

Call for the best

BY DAVID MAIDA



Photograph courtesy of TelstraClear

Can the modern contact centre be a template for the ideal office environment, and if so, what are the important design factors that promote a harmonious office culture? David Maida investigates.

As the contact centre interior is designed for employees who spend extended periods of time working in shifts, around the clock, it makes good sense for them to be fitted out with the best of everything - from the chairs to the carpet. These high-maintenance office environments are required to accommodate not only a staff member's work requirements, but their personal needs as well.

That's the ideal, but what's the reality? *Topics* sought out examples of thoughtfully designed contact centre interiors in which the architect or interior designer has considered everything from the colour and texture of the walls to the velocity of the air-conditioning unit.

TelstraClear has just completed a contemporary contact centre on the Kapiti Coast with workspace for 150 people. The internal fit-out for this purpose-built facility cost \$2.5 million. It utilises state-of-the-art equipment such as a voice-recognition system where callers merely state what they need and their call is directed to the most appropriate customer service agent. Plasma screens display real-time call statistics and staff notices.

Peter Rowbotham, registered architect with Rowbotham Boyd Architecture, laid out the plan for the centre. He says that where contact centres differ from other environments is in the need for a large open floor plan in which the office manager can walk around and handle any issues that a CSR may have.

“The main difference is that we had to obviously create an entrance with all the back-up facilities - toilets, lunch room, storage area, a reasonably large computer training room, but keep all that quite separate from a very large open plan office area,” he says.

Rowbotham sought visual interest by introducing variations in the depth of surfaces using different materials such as corrugated metal for wall cladding, green glass and smooth metal panelling.

“The challenge was to try to create some interest externally in what is a very big box.”

Practical considerations such as the 3.6-metre-high ceiling are designed to reduce noise levels as well as contribute to a feeling of spaciousness.”

A pleasant workplace can boost staff morale and therefore reduce staff churn, says Chris Sturgeon, who was the national contact centre manager at Kiwibank when the company moved premises. At the time he contacted Optim Group and commissioned the company to design the contact centre. He attributes the appeal of the new working environment to a reduction in staff turnover to just nine per cent, and says that effective use of space was the key.

Optim Group design and project manager Sally Johnson says the company recommends allowing nine square metres for immediate personal space. Add to that additional pathways, staffrooms and breakout rooms and this should bring the figure to a total of 15 square metres per person for the facility.

Sturgeon went with an open-plan design for the Kiwibank contact centre so that team members could interact and create a cultural environment.

In banking, he says, the customers often choose their banking product based on their service experience, so keeping the contact centre staff happy is a big part of that.

“We wanted to make sure that if you have a fun environment, that’s going to come across in the telephone call and your customers are going to get an exceptional experience.”

The Optim Group has contact centre design down to a science and Johnson says the colour scheme is especially important.

“Colour is an effective tool to reinforce the brand. Cool colours (blue, green) promote a relaxed and soothing space. Warm and bright colours (red, orange) promote interaction.”

From colour to lighting to furnishings, everything in a contact centre must be carefully selected.

“With the contact centre environment itself, the nature of the beast is everything needs to be controlled in it. It is a totally controlled environment - from the HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) to the lighting, to the acoustics through to the ergonomic furniture,” says Johnson.

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The break-out area includes a mix of seating options.



Architect Peter Rowbotham chose a diverse material palette for visual interest.



The purpose-built TelstraClear contact centre in Kapiti is designed for 150 people.
Photographs courtesy of TelstraClear.

In addition to the main open-plan room, contact centres need appropriate breakout areas for kitchens, training rooms and break rooms.

“Management should really place an emphasis on these breakout areas. Staff perceive these areas as (representing) an effort from management to them and recognising them and their value as staff.”

Breakout zones might have soft seating and a TV. The kitchen could have a funky theme or be designed as café. If possible, it is preferable to put storage and breakout rooms in the core of the contact centre so people can be stationed next to the windows and be able to look out and see natural light.

Either way, light is important. Johnson says the recommended lighting level for a general office is 500 lux, but contact centres should be at 300 lux due to the high use of the video display units in order to cut down on glare and make it easier on the eye.

Security at contact centres is also a primary concern because workers are coming in and out of the building 24 hours a day.

