



by Robin Chan
The Straits Times/ANN

Desk-sharing may sound a little threatening to some but it is one example of the way modern offices are being reshaped to bring about efficiency and innovation.

Government agencies and companies in Singapore are looking to introduce

such strategies to get the most out of

their physical space.

They are following in the footsteps of global multinationals which have, for the past decade, used technology and a mobile workforce to embrace workplace strategies to cut costs and improve productivity, said Peter Andrew.

He is Asia-Pacific managing director of DEGWA, a London-based global strategy and design consultancy that looks at how offices can better use space and change the way people behave within that space.

Organisations in Asia are just beginning to catch on to the importance of that, he said. "In the past 18 months, about 60 per cent of our business inquiries have related in some way or other to people looking at this. It may be part of something bigger, but it's on the agenda," he said.

There is more to this than simply using space more efficiently to save on costs. Productivity can be improved by streamlining processes in an organisation, breaking down barriers between departments and helping firms get products faster to market, Andrew said.

Crucially, an effective workplace strategy makes the employees feel like they belong to a distinct work environment,

Andrew said: "When I walk into that space, does it feel like I work for an insurance agency? Do I feel like I am working for Google?"

"Some organisations are really good at representing their brand and their space. Others, when you walk in, you just don't know what kind of company it is."

Andrew, who has postgraduate

degrees in corporate real estate and facilities planning and management, moved to Singapore in January last year to set up DEGWA's Asia base here.

He said organisations are asking not only how they can get more bang for their buck from their physical space, but also how this will lead to productivity gains.

He cited the case of a client who wanted to build 10 meeting rooms to counter staff perceptions that meeting rooms were always booked.

But DEGWA found that the firm's large meeting rooms were rarely used. It was the four- and six person-sized meeting rooms that were in high demand. The company was advised to build just five rooms to meet the demand, saving itself S\$ 250,000 (US\$ 174,000), Andrew said.

But what matters is not just physical space, how people behave within that space is also important. This change has been made possible through now technology which allows for a more mobile workforce.

With laptops, for instance, the work and the employee need not be confined to the desk, which has given rise to the concept of desksharing, or hot desking.

In the old way of thinking, if a company had 100 desks, it usually had to go to 95 people working at them, Mr. Andrew said. The company kept spare desks in case the boss or another project team visited from another office.

But using the now approach, the company can have the same number of desks, but it can now support up to 130 people as staff are mobile and share desks.

"So if I'm running on 110 people, and suddenly a business opportunity arrives, or a government regulation changes, I can bring in a project team and just throw another 20 people into that space and know that I can absorb it, I can respond much faster without any real estate implications."

This also helps to push back workplace capacity changes till later and minimises the need for extra physical space.

Those new concepts have understandably faced resistance especially from middle management.

"The higher leadership is quite for it, down at the grassroots, the 25-year-old level is quite interested in our work. The problem is the big lump in the middle, they feel threatened by what it means to them and what it takes away from them."

"It makes people accountable for what they do and not who they are."

But changing mindsets through workplace improvements has big benefits.

If you just change the space but do

Work Space - The Next Frontier

Concept of changing workers' mindset through better use of space catches

not invest in changing mindsets, then to the employee it may look different but it still fools the same.

"And if you try to change the mindset of people but not the space, then employees are told to act differently but when they come in to work, nothing has changed, he said.

"But if you change space and mindset at the same time, that's when you can transform," he said. "It's a case of there is a lot more value added."

Some companies here that are already implementing desksharing strategies include Microsoft, IBM and Standard Chartered Bank, he said.

While there are, still few examples of this in Singapore, he is optimistic that within the next six to 12 months, there will be changes.

DEGWA is working with government agencies and large local corporations here, but he is contractually bound not to reveal who they are.

But he adds the disclaimer: "Mobility plays out in different ways in different organisations. Companies think there's one solution... there are probably four to five different models of how you implement these solutions."

"The nature of mobility, desksharing, all the factors are different, even within the same industry. That's where corporate culture becomes key."



BUNDLED UP
Flanked by costars Nikki Reed and Elizabeth Reaser, Kristen Stewart takes a walk in downtown Vancouver on Sunday. The Twilight stars are in British Columbia shooting Eclipse - the third installment of the hit vampire series.

WINNING SMILES
Kate Hudson and tennis player pal Tommy Haas have plenty to smile about at the New York Yankees game on Monday night. The twosome cheered on the home team - and Hudson's beau, third baseman Alex Rodriguez - to an 11-1 victory over the Tampa Bay Rays.

MATTERS AT HAND
Though still nursing his broken hand, George Clooney makes a dashing appearance on the red carpet at the Venice Film Festival Tuesday during a promotional event for his latest film, The Men Who Stare at Goats. The actor arrived in Venice in good company, stepping out publicly the day before with his new girlfriend.

THAT'S AMORE
Matt Damon and wife Luciana (in custom Burberry) are the picture of old Hollywood glamour Monday while walking the red carpet at the Venice Film Festival premiere of Damon's latest movie, The Informant! While he looked svelte, the actor told reporters he needed to pack on 30 lbs. for the role.

SUPREME COURTSHIP
It's love-love for spectators Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban, who enjoy each other's company courtside as much as the tennis match at the U.S. Open in New York City on Monday.