**The Environmental Impacts of Space Management**

*By Sustainability Consultant Laura Porter*

When it comes to [environmental measures](https://www.gepenv.co.uk/climate-change-and-net-zero-carbon), you probably think of the big things – wind turbines, solar panels, and biophilic buildings covered floor to ceiling in plants.

But what if I told you that simply moving around the furniture in your office could reduce your energy costs? I’ve spent a considerable part of my career navigating space management in the modern office and can attest that even the smallest changes can have a big impact – both on energy bills and employee happiness.

**Space Management and the Modern Office**

The office has been in a state of near constant flux since 2020, and that doesn’t account for the years of back-and-forth office space experienced before Covid. After decades of converting cubicles into collaborative open-plan spaces, employees were beginning to push back, citing the need for private spaces to conduct meetings and engage in focused work. When the pandemic hit, employees were then forced away from collaborative spaces and into home offices. These employees, now used to working alone with minimal distractions, were then asked to come back into the office.

The good news? There are ways for employers to manage space in a way that minimises disruption, maximises employee happiness, and aren’t flashy or expensive. From identifying use of space to assessing whether you really need to move that wall, I’ve identified my best tips for space management below.

**Space Management: Back to Basics**

When it comes to office design, there’s plenty of here, there and back again. The only constant seems to be that work styles and employee needs are constantly changing. Take for example one of the space management projects I was tasked to complete several years ago. In this scenario, we had an office that had previously been four offices for 16 members of staff. The room had been opened into one office but with a divider halfway, which was never closed, and now only 12 desks were occupied. To maximise the use of space, we removed the room divider and reduced the amount of furniture to give staff more space. How did the team manage the transition?

* **We went back to basics on needs and wants:** this is often the hardest (unsung) part of the process – actually getting to grips with the people occupying the space and assessing their needs and wants. You’ll find that this is more difficult than you think. Employees are always going to prioritise their desires over the desires of the greater good of the project, and you wouldn’t believe how many office practices are considered standard simply because they’ve always been done that way. However, clear communication (and many straightforward chats about why we were making changes) worked wonders when it came to managing space. In this case, I spoke to the team members individually about the way they were using the space. They never used the room divider to create two separate offices, but it took up considerable space. In addition, two employees that were assigned desks regularly left the office to work elsewhere on site, and another two worked remotely – another inefficient use of space we quickly looked to rectify.
* **We checked ventilation:** this might sound silly, but look around at your current office. Are there any desks propped against radiators? Can you open the windows? Believe it or not, these small choices have a great effect on ventilation, which can make a real difference when it comes to energy costs. An inefficiently used radiator is an expensive radiator, and a window that doesn’t open will offer no cooling benefits to employees sweating their way through the summer. After assessing the space to ensure that it ventilates well, be sure to keep behavioural change in mind. While heating a building is relatively straightforward, the process of cooling and ventilation isn’t, so be sure to explain to employees the proper way to open multiple windows and facilitate air flow; some windows are designed to be opened in conjunction with others. In this instance, we only needed to adjust desks slightly, pulling all of the wall-pressing desks a foot away from the walls to free up circulation of heat by the radiators.
* **We were willing to navigate egos and compromise:** this was the hardest part of any office refurbishment – office egos are a considerable (but often unexpected) companion when it comes to space management. For many employees, having their own office is considered a status symbol, and asking employees to move out of an office or to share an office with another employee can feel like a demotion. It’s essential to assure employees that a space management task is only that – not a reflection on how well they are performing their jobs. I’d advise any potential space managers to carefully consider any egos within the team in an office shake-up, and to take that person aside ahead of time to mitigate the shock and manage their expectations. I’d also budget more time than you think is necessary to move teams or to move employees from one office to another space. I found that the length a space was occupied was inversely proportional to the efficiency with which the space was used – clutter is something that we build up, not something that most people arrive with, but it’s something that people are quite sensitive about. In this example, we spoke to the members of staff in the offices first – clearly explaining why the changes were needed – and asked them to review the contents of their cupboards and shelves. In approaching it this way the staff were very receptive.

It can be tempting to think of space management as an afterthought – once you have the desks and the employees in the building, everything will simply sort itself out in the long run. However, careful consideration of needs and wants can lead to lower energy bills, and happier (and more productive) employees than you ever thought possible.