Call Centers Find Their Voice

WORKPLACE SOLUTIONS FOR IMPROVING EMPLOYEE SATISFACTION AND PRODUCTIVITY

Any organization with brand-building aspirations is aware of the face it presents to the public. Perhaps, though, it should be even more aware of another attribute: its voice—specifically, the voice of the people staffing its call center.

Once a low-pay, low-skill job, the call center (or contact center or customer care center—call it what you will) has evolved into a key asset in the customer relationship. After all, in an age of global business, call centers often present the only opportunity organizations have to build a relationship with customers they'll never see.

"Call centers are on the front lines," says Charles Warren, principal of idea/span, an Atlanta firm that has designed more than three million square feet of call center space. "That's how customers form their first impression of a company, by the attitude of the person answering the phone."[1]

As call centers have learned, however, that first impression is unlikely to be favorable if agents are toiling in a bare-bones environment that detracts from the professionalism they're expected to exhibit. Instead, workplace design and furnishings must appeal to agents and help them do their best work.

What We Know

The elevated status of call centers has a bearing on how managers approach several chronic concerns and emerging trends. While this isn't an exhaustive list, it does cover common issues facing call centers, including

- Importance of controlling costs
- Impact of improving retention
- Need for providing comfort
- Flexibility for making changes
- Support for better communication
- Ability to handle technology

At Herman Miller, we examine these issues with an eye to determining what role workplace design might play in addressing them.

IMPORTANCE OF CONTROLLING COSTS

Call centers may be at the core of customer satisfaction, but that hardly insulates them from cost-saving efforts. On the contrary, controlling costs by keeping a tight rein on the ratio of square footage per employee has long been among the industry's top objectives.

"The obvious design issue unique to call centers is density, which is usually more than double that of conventional office space," says Roger Kingsland, managing partner of Kingsland Scott Bauer Associates, a Pittsburgh architecture firm specializing in call centers.[2] But here's the problem: Any floor plan that seeks only to pack as many people as possible in the least amount of space

is bound to backfire. The reason is that good agents—the kind call centers want to keep—don't appreciate being treated like sardines.
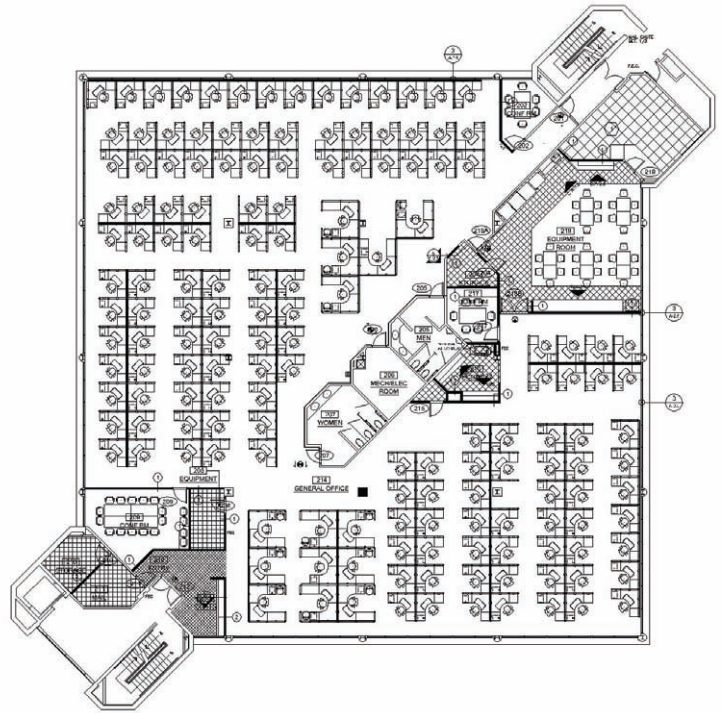
/ Figure 1 / A linear layout can increase density but often at the expense of agent comfort and productivity.

