

Workplace Privacy

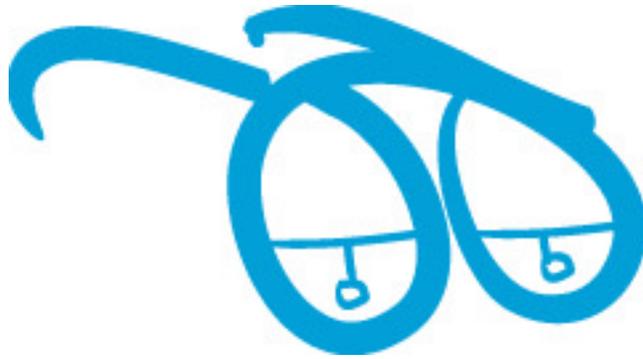
A Changing Equation



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“The one all-purpose, individual workplace that effectively supports both high-privacy and high-interaction activities is a myth. Private and shared activities are very different, and they’re more effectively supported with different worksettings.”

Fritz Steele, Ph.D.



Isolation and Interaction

Privacy in the workplace used to be a simple equation. The higher your status, the more private your office. Not anymore.

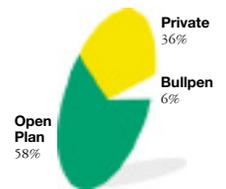
And the walls come down

Ever since the late 1980s when American businesses began flattening their ranks and reorganizing into teams as ways of speeding information flow, private offices slowly have been shown the door.

In an effort to help workers communicate more effectively and function better in teams, businesses have moved toward providing more collaborative environments. As hierarchical levels have merged and lines have blurred, some managers have left high-privacy offices and moved into less enclosed spaces where they can be more accessible to staff.

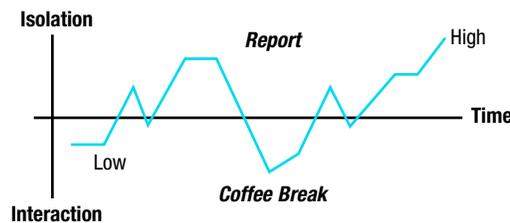
Growing acceptance of alternative solutions to drywall offices has further fueled a trend toward more open, modular landscapes. The new designs emphasize working together over working apart. Where walls do go up, they are more often made of glass.

There is still a need, however, for privacy in the workplace. More than ever before, high performance workplaces in the knowledge age need to provide workers with opportunities for both privacy and interaction.



Office Type

The ratio of open plan to private offices is consistent with previous studies. Bullpen seating, or open areas with no partitions, is declining.



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For many workers, privacy levels ebb and flow throughout the day. Isolation is at a high during report writing; interaction peaks during the coffee break.

Competing Priorities

As offices metamorphose from rigid, status-laden environments into highly flexible, collaborative-minded spaces, privacy issues take on greater urgency.

Potential for distraction



At **Owens-Corning's** new world headquarters in Toledo, Ohio, five executives are the only people with fully enclosed offices.

Hitachi eliminated hardwall offices for everyone but vice presidents at their reinvented western regional headquarters in Brisbane, California.

A decade's worth of downsizing and real estate cuts, coupled with a desire to improve adjacencies by putting entire groups together, has led to greater densities of people and equipment on floors. In any given work area there are likely to be more people talking and laughing, more telephones ringing, more keyboards clacking, and more printers whirring. With each new wave of technological tools — speakerphones, pagers, and desktop videoconferencing, to name a few — comes another array of sounds.

In addition, an estimated 75 percent of today's office workers are knowledge workers. These professionals consume, process, analyze, and interpret increasingly complex information, then turn that information into new forms. At any given moment, some of these people must work uninterrupted while others must interact.

A 1991 poll of American Productivity & Quality Center members revealed that the two main reasons people felt they needed privacy were to concentrate and to deal with sensitive issues. Privacy was considered the main advantage of traditional offices by 82 percent of respondents. Open communication was considered a main advantage of open offices by more than half the respondents.

