

[TREND ALERT]

WIN THE WAR ON PRIVACY

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The Open Office Concept Has Promised Greater Collaboration and Creativity in the Workplace. But Has It Come at the Cost of Our Privacy?

PHOTO: SMITHGROUPJJR; ©SHERMAN TAKATA



PHOTO: SMITHGROUPJJR; ©GREGG MASTORAKOS

There's a not-so-silent war that's being waged in corporate offices all across America that's threatening productivity, not to mention people's sanity. Since the unceremonious death of the cubicle in the '90s and the emergence of hip, cool office spaces, like those flaunted by the likes of Google and Facebook, it seems most modern workplaces have followed suit and are characterized by one common feature: an open plan in which there are no private offices or cubicles to keep employees from seeing and engaging with one another.

Flip through any design magazine and you'll find glossy photos of offices without walls, game rooms, and cozy cafés and lounges (see "Trend Alert", November-December 2013 issue, page 56, or bit.ly/1pneVUD) that promise to inspire creativity, promote greater collaboration, provide access to outdoor views and daylight, and contribute to an overall sense of satisfaction with the once-stuffy workplace. So what's the problem?

For all the positive benefits the open plan office has delivered, there is a major downside: a noticeable lack of visual and acoustic privacy. The same people who once dreamed of re-enacting the scene from the movie "Office Space," in which the protagonist took the liberty of deconstructing his own cubicle wall with a cordless drill, are now, in fact, looking for a quiet place to avoid the constant interruptions that result from working in a "fishbowl" and—get this—focus on work.

A 2012 *New York Times* article revealed that while physical barriers have been coming down, office workers have quite literally been building them back up. "They barricade themselves behind file cabinets. They fortify their partitions with towers of books and papers," the author noted, or they

↑ Privacy is not necessarily limited to interior spaces. In the DPR headquarters in Phoenix, SmithGroupJJR created interior, exterior, and in-between spaces where employees can meet or work privately.

employ another visual cue to hang the proverbial "do not disturb" sign on their personal work space: headphones.

"Headphones are the new wall," one office worker astutely observed in the *Times* article.

The Impact of Lost Privacy

Recent research from global furniture manufacturer, Grand Rapids, Mich.-based Steelcase, goes so far as to suggest that there is a "privacy crisis" happening. The research confirms that insufficient privacy in the workplace is not only an issue here in the U.S., but around the world. The company's survey results revealed "being able to concentrate, work in teams without being interrupted or choose where to work based on the task are frequently unmet needs." Further, of the 10,500 workers polled in North America, Europe and Asia for the study, only 11 percent who had more privacy were also found to be more engaged and satisfied with their workplace.

Not convinced? Consider the more substantive impact and consequences of distraction and disengagement in the workplace: According to the Gallup 2013 "State of the Global Workplace Report", the cost of employee disengagement in the U.S. alone is estimated at \$450 to \$550 billion. If that statistic seems high, think about the fact that the average office worker is interrupted every 11 minutes and that it takes up to 23 minutes for the same employee to get reengaged and back on task, according to a University of

The separation between private spaces, conference rooms, group work areas, and open office space can be seen as an opportunity for working surfaces in a larger spatial strategy and branded design approach—they're not just "required partitions".

California, Irvine, study by Gloria Mark. Perhaps even more interesting is another statistic discovered by Dr. Glen Wilson at the University of London, which revealed that men, on average, lose a total of 15 IQ points while multitasking while women lose five IQ points—a reduction in cognitive ability that is sure to have a measurable impact on the quality of work performed.

The privacy pendulum, as it were, appears to have swung too far.

"Privacy is more important than ever, and I think that the misconception of a lot of [building] owners and employers is that if they reduce the footprint and put everybody in these open work environments then they're just going to collaborate all day long and save real estate," observes Allison Arnone, LEED AP, EDAC, principal planner and workplace strategist, HDR Architecture Inc., Princeton, N.J. "The trend across every market sector is to increase collaboration, and it certainly has benefits to improve all kinds of things. But there are huge negative consequences to not having a balanced environment that provides privacy."

Part of the misconception stems from a faulty

definition of the term "open office," according to Zach Meade, lead designer at San Francisco-based architecture and design firm, Blitz. What most people think of when they hear the phrase is a large space without walls and a seemingly endless series of workstations linked together with a few meeting rooms sprinkled in for good measure.

"That's not the case at all," Meade suggests. "I don't think that's the kind of place that anyone would really want to work in. When we say open office environment, we're talking about opening up the spaces but also creating zones where people can actually come together as groups and utilize spaces together."

One Size Does Not Fit All

Meade's description of the common misconception—what amounts to a fishbowl—is often the result when companies rush to create or retrofit a space using a popular approach to workplace design without thinking through the implications.

"When we see [the open plan] not work, it was





↑ United Way was able to lease the grand banking hall of a main-line (former) downtown Detroit bank for its regional headquarters. Simple interventions addressed a mobile workforce, including free-address small office pods for conference calls and heads-down work.

because there was no knowledge or care given to what actually was being done in that office—how many different people or different types of work are being done at the same time,” explains Sven Shockey, AIA, LEED AP, principal at SmithGroupJJR, Washington, D.C. “There was a one-size-fits-all solution applied without any relief space.”