The trick is to use space efficiently, but in a way that doesn't jeopardize agent comfort or productivity. For many call centers, the easiest way to pull this off is to simply run multiple shifts and make each workstation do double or triple duty. Often, of course, call centers do this anyway because they need to be open 24 hours per day, in which case maximizing space efficiency becomes an ancillary benefit.

Even so, every call center, whether multiple shift or not, trains a keen eye on its real estate costs. "The biggest facility expense call centers focus on is cost per square foot over the length of lease or ownership," says Andy Hollis, principal of The Hollis Group, a call center facilities consultant in Seattle. "If you can fit 1,200 people into a space originally intended for 1,000, you'll save a lot of money because you're spreading your real estate costs over more agents instead of investing in additional space to accommodate them."[3]

Efficiency in call centers often takes another form—the wise use of energy. Costs for lighting and heating, ventilating, and air conditioning (HVAC) are significant. When off-hours operations require only a small fraction of the peak-time staff, there is the chance to control these costs.

Establishing zones with sensors that control lighting and HVAC can be one approach. However, with practices such as allowing workers to vote for the team they'd like to be on—and subsequently moving them—zoning may not provide the flexibility needed.

Letting all of a building's sub-systems talk to each other and be managed from a single, intuitive, user-friendly interface is another answer. This creates a smart building platform. From a management standpoint, the platform enhances control of energy, physical space, and technology so a call center can get the most from a building's resources over time.

IMPACT OF IMPROVING RETENTION
Though call centers may be getting more respect, they remain tough places to work and even tougher to staff—most tend to experience extremely high turnover. In an effort to stem the outflow, many call centers are scrutinizing their work environment to be sure it's not giving employees one more reason to look elsewhere.

"Churn is a real drain on the bottom line because call centers spend so much money to train their people," says Richard Merlini, who heads up the call center practice at idea/span. "Some call centers seem resigned to turnover, but most are trying hard to reduce it."[4]

A well-designed workplace can alleviate staffing problems by helping to attract agents and keep them content and productive. What's more, it sends a clear message to agents about how highly their work is valued. So do amenities. Many of these relate to food—coffee bars, cafeterias, vending machines, refrigerators. The further a call center is from local restaurants, the more—and more extensive—these amenities tend to be.

Other perks address convenience: on-site daycare centers, dry cleaners, fitness centers, automatic teller machines. Some take the concept of a break room to new levels: game rooms for unwinding, quiet rooms for relaxation, lactation rooms for nursing mothers, study rooms for those pursuing a degree.

There may be a customer service benefit to these amenities as well: Put agents in a pleasant environment and they're more likely to maintain a patient, friendly attitude than if their workplace is cramped and depressing.

/ Figure 2 / Adjustable surfaces and work chairs let agents fine-tune these elements to meet their personal preferences.

NEED FOR PROVIDING COMFORT
For those who are serious about reducing turnover, comfortable workstations are a must. After all, call center agents sit for hours on end, often in a high-pressure environment, making them prime candidates for aching backs, necks, and wrists. Aches and pains, in turn, can lead to absenteeism and costly injuries.

"If you experience constant stress, like people yelling at you on the phone, your muscles tense up, aggravating the risks of developing a (musculoskeletal disorder)," says Dr. Alan Hedge, professor of ergonomics at Cornell University. "This doesn't occur to the same extent in other white-collar jobs."[5]

Ergonomic furniture that can be adjusted easily to support comfortable postures is critical. So is training on how to make proper adjustments. That's especially true for seating—the more you sit, the better your chair should be, which means high-performance chairs are justified in call centers more so than anywhere else.

Adjustable work surfaces, keyboard trays, and monitor arms are also important because they allow agents to customize their workspace to their size and preferences. This flexibility becomes even more essential in multishift operations that require agents to share workstations.

Beyond the physical side, comfort also has a psychological aspect. Workers in all types of offices and job functions say they are happier—and more productive—when they have some control over their workspace. Take temperature control, for instance. Workers consistently rank it among the top 10 workplace qualities that have the strongest effect on job performance.

