

## Beyond Four Walls and a Door

Understanding Privacy in the Office



If you ask people who work in offices whether they need privacy to do their jobs, most of them will say yes. Ask them whether or not they have enough privacy, and many of them will say no. In a recent study of people working in both private offices and open-plan environments, about 50 percent said their space “provides all of the privacy I need to get my work done.”<sup>1</sup> When people need privacy to do their work and don’t get it, they report significantly lower productivity and job satisfaction compared to those who say they have the privacy they need.<sup>2</sup>

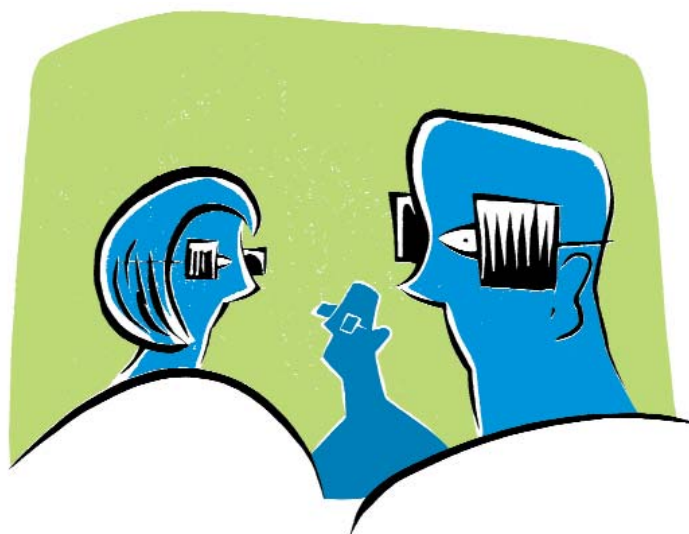
Conventional wisdom might suggest that giving everyone an enclosed office would address the issue. Organizations are unlikely, however, to abandon their investments in open-plan furniture because of the flexibility it gives them to rearrange work areas, to say nothing of the economies achieved from greater densities. But, a widespread return to drywall and doorjamb would ignore another fact: Research indicates that four floor-to-ceiling walls and a closable door don’t necessarily translate into privacy. So just what is privacy when it comes to the office?

### Privacy and Human Needs in the Office

In one qualitative study, knowledge workers and managers defined privacy primarily by the ability to own a “territory,” a space that is completely one’s own and can be personalized. Ideal privacy would provide complete freedom from audio and visual distraction, and also provide employees the feeling they have earned the privilege of belonging there.<sup>3</sup>

To a lesser degree, workers in the same study discussed privacy associated with employer monitoring of e-mail, voice mail/telephone, and computer/internet activities. Although employees and managers acknowledged that employers are using technology to monitor these activities and information, they were more interested in discussing privacy associated with their physical work environment.

According to Jon Lang and Walter Moleski, a person’s need for privacy reflects one of several other complex human needs. They assessed privacy requirements using psychologist Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs for safety, belonging, esteem, and actualization.





Privacy, they argue, “is not a simple response to a single need level; it may be a need for security from unwanted intrusion, or for belonging in terms of intimacy, or for the esteem of holding private territory, or actualization for pursuing one’s own creative goals.”<sup>4</sup>

John Archea, writing on “the place of architectural factors in behavioral theories of privacy,” says, “Privacy is not simply a matter of curtailing exposure to prevent invasions of the self. It must also include sufficient access to interpersonal opportunities. . . . Matching one’s spatial and behavioral conspicuousness . . . is a key element of privacy regulation.”

According to Archea, then, loss of privacy can result from either too much “conspicuousness” or too little. “In effect,” Archea writes, “the way in which we present ourselves to others is a function of our position relative to . . . our physical surroundings. And how we present ourselves to others is the essence of privacy.”<sup>5</sup>

As Ronald Goodrich puts it: “Having a private space does not necessarily mean that a user has privacy.” Among the other variables that affect perceived privacy, Goodrich lists—(1) norms regarding the acceptability of closing an office door; (2) social variables (for instance, individuals working in cohesive work groups reported less need for privacy); (3) size of the work group (people in larger open spaces reported a greater sense of personal privacy related to feelings of anonymity); and (4) task variables (jobs that require intense concentration or creative thinking require more protection from distractions than routine jobs where too much isolation leads to stress, boredom, fatigue, and reduced morale).<sup>6</sup>

To environmental psychologist Franklin Becker, privacy implies the freedom to regulate information flow by limiting distractions and interruptions and maximizing confidentiality.<sup>7</sup> Put another way, control is the operative concept. Other research supports the finding that control of interactions is a key attribute of privacy. A study of 600 people working in the same office environment found that people’s reactions to the amount of privacy they had (some thought it was adequate, others didn’t) really reflected not their physical space (for they all had the same size and type of office) but the degree of control they felt they had over their interactions with the environment.<sup>8</sup>

