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THE NEW OFFICE

GEOGRAPHY

If you're working in a completely open, partition-free workspace (aka 'the new open plan'), you've no doubt begun to experience its pitfalls. And, unsurprisingly, most relate to noise.

Acoustically, these spaces have two major strikes against them. First, density is higher. While the average space per occupant was 225 ft² (21 m²) in 2010, it's now 150 ft² (14 m²) or less. In a workbench setting, it can be as little as 60 ft² (5.6 m²). And the tighter we space people, the tougher it is to design spaces that work well. There's not only less distance between people—meaning any noises they generate reach more listeners at higher volumes—but many more people within the same area, producing more noise overall.

Second, they favor wide-open spaces over the partitioned ones that provide a measure of immediate isolation. That means expectations regarding some aspects of their acoustic performance have to be lowered and greater attention paid to remaining methods, such as absorptive materials and sound masking. However, these treatments won't have any effect over very short distances. In other words, if you dispense with barriers, you reduce acoustic performance in a way that can't be offset by other design decisions.

Occupants tend to seek refuge in headphones or work from home. They also resort to electronic means of communication rather than risk being overheard by or disturbing others, defeating one of the primary reasons given for providing a partition-free environment in the first place: to encourage conversation and cross-fertilization of ideas. And so, the question remains: how should the physical work environment be organized? After all, you want people to come to the office, not avoid it. It can play a key role in fostering your company's culture, strength and creativity...but only by nurturing the individuals within it.

After embracing open benching—perhaps with a little too much fervour—many organizations are looking to offer occupants more choice: a 'palette of places' from which to select, depending on the task at hand. But is there an argument to be made for the return of the cubicle?



2 DIFFERENT VIEWS ON THE IDEAL OFFICE SPACE



VIEW 1 A PALETTE OF PLACES

Why not reduce your organization's footprint and property costs by adopting a non-assigned seating model, particularly if a lot of your staff are routinely 'on the road'?

Transitioning to a more flexible workspace can also help attract top talent. Environments that offer choice can be empowering, allowing employees to complete assignments how, when and where they desire, in the type of space that best suits their needs at the time. Technology—lightweight laptops, follow-me printing, softphone technology, access to docking stations—enables us to easily change locations. And, of course, getting up and moving can be good for our health.

Hence the current move towards a more casual, textured landscape that rather than giving an employee a fixed desk offers a palette of places (with an equally diverse set of names) designed to support focus, inspiration, formal and informal collaboration: privacy pods, isolation rooms, phone booths, huddle areas, maker spaces, war rooms, coffee hubs, home zones, lounges...the possibilities are endless. Just make sure this 'free address' space isn't based on guesswork, but rather careful study, planning and change management, particularly if it represents a major cultural shift for your organization.

Implementing a more agile environment doesn't mean abandoning the concept of a home base. To maintain a sense of belonging and facilitate collaboration, create neighborhoods for each type of business unit, with custom seat-to-people ratios, furniture configurations and plenty of storage for personal items. Just don't get so aggressive with the ratios that people have trouble finding seats...or rather, sit-to-stands. To make relocating easier, offer a consistent interface and plenty of power throughout your space.

Also be prepared to invest in acoustic materials and technologies. Though rumour had it that Millennials didn't need the same degree of acoustic privacy as preceding generations (some even went so far as to suggest they thrive in noisy or 'buzzy' spaces), studies show that human beings, regardless of age, value privacy and aren't impervious to acoustic interruptions. In fact, surveys demonstrate that it's even more important to the incoming Gen Z.

Many of the negative effects of a shared-desk environment stem from poor speech privacy and noise control. And that goes for everyone, not only those involved in activities that demand a high level of confidentiality, like accounting. The inability to concentrate or have a private conversation negatively affects learning and productivity, and also prompts employees to withdraw from their coworkers, nullifying many of the positives the organization is seeking to attain from an agile environment. It's important to invest in a holistic acoustic strategy that supports flexibility. And that means ensuring this key attribute is considered throughout your space.