"There are many other things that affect satisfaction like job design and company culture," says Craig DiLouie of the Lighting Controls Association. "But when workers can adjust their offices to their individual styles and job requirements, they tend to be more satisfied and report higher productivity."[6]

The U.S. government's General Services Administration (GSA), which manages government facilities worldwide, confirms the importance of psychological comfort. The author of a recent GSA report says, "It is obvious that people who are constantly uncomfortable, or have to continually interrupt their work to make themselves comfortable, will be less productive than those who don't have to deal with such distractions."[7]

FLEXIBILITY FOR MAKING CHANGES
Workspace change in call centers occurs for any number of reasons:

to adjust staffing levels, to upgrade technology, to support new teaming protocols, and to refine supervisor-to-agent ratios.

Consequently, workspace flexibility is a big issue. All call centers value the ability to move things around quickly so they can expand, contract, or realign with little expense or downtime. That means workstations should be simple to reconfigure—the fewer parts, the better—and voice/data cabling should be easy to access.

With agent performance metrics easy to monitor, call centers are constantly seeking insight into how they can dispatch their duties better, faster, and cheaper. Reconfiguring workspace often plays into the solution, but only if it can be accomplished efficiently.

SUPPORT FOR BETTER COMMUNICATION
Many call centers are adopting clusters because they're ideal for team-based work models. The idea is to support communication between and during calls with a layout that makes it easy for agents and supervisors to share information and resources.

The movement to clustering coincides with one of the most widespread trends in call center design—the tendency to replace rows of cubicles with non-linear, organic layouts that group agents together. The primary virtue of such an approach is its appeal to agents, especially youthful ones who tend to prefer a workplace landscape that is more open and collaborative.

Whether to support collaboration or accommodate agent preference, the new look of call centers tends to be free flowing rather than rigidly structured. High panels are giving way to open environments with lower partitions that are easy to scan over and around, helping agents stay connected with colleagues.

Connecting more easily with colleagues can also enable learning by observation. This sort of collaboration lets people see how others interact with coworkers, react in a crisis, or use shared documentation and technology. It can be a powerful tool for understanding everything from the most practical matters to internalizing corporate culture and values.

Open environments with low partitions also make it easier to give

agents access to natural light and outdoor views, both of which have a positive impact on productivity. In one study of call center employees at a municipal utility in Sacramento, agents with the best possible view to the outdoors processed calls up to 12 percent faster than those with no view.[8]

Openness can bring challenges with acoustics, however. The acoustic environment, or soundscape, of an office is a mixture of many sounds—people's voices, HVAC, outside roadway traffic, and office equipment. As acoustical experts have shown, dealing with the soundscape requires a holistic approach. Furniture, carpet, ceiling tiles, HVAC silencers, electronic sound masking, and voice-privacy systems—all must work together for the space to be a pleasing place to work.

ABILITY TO HANDLE TECHNOLOGY
Few things change as quickly as technology. The move from monitors to flat panels and the transition from CPUs to back-room servers with blade technology are well underway. Telephones are disappearing as more call centers move to VoIP, a telecommunications protocol that transmits voice through the Internet.

This streamlining of hardware not only frees up space on the work surface, but also creates less need for it in the first place. "In most call centers, the amount of space needed to do the job has shrunk dramatically because the technology footprint has all but disappeared off the work surface," Hollis says.[9]

In other respects, though, the technology demands of call centers show no signs of abating. Most call centers are quick to invest in any new technology that promises to improve agent productivity. That's why it's critical to plan call centers in a way that allows technology to be added or changed with little expense or downtime.

Design Problem
How do call centers make the most of expensive square footage while making individual workspaces appealing to agents? That's the central challenge. Maximizing space efficiency usually comes at the expense of minimizing comfort and aesthetics. But that is an unacceptable tradeoff in a workplace that needs to attract agents and encourage them to meet operational goals.

