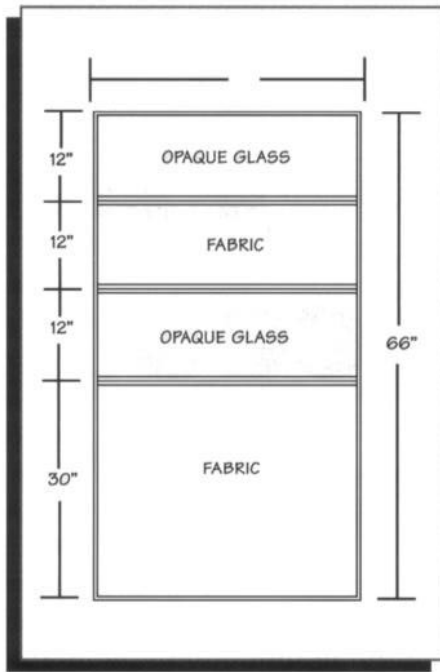




Modular Offices Provide Areas for More Lab Technicians in Same Space

By Sandra Johnson

A modular office system made it possible to provide private areas for a substantially increased number of laboratory technicians without increasing floor space. Key to these space savings was the vertical storage capabilities of the modular system and the integration between furniture and panels. The flexibility of the modular system made it possible to arrange offices close to instruments so technicians could easily check on their work. Later, when additional offices needed to



be created, the modular systems were easily arranged to accommodate the new staff.

Open Layout Wasted Space

The technicians originally worked on desks set up without dividers around the edges of a laboratory located in the company's research and development center. The technicians need to be close to the laboratory so that they can easily check on instruments that typically take several hours to run an analysis. The problems with the original arrangement were twofold. While their experiments were running, the techni-

cians either talk to scientists or suppliers on the telephone or do paperwork with all the desks out in the open, the ones that were talking on the phone distracted those who were doing paperwork. Also, the conventional desks and filing cabinets were relatively inefficient in their use of space.

Georgia-Pacific management made the decision to address these issues even before the number of technicians was expanded. They felt that a modular office system would address both problems. Use of wall dividers would give each technician the ability to talk on the phone without disturbing others around them, while the modular

approach would allow more people to feel comfortable in the same amount of space. Managers consulted with the Piedmont Contract Furnishings, Atlanta, who helped them devise a solution to the problem. Piedmont recommended modular panels from Mode Corporation, San Leandro, Calif, because they provide a range of sizes, types and styles, can be easily installed and reconfigured and are exceptionally rugged.

The arrangement involved 8-foot wide offices spaced along the 60-foot wall for the six technicians with the extra offices devoted to network printers. The offices are 7 feet deep, which makes it

possible to provide each technician with a 3-foot wide lateral filing cabinet. Plexiglass inserts were used so that the high ceiling lighting in the laboratory would light each office. Gray and mauve panels were chosen to provide a modern look

Lack of Disruption

Management was pleasantly surprised with the speed and lack of disruption involved in installing the partitions. First of all, the Mode installers came equipped with a complete bill of materials and a CAD drawing that was keyed to each box, making it easy to stage the materials for rapid installa-

tion. Since 80 percent of all construction time typically involves the handling of materials, this provided a major saving of time in the end. The raceways provided with the partitions simplified the process of providing necessary power, telephone and data connections. All that had to be done was knock out spacers covering the preformed holes and install whatever type of outlet was needed. Having the wiring running through the partitions saved installation time, avoided problems with wire breaks and improved appearance.

The results were everything that management was hoping for. The techni-

cians were pleasantly surprised at how much additional space each one received. Hanging work surfaces nest better than conventional furniture, so they save space and provide more design flexibility because they can hang at different angles and heights. The ability to mount files, shelves and lights

at any desired height on the panels saved additional space by adding a third dimension to the floor plan. The panels even serve as supporting members for the furniture, so that the furniture can have a smaller footprint than conventional designs while serving the same function.

Because Mode offers custom-sized furniture as well as panels, not an inch was wasted. The acoustic panels absorb most of the distracting noise so technicians can focus on their work without the distractions of hearing other activity. Sound absorption tests show that Mode's panels have a noise reduction

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coefficient of 0.85, which means they absorb approximately 85 percent of the sound. And even though the sound-absorbing partitions protect employees, see-through panels prevent an enclosed feeling.


The success of the new arrangement also encouraged management to

address another space-related problem. Two secretaries sit together in an office that also serves as the entryway to their manager. One of these secretaries handles human resources, so management wanted to provide her with more privacy. Another problem was that traffic through the office provided a constant series of distractions. Both problems were solved by installing dividers in the room to create two cubicles that enclose both secretaries' workspaces. The human resources secretary's computer was positioned so that someone approaching her cubicle could not see the screen.

Rearrangement in an Hour

The flexibility that comes with moveable furniture and walls came in very handy not long after the dividers were installed. An organizational change made it necessary to add several more technicians to the team. The maintenance staff had no difficulty in rearranging the partitions to meet the new workspace needs, without power tools or special equipment, in about an hour. The work was done after hours to avoid even a minor disruption. Mode's partitions make it possible to add stackable panels to increase height of partitions at a later date, although that wasn't necessary in this situation.

Now that the modular office system has been in place for more than a year, Georgia-Pacific management has had time to evaluate its effectiveness. The system has improved the company's utilization of floor space while improving employee productivity by reducing distractions. The employees that work in the new offices are delighted. The pleasing, comfortable environment the company has

been able to create for its employees has, without a doubt, improved employee productivity and satisfaction. 

About the Author

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