with the community.** Hosting after-hours presentations and workshops expands tech companies' partnership opportunities with their neighbors. Providing public outdoor spaces or commissioning a local artist to create a mural

are ways of being a good steward of the community.

- **Focus on wellness and sustainability.** Providing bike storage supports a healthier commute. A place to exercise or meditate, height-adjustable desks, good ventilation, access to daylight and outdoor spaces, and toxin-free construction materials are all essentials of a healthy workplace. Operable windows can reduce both heating and cooling costs.

Food also plays a key role. At the office of Kaiser Permanente's Thrive group, healthful food and snack options are supplemented with regular cooking and nutrition classes to help staff make better lifestyle choices. When employee wellness is a driver for office design, increased productivity usually follows.

While these concepts may seem like obvious positives, industries outside of tech have been slower to follow suit. Implementing collaborative design principles in traditional organizations often involves concerns about

maintaining information privacy, navigating and managing regulatory requirements, and breaking down reporting structures. Since shifts in demographics and mobility will eventually affect every industry, it's time to adapt or be left behind. Creating a more progressive workspace means asking hard questions and challenging the entrenched hierarchies and models of corporate workflow and space utilization.

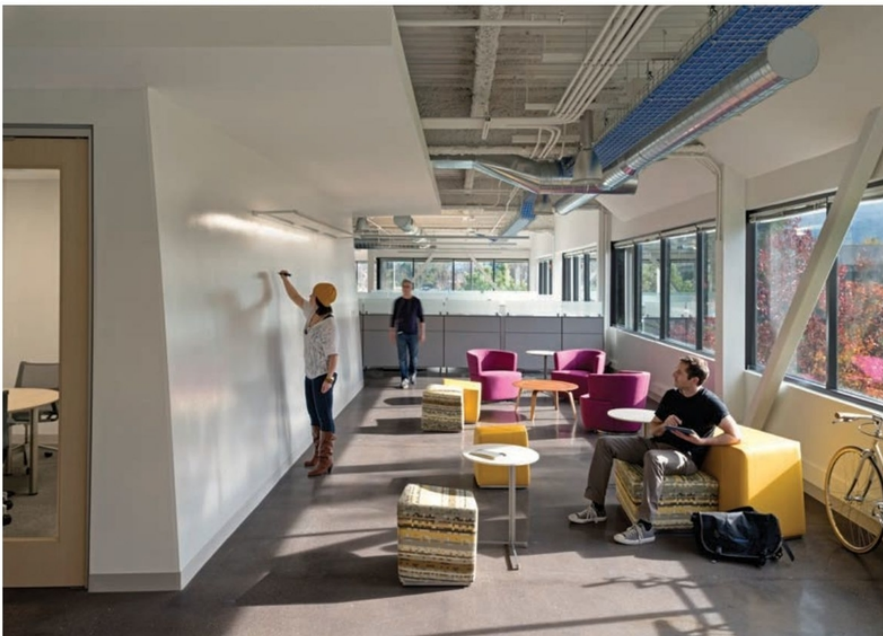
#### Understanding a company's culture

Workplace interior projects are ideal vehicles for organizational evolution. In partnership with clients, designers are positioned to unlock how organizations work and how they aspire to work. Carrying out a visioning process prior to design can ultimately lead clients to reassess their organizational structures. When the discussion shifts to how physical space can support a company's business strategy, design is an extremely powerful tool.

Each client's solution is unique, so any design must begin with research, including



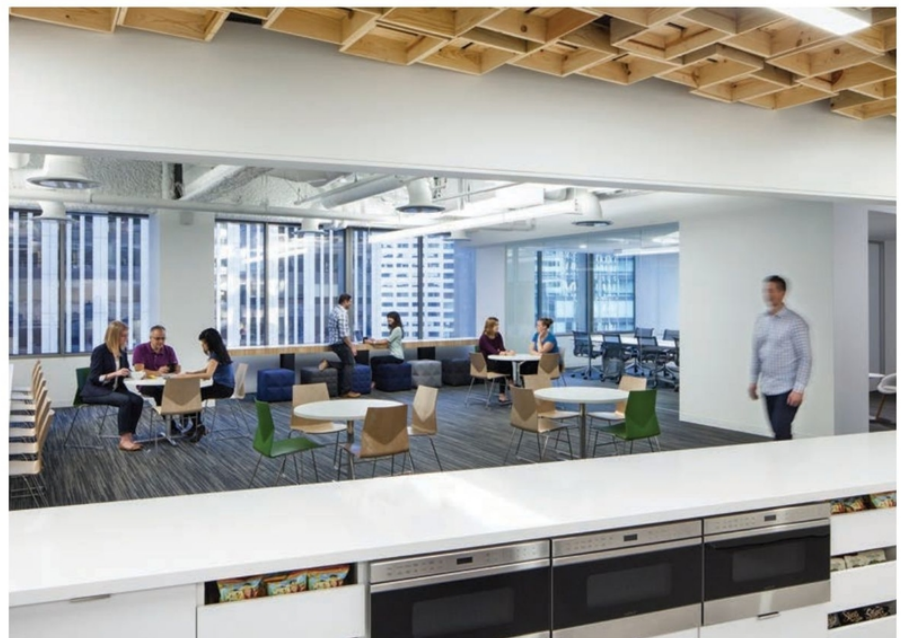
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At Autodesk in San Rafael, California, collaborative spaces (left) are located at the perimeter of the building to take advantage of daylight and views. Furnishings are lightweight and have casters so Autodesk's employees can easily modify the layout. In the cafe of Lithium Technologies' San Francisco headquarters (above), tiered plywood benches double as stadium seating during meetings. Lithium's brand elements are embedded throughout the workspace (opposite, top), contributing to a vibrant atmosphere.



At Essence Digital in San Francisco, open workspaces are flanked by flexible lounge areas (above), and a beach-themed seating area (opposite, top) provides additional space for informal meetings or a place to relax. A long countertop (right) in the Xoom office is ideal for catering meals or as a walk-up surface for impromptu discussions.





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quantitative programming that incorporates information on head count, group adjacencies, and growth projections, as well as qualitative analysis in a process akin to organizational anthropology. Existing work behaviors should be analyzed in tandem with an employer's strategic objectives. With pressure to deliver projects at ever-increasing speeds, designers may be tempted to simply implement the latest trends. Clients may even ask to have their office look "more like a tech company." But emulating others or employing partial solutions, like just converting to bench-style desks, does not yield meaningful results. Culture cannot be copied. Designers need to dive deep into a client's organization to find the unique drivers.

Clients expect creativity, competitive pricing, speed, technical proficiency, and competent project delivery, so designers are positioned to have the most strategic impact at the front end of the project. When a client hires a designer, one key consideration should be the designer's ability to listen and then synthesize

what they learned. Understanding an organization's culture is a designer's most valuable contribution.

Design is too frequently perceived as a commodity, and built space as a mere operational expense. To demonstrate tangible value, successful designers shift the conversation toward the role interiors play at a strategic level. This means emphasizing not only how a space will look or function but how people connect to it emotionally. Beyond merely looking cool, the best tech workspaces truly engage employees and amplify the organization's culture, ultimately impacting the bottom line—and that should be the goal for every office interior as well. **c**

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