Beyond Four Walls and a Door

Understanding Privacy in the Office

If you ask people who work in offices whether they need privacy to do their jobs, most of them will say yes. Ask them whether they currently have enough privacy, and many of them will say no. In a study of people working in both fixed-wall offices and open plan environments, about 50 percent said their space "provides all the privacy I need to get my work done."[1] But when people feel they must have privacy to do their work and don't get it, they report significantly lower productivity and job satisfaction than those who say they have the privacy they require.[2]

The answer to this dilemma can't be to simply give everyone an enclosed office. For one thing, employers are attempting to shrink their real estate holdings, not expand them. In one recent survey, employers indicated that over the next five years the percent of employees who have a dedicated workstation will decrease 24 percent. While some of the recovered space will be eliminated to save costs, much of it will be changed to collaborative areas. In fact, the percentage of space dedicated to group or community areas has been steadily growing since 1999.[3]

Employers are also keen on increasing collaborative working environments to accommodate teams, which often include both employees and outside consultants, are. In one survey, 57 percent of employers polled said that they will add more collaborative work areas to their facilities.[4] This will decrease floor space for individual offices.

With the trend away from fixed-wall private offices, must privacy be sacrificed for the majority of workers? The answer is no, because a feeling of

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privacy is a complex brew of both measurable and subjective elements.

It's possible to offer most employees the degree of privacy they require, even in open plan environments. But a working knowledge of the issues that make up the elusive feeling of privacy must first be understood.

What Creates Privacy?

Privacy is actually a combination of two main elements: visual and acoustical privacy. We believe we have privacy when we are sheltered from the constant observation of others—when we have some relief from both being observed visually and overheard. But in this day and age, privacy of any nature is at least partly an illusion.

With employers free, if they wish, to monitor everything from e-mail to office conversations, there is actually little personal privacy in the office. Employees have shown in research that they focus more on their physical work environments than on electronic monitoring when they assess privacy. But the latter may in fact be a background reason why visual and acoustical sheltering is an increasingly guarded commodity by workers.[5]

Heard It Through the Grapevine

Acoustical privacy is usually defined by workers as the ability to speak privately and not be overheard. But sometimes what they themselves hear alters their sense of acoustical privacy more directly. When workers can easily overhear others near them, it undermines any perception they may have had of their own voice privacy.[6]

The closer quarters of today's open plan areas facilitate team communications and a feeling of connection, but they can also generate discontent about acoustical privacy. Office workers who participated in a study on privacy-related issues listed overheard conversation as their biggest workday complaint. Most respondents agreed with the statement, "When I am working in my workspace, I'm distracted by conversations of my immediate neighbors."[7] In fact, an interruption of five minutes can take a worker up to four times as long, or twenty minutes, to return his or her mind to the interrupted task.[8]

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Now You See Me, Now You Don't

What constitutes visual privacy has proved to be even trickier to pin down than acoustical privacy. Early studies showed that panel enclosures were welcomed by workers who used to sit completely out in the open in bullpen areas. They judged these dividers a vast improvement in privacy. Conversely, people who gave up floor-to-ceiling walls or panels felt deprived of privacy in the same workstations.[9] These results were not surprising. What was more startling was information gathered over the past ten years about panel heights and the area of enclosed space in an open plan workstation, and how these two factors relate to perceived visual privacy.

In the same way that a person's sense of voice privacy is based on what he or she can hear, a sense of visual privacy seems to be based on what he or she can see. In some studies, full-height panels did not increase a sense of privacy. Panel heights of four to five feet were found to be optimum. Above five feet, no further sense of privacy was obtained by changes to panel heights, suggesting that the seated position was the major way that workers judged their visual privacy.[10]

Being able to work without seeing coworkers pass by adds to a sense of visual privacy—perhaps even more than whether or not the seated employee can be seen by those walking by. This can be at least partly explained by a perceptual phenomenon called visual dominance. A person's attention is directed to the visual modality first, before any of the other senses are engaged. This makes visual distractions harder to shake off than auditory ones.[11]

Other studies have shown that people also do not feel visually private or enclosed enough in open plan stations that are too large. One study suggested that most people preferred workstations with between 42 and 209 square feet of space, but no more than that.[12] An unsettling feeling of being "too out in the open" can actually be created when an employee is rattling around in a single, overly large workstation, and actually creates a similar feeling to being exposed in a bullpen of desks.

Why Do We Need Privacy?

Despite its elusive qualities, privacy, both real and perceived, is necessary in some degree for most

workers. There are a number of foundational reasons, both business- and psychologically related, for this need.

Practical issues such as confidentiality in discussions and concentration during certain types of tasks are apparent business needs. The ability to have private conversations, for example, is important for nearly all knowledge workers but is critical for those involved in areas such as human resources and finance. And the ability to focus on certain types of concentrated work with minimum distractions has been an ongoing difficulty in earlier open plan office designs for those doing tasks such as research or writing. These are relatively easy factors to assess, since they are easily identifiable on an employee-by-employee basis.