Flexibility is also crucial. The need to embrace changing technology and work processes requires that call centers be nimble enough to adapt quickly to whatever's coming next.

Design Solution
Herman Miller draws on its knowledge of workplace trends and best practices and a complete spectrum of products to outfit call centers of all types around the world. Our experience covers call centers in nearly every industry, including financial services, telecommunications, manufacturing, and transportation.

The range of solutions Herman Miller offers is broad. Beyond furniture and seating for operator offices, there are products for outfitting auxiliary areas, such as meeting rooms, training rooms, private offices, cafeterias, and break rooms.

Key to the solutions Herman Miller provides is a balance between the practical needs of the call center and the culture of its organization—and the culture of the country where the call center reside. This balance yields solutions that address a particular organization's priorities.

When a top priority is addressing turnover, for example, the solution may look like the one the Navy Federal Credit Union chose. Ebb Ebbesen, senior vice president in charge of construction for Navy Federal, decided early on that a new facility in Pensacola, Florida, needed to be a place "where employees are pleased to come to work in the morning and still smiling when they leave at night."[10]

Historically, the turnover rate for Navy Federal was 60 percent among its telephone operators. While this rate wasn't extreme by industry standards, its scale was significant. Navy Federal is the largest member-owned credit union in the world, with more than $30 billion in assets. It receives an average of $63 million worth of loan applications every day; 45 percent of those applications come through this call center.

The new Pensacola facility houses almost 300 operators. Nearly all of them work at workstations arranged in an organic layout. The workstations fill a single 400-foot-long main room, which faces out toward a stand of live oaks. Agents sit in comfortable, supportive

chairs. As Jim O'Connor, a former telephone operator who is now a team leader, says, "When the air is cleaner, when it's lighter, when you can stand up and look out a window or look across the expanse of the call center—to exercise your eyes even!—it makes such a difference."[11]

The Pensacola area is home to many call centers, so competition for agents is intense. O'Connor notes that he has to be careful in social situations not to make his friends envious of his workplace. His colleague Maggie Scarry, a Navy Federal recruiter, says it makes her job easy. She has to a long waiting list of applicants, and the turnover rate has dropped to 17 percent.[12]

Whatever the primary issue—addressing turnover, controlling costs, providing comfortable work areas, handling technology—the systems, seating, accessories, and services described below bring a range of strengths to solving the challenges call centers face.

AN APPROACH THAT COMBINES ORGANIC LAYOUTS AND MAXIMUM DENSITY
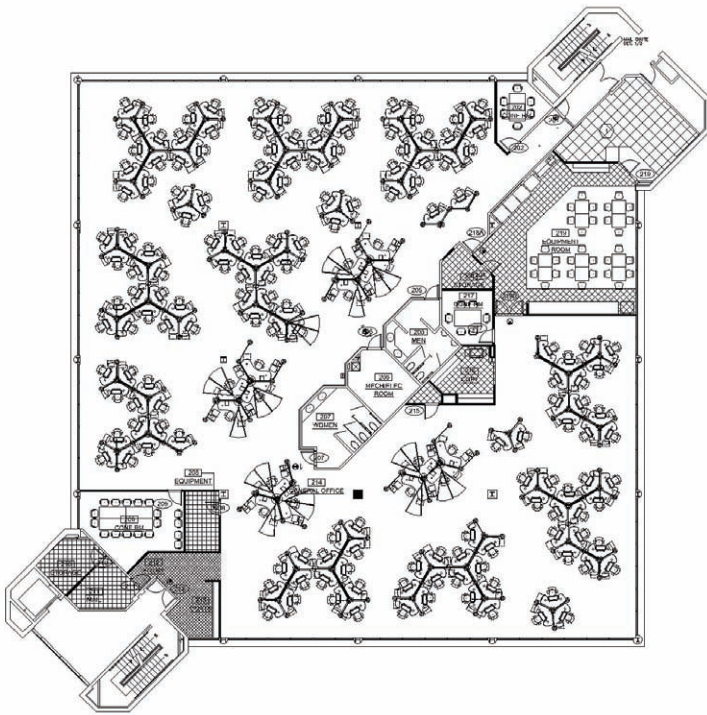
/ Figure 3 / An organic approach increases density while keeping the workplace light and open so it appeals to agents.

