Benching — An Important Piece of Today's Workplace

Terry Carroll

Benching is relatively new to North America; in fact, it's only been around since the early part of the 21st century. The recent recession and lingering economic challenges driving cost reductions, combined with a strong emphasis on collaboration and increased focus on sustainable office design, are all powerful forces behind the emergence of workplace benching. The convergence of these three factors has placed benching in the spotlight as an important part of today's workplace. There are multiple benching solutions available in the market today. For discussion purposes, they tend to fall into one of three broad categories.

KEY FINDINGS

· Benching solutions allow for improved flexibility, mobility, and collaboration.

· By eliminating high cubicle walls and allowing more natural light in, it positively affects mental well-being.

· The square footage allocation to each employee is declining significantly.

· The way people interact and work is changing.

· Focused work is still important but not as important as collaboration.

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SECTION 1
What Is Benching?

1. **Benching 1.0:** large stand-alone benching solutions designed for the open plan with limited acoustical and visual barriers and limited flexibility.

2. **Benching 2.0 (Table-Based Benching):** similar to Benching 1.0, except these recent solutions are designed to integrate with other products, such as lower storage, panels, and height-adjustable tables. Newer benching solutions have a smaller footprint than earlier versions, and are designed to better address user needs specifically related to flexibility, mobility, and storage.

3. **Hybrid Panel-Based Bench:** this solution is simply a new application of the tried-and-true panel-based cubicle; it incorporates lower-height panels, rectangular worksurfaces, divider partitions, and mobile storage units to create a layout that reduces the footprint and drives greater interaction and collaboration.

Benching 1.0

Many of the early North American office benching products were unique, stand-alone solutions that did not integrate well with other office components. These initial benching solutions were designed to target a niche segment of the office furniture market, specifically industries and functional areas where the work style tended to be more collaborative. Success depended on drawing from the experience and ideas of the collective team, more so than on the brilliance of any single individual. Early adopters included IT project teams, product development teams, advertising and marketing agencies, and other cross-functional groups that needed to become more collaborative in order to succeed in a rapidly changing world. These benching solutions were larger, table-based products with limited flexibility and mobility, which resulted in the products taking a larger footprint than today's options. Additionally, they were not designed to integrate with

panels and other furniture components. Another limiting factor of first generation workbenches was that they were relatively expensive when compared with other furniture solutions such as cubicles.

Benching 2.0

By 2010, a new type of benching solution was emerging in North America. The new workbench is a hardworking, table-based solution designed to integrate with the entire office environment. The design is more rectilinear and its mobility and flexibility allow designers to create a myriad of solutions to accommodate a wide range of needs. Early research by Kimball, indicates that new benching solutions occupy less space per worker than Benching 1.0 products, and 20 to 50 percent less space than a typical panel-based cubicle workstation. Actual space utilization savings vary by customer application, depend on the size of the current workstation, and the goals and objectives of the client. Additionally, table-based workbenches tend to be priced slightly lower than panel-based cubicles.

Hybrid Panel-Bench

As corporate America moves away from the tall cubicles that dominated the office landscape in the latter part of the 20th century and migrates to more open solutions, the panel is finding new relevance in the form of a hybrid panel-based workbench. The essence of this newly morphed solution is its capacity for power and data distribution along the center spine, and its ability to support long horizontal worksurface spans. Facility managers' familiarity with this solution, along with designers' years of experience specifying panel solutions, makes hybrid panel-benching a natural fit for clients that seek the advantages of benching but are not quite ready to make the full leap to table-based products.

> "Today, business success flows from intangible assets such as ideas, information, and expertise."
>
> *Gensler*

SECTION 2
Factors Driving Benching

Cost Pressure: Real Estate Efficiency

Prior to the recent recession, American businesses had begun exploring and adopting new workplace strategies. A 2009 Global Benchmarking Study by New Ways of Working shows that recessionary pressures are expediting the adoption of alternative workplace strategies. "Survey participants identified the recession of 2008-09 as a significant impetus for Alternative Workplace (AW) adoption."[1] New Ways of Working defines AW as the combination of non-traditional work practices, settings, and locations that supplement or replace traditional offices. "Successful AW programs incorporate Human Resources,Information Technology, and Corporate Real Estate practices. If AW is not supported by all three domains, success is less likely."[1]

Workplace benching fits well into this new way of workspace planning and its rapid rate of adoption is being fueled by cost pressures that continue to be felt across corporate America.