A fully enclosed workspace with a door may satisfy a manager's need to conduct a performance review, but that same high-privacy workspace can become a barrier to communication and productivity if the manager can't easily see when a staff member needs help. Open workspaces may invite interaction but may allow too much noise and visual distractions for someone who's got less than an hour to pull together a presentation.

Competing Priorities

(continued)

Where there's a will... there's a way

When people need to concentrate and know they won't find the necessary quiet time at work, they find it in other ways, usually by juggling their work hours. They come into the office early, stay late, work during lunch, find a space where they won't be easily discovered, or work at home for the day:



11.1 million Americans currently telecommute from home, an increase of 30 percent since 1990 (FIND/SVP, a market research and consulting firm).

23%

The ability to work uninterrupted in a quiet setting was a primary benefit of working at home for 23 percent of respondents to Kennedy Research's fall 1996 survey of home office trends.



The 1997 Steelcase Workplace Index, a semiannual survey that gauges workplace trends in the United States, found that 55 percent of American office workers do things on their lunch hour other than eat. Of these people, nearly 40 percent were using their lunch hour to catch up on work.

A State of Mind

Sufficient privacy can help people reach a peak state of performance.

Control and flow

People tend to feel they have privacy when they can work uninterrupted or talk about sensitive issues without other people understanding what they're saying. Many people equate privacy with degree of enclosure. The more sides a person has around their workspace, the higher and more opaque those sides, the more privacy that person feels they have.

During its five-year study of the impact of office design on productivity, Buffalo Organization for Social and Technological Innovation (BOSTI) found that enclosure relates to job performance, environmental satisfaction, and ease and quality of communication.

The real issue, however, may be control.

Dr. Alan F. Westin defined privacy in 1967 as “the claim of individuals, groups, or institutions to determine for themselves when, how, and to what extent information about them is communicated to others.”

The ability to work uninterrupted is particularly important to today's knowledge workers who regularly perform complex tasks requiring their full attention. Having sufficient privacy can help these people reach a peak state of performance, also known as flow. Ever gotten so absorbed in a task you lost track of the time or forgot to eat lunch? You probably were experiencing flow.

Tom DeMarco and Timothy Lister, co-authors of *Peopleware: Productive Projects and Teams*, claim reaching a state of flow requires at least 15 minutes of ramp-up concentration and that people are particularly sensitive to interruptions during this immersion time. When people are disrupted out of flow, they can't just go right back in. Rather, they must go through an additional 15 minutes or more of immersion. Frequent interruptions to people trying to reach flow can lead to increased frustration and reduced productivity.

“State-of-consciousness theories strongly suggest a connection between one's level of privacy and one's ability to achieve optimal work experiences. Privacy alone can't ensure flow; but the lack of privacy can obviously prevent it. Interruptions, intrusions, and distractions can hamper knowledge worker productivity just as surely as defects, irregularities, and errors can hamper assembly line productivity.”

Mark Baloga
Steelcase Principal Researcher

Components of Privacy

How much privacy a person or group needs at any given moment usually depends on the nature of their task.

What to consider

Steelcase believes that to provide appropriate levels of privacy, the physical setting must be intelligently designed, and behavioral protocols must be intentionally established. Steelcase defines requirements for privacy in terms of four overlapping components:

1. acoustical
2. visual
3. territorial
4. informational

With thoughtful planning, it's possible to augment elements of physical privacy (walls, panels, sound barriers) with the right mix of protocols (rules, guidelines, standards) to achieve the nature and level of privacy desired. For the physical setting, it's important to analyze employees' functional privacy needs and provide worksettings with an appropriate range of privacy options.

Behavioral protocols must take into account the entire business culture: geographic location, organizational history, worker expectations, management style, communication needs. Protocols help people signal their availability, and vary according to cultural norms.