For many organizations, balancing prudent economics with a light, open workplace that appeals to agents is a must. That has led to the popularity of Resolve®, a system consisting of vertical poles with screens attached at 120-degree angles. This open, organic design helps people feel valued and connected to their coworkers. It enables easy interaction between the person and technology.

Resolve poles and screens work together to define space, support hang-on components, and route power and data. Meanwhile, the 120-degree versatility of the system is a big benefit in call centers because space planners aren't restrained by rectilinear layouts.

Instead, the patterns of Resolve are based on five configurations offering varying levels of privacy. By clustering and mixing these configurations in creative ways, designers can fashion unique layouts that make efficient use of every square foot.

A Canadian telecommunications company, for instance, configured its 600 or so Resolve stations in a medley of clusters—hardly any two are the same—reducing square footage per workstation by nearly 30 percent over its previous quarters.

Even so, agents new to Resolve consistently report that their stations feel roomier than what they had before. Low screens are one reason; boomerang-shaped work surfaces that keep work tools within easy reach are another.

Few parts and pieces—about one-fourth as many as traditional systems—also favors Resolve in call center applications. A financial services call center, for instance, found that Resolve's small kit of parts was especially helpful in keeping asset-management costs in check. According to a pre- and post-move analysis, expenses related to moves, adds, and changes decreased 65 percent compared with what the company had been spending in its previous workspace.

Resolve streamlines the installation of technology as well. Power and data cables simply drop through tall Resolve poles attached to the ceiling and then route among workstations via a channel in the framework supporting Resolve screens. Alternatively, call centers can distribute power and data via a system of overhead trusses,

which attach to Resolve poles and span among workstation clusters.

Either way, installers can run power and data cables at least 30 percent faster with Resolve than with conventional panel systems. This makes reconfiguration faster and avoids lengthy downtime.
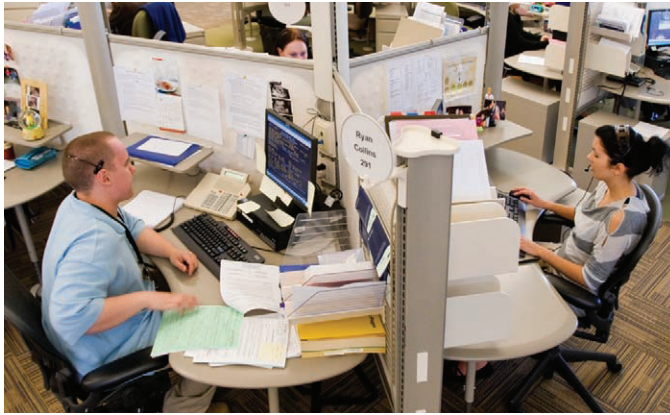
/ Figure 4 / Lower walls provide seated privacy while still permitting easy interaction with adjacent colleagues.

A SOLUTION FOR INSTANCES WHERE AGENT PRIVACY IS KEY TO CALL SUCCESS

Many factors influence the layout of a call center. One of the most important, however, is the nature of the interactions agents have with customers. When that requires agents have more privacy than a low-walled cluster arrangement, for example, the three walls of a traditional workstation provide the answer.

To get a traditional workstation that doesn't require sacrificing aesthetics for function, cost-sensitive organizations have chosen Vivo® Interiors (now known as Canvas Office Landscape). It is a frame-and-tile system with refined textures and precise details that provide a crisp, clean look. And its fundamental set of capabilities makes it a solid performer—and a moderately priced one.

The capabilities of Canvas Office Landscape helped Booking.com launch a 150-person call center in West Michigan. As Europe's leading online hotel reservations agency—and a division of Priceline.com—Booking.com is growing fast. The company wanted its West Michigan operation to be up and running just as quickly. It was, taking two-and-one-half weeks from start to finish.

