

A photograph of two men standing in a room filled with bookshelves. The man on the left is bald, wearing glasses, a grey cardigan over a white shirt, and dark trousers. He has his arms crossed. The man on the right has dark hair and a mustache, wearing a black V-neck sweater over a white shirt and olive green trousers. He is sitting on a chair. The background consists of white bookshelves filled with books of various colors and sizes.

HARNESING ALL THE BENEFITS OF a sound office design

Martina Said sits down with the co-founders of Forward Architects, **Chris Micallef** and **Michael Pace**, to find out about the importance of a well-thought out office design, the current trends in modern workspaces, and how a successful design comes down to one crucial thing: a good brief.



Over the last decade, a lot has changed in Malta's business landscape. New sectors were born and bred, and ushered in new and improved ways of doing things, including where and how we work, and quite significantly, the ambience within which we carry out our daily tasks. It's a shift that has affected many other industries and their work too, including that of architecture and interior design practice Forward Architects, co-founded by Chris Micallef and Michael Pace.

The firm, which started out with a focus on residential architecture and interior design, has changed over the past eight years in line with industry demands. "Back in 2012, we began to notice a shift in offices and their design," says Chris. "We had already worked on a number of office projects until that point, but we could see how companies evolved from their start-up days, moving from one office to another. On the other hand, and especially with the introduction of gaming, company structures began to change from a hierarchy to a flatter organisation. In my opinion, this has been the biggest shift in interior design in relation to offices."

Michael adds that an evolution from a one-size-fits-all design to a tailored approach for offices became more evident, as offices increasingly started requiring something a little outside the box. "There was a shift from an office which is just a space you kit out with soffits and desks, to something where brand identity, the importance of staff well-being and other parameters which are now extremely important in office design, started to become evident locally."

There was also a noticeable move away from certain trends, such as hot-desking. "We've realised that people do need a sense of belonging at their workspace, they need their territory and at least they need their desk, which doesn't mean that they don't need a place that's dynamic - in fact it makes an office more dynamic because it reflects a move towards mobility, where people could work a couple of hours at their desk, in the kitchen, and possibly even from home. The office has extended beyond the confines of the workplace itself."

This sense of belonging, together with strong connectivity, flexibility and agility are among the top requirements of modern workspaces. "At par with these is a sense of belonging from a workforce perspective. A company's workforce



needs to feel proud of the entity it forms part of," says Michael. "In this generation of start-ups, agility is also key," adds Chris, "because their growth pattern is not quite known or understood from the start. They could go from 20 employees to 100 in a short amount of time, and so the office needs to be able to adapt to foreseeable growth patterns."

However, the most important step towards the creation of a successful office, they agree, begins with the absolute basics: investing the time to draw up an accurate brief. "A set of design parameters established through dialogue between the designers, the client and key staff will dictate the whole design procedure. And if the brief is right, the chances of creating a successful result are reinforced exponentially. Once you know what direction you need to take, it will save a lot of time and eliminate trial and error," says Michael. "The brief needs to cover everything, from budget to timelines to look and feel. The designer fires the questions and the client either provides the answers or realises there are gaps in the brief that need to be addressed." →



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← Engaging with the client to understand their structure of growth is essential, Chris continues, even if the client doesn't necessarily have the answers. “One of our clients did just this - they started by understanding how they feel their teams will work. Will they be teams of eight or 10? Do they want to work facing each other or back-to-back? They opted for back-to-back because they could communicate by just turning their chairs. The set-up they eventually opted for was applied throughout the office, and not only in their local office as they grew, but also internationally.”

By asking the right questions to the client at the beginning of the project, Michael says, the designer can understand how much change the company needs to cater for. “That includes whether the office space you're currently designing with them is going to be used for the next two years or five, and you cater for that accordingly, while allowing for those future spaces to be taken over later, which you kit out to not be dead zones in the meantime, because nobody wants an office with empty spaces. So, the more flexible it needs to be, the more thought needs to go into the whole set-up - technical, mechanical, electrical, desk layouts and even choice of furniture.”

Combined with this is the necessary investment that needs to be made in order to fulfil the brief. “Before thinking about ‘going the extra mile’, you need to consider the basic investment that must be made to ensure that the performance of your office is the best that it could be,” says Chris. “Invest less than the minimum infrastructure required, and you'll notice your office is not operating efficiently. Invest less in your technical support, and you'll notice your connectivity is less than what you anticipated. Once this initial investment is made, you should go the extra mile and invest in branding and identity, because that is where it's really felt in the office. And here, the sky's the limit.”

Michael is in agreement, and asserts that if you want a successful office, you have to invest in it. “There are, of course, tangible benefits of engaging in a proper design process: unique company branding which sets

the company and staff apart, a sense of identity among staff which comes from the workspace and not just from the brand, and from an HR point of view, it helps to attract new staff and retain existing members. A happy workforce is not just good for productivity; it is your best brand ambassador.”

An aspect of office design that's intrinsically associated with gaming companies is the provision of spaces that are associated with leisure, and, increasingly, with home. However, Chris asserts that these spaces are still, in essence, workspaces, and shouldn't be confused with areas that encourage procrastination.

Quite the contrary, “when you have a sofa area within a space, it's because team members need to be working in that way, and not over a meeting table or at their desks. It's a more comfortable way of engaging with ideas, it's their process of thinking. Many gaming companies do have their own ideas for entertainment areas, such as incorporating ping-pong tables, play station areas, and social spaces where everyone comes together, but even from an early start-up stage, these areas double up for when meetings need to happen collectively.” →

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Such leisure spaces come in various forms – break-out areas, areas for congregation, coffee corners, zone-out spaces and introspective spaces for focus and concentration. Depending on the size of the company, exercise areas, outdoor areas, office catering, gaming areas, and many more make it to the extensive list. The architects explain that, in line with gaming companies’ tendencies to use all the space available in the office, even the spaces between desks doesn’t go to waste. “For one client in particular, this kind of negative space was used to add greenery everywhere within the office, which was a way of bringing their culture and native environment closer to home.”

Chris adds that understanding global and local trends in the work environment helps to come up with the best possible solution for your office. “One ingredient I also find to be super important in offices is daylight, and the trend has moved towards being more responsible towards the environment, so looking at ways to reduce energy consumption, waste, and the sustainable sourcing of materials. This has already started, and will hopefully become more ingrained in our culture going forward.”



Asked to share what they believe are the most crucial ingredients for a successful design, Michael says engaging the designer or architect during the office hunt stage will help the client find the best property for their office project. “I also can’t emphasise enough the importance of the early stages. Once that is established, two-way, client-designer communication, especially during the appraisal and concept stages of the project is key.” igC