Bob Jones, associate at design firm Chow: Hill, addressed the concerns at the Southern Cross Healthcare and Counties Manukau DHB contact centres by designing them to reduce the number of times that a staff member has to leave the secure room.

“They have to have an area for a kitchen or rest areas within the space. You go into one large space and you do everything there. The toilets are fairly close by,” he says.

With a large number of people in one room talking on the phone, sound suppression is also a concern.



Adjustable desktops enable CSRs to stand or sit depending on their personal preference.



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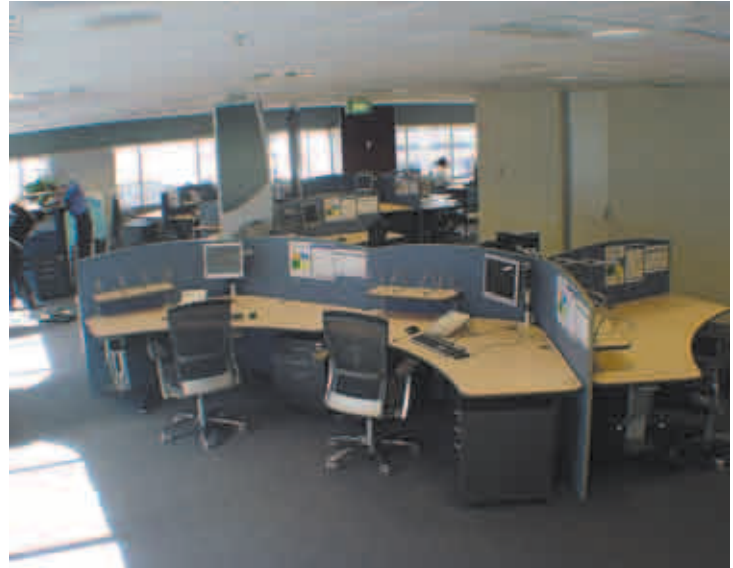
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According to Optim's Sally Johnson warm colours promote interaction (left) while cool colours are relaxing and sooth (right).
 Photographs courtesy of The Optim Group.

"You have quite a lot of acoustic issues within the space, especially when you're trying to speak to a caller, and you shouldn't be able to hear it in the corner next to you," says Jones.

Contact centres generally utilise sound-deadening dividing partitions to alleviate this problem. But they must be high quality to be effective.

"You can't have sound bouncing off the partitions at all. It has to be absorbed quite a lot. There is quite a lot of design work in the partitions themselves."

Perhaps one of the most important features of the centres is the chairs. Workers are often 'hot-desking' - where one desk is used by five or six operators at different times. Jones says if people are required to work at different desks, then chairs must be fully adjustable for ergonomics.

"If you buy a cheap chair for even \$100 or even less than that, you don't get much for your money. Even \$500 is not a lot for a good office chair nowadays."

The chairs need rugged adjustment mechanisms that will last after being adjusted several times every day. Desktops can also be adjustable with electric-operated or winding desktop operation to lift or lower the work surface.

Carpet is another high-wear item which must be high quality. A good underlay with deep, dense, looped carpet will help with the acoustics, Jones says. It will need to stand up to the wear and tear of the chairs going backward and forward.

"You can actually spend some money on the quality of the interiors because you don't want to go back in and change the finishes too often because it disrupts the whole space as its open-plan. To close it down is virtually impossibility."

The aesthetics of an environment where people are spending a large chunk of their time needs to be actively addressed. Colour or the lack of it will affect the way customer service agents feel and how they interact with their customers.

For the contact centres designed by Chow: Hill, Jones chose muted colours for the walls because the clients wanted bright colours for the dividing partitions. Interior plantings in pots were also used to break the monotony of the large room.

Tim Hooson, director of the architectural practice Jasmx, has worked on contact centres for Fonterra, Vodafone and ASB.

"It's important to produce things like quiet breakout areas as well as social break out areas, and also highly interactive areas - even things like X-box and PlayStation types of activity."

Giving workers a chance to see daylight will also help. But Hooson says the physical outlook that staff have on their surroundings is equally important. He says the eye should be able to focus on something more than 10 metres away at all times.

Purpose-built contact centres can be expensive offices to build, but the investment should go a long way toward minimising staff turnover.

"The facilities that contact centre staff receives should be pretty much exactly the same facilities as the senior management get. If anything, possibly even add a touch more." ■