Of the four design options presented to Booking.com—each with its own price range, complete 3-D drawings, and detailed product list—the company chose Canvas workstations with a 90-degree shape. Two wall heights are used in each station—57 and 46 inches high. The higher walls offer privacy; the lower wall provides seated privacy while still permitting easy interaction with adjacent colleagues. Clusters of six to eight work areas include a supervisor's station and are arranged to take advantage of natural light.

Closer to home, Herman Miller chose Canvas for its customer care center. The center's operators sit in U-shaped workstations featuring a fixed work surface on one side and a height-adjustable surface on the other. The height-adjustable surface allows representatives to work either seated or standing. Reps can program preferred work surface heights into the electric adjustment mechanism, allowing them to shift to a more comfortable posture with the push of a button.

As opposed to the traditional approach to arranging work areas, with the corner as the focal point of activity, workstations have an alternate setup that features the About Face™ orientation. It lets people face outward as they work. This gives them better screen privacy and more awareness of their surroundings. The standing-height sides of each station are topped by a row of glass tiles, which afford acoustical privacy while letting natural light in.

/ Figure 5 / Higher walls and strategic placement of work areas increases privacy for individual agents.

Though Canvas can be rearranged with minimal disruption, Herman Miller's customer care center made change even easier by placing a mobile Meridian ® pedestal and storage tower in each workstation. Both are on casters so reps can easily take their storage with them if they ever need to switch stations.

In deciding among systems, the choice hinges on what a call center is asked to accomplish. For some, the frame-and-tile approach of Canvas may be the right choice. For others, the pole-based design of Resolve may make more sense. In some cases, such as technology-intensive call centers or those that depend on agents with specialized expertise, the Ethospace® system meets the need. In all cases, a careful consideration of company culture and organizational goals helps ensure the best fit between furnishings and call center.

AN ARRAY OF ERGONOMICALLY DESIGNED CHAIRS THAT SUPPORTS THE INDIVIDUAL

When it comes to seating, the choice is clear: A high-performance work chair is a must, more so in call centers than just about any other application. Agent comfort, after all, isn't an option, not when they're sitting for hours at a time and expected to exhibit a perennially positive attitude.

/ Figure 6 / Arranging work tools so they are within easy reach helps agents be efficient and comfortable.

Herman Miller's three most widely specified chairs in call centers are Aeron ®, Mirra®, and Celle ®. Like all standard Herman Miller office products, each carries a 12-year warranty that covers everything (even labor) and contains none of the exclusions that dilute the aptly named "limited" lifetime warranties offered by many competitors.

Importantly, the Herman Miller warranty also covers three-shift usage, a necessity for call centers that operate round the clock. Most manufacturers offer a one-shift warranty that gets prorated down if the chair is used 24/7, evidence that the chair was never built to withstand multiple users.

Call centers also need chairs that can accommodate a variety of users with different body shapes and sizes. Mirra and Celle are both designed to fit 95 percent of the population, while Aeron is available in three sizes to accommodate an even wider range, from 4'10" females to 6'6" males. What's more, all Herman Miller chairs are tested and warranted up to 300 pounds.

Ample ergonomic adjustments, of course, should be a given in any high-performance work chair. What isn't so certain is that agents will understand and use them. To be sure they do, the ergonomic controls on Aeron, Mirra and Celle are labeled with icons that make it easy for first-time users to find the perfect fit. For users who want more information, videos and detailed adjustment instructions are available on HermanMiller.com.

Another favorite in call centers is the Meridian Pedastool ®, a combination seat and personal storage unit. A mobile pedestal with a cushion top, the Pedastool normally stays tucked beneath the work surface, but can be pulled out to offer a spur-of-the-moment seat to visiting supervisors or co-workers. By combining two items into one, the Pedastool appeals to call centers that appreciate the cost-saving virtues of using space efficiently.

