



Innovation Hubs grow in popularity in SA with the likes of Google, GE and Standard Bank

- Published on August 16, 2016

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- *Working ways are changing globally*
- Hubs seen as drivers of business innovation
- 70% of ideas come from collaboration

Innovation Hubs, separate and relaxed spaces designed for creativity and collaboration, are quickly growing in popularity

in South Africa as a way to drive innovation in a relaxed ‘feel at home’ atmosphere.

“Workplaces are changing,” said Richard Andrews, Managing Director of Inspiration Office, an Africa-wide office space and furniture consultancy with offices in Johannesburg and Cape Town.

“Every leading organisation knows that it needs to innovate to stay ahead. According to a McKinsey survey, 33% of global business leaders rank ‘innovation of new products and services’ as their company’s top focus.”

“But innovation is hard. How do you make ideas grow especially when companies become more globally integrated as business becomes national or global?”

“One of the best ways it to make is easy for people to get together in a casual environment. Research shows that 70% of ideas come from when people collaborate.”

He noted that Innovation Hubs create a culture of innovation by supporting creative collaboration, project teams and individuals.

Inspiration Office has recently helped create Innovations Hubs in South Africa for Google, E&Y, General Electric, Accenture and Standard Bank to name just a few. General Electric’s R500m Innovation Hub in Johannesburg is the first of its kind in Africa and is similar to its other hubs around the world.

Magnus Taljaard, Head of Digital Customer Solutions at Standard Bank Group, said about the creation of its hub: “We wanted to create a highly collaborative and engaging environment where our digital product teams can thrive and create solutions our customers love.”

Andrews noted that businesses need spaces that support both collaboration at a distance and face-to-face and that also promote privacy as individuals need to do their best thinking. Hubs when not in use by groups, also provide private places to work.

He noted that during the last few years, work has become dramatically more intense. Business tasks today are more varied and more challenging, and in some countries workers are increasingly mobile.

“Employees in every organisation are working longer and harder, and they need a physical environment that not only supports them, but also re-energizes and inspires them.

“Some organisations embrace the idea of employees working in a coffee shop or other third place for a variety of reasons. Employees may need places where they can relax or work undisturbed. Already 31 percent of full-time employees in the United States do most of their work away from their employers’ locations. South Africa is following the same trends.”

Andrews said millennial workers are particularly keen on mobile working but need to have a place where they meet colleagues to catch up and think together.

He also pointed out that the idea of having an opportunity to move during the day is important.

“People hate the idea of being stuck at their desks all day.”

Businesses increasingly see the need to offer employees a place where they can take a break from their usual workspace, choose from spaces ranging from individual to large group settings, and maintain close connections with colleagues and the organization.

“It resets your mind and gets you reengaged. Having spaces that are appropriately designed for the activity that’s going on makes that activity much more productive. What we’ve installed for clients tend to cater for a ‘palette of postures’ so people can sit or lounge in a way that’s most comfy for them. We also tend to use bright, colours and funky furniture not typically found in the more formal offices spaces.”

Innovation Hubs also help to manage commercial property costs by having fewer people in the office if companies allow remote working.

Characteristics of Innovation Hubs

Technology Integration

More than anything, highly effective hubs that accommodate real work must provide great technology. Users come for refreshment and with the expectation that the place will provide what they need for effective performance, so technology needs to be immediately available and convenient.

Design Attributes

Design elements create the ambience of a corporate hub and influence worker reaction. Finishes, lighting, music, scent, inspiring artifacts, artwork—these all work together to attract users by creating a sense of welcome. They also tell users how to behave in a space.

Hosting Characteristics

Hosting is ultimately about making employees feel connected to the organisation and to each other. The way employees are welcomed and supported lets them know they are valued and demonstrates that the organisation recognises the challenges of work and life integration.

Where should companies locate an Innovation Hub?

The corporate cafeteria is an obvious place where a company can create a corporate third place and better leverage under-utilized space. It isn't the only answer, though. A company might need more locations to hold meetings, for example.

Andrews noted that some project *groups* often go off-site to hotels.

