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CBA goes step beyond hot-desking

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David Craig and Jennifer Saiz (below) at CBA's new Darling Quarter building, where space has been designed to stimulate collaboration between staff from the company's various divisions and businesses. Photos: Louie Douvis

AINSLIE CHANDLER

The staid, stuffy image of banking is being put firmly in the past by a cutting-edge workplace in the heart of Sydney.

Staff at Commonwealth Bank of Australia's new Darling Quarter offices will be housed in one of Australia's most sustainable buildings and also be at the forefront of the bank's shift to activity-based working (ABW).

The 6300-odd staff, who will move into the building between now and the end of the year, will not have permanent desks in the brightly coloured new workplace.

Rather, they will have a "home zone" of 70 to 100 people, where their team will be based, but can elect to work in other areas throughout the building, including a library-style space (where mobile phones are banned), cafes, meeting rooms or booths

While senior management, including managing director Ralph Norris, had offices in the bank's old workplaces, the new buildings are office-free.

All staff will be allocated a personal locker, accessible by swipe card, and aside from heavy computer users, will get a Macbook Air computer.

At each work station is a laptop dock, a keyboard and screen, while wireless headsets allow workers to make calls through their computers.

The bank's head of construction and design, Jennifer Saiz, is quick to point out that, despite the obvious similarities, this is not simply hot-desking.

"In order to have ABW be activity-based working and not hot-desking, you need three elements," Saiz says. "You need the physical environment, to have myriad different settings to fit different activities. You need the technology. And then it's the change component, the behaviours, that enable us to work."

The new style of working, which is already in place in a number of financial services and technology companies, albeit usually on a smaller scale, focuses on supplying the technology, workplace and support for staff to be empowered to work wherever they feel most comfortable.

This means judging their work on "their output, not on their presence", the bank's chief financial officer,



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David Craig, says.

He says the decision to shift to the more collaborative workplace design was made when the bank elected to consolidate a number of its Sydney offices at the purpose-built campus development.

“Because we were going into this building, which was clearly going to be revolutionary, we thought here we’ve got the chance to do something really special,” he says.

A team of leaders from the company’s various businesses was assembled to discuss how best to make the leap.

The bank spoke to representatives of Macquarie Bank, an earlier adopter of activity-based working, to discuss their experience, and architects and property staff were sent overseas to look at best practice workplaces.

Saiz says the most advanced use of ABW is in the Netherlands.

The team looked at the offices of a number of noted ABW users, including insurance groups Interpolis and Marsh, Microsoft and Rabobank, and used their experience in the bank’s new workplaces.

CBA used its knowledge to design a pilot floor, where staff tested the new model of workplace over 18 months, providing frank feedback on what they felt worked and did not. Saiz says there have been numerous changes between the pilot design and the final design.

The new 55,000 square metre Darling Quarter workplace features a riot of bright colours, designs and textures more akin to a classroom than the stuffy and staid image of a bank. The space has been designed to help stimulate collaboration between staff in all of the company’s divisions and businesses.

A help desk is permanently staffed to help workers deal with the high-tech workplace.

Staff in the headquarters of the bank’s subsidiaries – Bankwest in Perth and Auckland Savings Bank in Auckland – will soon follow suit and employ ABW.

Craig says both subsidiaries have been keen to “leap on to the bandwagon” and adopt the new way of working. CBA’s staff were equally excited about the change and about 98 per cent of staff who worked on the pilot floor say they do not want to go back to a traditional office model.

Craig says the new fitout cost more per square metre than the bank’s other office space. But the need for less space, increased flexibility, occupational health and safety improvements and the empowerment that the new way of working will give staff will far outweigh the cost.

Surveys found only about 50 per cent of permanent desks were utilised at CBA’s old offices. The new fitout works on a ratio of eight desks per 10 staff, with additional space in breakout workspaces, including meeting rooms.

Sustainability is also a big factor in the new \$500 million-plus workplace, which developer Lend Lease built to a six-star Green Star version two office design rating. Staff will have only one linear metre each in storage, on top of their personal locker.

The Australian Financial Review

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