Acoustical Privacy

Tips

- Build in some quiet spaces where people can retreat
- Think integration: a high-absorption ceiling system and acoustical panels to absorb sound, vertical acoustical barriers for blocking sound, a sound masking system to cover sound
- Separate noisy areas from quiet areas
- High-pitched sounds like voices travel best in a straight line; minimize intrusions by blocking direct sight lines between people
- Locate phones on opposite sides of adjacent workspaces so occupants face away from each other when talking on the phone
- Seal openings in ceilings above rooms to prevent sounds from leaking through
- Too much clutter on acoustical panels can diminish acoustical properties

While some sounds may be meaningful to the person or group that creates them, those same sounds may be considered noise by the people they bother.

Shhhh...

People may feel they have acoustical privacy when they can work undisturbed by noise or when they can create noise of their own without disturbing other people.

A recent survey of office workers, co-sponsored by the American Society of Interior Designers, Steelcase, Armstrong World Industries, and other workplace industry manufacturers, found that

- 71% of respondents find noise the most significant workplace distraction
- 81% believe a quieter environment would help them be more productive

While people may be more easily bothered by sounds they can't control or don't expect, not all sound is bad. It can be bad if it's distracting people who are trying to concentrate on a task. It can be good when it motivates people to perform at higher levels. And while some people need high levels of quiet when they work, some people concentrate better with some sort of background hum. Having some background sound can help people feel more comfortable that what they're saying won't stand out against the backdrop of the office.

Just as too much noise can cause stress and impede productivity, too much quiet can actually interfere with the ability to focus. If it's so quiet you can hear the proverbial pin drop, the sound of that pin dropping will be distracting. Similarly, too much quiet can hamper effective communication. People may feel reluctant to discuss confidential information if they think other people will be able to understand their words.

Traditional drywall offices are not always a foolproof solution for people requiring conversational privacy. If the ceiling above a room isn't sealed, conversations may travel into adjacent work spaces.



Visual Privacy

Too much visual privacy can lead to feelings of isolation. Too little visual privacy can leave people feeling exposed.

A balance

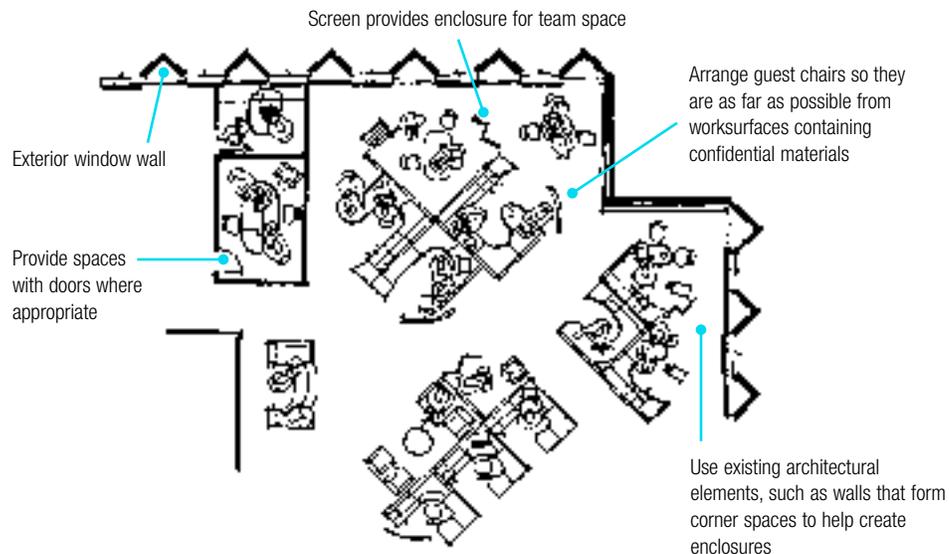
People may feel they have visual privacy when they can work without feeling they're being observed or work undistracted by sudden movements and other unexpected sights. Ever see windows on workspaces covered over with posters or computer paper? Most likely, employees employed this tactic to achieve greater visual privacy.