VIEW 2 CRAVING A CUBICLE

There's currently such a strong attachment to a partition-free workspace that any other approach seems favorable to restoring physical barriers between occupants—even requiring employees to move to designated 'quiet areas' or 'privacy zones' when they need to concentrate or make a call.

Given that most spend more than 50 percent of their time on individual work that requires focus and a further 20 percent on the telephone or in conversation within their workspace, it's worth questioning if this is truly the right course of action. If we're already concerned about the impact distractions have on concentration, as well as the time it takes to refocus afterwards—up to 86 minutes per day per employee, according to furniture manufacturer Haworth—what about the time it takes to move from one space to another, get set up and engaged in the desired activity, particularly if you have trouble finding an unoccupied location?

If employees are to feel engaged and focused rather than a desire to retreat and unplug, we have to provide them with a primary space that supports the types of tasks on which they spend the majority of their time. For most, that means one that affords some degree of acoustic privacy. Workstation partitions that are 60 to 65 inches (1.5 to 1.65 m) are effective because they extend beyond seated head height. It's also important to seat employees facing away from each other on either side of partitions, in order to minimize direct paths of sound transmission from one person to another.

Providing a home base has further benefits. Though some argue that offering a diversity of spaces makes the office a more casual and human-centered environment, research indicates that many people want—and perform better when they have—a dedicated area they can personalize. 'Nesting'—for example, displaying photos and other personal belongings, and making ergonomic adjustments to suit their needs—allows individuals to carve out their own space within an otherwise shared area. There's also something to be said for the visual privacy afforded by higher panels, which reduces the feeling of being observed by others.

Given that people typically cost 10 times more than the building and its maintenance combined, space efficiencies shouldn't be pursued at the expense of privacy, concentration and overall comfort. Instead of moving to a completely non-territorial model, perhaps organizations should take advantage of the productive benefits of nesting, by combining cubicles with flexible, multi-purpose spaces. While offering various kinds of 'quiet zones' might seem to simplify acoustical planning, these spaces don't offer a facility-wide solution to what are, with few exceptions, facility-wide concerns: the ability to have a private conversation and concentrate on the task at hand.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Are open spaces only a problem for introverts? Or does everyone need to do 'heads down' work? Studies show that office workers spend over half of each day on individual focus work and 88 percent of employees say it's the most critical aspect of their job.
- 2 Do younger employees thrive in open spaces? Surveys show that Millennials and the incoming Gen Z are more frustrated by environmental distractions than their older counterparts and also more likely to do something about it, like don headphones. Studies show that a mere 9 percent find noisy work environments energizing. That said, even if someone says they like it, is it best for their productivity? The things we like aren't necessarily good for us—or, in this case, for our employer.
- 3 Are headphones a solution? Or just a symptom of a design that doesn't support its occupants' needs? They certainly send a clear signal that the wearer isn't interested in communicating. Many people play music, which, while enjoyable, is distracting—at least while we're working. Studies have shown that music is good for productivity if we listen to it *before* we work.
- 4 Does collaboration happen simply because design puts everyone within earshot? A Gensler study shows that spaces designed with the intention of supporting individual focus work perform better for collaboration than those solely designed for collaboration.

5 Is talking to someone past your immediate neighbor collaboration or disruption? Is it 'teaming' or 'teeming'? Research shows that after a move to a fully open office, spoken communication drops dramatically and is almost entirely replaced by electronic communication—even between people located close to each other.

6 Is it best to offer employees a variety of spaces to which they can move, depending on the task at hand? Certain activities, such as scheduled group meetings, are best done in specialized spaces, but recent studies examining the implications of transitioning staff to an activity-based workplace show that they can't concentrate on their work, lose their sense of community with colleagues, and feel less supported by their supervisors, leading to decreased efficiency, more conflict and poorer well-being.



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