

Creating an Easier Transition Out of Private Offices



Moving out of enclosed offices into workstations is one of the more difficult workplace changes to make, since it almost always has emotional and political issues tied to it. Effectively supporting that change will require addressing three aspects: the personal attachment to status and territory, issues of control over noise and disruption, and satisfying functional requirements. A successful transition will also depend on discussions with those affected that explain the reasoning: what desired behaviors this new arrangement will foster, how the obvious tradeoffs will be addressed, and how those affected might benefit and not just the organization's bottom line.

But having said all that, moving people out of private offices should be grounded by sound reasoning and realistic assumptions.

Let me start by citing Louis Sullivan and his famous observation that "Form Follows Function." The most often cited benefit to open plan is to support greater levels of collaboration – widely believed to be critically important to organizational effectiveness. By helping workers to see and find each other to solve problems together or just have a brief interaction, overhear their teammates, and be more aware of what's going on, knowledge work is enabled. Research suggests that high levels of awareness, for example, are beneficial to teams and groups who are under intense time pressures and need to share information or get rapid feedback, or to coordinate interdependent tasks; and can help newcomers to

integrate into an organization (Heerwagen, p.513). But the trade-offs are also well known – noise and interruptions can undermine the thinking and processing tasks that are also a critical part of knowledge work.

Many organizations have made the choice to move (more) workers from closed offices to open plan to reap the benefits of greater interaction, and have used several strategies to minimize the downsides and the less conscious, more emotional issues surrounding this topic.

The Issues

Certainly we all appreciate the meaning that gets attached to a private office. For many, it represents accomplishment and status - especially in those organizations that use a range of open to closed individual work areas, assigned on the basis of rank. It can also be a sanctuary or the one domain over which they can exert control - the freedom from interruptions or visual or acoustical distractions to do their best work or manage that particularly delicate client phone call. Historically we also assumed that the vast majority of activities a workers spent their day doing were done in that office – with perhaps the exception of the (scheduled-in-advance) large meeting held in a conference room. Cubicles were for lower ranks, whose work was more processing in nature and for which privacy was not required.

If we “unpack” all this, there are three aspects to consider: status, control, and function.

Status

While this clearly has a very personal side to it, often this is driven by the norms of the organization. Said a different way, if the company I work for uses offices to distinguish one level of worker from another, I will want what my rank entitles me to. If the rules change, and my level no longer gets offices, I can live with that as long as everyone in my rank is treated alike. And if no one gets an office anymore, I can't really complain, can I?

This last argument is why many organizations go from status or entitlement-based standards to a one-size-fits-all approach. Not only is it cheaper and easier to manage (although it, too, has its downsides), but it purges the organization of the 'space-as-entitlement' mentality.

Control

That office door lets workers control interruptions - often signaling the occupant's willingness to be disturbed. They're also (somewhat, if they have a glass front wall) protected from distraction from their neighbors by their four walls.

Those organizations committed to open plan address these very real issues in a variety of ways – reducing distracting ambient noise with high performing ceiling materials and/or white noise, providing quiet rooms for those times/days when a worker is not working from home and needs a distraction-free

space they can use while they write that report, or analyze that data, or make those calls. Those quiet rooms can be designed for one or many occupants – as long as everyone obeys the rules about no conversations or cell phones.

Other organizations provide surrounding screens to give workers seated privacy when they're facing their computer, and may allow or even encourage the use of headphones so they can listen to their iPod and block out other distractions. In addition, "zoning"-like planning strategies can be applied to separate quiet areas from noisy ones. Hard wall spaces - like conference, project and quiet rooms – can be used to buffer one team or department from another.

There is also data that seems to suggest that when panels are low enough for workers to be aware of their neighbors, they modulate their voices accordingly; and as they also pick up on the non-verbal and behavioral cues that their neighbors use to indicate concentration, they are less likely to interrupt until that neighbor makes eye contact or otherwise signals their availability for conversation (Heerwagon, p.514).

Function

In addition to the rationale that we assign offices to signify rank, we have tended to provide places assigned to an individual in which they were to do the vast majority of their tasks – heads-down work, small meetings, phone calls, paper processing tasks. But what has turned out to the case is that – on average – offices and cubicles are only occupied less than 50% of the time. This average rate of occupancy seems to be the case regardless of industry, or space type.

What this suggests is that these workers are spending their time either in other places in the building or campus - in meetings or brainstorming sessions, in labs, or simply in hallway conversations; or elsewhere - home, on a plane, in a coffee shop. We've also realized how important it is to provide a much larger range of the other settings or places where they're working when they're not at their desks.

Gensler's Chicago office developed the following two diagrams to explain this shift how and where work is truly getting done.

In addition, Mobility programs, now more popular than ever, and supported by ever-improving technology, enable work to happen anytime, anywhere, provide many more options for finding the right spot for a given activity. Choice - the ability to choose where and when one works – is often the give-back that offsets the loss of control that an office once provided.

Addressing the Trade-Offs

The case for change is challenging. But many organizations have succeeded by listening to the concerns of those affected, creating spaces that more closely align with the way work is actually happening, give workers more choices over where and when they work, involving teams in the creation of new user protocols, and thoughtfully designing these new work environments to minimize distractions and unnecessary noise.

The HNI Workplace Advisory team would be happy to share more about the strategies that customers and other organizations have used to address this transition; and highly recommends the following additional reading.