In Minneapolis, Minnesota, National City Bank's move out of a high-privacy environment and into an all-glass setting in a retail mall raised issues of visual privacy. Employees are able to easily see everyone and everything throughout the bank. So can the public, as storefront windows are all that separate the bank from the mall's central walkways.

Some individuals who felt they needed more privacy had a hard time adjusting. A few people resigned. The majority stayed. Bank employees have learned that small changes and signals allow them to turn up the level of visual privacy and communicate that they are busy and not available. Among the informal visual signals they've developed: turn their chairs to face away from neighbors, retreat to unassigned worksettings in out-of-the-way locations, perform high-concentration tasks in the morning before interruptions usually start. For months, one employee created greater visual privacy for himself by blocking sight lines into his workspace with a large easel.

Tips

- Lay out space to direct general traffic away from work areas
- Analyze people's functional needs for standing-height privacy vs seated-height privacy
- Use taller partitions, file cabinets, stacked screens, and upper storage components to provide standing-height privacy
- Use lower partitions, screens, or storage units for seated-height privacy
- Install window blinds or curtains in spaces with glass walls
- Use opaque barriers where higher visual privacy is required



Territorial Privacy

Human beings have an innate need to stake claim to a piece of ground. And once we have it, we mark it and control access to it with fences, walls, and gates.

Identity and productivity

Even in modern sub-divisions where one house looks pretty much like another and a homeowner's association stands guard to ensure uniformity, people may use flower beds, potted plants, window coverings, and door decorations to personalize what's theirs. Having a place to call our own often contributes to our sense of self-worth and personal identity.

The desire for territorial privacy carries into the office. People are running so much faster than before, juggling more projects, working longer hours, and dealing with more complex information. They need a place where they can retreat, regroup, refuel. They need an environment where they can set out photos and plants, create piles of papers and books, put up their feet, and let down their hair without getting in anyone else's way.

The trend toward non-dedicated workspaces for people who spend most of their time outside the main office has caused a dramatic shift in their sense of territorial privacy. For these people, who no longer have desks to call their own, "what's theirs" in the main office has taken on an entirely different meaning. It may mean a dedicated phone extension, one or two locking drawers in a file cabinet or designated "unassigned" space.

Teams also need some measure of territorial privacy. Members of a newly formed team may bond faster and enjoy greater cohesiveness if given a project room of their own. They may achieve this form of privacy in a dedicated room that is under their control. Or, they may claim an area on a temporary basis, enclosing their group with easels, rolling files, screens, and other privacy-enhancing tools.

Informational Privacy

When people have informational privacy, they feel comfortable that others won't interrupt a confidential meeting, and can't read confidential documents in their workspace.