What this realization points to is not so much that the open office concept is a failure by any stretch but rather that with any new design or concept, a universal application is rarely the most effective one.

“There is no silver bullet for how to provide that kind of space,” Arnone suggests. “The very worst thing to do—and we see it all the time—is to design big, open spaces filled with this open-bench-style seating and not enough closed work spaces for private work.”

Effective workplace design must be tailored to an organization’s DNA, its culture and the types of work being done. In other words, it must be thoughtful and flexible, addressing the needs of its users while providing ample room for privacy and focused work.

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, there are a number of approaches to workplace design

that can help combat the assault on privacy, particularly in offices that have embraced the open office concept. Consider the following:

■ **RECONFIGURATION** David Varner, Washington studio leader and workplace national practice leader at SmithGroupJJR, notes a holistic view of the whole floor plan across the company is needed to choose the right space to reconfigure for privacy—not one that is in the middle of a busy thoroughfare, for example. Some clients might come back and request additional private spaces, in which case Shockey says they might add glass or architectural panel solutions to address the issue.

“Visual and acoustic privacy is really important, and we should also say technology is really critical, too,” Varner says. “If people can’t be portable and can’t be productive in these spaces, then there is no point.” He adds building owners should be careful to spend their money in the right places and avoid applying a thin solution that will not result in the desired outcomes.

■ **QUIET ZONES/LIBRARIES** “We like to provide a quiet, library zone or some kind of quiet focus room for people to go where there’s no talking allowed, no other noise-generating activity allowed in that

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↑ Muscatine, Iowa-based HON reprogrammed its headquarters into a mix of open workstations, private offices and collaboration zones.

↓ In the Advisory Board Co.'s San Francisco offices, a track-mounted curtain provides opportunity for visual privacy when needed and adds a softer, more informal texture to the space.

room," Arnone says. "There should be at least one of those provided per floor." These "study zones" might accommodate eight to 10 people that allow for focused work to take place. In fact, Arnone says these types of spaces are the No. 1 request HDR receives from its clients in the academic sector.

■ **THE THIRD/HYBRID SPACE** Another option in the quest for privacy is for building owners and employers to consider adding a third space—not home, not work but something in between, such as a coffee shop, that's carved out of an existing floor space that's distinct from the office environment, according to Varner. Shockey adds, "It doesn't feel like a totally branded space; it really feels like an authentic, vibrant café space, and there are certain techniques you can use—maybe with high-backed banquettes or the arrangement of the space, incorporating technology in there—so that it really can function as a pure café but also as a really valuable additional typology of space for people to work in."

Meade suggests similar hybrid spaces that utilize booths or banquette-type seating—a small, enclosed all-hands area, for example, where there is separation from the open space for perhaps six to eight employees to sit down quietly and collaborate in small groups or hold impromptu meetings without being entirely enclosed.

■ **PHONE BOOTHS** "Something we'll employ heavily in a lot of our work is private phone booths, which are just rooms for one, two or three people where they can sit in there all day if they want," Meade notes. If employ-

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ees have a private phone call for example—personal, work-related or whatever it may be—these small-footprint phone booths are spaces people can utilize without having to leave the office.

■ **FURNITURE** Although many furniture manufacturers have (rightfully) attempted to address the issue of acoustical and/or visual privacy in their products, there is a distinct difference between implied privacy and psychological privacy, Shockey notes.


“I think furniture can only go so far,” he says. “There are some really ingenious solutions out there for furniture but I think a lot of them are not necessarily applicable to the business environment. They might be more applicable to a university lounge-type environment or a semi-public environment, but some of the high-back furniture systems, for example, have very limited application in commercial settings.”

Still, in a retrofitting scenario where existing floor plans or expensive renovations are a barrier to addressing privacy issues thoroughly, there are a number of furniture solutions that can help improve a sense of visual and acoustic privacy.

Winning the Privacy War through Permission

At the end of the day, addressing privacy concerns in the physical design of an office environment will only be as effective as the corporate culture that enables (or discourages) it. In other words, all the quiet zones and additional conference rooms will be to no avail if management frowns upon those employees found using them.

“There has to be a culture of permission,” Shockey insists. “If somebody is an introvert and they feel that for them to really get their job done, they need to spend a half day in some kind of an enclosed space—enclave, huddle room or whatever you want to call it—there has to be a culture of permission where they feel like they can do that, as well as the physical space to do it.”

Ultimately, people are all different, and their work styles and needs vary from day to day or even hour by hour. It’s the nature of the modern knowledge worker. Companies that embrace their diversity and provide ample space for employees to switch gears from collaboration to quiet, focused work will be the ones that win the war on privacy—and reap the benefits of a peaceful workplace. 

Several of HDR’s projects address privacy concerns by incorporating a variety of spaces for focused work and quiet reflection as seen in the University of Oregon, Lewis Integrative Science Building, Eugene (top photo); University of Maryland, Physical Sciences Complex, College Park (second photo from top); and Unilever, Agile Workplace, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. (bottom two photos).