The Coming Office Revolution

There Are Changes Coming, Sure, in Office Partitioning, But They Won’t Be All That Radical

The office of the future? Some would have you believe that a spectacular revolution is currently in the making and all that has gone on before is now obsolete.

Not so, says a trio of wall and ceiling experts from the Gold Bond Division of the National Gypsum Company, Charlotte, NC. The three who offered to talk to CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS MAGAZINE included Lee Poole, advertising manager; Floyd Flocco, production manager for pre-finished panels, and W. Kurt Withrock, production manager for metal products and systems.

In a wide-ranging discussion on what wall and ceiling contractors may expect in the rapidly developing markets for demountable partitions, office facilities, and new office planning, the Gold Bond executives repeated this single dictum:

You should expect changes in office design in the next decade, of course, but they won’t be so radical that contractors need worry excessively about their own survival.

“You have the open office concept,” explained Flocco, “and I’m certain it’s here to stay. But it won’t be pushing out the private office concept because regardless of what its supporters contend, there simply isn’t enough personal privacy in the open work station of panelized space division.

“What’s happening is a combination of both the open office and the so-called four wall approach. The interiors of many buildings are developed in the open office or work station concept and the perimeters continue to be partitioned off into private office spaces, usually for higher executive level positions.”

As evidence that the industry doesn’t see a full-scale departure of floor-to-ceiling partitions, both Flocco and Withrock pointed to the recent acquisition by furniture manufacturer H. Miller of the prestigious Vaughan Walls.

“H. Miller is one of the top five office furniture manufacturers,” Withrock emphasized, “and they now own Vaughan Walls as an adjunct to their own furniture and panels.

“It’s a good combination—and shows that one of the top furniture makers is taking a step toward the realization that the market will consist of a combination of open office planning and traditional office space partitioning.”

For the moment, wall and ceiling contractors may expect that furniture people will be moving into the fixed wall and ceiling market rather than the other way around.

The claim, too, that demountable partitions are becoming increasingly more expensive and that this serves as additional incentive to go to open office planning is overblown.

“Demountables right now,” says Poole, “are less expensive than steel case and furniture panels.

“Of course, the cost of a demountable partition depends on the quality that the client specifies. Your average runs $25-$30 per lineal foot—but any contractor knows that some systems are more expensive and some less expensive.

“What makes this entire market so attractive to the wall and ceiling contractor is the opportunity to go after the work on a package basis. A contractor seeing this market in this new light could put the package together because he could provide the entire interior—and have it all color and texture coordinated as a bonus. That’s the attraction of an integrated approach to interiors.”

The individual contractor won’t be hitting this kind of market immediately,” Flocco said, “but he should know that Gold Bond, for example, has already begun research and development with the view of gaining entry into this area.

“Right now, a contractor can, through his supplier, offer coordinated panels, colors, textures. If furniture—office desks and chairs,
panels, less than ceiling height partitioning systems, that sort of thing—seems to be of interest, then inquiries should be made. The key to getting into an interior package approach is to get your information beforehand—and then make the commitment.”

In any event, there is little doubt among manufacturers and contractors that the benefits of demountable partitions are increasingly recognized. Consequently, the market continues to grow swiftly. The tax advantages alone now that demountables qualify for the investment tax credit and accelerated depreciation makes their consideration of prime importance in any office building plating.

Another advantage is the low cost of these partitions in view of the many other elements that must be considered over the life of the system. They can be moved later and easily, with a minimum of interruption to existing work patterns.

Demountables are accessible—and in some cases non-progressive—in that a single panel can often be removed without involving adjacent panels or the entire wall. The flexibility of the system is high and, in many cases, an entire wall can be removed without ruining the panels, i.e., they can truly be re-used.

“The technical features are the key to a demountable system,” says Withrock. “Can you decide to put in a door where a panel now exists...can you hang or attach things to the panels...can you provide panels with high impact resistance.”

To the Gold Bond specialists, the entire office environment is one that contractors should investigate carefully. There are changes afoot, of course, but with demountables, complemented by other elements in the entire interior package, an enterprising wall and ceiling contractor could stake out a large chunk of a future, growing, emerging market.