"The primary business drivers of alternative workplace have shifted toward 'hard' economic issues—cost savings and real estate flexibility—and away from 'soft' employee-centric ones—greater work/life balance, increased employee productivity, and improved employee attraction/retention."[1]

After personnel costs, real estate is often the second largest business expense. During the recession, as companies reduced their head-count and renegotiated lease agreements, the square footage allocation to each employee declined significantly. Global real estate services firm, Jones Lang LaSalle, recently reported that tenants renewing their leases often reduce space totals by 10 to 30 percent.[2] In fact, real estate research firm, Reis, found that since 2008, companies have given up 137.8 million square feet nationwide.[3] Leading design firm, Gensler, estimates that cubicle sizes have

been downsized from an 8-by-10 foot area to a 5-by-5 foot work space—in other words, a 69 percent space reduction.[4] In 2000, annual production of panel systems products reached a peak, representing 36.6 percent of all U.S. office furniture production as reported by the Business and International Furniture Manufacturers Association (BIFMA).[5] Since then, systems furniture production has continued to decline. By 2010, systems furniture fell to 27.4 percent of all production—25 percent less than it did a decade earlier. Saving money, though, is not the only reason to downsize space. According to CoreNet Global, approximately 60 percent of workstations are vacant at any given time, because workers are either in meetings or traveling.[3]

Collaboration

The way people interact and work is changing. Focused work is still important, but not as important to business success as collaboration, according to Gensler's *2008 U.S. Workplace Survey*. "Today, business success flows from intangible assets such as ideas, information, and expertise." Gensler's research establishes new measures of performance that make the difference in a global knowledge-based economy: the power of people and place to drive profits. The survey identified four work modes—focus, collaborate, learn, and socialize—that allow the creative and innovative power of people to be fully realized. According to Gensler's findings, average companies are centered on focus work, while top companies focus on collaboration. "Average companies spend half their week in focus mode—21 percent more than top companies." Top companies on the other hand, spend 23 percent more time collaborating than average companies. All four work modes are critical to success, but collaboration continues to grow in importance in a knowledge-based economy.[6]

Knowledge worker is a term first coined by Peter Drucker in 1959.7 Today, knowledge workers are estimated to outnumber all other workers in North America by a margin of four to one.8 Today's modern knowledge workers require new workplace solutions that facilitate the flow of information and ideas. According to a recent Harvard Business Review article, traditional cubical-based office layouts prohibit a productive flow of information,

taking knowledge workers, on average, 4.7 hours to get a response from colleagues and 8.8 hours to get a response from managers.[9] In a society that runs on instant access and information, these findings are key factors to why the modern, cubicle-centric office design is slowly being replaced by open benching solutions that encourage frequent communication and collaboration.

According to Sue Kerns, a Principle and Director of Interior Design at Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Architects, many companies, before the recession, had already begun eliminating high partition cubicles and closed-in office spaces, in favor of the collaborative approach. Kerns goes on to say, "part of that movement has been spurred by younger workers. A lot of it comes from how they're taught in school these days. They're taught to work in teams or groups, so that's what they're used to and that's what they expect when they come to the workforce."[10] In a January 2008 report by IBM, "approximately 75 percent of CEO's say that collaboration is very important to their innovation efforts, but only a little more than half say they practice collaboration to a large extent—leaving significant room for increased collaboration in the future."[11]

Importance versus Extent of Collaboration and Partnering
(Percent of Respondents)
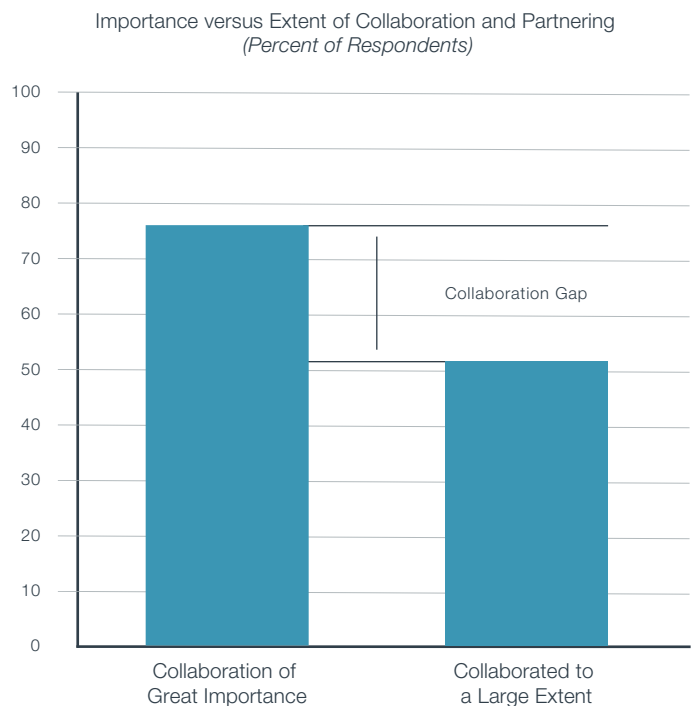
Source: IBM[11]

Sustainability

Another driving force behind the recent adoption of benching is sustainability. In particular, is the growing emphasis on daylight views which can earn companies up to three Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design-Commercial Interior (LEED® CI) points, depending on the extent daylight views are provided for tenant spaces—see below for details:

· IEQ Credit 8.1—Daylight and Views, Daylight 75% to 90% of Spaces (1 to 2 points)

· IEQ Credit 8.2—Daylight and Views, Views for Seated Spaces (1 point)

The points available for daylight and views are cumulative, meaning if an organization meets all of the criteria, it earns three points (two points for Credit 8.1, and one point for Credit 8.2).[12] Based on historical data, 64 percent of all LEED Certified projects in California achieved this credit.[13] According to Kerns, "research has shown that natural light is incredibly beneficial to people who work in an office building. As a result, design professionals have been trying to maximize daylight by pulling offices off the window walls as much as possible."[10] "These days, we see a lot more natural light, partitions that are much lower or not there at all, and lots of collaborative spaces," said Lisa Zangerle, Director of Interior Design at SERA Architects.

