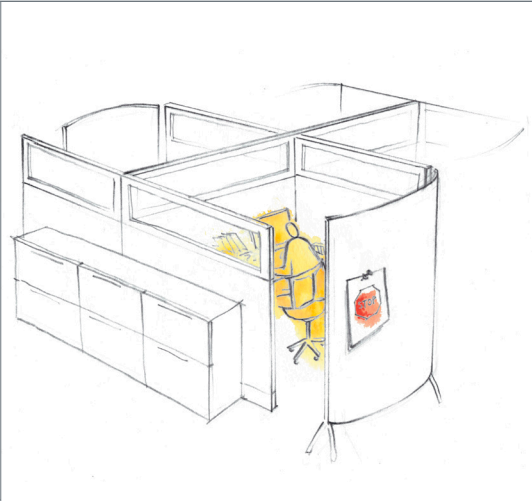# Maintaining Productive Privacy in an Open Workplace

Privacy Summary

The modern work environment is designed to accommodate a fast, flexible pace, to integrate an increasingly complex level of technology, to keep workers engaged and to enable collaboration. Toward these ends it continues to succeed, but there is a residual effect that often compromises this environment: a lack of personal quiet space and time to focus on one's work.

While some might suggest learning to live with workplace noise and distraction is part of the cost of doing business, research indicates this cost is needlessly high and continues to escalate. According to a Basex study, office workers spend a quarter of their day reacting to interruptions and distractions (Wallis, Steptoe & Cole, 2006). This includes not only the events themselves but also the recovery time associated with getting back on task. Constant disruptions also have an impact on health. Numerous workplace studies show that long-term reactions to stressors—such as noise and distraction—include decreased performance and negative physical conditions, such as chronic fatigue, burnout, and musculoskeletal disorders.

WHAT WORKERS WANT

In many ways, the distraction dilemma comes down to a simple equation — the desire for a little peace and quiet. This was borne out of an extensive workplace study conducted by BOSTI Associates (the Buffalo Organization for Social and Technological Innovation). The BOSTI study ran from 1994–2000 and included responses from 13,000 people of several age ranges working in many different types of jobs. It covered 40 business units representing a variety of industries, both old and new economy (Brill, Weidman & BOSTI Associates, 2001). The most desired quality, it turned out, was the ability to perform distraction-free solo work.person answering the phone may not support the brand. Such a disconnect can be confusing.

BRINGING PRIVACY NEEDS INTO FOCUS

Is it possible to maintain an open environment and still provide a measurable degree of privacy? What, exactly, does privacy mean to the people doing the work? Can the often competing needs of individual and collaborative work be satisfactorily addressed in the same workplace?

The answer to all of these questions is yes. This is the conclusion of a series of studies conducted by Dr. Virginia Kupritz and Haworth, Inc. involving a select group of job types and their response to a wide range of architectural design features. The studies addressed for the first time the critical missing link in the open versus closed office debate — the identification of specific design features that workers perceive as providing the most productive environment for both individual and group work. The research led to the following basic points:

- Needs for privacy and communication/collaboration can vary by job type. A data entry worker spending most of a day on a repetitive task may need as much or more privacy as a job type whose tasks are more complex but require less single-minded concentration.

- A three-pronged design solution that provides for a proportionate balance of key workplace issues—basic job functions, collaboration, and privacy — is best suited for today's workplace.

- Only certain design features seem to enhance stress reduction, performance, and/or informal learning.

CREATING OPENINGS FOR PRIVACY

With careful planning and insight companies can incorporate privacy solutions that strike a productive balance between individual and group work. The Kupritz and Haworth, Inc. studies suggest the following considerations:

- Understand that worker perceptions are fundamental to evaluating privacy issues. Their attitudes about what's needed and what works should be weighed before making design decisions.

- Recognize that workers perceive the open floor plan layout as an impediment to individual and group privacy and that 1/3 of noise- producing activities causing problems with acoustical and visual distractions occur in or near one's own workspace.

- Provide design solutions that support architectural privacy based on the types of privacy activities workers engage in and their duration, rather than job complexity alone because privacy needs can vary by job type. A worker performing a repetitive task, however basic, may require a level of concentration that demands a greater degree of privacy than a higher-level manager who may need only a few private moments during the day.

- Offer design solutions that orient and distance workers away from main corridors and high foot traffic areas. In certain industries, proper orientation and distance seem to be more important than barriers, such as walls, panels and doors.

- Place co-workers who frequently work together closer together. This reduces traffic and impromptu meetings that may disrupt workers involved with unrelated tasks.

- Design features (i.e., workspaces located away from high traffic/noise areas, having flexible furniture, room to spread out work, etc.) that maximize a worker's opportunity to perform and reduce stress as well as support privacy, collaboration and basic job functions are of major importance to workers.

- Having sufficient work surface to spread out work is viewed as a key factor in reducing stress and supporting performance by allowing workers to keep up with fast paced work and reduce work delays and errors as well as supporting privacy.

- Certain design features (i.e., having sufficient lighting and HVAC controls, flexible furniture, room to spread work out, etc.) that support work processes and reduce stress may help buffer the negative impact of environmental stressors for office workers and allow for increases in performance/productivity.

- Address sensory issues — such as noises, smells, visual distractions. This includes isolating workers from dining and break areas, as well as providing HVAC systems that deliver consistent, comfortable temperatures.

- Involve HR professionals in training on effective ways to regulate privacy — such as when it is appropriate to interrupt and when it is not — and to help establish workplace norms and protocols/policies.

Working within a few basic guidelines, it is not only possible to design space that provides workers with that most desired quality — the ability to do distraction-free solo work — but also possible to realize a productive, collaborative environment that optimizes everyone's ability to perform, both individually and in groups.

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LINKS

Ethnographic Assessment of Individual and Group Privacy Needs: Phase I and II Studies. Virginia W. Kupritz, Ph.D.

The Impact of Architectural Privacy Features on Performance, Stress and Informal Learning: Phase III Study. Virginia W. Kupritz, Ph.D.

Privacy Matters. Teresa A. Bellingar, Ph.D., AEP and Virginia W. Kupritz, Ph.D.

Design Features Supporting Privacy Activities. Teresa A. Bellingar, Ph.D., AEP and Virginia W. Kupritz, Ph.D.

Design Features Supporting Individual Work. Teresa A. Bellingar, Ph.D., AEP and Virginia W. Kupritz, Ph.D.

Design Features Supporting Group Work. Teresa A. Bellingar, Ph.D., AEP and Virginia W. Kupritz, Ph.D.

Design Features Supporting Stress Reduction, Performance, and Informal Learning Activities for Individual and/ or Group Work. Teresa A. Bellingar, Ph.D., AEP and Virginia W. Kupritz, Ph.D.

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