The Issue of Status

But there are a few other needs woven into the fabric of privacy that are not as objective or quantifiable. One of those is a sense of status. Traditionally, offices have reflected the status of their occupants. To some workers, the sense of status that their workplace conveys is very important. These individuals tend to feel deprived, even aggrieved, when taken from a private office and placed into an open plan environment.[13] Very often, these employees do not want to admit that they feel embarrassed or demoralized by the loss of a more enclosed workspace, so instead they tend to describe their loss-of-status feelings as a loss of privacy or dissatisfaction with the acoustic environment.

Why should organizations be concerned about a loss of satisfaction triggered by an individual workspace? Sometimes it can be a tipping point for an employee. There is evidence of a correlation between lack of job satisfaction—particularly if it is linked with a sense of being unappreciated—and an employee's intention to leave a company. If that happens, the cost of replacing the employee is high. Aside from a separate sticker price on the loss of knowledge that walks out the door with departing employees, replacement can cost between 50 to 150 percent of a worker's annual salary.[14]

At Home on the Savanna

Other preferences regarding privacy and a sense of sheltering may come not from long-standing tradition, but from our own genetic hard-wiring. Gordon Orians, an ecologist, believes that we draw a sense of comfort and well-being from environments that go back to our original landscape: the African savanna. There, our

ancestors would have found trees with spreading canopies, under which they felt sheltered. But they would have also preferred an open view or one with multiple sight lines so they could see what dangers might be headed their way.

Similarly, Jay Appleton, a geographer, has noted that people like places where they feel safe or protected but where they also have a good view of their surrounding environment—observations that dovetail with Orians' findings.[15] Appleton calls this need a desire for "prospect and refuge."

In reviewing this and additional information about preferences for privacy and other workplace needs, researcher Judith Heerwagen summarizes, "Buildings affect our psyche as well as our bodies. They can be inspiring and supportive of daily activities, or they can deplete the spirits and undermine the best intentions of the designer….Buildings with high psychosocial value are designed around basic human needs, ancient preferences, and connections to the patterns of nature and the mind."[16]

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Connecting to Both Work and Workers

Take a walk around any office, and the varying degrees of privacy versus connection become immediately apparent. Some workers need to know what others are thinking and doing. By the very nature of their work, these people have to connect with people all day long. Human resources professionals, receptionists, customer service representatives all spend the largest part of each workday talking to people. Workers whose tasks are routine will also have more contact with others—not always out of a need for information, but rather a need to prevent stress, boredom, or fatigue.

Other employees, such as accountants, copywriters, and designers, may feel they want quiet and privacy to do concentrated thinking, planning, or writing. People who fall into the broad category of "knowledge workers" are usually the ones who feel they are being disrupted the most by others, because their thought process is their work.

But being shut off from other workers, especially in team projects or team-organized departments, can be a double-edged sword. There's a fine line between privacy and isolation, and studies have shown that few people prefer the latter. In reviewing information about the elements of privacy, the authors of a

research report compiled for the Canadian government commented, "Although the need for some degree of privacy is strong, in general, most people prefer to work with other people in the vicinity, rather than totally alone."[17]

An internal study at Herman Miller uncovered similar results during the testing of a more open and space-compressed work environment, one that had been designed to enhance group interaction. Although team members rated their new workspace as being "less private," than their previously more panel-enclosed offices, they also rated "collaboration with coworkers" as being more essential to their productivity than either "privacy" or "quiet places."[18]

If privacy or loss of privacy is such a top-of-mind employee concern, why would workers need teamwork and connection more? Because it goes directly to survival and achievement in the workplace. Research has shown that as much as 70 percent of what we need to know in order to do our jobs is learned informally through interactions with coworkers and customers.[19] Completely visual and aural privacy all day long, although it is something that many workers believe they want, actually is counterproductive to their success in the office.

The Challenge of Added Variables

The people who inhabit offices are a collection of many individual personalities. This adds layers of variables into both the need for privacy and each person's perception of it. It also makes it much trickier to fine-tune a facility to provide for each person's requirements.

"People need to do work and need to get their jobs done," notes Jeff Specht of Herman Miller, Inc., who works on sound and acoustics for the company. "That may require some form of privacy. But people also want privacy for personal reasons." These may include a person's individual ability to concentrate or their level of distractibility. A person sensitive to noise, one who is more introverted by nature, or someone with an individual contribution to make to a project will desire more quiet and privacy. Conversely, someone who is tolerant of noise, likes having background noise while working, or spends more time talking with others to achieve project goals will probably want less privacy and quiet.[20] Both personality and work style are variables that must be taken into account.