"It's not exactly new. It's just the way it is now. What that's meant in contemporary office design has been fewer walled-off offices, more open areas where employees can gather for impromptu meetings and, in some cases, grouping employees together in shared workspaces through a design solution known as benching."[10]

New research by energy efficiency building consultants, Heschong Mahone Group, asserts that, "windows that admit daylight and provide an ample and pleasant view can dramatically affect mental alertness, productivity, and psychological well being."[13] A study by Eunice Noell Waggoner supports the increased benefit of daylight for older adults, which is important given that so many baby boomers are putting off retirement due to economic uncertainty brought on by the recession. According to Waggoner, "as the eyes age, less light reaches the retina, so that aging adults receive only a third of the light exposure experienced by younger people under similar conditions."[13] And old is a relative term. According to Dr. Rajesh Khanna, an internationally recognized top LASIK and refractive vision care specialist, near sight eye deterioration typically begins at age 40.[14] "According to one government estimate, 93 percent of the growth in the U.S. labor force from 2006 to 2016 will be among workers ages 55 and older."[15]

In addition to LEED certification, "maximizing daylight penetration to reduce the need for artificial light, which generates heat and consumes energy,"[2] is another important reason to open up workspaces.

"Windows that admit daylight and provide an ample and pleasant view can dramatically affect mental alertness, productivity, and psychological well being."

David Hobstetter

SECTION 3

Where Benching Fits in Today's Workplace

Based on research conducted by Kimball in the spring of 2011, benching continues to take on a more important role in the open plan office environment. Benching is beginning to replace more traditional, panel-based workstations in many organizations. The research identified three dominate worker profiles for benching solutions.

· Traditional workers
· Teams
· Transient workers

Collaboration levels vary across the three worker profiles, as does the appropriate benching configuration.

Traditional Workers

This profile includes workers who constantly shift back and forth between interactive and independent work modes throughout the day. Examples: Office administrators, legal, customer service, finance and accounting.

Traditional Worker Benching Configuration

These workers depend on benching to provide a work environment similar to the traditional cubical workstation, but flexible enough to allow easy interaction and collaboration with teammates. Privacy dividers allow for visual privacy from neighbors and mobile storage units with cushion tops serve a dual purpose—as both storage and visitor seating.

Teams

This profile includes workers that spend the majority of their time working in team settings where collaboration is a key component in determining and producing successful project outcomes. Examples: Marketing, product development, IT project teams, consultants, managers, engineering, research and development, architects and designers.

Team Benching Configuration

Teams and benching are the perfect match. Team members come together to accomplish a common goal that can last anywhere from a few weeks to more than a year. Access to power, data, storage, and a visual connection between team members provides the ideal environment for a winning outcome. The flexibility of benching allows for easy reconfiguration and expansion or contraction of the work area as one project is completed and a new team moves into the space.

Transient Workers

This profile includes workers who show up in the office on a limited basis to interface with team members. They tend to spend more time traveling and at other sites than in the office; they leverage technology to stay connected and productive. Examples: Sales, consultants, guest, managers, telecommuters, and marketing.

Transient Worker Benching Configuration

Transient workers spend a significant amount of time away from the office. When they do come in, they need a place to plug-in and work. The bench provides the ideal touch-down spot with easy access to power and data. The open configuration allows them to interact and collaborate with fellow colleagues.
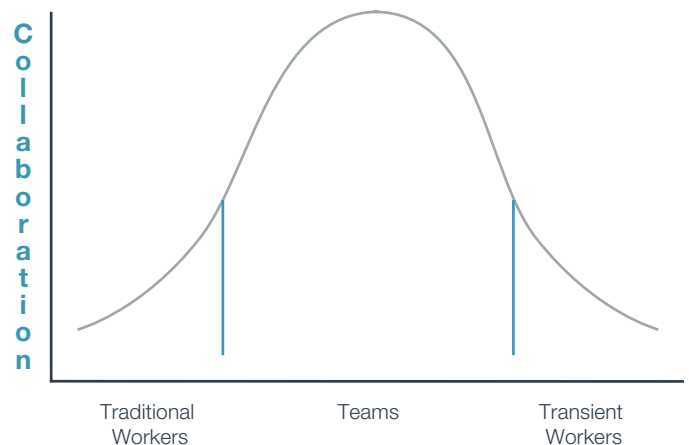
SECTION 4
Summary

Today's benching solution has improved flexibility, mobility, and easy access to power and data, which make it the ideal solution for a wide range of organizations and workers. Its ability to facilitate interaction and collaboration among workers, while improving real estate efficiencies and allowing daylight to flood into the workplace, are three powerful forces that will give Benching 2.0 and the hybrid panel-based bench staying power well into the future.

To learn more about benching visit our website kimball.com, or contact us at:

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