No cubicle, no problem: Technology drives work space changes

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Forget the cubicle world of Dilbert. Today's new office spaces are looking more like places to hang out with friends, featuring hip gathering spots, easily accessible hookups for all your tech gadgets and desks where you can exercise while you work.

"The world has changed dramatically and the biggest driver is technology," said Adam Gray, sales manager for WorkSpace Interiors in Kingsport.

Walk into the new Kingsport Chamber of Commerce office on Clinchfield Street and you'll see how work spaces are changing. No longer are employees stuck behind closed doors, separated from co-workers by walls with no windows.

Here, common areas are spacious and feature collaborative spots where employees can come together and share ideas.

Here, offices have glass walls and doors and employees can see each other from one side of the building to the other.

Here, personal work spaces are unique. You may see Miles Burdine, the chamber's chief executive officer, working at a standing desk that lifts and lowers as needed.

Burdine said he was at first skeptical about the new office design, but he's since become a fan.

"It encourages collaboration and networking which quite frankly is what the chamber is all about," Burdine said.

One of the newer trends in office equipment is desk design. In addition to "standing desks" which Burdine has, you can also get a new treadmill desk, and work and walk at the same time. Some companies across the country are incorporating these desks throughout their offices to help employees get fit, which will ultimately lower their health care costs.

Gray recently demonstrated the treadmill desk at WorkSpace Interiors on Main Street. He showed how you can increase or decrease the treadmill speed and raise or lower the computer monitor for optimal viewing.

WorkSpace Interiors President Bob Feathers said the traditional office was all based on hierarchy, and the head of the company got the big corner office at the front of the building, while employees were positioned elsewhere, based on their status within the company.

Now employees may have their own work spaces, but they're encouraged to come together to brainstorm and network on plans and projects.

And because many employees now work from home and on the road thanks to digital devices, individual office space is not necessary in all circumstances, Gray said.

"What we're finding is that, being untethered with your mobile devices, with your iPads and your iPhones and your laptops , that people aren't necessarily needing to go to the office to get their work done. So we're moving towards that model, where the workplace doesn't have to be a place where you go from 9 to 5 and you sit in a cubicle. The idea is the space can be flexible and it can change," Gray said.

He said the trend is leaning toward more collaborative spaces where employees can meet.

"We've taken down boundaries and barriers to open up space," Gray said.

"This is like our living room," added Feathers, looking around one of the open collaborative spaces at WorkSpace Interiors. The space includes a semi-circle banquette with two large monitors and an interface "puck" where folks can plug in their digital devices. The area allows several employees to get together and share information downloaded from their smartphones, tablets or laptops.

"People have more control over how they work and where they work. Instead of just 'I work' and 'team work' it's more of a 'we work' space as well," Feathers said.

School systems and the health care industry are also converting to a more open concept. WorkSpace Interiors has examples of school desks that can easily be moved into small groups to allow students to share with one another. Feathers pointed out that many schools are moving away from textbooks and moving toward tablets, which require less space.

And instead of centralized stations in a hospital setting, health care is moving to create smaller nursing stations closer to patients.

"It's all changing based on what's best for patient care, student learning, and workplace performance," Feathers said. "It just makes sense."