A COLLECTION OF ACCESSORIES THAT CONNECTS INDIVIDUALS WITH THEIR WORK

With call centers moving toward smaller work surfaces, cutting down clutter has become a priority. The Thrive Portfolio ™ from Herman Miller can help. It consists of work tools that assist agents

in using technology, staying organized, and taking control of their personal space, all in a way that keeps work surfaces clear.

One example: the Ardea ® personal light, an energy-efficient fluorescent task light that clamps to work surfaces or attaches to systems workstations. The light has flexible hinges at the base and head to allow personal illumination—just point it wherever you like and readjust it whenever you want.

The Thrive Portfolio also includes adjustable keyboard trays that allow agents to remain engaged with their work chair. Without a tray, agents may have to hunch over their keyboard, defeating the ergonomic virtues of their seating. With one, the keyboard comes right up to them in perfect position.

Monitor arms within Thrive Portfolio also free up workspace by clamping to work surfaces, mounting on architectural walls, or attaching to systems panels. They're available with a patented lift-assist mechanism that allows users to simply push them into the ideal ergonomic position—no knobs to turn.

Aside from keeping work tools off the work surface, most elements within Thrive Portfolio offer call centers another benefit: user adjustability. Centers that run multiple shifts can assign multiple agents to the same space without compromising ergonomics because work tools easily adjust to suit the preferences of individual users.

A RANGE OF WORKPLACE SERVICES DESIGNED TO ENHANCE CALL CENTER PERFORMANCE

Aside from product solutions, Herman Miller also offers workplace services designed to help call centers improve productivity and reduce costs. One example is change management. Whether a call center is moving to a new building or reconfiguring existing space, any significant workplace change is bound to make employees wary. Herman Miller's change management service helps articulate the case for change and communicate it to employees in a way that generates enthusiasm.

For starters, Herman Miller's change management specialists identify what information needs to be conveyed, to whom, and how quickly. Next, they craft a detailed communications plan for spreading the word and ensuring a smooth transition.

Ergonomics analysis, another Herman Miller service, is also helpful when a move is in the works. Here, Herman Miller experts analyze the ergonomic requirements of individual employees and document the measurements installers need to set up each workstation properly at the new site. Chairs, work surfaces, monitors, keyboards, everything is adjusted just so. That means maximum productivity from day one and no costly callbacks after move in.

A related service, ergonomic training, is especially helpful in multishift operations where agents may need to fine-tune adjustable furniture upon their arrival each day. Herman Miller ergonomic experts can visit the facility to show employees how to adjust their workstation to reduce the chance of injury and improve productivity.

Leasing is another service worth considering. Many companies would rather not pay cash for a depreciating asset that doesn't generate revenue, at least not directly. The solution? Lease instead of buy. After all, the value of new office furniture comes from using it, not necessarily owning it.

With leasing, there's no need for a big down payment, just a series of monthly payments that keep the capital budget intact for other investments. What's more, leasing also results in tax benefits because those payments hit the books as a deductible expense rather than a depreciating asset.

Together, Herman Miller products and services help call centers leverage their work environment as part of the solution for controlling costs and reducing turnover. To put their best voice forward, call centers have found that dialing up their demands for workplace design is perhaps the best call of all.

Notes

1   Charles W arren, personal interview, May 2008.

2   Roger Kingsland, personal interview , May 2008.

3   Andy Hollis, personal interview , May 2008.

4   Richard Merlini, personal interview, May 2008.

5   Dr. Alan Hedge, personal interview, May 2008.

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    Integrated Workplace: A comprehensive approach to developing
    workspace." (1999): 30.

8   Derek Clements- Croome, ed. Creating the Productive Workplace.
    (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006).

9   Andy Hollis, personal interview , May 2008.

10 Andrew Blum, "The Accidental Environmentalists: A chronic problem
    with employee retention led this pragmatic client to building green,"
    Metropolis, January 2008.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

For more information about our products and services or to see a list of dealers,
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