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Contractors meeting high-tech demands

The office of the new century bears little resemblance to the office of even a decade ago. Where once fixed and closed work-spaces dominated the office landscape, today's offices are a hybrid of all things flexible, mobile, and perpetually evolving. Construction firms that build out these new spaces must accordingly be flexible, and most importantly, educated in how, where, and when to link up with all the other service providers.

It's no secret that early coordination is the best medicine for minimizing risk. Some owners have answered that call with great success, and in the design-build project. The real challenge, however, is keeping up with the changes in the office culture itself.

For decades, tenant finish to the general contractor meant floors of drywall and glass offices, one after another, often repetitive in both design and construction, and always traditional. The contractor had a limited communication requirement with the other consultants, even with the owner. Autonomy across the trades for any given project was not only possible; it was an accepted practice. As a general contractor, you just didn't need to worry about what the telephone guy was going to do.

But as the computer era began to take hold, methods of doing business would change, never to return to the way things were. And as the culture changed, so went the design, and of course, the construction, of interior spaces. So in a nutshell, the function of today's office space is a systems integration, the design and construction of which must stretch across all the trades.

It's in the data

This is manifested most noticeably in the function of data itself. As late as ten years ago, office tenant improvements and computer rooms were separate entities with completely separate

CONSTRUCTION

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requirements. Today, offices are built around a data system. Almost every tenant improvement today—and certainly every advanced technology operation—has some kind of computer built into the office space proper. When once these separate entities could exist and function each on its own, today's requirement is largely a microenvironment. That is, there is an environment within an environment, each with its own special requirements and challenges to build out.

The result is a systems integration requirement that must stretch across all the trades in order to meet budgets and schedules. Many vendors all must have not only a perpetually growing expertise of their own products and services, but a working knowledge of what everybody else is doing in the project. It's unavoidable.

General contractors have to know how today's demountable walls and systems furniture will affect the construction of hardwalls and millwork. The furniture vendor must know about ad hoc gathering places before the build-out so even mobile furniture components fit where they are supposed to. Virtually every office space today has become integrated with overlapping functions, and the design and build-out is what allows the concept to become real. None of this existed a decade ago.

The material world

The cultural changes also have given birth to hundreds of new materials, components and processes, all affecting the methodology of tenant finish and catching the collective eye of a much more sophisticated client.

From the perspective of infrastructure, there are now methods of electronically de-signing and fabricating ductwork, which is delivered to the job site only when the contractor is ready to install it. The same is true of studs. Steel gauge studs and wall sections can be pre-cut and delivered as needed, allowing for faster installation and minimized waste and storage space.

High-tech fixtures, powdered and ploy finishes and coatings, electrostatic paints, and space-age metals are a few of the almost limitless number of choices available for the aesthetic demands of today's client.

Subcontractors, accordingly, must constantly enhance their knowledge of these new and specialized materials, the lead times to obtain them, and the methods of application.

Speaking of lead times, the sheer number of players in any given tenant finish and the amount of different materials available makes logistical planning more critical than ever before. From generators to wall sconces, materials delivery and installation times have spawned new and creative methods of scheduling, like "phasing," in which a project is broken down into smaller parts, each with its own sub-schedule, permits and occupancy dates.

Finally, owners, too, are more educated about and aware of fluid change than ever before. They are more prudent, more willing to spend money, less willing to waste it, more keenly aware of the value of time, and more demanding to get what they pay for. That's a good thing for service providers, as long as we realize that just because we had some experience with a product or process last year doesn't mean we'll know a thing about it this year—or next.

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