

OFFICE SPACE: EMPLOYEE-APPROVED

## **Google's workplace of the future - on a cubicle budget**

SHEILA NORMAN-CULP

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ZURICH -- It's the first question Google employees in this Swiss city must resolve when they want to go to the cafeteria or game room: stairs, slide or firefighter's pole?

The next dilemma for Zooglers (Googlers in Zurich): homemade pastry or exotic fruit juice? These are part of the three free meals a day, with regular snacks, that Google serves at its new European tech centre.

Then there's the phone-call dilemma. Should you use the former ski gondola that has been converted into a private phone booth? Shut yourself inside a blue igloo or a giant purple egg? Put the call on a video monitor? Or just take it outside and walk beside a rushing Alpine river?

If you want to tap into the maximum creativity of everyone you hire, Google executives figure, it might just take a whimsical mishmash of colours, shapes, textures, nooks and crannies to do so.

"To be effective in a short innovation cycle, you cannot just be sitting at your desk," explained Matthias Graf, the company spokesman in Zurich.

That explains the pinball, foosball and pool tables, the Wii sports centre, the air guitar video game, the massage tables and the aquarium water lounge. And the café next to the technical centre where you can eat, chat, read and play video games while waiting for your computer to be fixed.

Yet this is not dot-com déjà vu, when Internet companies wasted gobs of money on outlandish toys before burning through all their cash and firing everyone. The Internet giant worked with a psychologist and design team to interview all 350 employees and incorporated their ideas into a new workspace - yet insisted the new design should not cost more than an ordinary

office building.

"Everyone says 'Google is wealthy, you can buy a fancy office.' But we wanted to show what anyone could do with some imagination," Mr. Graf said.

The result: Simple, neutral but small individual workspaces with lots of natural light are interspersed with stimulating, brightly coloured, wildly original communal spaces. The lack of private offices allowed Google to create vast amounts of communal space - more than 100 different meeting rooms for anywhere from two to 200 people.

"It feels good to be here, it feels comfortable," Swiss engineer Patrik Reali said as he took a break to play Star Trek pinball. "There's nice places to retreat and hide if you need to think."

Each floor has a different colour and theme. The fifth floor is the history floor, with an old-time library, heavy velvet curtains and overstuffed, second-hand chairs. The fourth is the green environment floor, complete with a terrace for eating outdoors. Switzerland is the theme of the third floor, with reinvented gondolas, carpets that look like snow or blue ice and a quirky stuffed penguin mascot.

"Companies often spend a lot of money on expensive things - furniture, lights - that employees don't really care about," said Stefan Camenzind, founder of the architectural and design firm Camenzind Evolution, which created the Zurich office. "Google was smart to focus on what matters to employees."

Google's design choices both break the mould and reinforce current office trends in the United States. According to research by Jones Lang LaSalle, a global office property management firm, companies are building more open-demand meeting rooms and ditching hierarchical corner offices in favour of floor plans that foster teamwork - just like Google.

Yet many U.S. companies are also trying to save money by cutting down total office space and creating anonymous temporary spots for nomadic employees, Jones Lang LaSalle reports. Google, meanwhile, is trying harder than ever to cluster its people together, make the experience personal and leave room to grow.

"It's so unique and different - I think even people in Mountain View are envious of this building," said Roshan Sembacuttiaratchy, a 31-year old engineer from Sri Lanka, referring to Google's California headquarters. "Everyone had a say in what went in. You felt like you were kept in the loop."

The new centre - Google's largest engineering site outside the United States - is flexible enough to accommodate 800 employees. And Google has no qualms about the number of play areas in the new building, which formally opened in March. "We have a strict performance-management system - they will not play all day, we don't worry about that," Mr. Graf said.

The only issue the company hasn't solved is the Google 7 - the number of pounds Mr. Graf said employees gain from Google's fabulous food and heavy work ethic. Others begged to differ.

"I think it's the Google 15 - seven is too low," said Mr. Sembacuttiaratchy.

"No, it's the Google 15 kilos (33 lbs)!" Mr. Reali laughed. "Time to get on those bikes."

And those would be the fully loaded Google touring bikes the company handed out on Earth Day last year, to encourage employees to ride to work.

"Freedom makes people happy," Mr. Reali said. "The work we do, the people we meet, the building we work in - it all adds up."