A Ride on the Office Horizon

College Professor Bob Vrancken Saw Early the Impact of Electronics on Office Construction

What Robert Vrancken had wanted to do was alert wall and ceiling contractors to the incredible bonanza that would be opening up in the office planning and facilities market.

He did, too.

Starting in 1975 when he first addressed wall and ceiling contractors at the AWCI convention in New Orleans, Vrancken has been carrying the message that new attitudes and approaches to the office of the future mean opportunity and profit to an enterprising contractor.

A number of AWCI contractors picked up on his call and their businesses have been expanding splendidly. To Vrancken, the realization of his promises came as no surprise. As a horizon-occupying executive with Sperry-Univac in Pennsylvania, he knew the revolution was underway.

Today, the matching up of people and their office environments and machines is akin to a prairie brush fire. The limits are endless.

A few quick-to-see universities are jumping into the inferno. One of them is Grand Valley State Colleges, in grand Rapids, Mich., and the institution was quick to snatch up Vrancken as its director of Facility Management Program. As an Associate Professor, he now faces the task of setting up a comprehensive curriculum to train people for a new job title—Facilities Manager.

To keep his hand in the industry, Vrancken continues his own consulting service. He recently set up the AWCI Seminar, “Office of the Future,” which proved out as a dynamic and exciting eye opener on what office planning and construction means to the contractor.

A graduate of Notre Dame, Vrancken did graduate work at Syracuse University and University of Detroit. He was with Sperry-Univac for 15 years, and prior to that was a facility industrial designer with Smith Corona Marchant in New York and Ray C. Call, Inc., in South Charleston, West Virginia.

CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS caught up to the fast-moving Vrancken in Grand Rapids, the day before his “Office of the Future” seminar was scheduled to begin.

DIMENSIONS: You’re pretty much of a known quality among AWCI contractors, Bob. Will this seminar be setting a course for the future, or will it be concerned with today?

VRANCKEN: Both the future and today—and at the same time. A lot of people in the industry don’t realize it, but we’re caught up with the future.

You simply wouldn’t believe how far computer technology and planning have penetrated office construction. We’ll be showing that to these contractors—and then we’ll show them how to do it, too.

DIMENSIONS: What’s really changing in all this—the people, the office environment, or the techniques of managing the work?

VRANCKEN: The electronics technology revolution is upon us now. We have ways of managing information and data—and using this for planning and design purposes that appear—remember, I said appear—to be incredible.

I suppose it is incredible—but it’s just the new way of manipulating information. Wall and ceiling contractors will have to take a whole new view of offices, of equipment, of techniques.

DIMENSIONS: —of ergonomics . . . I believe that’s the science of Continued on page 10
“Furniture companies saw the gap that was developing and they moved swiftly into the interior panel business as a means of dividing space. They didn’t explore the wall situation but rather sought to do the job with strategic placement.”

VRANCKEN: Yes, there’s flexibility there. But sometimes you need no walls. In the past, we designed and put up walls automatically. Now we don’t do that.

Furniture companies saw the gap that was developing and they moved swiftly into the interior panel business as a means of dividing space. They didn’t explore the wall situation but rather sought to do the job with strategic placement.

DIMENSIONS: Let’s clear the air early on open office? The major complaint seems to be lack of privacy. That’s a real criticism. What’s your answer to it?

VRANCKEN: We all need privacy, yes. But it’s not just traditional walls. Privacy needs to be defined. Do you really mean closed-in space? Are acoustics an equal consideration? If they are, you perhaps don’t always need solid walls to achieve privacy.

DIMENSIONS: There are some strong examples of open office arrangements not on the same employee acceptance levels as floor-to-ceiling partitions?

VRANCKEN: I fully realize that. And I’m certainly not coming out against walls. All I’m saying is that the design and installation mind should remain open so the office problem may be solved appropriately—that whether it’s a solid, a demountable, or a panelized division of space that will do the job, then that should be the approach.

Office planning and facilities management is a young profession and too many so-called experts haven’t been doing a good job . . . they haven’t given priority to the solution of a problem even though they say they are.

The entire profession of psychology has begun to look into the interface with technology. There are many elements that go into a successful office plan and today—more than ever before—we are in a position to measure, test, and prove our conclusions.

DIMENSIONS: So? What does that mean to a wall and ceiling contractor?

VRANCKEN: It means that each discipline in the process must use the proper planning steps. It means that through education and training, each must understand how and why this new office environment is going to operate.

When people who will occupy an office area are involved themselves in the level of acoustics, it’s infinitely better. A person can establish his or her own level requirement of sound—

DIMENSIONS: But sound isn’t the only criterion of privacy?