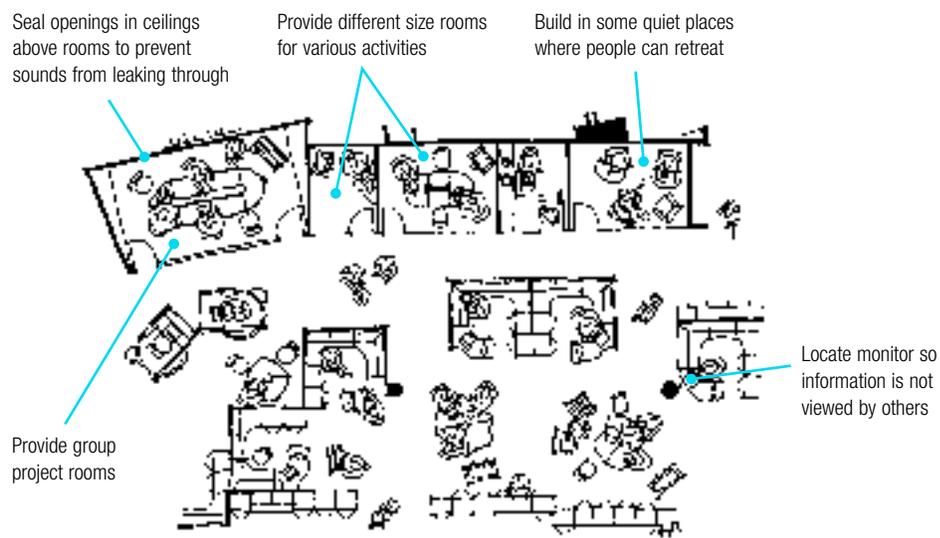
Helpful barriers

Achieving informational privacy may require having a door to close on a meeting and thinking twice about what is left in view when you're not in your workspace. It may require sitting at your desk in a way that approaching people can't read over your shoulder. It may involve having a drawer or other place to easily stow documents so they can't be read upside down by someone sitting or standing in front of you.

Teams with sufficient informational privacy can benefit from uninterrupted conversation and smoother workflow. A team with an assigned project room — a room that locks and which they don't have to set up each time they come in or clean before they leave — can quickly pick up where they left off every time they meet.

Tips

- provide spaces with doors where appropriate
- isolate workers from main traffic patterns
- place monitors in opposite corners of adjacent, low-boundary workspaces
- use screensavers on computer monitors
- provide lockable storage
- arrange guest chairs so they are as far as possible from worksurfaces containing confidential materials.



Trade-offs

With varying needs for interaction and privacy, there's no such thing as an effective, all-purpose workspace.

Collaboration and confidentiality

A person may be assigned a particular kind of workspace because it's well-suited to the majority of his or her job functions. Yet that workspace may not fully meet the occupant's desired levels of acoustical, visual, territorial, and informational privacy for all tasks.

The question is, to what degree can trade-offs in privacy be made without reducing productivity and satisfaction?

For example, a team may need a space in which to hold a brainstorming meeting. Their acoustical privacy needs are high since they'll be discussing confidential information and generating noise. Their desire for informational privacy is strong since they'll be writing confidential thoughts on whiteboards and easels.

Holding this meeting in a fully enclosed, glass conference room satisfies the team's need for acoustical privacy. The room's glass walls are hung with blinds which the team can close, satisfying their need for informational privacy. Or, the team might choose a collaborative setting within their group's open work area. Since other people working on related projects surround the team, they feel comfortable discussing their project in this space, satisfying much of their need for acoustical and informational privacy. They do, however, enclose their meeting area with privacy screens to reduce visual and sound distractions to others.

Trade-offs

(continued)

An example

In 1993, Steelcase conducted a research experiment at a scientific company located on the West Coast. Members of a newly formed product development team moved into a collocated, dedicated team room. The room was larger than all of their previous workspaces combined, had opaque walls, and a door they could lock. Team members had assigned workspaces within the larger room. These individual workspaces were half the size of people's previous workspaces, opened onto the shared interior of the overall room, and had doors and other features which gave occupants far greater control over their individual working conditions.

Since team members would be discussing highly confidential information, having a room of their own satisfied many of their group privacy needs. On the other hand, some people initially balked at their loss of individual territory and were concerned about how to keep some confidential information out of other people's view.

As people got to know one another and trust developed between team members, their needs for individual, informational privacy diminished. And for most people, the loss in individual territory was more than offset by having greater control over their individual working conditions and having significant territorial privacy for their group. In fact, most team members came to feel so good about the positive impact this new environment was having on their company's business that they couldn't imagine going back to the more individualistic environment they had before.

A Quick Summary

As American businesses evolve to meet the changing demands of a global, information economy, they are reinventing their workplaces to support new business goals, new ways of working, new business processes, and new technologies.

In their book *Culture and Environment*, authors Irwin Altman and Martin Chemers write, “The process of privacy regulation is, we believe, so central to human functioning that it is hypothesized to be present in all cultures... What differs among cultures is how they regulate privacy...”

Workplaces may be looking a lot more open these days, but they’re also starting to provide better balance between knowledge workers’ needs for privacy and needs for interaction. Companies that effectively balance these needs have opportunities to reap the rewards: more effective communication, greater teamwork, higher morale, improved learning, and more satisfied customers.



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