Layering Privacy

A database of information collected from 13,000 participants showed that 80 percent of office work was either quiet, solitary work, or interactions with other people—such as group discussions or phone conversations. The presence of two such incompatible activities in close proximity underscores just how hard it can be to create a feeling of privacy in an open plan space.[21]

In response to this dilemma, author Audrey Kaplan suggests thinking about privacy as a continuum from "none" to "total," rather than a commodity that was either present or absent. That would allow people, she argues, to explore open plan environments for spaces that allow varying degrees of privacy needed throughout the workday—from individual workstations to casual seating areas to fully enclosed team spaces or conference rooms.[22]

In an office, "people sounds"—two-way conversations, throat clearings, sudden bursts of laughter—are the things that attract a worker's curiosity and may disrupt their concentration. Background sounds that are regular and predictable are easier to block out; it's variety and suddenness that demand attention. The hum of the HVAC fan doesn't disrupt thinking, but a loud greeting might.

This turns the environment itself into yet another variable. An office that offers alternative workspaces can automatically reduce the demand for privacy in individual workplaces. Employees who lack choices can feel stuck or trapped in workstations that don't exactly suit their work style and individual preferences. An office that's near a noisy break room or an elevator will become unbearable for someone who feels he or she needs long periods of quiet to work. But if there's a research library or even an empty conference room nearby, there's an alternative, a choice. "If someone has only one place to work and that is where they spend all their time, they view their environmental needs differently than someone who has multiple locations or is mobile and only has a 'camp site' at the main office," notes Specht.[23]

Drawn from an understanding of why people need and want privacy, solutions that address psychological and practical concerns can be layered to create the balance of collaboration and concentration needed in the work environment today.

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Rooms with a View—Sometimes

Distractions in the workplace can come in many forms, but two of the most pervasive in an open plan space are the walk-by coworker and the walk-in guest. To minimize walk-by distractions, designers often orient workers so that they are facing into corners, with their backs toward the workstation "doorway." But this creates an unsettled feeling. It deprives us of the long view that is encoded in us as a survival need. We want to be able to see what's coming on the horizon. At the same time, research shows that when we work in a concentrated way, we actually find visual distractions harder to filter out than noise.[24]

A change in seated orientation is one solution to removing the unsettled feeling of being turned into a corner. Workstations that allow workers to move from one area to another also allow them to see an aisle if they wish. Softer corners and a smaller, more well-designed space, like a ship's cabin or cockpit, remove the feeling that a workstation is too large. They provide the shelter that we need for psychological comfort. And the addition of translucent materials, shutters, and even sliding doors allow a worker to take the long view when it's wanted and to shut out any visual distractions when it's not.

In many open plan offices, people feel helpless to shut out the stroll-in guest, who invariably arrives just as a deadline needs to be met or a great idea is taking shape. Permeable privacy—translucency that gives people control over their privacy yet lets them stay connected with coworkers—allows people to send out subliminal signals that they are either open to visitors or don't wish to be disturbed.

Even in an open plan space, the feature of a doorway or shutter that can be closed signals to others that concentration is desired and interruptions are not. This gives people in workstations a degree of the same kind of privacy signaling that those with fixed-wall offices have—the ability to be left alone when it's necessary. Control of this type over the individual environment is also meaningful because it can offset stress and improve work performance.[25]

When translucent materials are used in workstation design, they allow a sense of movement and connection that is psychologically important in team-oriented spaces, even when a door or shutter is closed. That sense can be further enhanced by using higher aisle-side panels and lower interior panels. People grouped in clusters can communicate more easily, and those walking by to other team spaces or work areas become less of a distraction.

Technology "Boundaries"

Some employees are tethered to one workspace by the very nature of their work. They need to be at one computer and near one phone to accomplish specific tasks, receive information, and record and send it on to other team members. They can't seek the shelter of an enclosed room for a confidential conversation. For these people, new voice privacy technologies help keep confidential information out of the public "airwaves" of open plan environments.

One emerging type of voice privacy technology takes the speaker's voice, scrambles and multiplies the phonemes, and then projects those sounds over a small speaker. This creates a sound that others seated near the speaker hear as "crowd noise." However, the person on the other end of the telephone conversation hears only the single voice. In areas where auditory privacy is not possible to factor into the design, technologies such as these, combined with good workstation design, help workers feel they have enough privacy to do their work correctly and well.

Mixing It Up

In addition to thoughtful workstation design, privacy needs can also be met with alternative spaces. Enclosed conference rooms provide privacy for confidential meetings or phone conversations. They can also act as retreats or a change of view for workers who need a break from an individual workstation.

In the same way, shared activity areas—everything from cafeterias to community gathering spaces to assigned, open group areas—allow for discussions and collaboration when confidentiality is not an issue and when team building, rather than retreat, is the goal.

"Third places," such as coffeehouses, libraries, or even an outdoor area on a corporate campus, are also potential workplaces. A surge in use of public places for work has been created by employees who have been untethered by mobile technology—laptops, cell phones, PDAs—that still allow them to stay connected to team members and employers.

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Whether it is through direct means, such as opening or closing a door, or indirect means, such as moving to a more appropriate space, the more control mechanisms workers have at their disposal, the more satisfied they are likely to be with the amount of privacy they have.[26] All these layers of choice allow workers to feel less tied to one space with one level of privacy. In this new office landscape, choice reduces frustration over perceived or real lack of privacy by providing different venues for different tasks, and by addressing the individual needs of each person in an organization.

Notes

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