VRANCKEN: I realize that. We’ve been touching on only one facet. But there’s also the visual, for example. With proper planning you can arrange an area so that seeing in or out of that particular area is eliminated.

Despite all the benefits, some people believe that open office planning is a fad . . . that it will just go away. But take into consideration the lack of flexibility in the way things are done today, the increasing costs—then you’ll see why wall and ceiling contractors will need a wider vision on offices and facilities.

DIMENSIONS: Do you see a
rapid—or a slowly evolving—decline in fixed walls?

VRANCKEN: I see a rapid decline. Open office and demountable walls are the wave of the future . . . the revolution, if you will. And the revolution is underway right now. It’s unbelievable what’s coming in the way of systems furniture, space division, flexibility of people to interact and control the elements of their own working environment.

Office technology itself is in complete revolt right now. Look at what’s being done just to accommodate computer terminal stations. Then consider all of the other equipment-to-people needs and you begin to understand something of the dynamics, of the need for flexibility.

DIMENSIONS: But what has the installation of a computer video unit got to do with a wall and ceiling contractor? Where does the contractor enter the equation?

VRANCKEN: To bid or negotiate a job, you need to talk . . . to speak the vocabulary. For years, analysts have bemoaned the lack of productivity growth in office work. In the factory, they’ve developed sophisticated techniques for time studies and analysis. In the mechanical process, it’s easy to quantify . . . to count.

Now we’re coming into the computer age and more and more of the workforce is shifting to office environments. You simply can’t treat people like machines. You can’t oil a secretary to make her work faster, or adjust a statistician to make him add more accurately. Machines work; people work machines.

DIMENSIONS: I’m not certain what you’re saying? They still have many unsolved problems left in the factory workplace—and I don’t see that any miracle solutions have been obtained in the office area either?

And I return to my earlier question: what’s this got to do with a contractor? What course of action do you recommend?

VRANCKEN: I think a wall and ceiling contractor with an eye on assuring his place in future office work should right now be visiting with furniture manufacturers. He should be studying the office revolt and getting as much background as possible.
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Whether he wants it or not, he’ll be involved much deeper in the planning aspects . . . in the advice . . . into a consulting function from the standpoint of installation.

**DIMENSIONS:** —and that’s where the furniture dealers today are missing out?

**VRANCKEN:** Exactly. Most furniture stores are interested in turning over inventory. A contractor should be able to talk—and do—office division work and provide the same kind of service in furnishings.

Systems furniture must be installed. Furniture dealers can’t perform this function.

**DIMENSIONS:** Are you suggesting that a marketing vacuum exists? . . . that contractors can move into the furniture—office furniture, that is—business by providing the facilities that they install?

**VRANCKEN:** I’m suggesting precisely that. The furniture dealers have truly dropped the ball—and they don’t show a great deal of interest in picking it up.

Furthermore, the need to inventory is not great. Contractors can develop an alliance with a manufacturer and order for the job . . . just as they often now do for gypsum board and other wall and ceiling supply needs.

The fact that these systems must be installed puts the contractor in a potentially powerful position. Furniture dealers can’t provide this service—and, as I said, they simply aren’t oriented toward doing things that way.

**DIMENSIONS:** You mean they’ll truck it to the front door and dump it—then expect someone else to finish the job? But how does a contractor go about lining up—provided he’s even interested?

**VRANCKEN:** There are a number of ways. Direct with a manufacturer . . . liaison or affiliation with a dealer . . . set up his own showroom where designers could come and take a look . . . franchises . . .

It’s a null right now . . . even in de-mountables. In the bottom of the valley is the subcontractor; halfway up is the general contractor with the architect on the ridge talking to the client. This isn't efficient.

That client should be talking to the sub—the one who’s getting and installing the materials. The sub is the one who has something to say.

**DIMENSIONS:** In the way of wrapping this up, Bob, how many companies in the interior partitioning business do you know to be utilizing computers in the manner that AWCI’s Office of the Future Seminar describes?

**VRANCKEN:** You can’t begin to believe how computers are taking over design, specs, estimating, costing . . . the whole construction management system.

Believe me, every specialty—and general—contractor will soon converse with computers or they’ll be swiftly behind the times. Too few are using computers now, but this will change. The need to manipulate information fast and accurately is just too great to avoid an involvement.

When a contractor walks into a customer’s office and pulls out a computer print-out, that contractor is announcing that he’s in the stream of things. The day is gone when you could write some figures down on a notepad and that would suffice.

Systems are far more complex than they ever were—and the means of managing these systems must keep in lockstep. That means computerization . . . of financing . . . designing . . . estimating . . . cost controlling . . . the whole thing.

There’s a bright future for wall and ceiling contractors. But like the past, the enterprising sub has to keep up with the change in time and methods.