VISION STATEMENT

How Culture Shapes the Office

by Christine Congdon and Catherine Gall
How Culture Shapes the Office

Organizational culture differs from country to country, but how does that affect the way offices are arranged? Researchers at Steelcase, the office furniture company, have identified six dimensions of workplace culture that shape an office’s social dynamics. By evaluating the trade-offs inherent in each, firms can design spaces that help employees operate more effectively. Here are highlights from Steelcase’s five-year, 11-country study.

**In Russia**, teamwork is emphasized within groups, but departments are highly segregated in distinct spaces. Employees have little access to executives.

**In Italy**, most firms have assertive, competitive corporate cultures. Visible symbols of hierarchy, such as private offices, are important. Collaboration spaces tend to be no-frills.

**The British** are at ease with unstructured, unpredictable situations and prefer work spaces that promote sharing, mobility, and creative thinking.

**In the U.S.,** eliminating the cubicle in favor of flexible work environments lets employees choose the space that best suits their current task.

**In China**, communication is expected to be honest and straightforward. How a message is delivered is less important. Here, office spaces should be outfitted with whiteboards and other information-sharing tools.
In high-context China, tools such as video conferencing allow participants in virtual meetings to see visual cues such as where people are seated and their body language, building deeper understanding.

In China, supervisors exert more control and guidance, alternative spaces are a new concept. Employees are comfortable with densely arranged workstations.

In Spain, workers tend to be careful about sharing information and make big changes only after deliberation. Accordingly, the design of spaces should reflect their intended use.

In China, spaces embody a company’s history, values, and rituals. Executive offices are important symbols of tradition, order, and long-term stability.

In the U.S., UK, Germany, and the Netherlands, spaces reflect a progressive view of work, with all levels of employees sharing spaces. At the same time, workers don’t like to feel crowded, which has led to the liberal use of “hotel” spaces and telecommuting.

In France, Spain, and Italy, where space allocation is more egalitarian, firms tend to optimize by reducing the size of both private offices and open work spaces. Firms there are beginning to explore alternative locations, such as coworking facilities and satellite offices, to address overcrowding.

Firms in China, India, Russia, and Morocco share a high tolerance for density and are extremely hierarchical. Many employees optimize their office layouts by reducing workers’ space and giving managers and executives plenty of room.