

Historically, difficult economic conditions have always had an impact on our office environment. Now **Barry Jenkins**, director of specialist workplace design consultants, BroomeJenkins, believes that current conditions may be right for another significant step change in the way we work and how our workplaces are shaped.



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Workplace trends

Redefining desktops in the new office landscape

During the recession of 1992, a spokesman for the CBI addressing the UK office furniture industry described furniture as 'the ultimate deferrable purchase'. By this he probably meant that when times get hard, it is easy for a company to cut their furniture budget without too much risk of impacting on performance or productivity.

What emerged from that period was a simpler and cheaper style of workstation, where the complex system approach of sliding work tops and heavy cable management made way for lighter structures and single piece corner cores.

Since then, significant advances in information technology and communications have continued to impact our lives and enabled further changes in patterns of work and the rise of mobility. But as with so many



"People respond to having natural light"

things, dogma can inhibit change until something decisive happens in the world to force us to re-evaluate our lives and the way we do things. So as the economy now slows and energy prices rise, we may find that the conditions become right for another step change in the way we work and how our workplaces are shaped.

The two opposing forces of technology and the economy frequently conspire to force change. But no matter how compelling a new form of technology is, it is only when it makes clear commercial sense, or in other words, becomes affordable, that we see mass adoption.

In the past ten years we have seen the popularity of linear workstations or 'benches' develop in place of the well-established corner core. This is due in part to flat screen technology and flexibility, but above all it is about economy. The efficient use of space and the commercial need to drive down occupancy costs led to the growth of corporate home workers between 2000 and 2002, with large corporations reducing office costs by encouraging a largely absent mobile workforce to work from home.

In the current economic climate we will once again see corporations' facilities managers looking at ways to improve efficiency and make the best use of smaller offices by adopting the latest technology and re-thinking the established styles of workplace and the systems used.

During the economic crisis of 1973, energy costs rose significantly causing large open plan 'Burolandschaft' style offices of the 1950's to be rejected in Europe. As large deep spaces, they were very reliant on energy for light, heat and ventilation and seen as expensive and inhuman.

The current economic climate comes at a time when a number of opportunities jockey for position and, as a result, the need for financial prudence will bring new ideas into the foreground.

Energy efficient buildings

The desire for greater access to natural light and ventilation had an impact on the shape of buildings from the 1970's onwards. While



Kinnarps' bench F is a good example of low rise furniture which ensures sight lines are maintained with co-workers – see Page 36

today there is a more prominent environmental need to use passive ventilation, the human need is the same. People respond to having natural light and contact with other people. In a culture of increasing collaboration, having a more open egalitarian work environment is the way people want to work.

Although this style of workplace has been emerging one way or the other for the past ten years, the conspiring forces of economy and technology may finally enable this style to really take hold, even with those more dogmatic companies routed in the 80's style corrals. The reason for this will be that it will make economic sense to run more energy efficient buildings, shaped around the reduction of forced ventilation and the use of natural light.

Furniture systems will be low rise – maintaining sight lines with other co-workers. This not only allows for higher levels of collaboration but also promotes better ventilation. But whilst this seems like a very easy utopian solution, with it comes a host of other issues.

Privacy and concentrated study can be difficult to achieve in an open plan environment and the flexibility of a linear workstation can deprive individuals of their own personal territory. These issues will reduce productivity and make people uncomfortable at work unless they are dealt with through the design of the systems and furniture we use.

Looking back to the birth of the modern office, where workflow created the typing pool and the office was a production line, furniture has always played a supporting role for the technology used. Many styles of office planning have been developed, from the 'Taylorist' style of the Larkin Building through to the 'Stakeholder' office of today.

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Whilst some were based around process and others around human need, the situation in larger corporations today is that we probably need a bit of everything. In addition to this we have seen technology become truly ubiquitous, with high levels of mobility, seamless connectivity and applications which make work and life more productive.

In the developed world we talk of the 'knowledge economy' where wealth is generated through creative use of information and the invention of new ideas. Not everyone has the pleasure of working in the type of environment we associate with bright, modern, innovative organisations. But regardless of what corporate persona the style of workplace reflects, changes in computer systems will bring about change in the style of workstation as it always has. Remember the typists return?

Technologically advanced companies have been shifting over from the conventional PC with its installed software and hard drives to 'thin clients'. These are networked terminals that store nothing and access data content and applications via a high-speed network, in effect a reinvention of the main-frame systems used before the advent of the personal computer.

They have many advantages over the PC, power consumption being one. According to Sun Micro Systems their 'SunRay' thin client uses 5% of the power consumed by a conventional computer. Thin clients have been around for a while, but the current need for economic prudence and environmental responsibility may enable the step change to take place. And in the way that the advent of the flat screen has meant that the deep corner core (designed to house an 18 inch CRT monitor) is no longer required, the thin client will put an end to the CPU holder and the need for a wide desk.

If, as a result, we see smaller workstations, the challenge will be how to manage the space for the user. How can collaborative open plan workstations also provide privacy and how can territory be defined easily and flexibly on a bench?

Considering the economic climate and the enabling affect it may have on the advance of available technology will set new challenges for the office furniture industry. Some are ready, having been charting emerging trends and possible scenarios. But reflecting on what we know and how we can draw on past trends and styles of work, it is true to say that information technology has been the master since the type writer was invented and it still is. So to find a new office landscape, we will need to re-define the desktop. ■