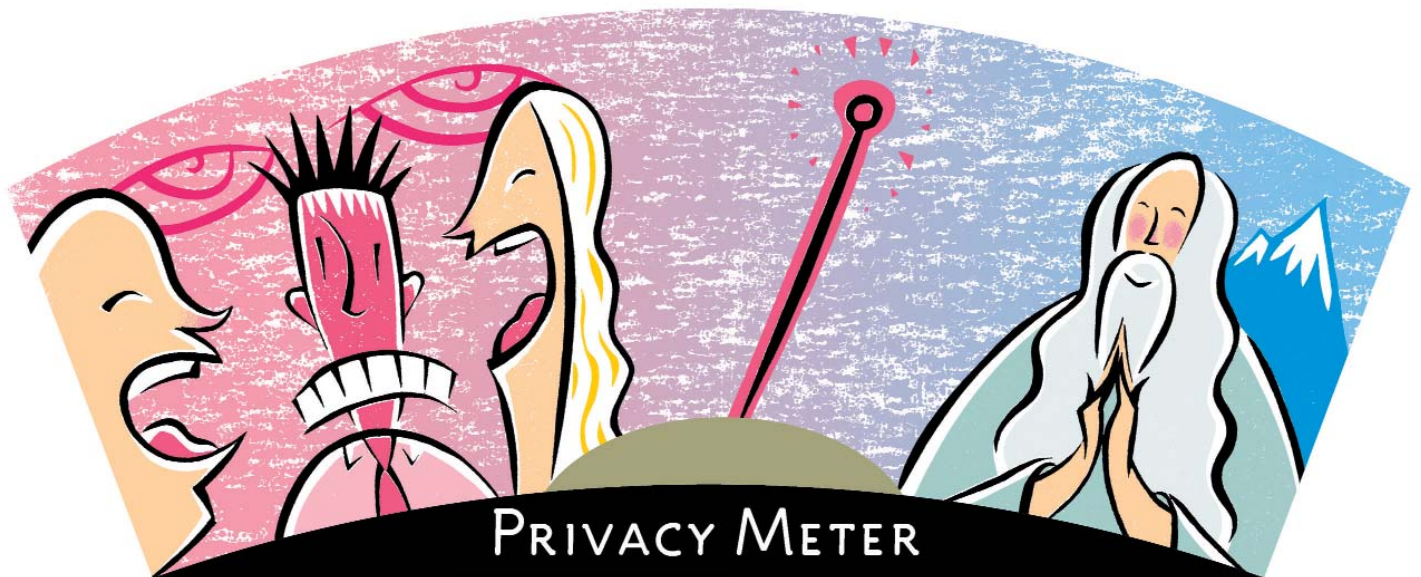
### Privacy Needs Vary by Job Type and Work Style

Some workers need to know what others are thinking and doing. For example, a sales team with a common goal and common customers learns by immersion, hearing, seeing, and repeating the work done by others. Research says that more than 70 percent of what we need to know to do our work is learned informally, through interactions with coworkers and customers.<sup>9</sup>

People doing similar jobs or who are part of a cohesive work team need privacy less and benefit more from ongoing interaction. As a general rule, the more routine the work is, the more likely workers are to need interaction, to prevent stress, boredom, fatigue, and reduced morale. Also, those who are part of a large group, seated in an open space, tend to feel more anonymous, which can contribute to feelings of privacy.<sup>10</sup>

As organizations strive to keep pace with rapidly changing markets and technologies, they are changing standard open-plan office layouts in ways that better support collaborative work. One way they’re doing this is to lower panel heights and use fewer dividing walls in situations that had previously been a mix of enclosed offices and standardized workstation configurations of tall panels or dividers. The impact on privacy—perceived and real—is obvious.

“All the accepted research in this field says you have to have more visual and acoustic openness to get the benefits of a team-based organization,” says Jon Ryburg, President of the Facility Performance Group, a research firm in Ann Arbor, Michigan. An internal study of a team of employees and contract workers at Herman Miller found that a more open and compressed work environment enhanced group interaction. Although team members rated their new work space “less private” than their previous one of panel-enclosed workstations, they also rated “collaboration with coworkers” as more essential to their productivity than either “privacy” or “quiet places.”<sup>11</sup>



By contrast, other types of workers need seclusion to order their thoughts and make headway. For example, software engineers rely on intense concentration and mental referencing, and interruptions are disastrous, both in terms of lost time and increased error rates.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the benefits of physical openness are gaining recognition even among the engineers and programmers of Silicon Valley. As a Netscape Communications programmer and open-plan advocate put it, “The programming code we write has to work together seamlessly, so we should work together seamlessly as well.”<sup>13</sup>

Job satisfaction and performance can require either seclusion or immersion—but some jobs require both, at different times in a given workday. People prepare, meet, learn, retreat, assimilate, apply, prepare, and meet again. Some activities are eminently appropriate for solitude. Other activities require a group.

One study of middle management executives found that, as their responsibilities varied over the course of the day, their desire for privacy and the actions they took to ensure privacy also varied. The researchers concluded that the experience of privacy is “a function of what is required, what is available, and what is acceptable.”<sup>14</sup>

### Exploring Options for Privacy in Offices

Given all the variables that affect privacy, it becomes clear that, as James Russell and Lawrence Ward write: “Places cannot be categorized as offering or not offering privacy. Places simply differ in numerous ways that facilitate or hinder attainment of various goals.”<sup>15</sup> So how can a facility foster attaining goals?

#### The Private Office

For many, the traditional enclosed office with four floor-to-ceiling walls and a door is the ultimate expression of privacy at work. They equate the private office with enclosure and enclosure with performance, ease of communication, and comfort. Yet, in a major American study, only 10 percent of people surveyed said they had as much privacy as they needed—and they were the ones whose offices had four walls and a door.<sup>16</sup>

Enclosure does allow more control—or the perception of more control. It may include the cachet of status. It does increase separation between self and others. It can provide psychological

privacy, conveying the message that the occupant is in control of interactions that occur and doesn’t need supervision to work well. However, Fritz Steele points out that “closed offices provide visual separation, but they are no guarantee of aural privacy. In fact, they may provide a false sense of security when people should instead be aware that they can easily be overheard.”<sup>17</sup>

In his studies of office workers, Eric Sundstrom found a correlation between architectural privacy and psychological privacy. But his conclusion—that this may be “because people in private quarters can control their accessibility to others more easily than in open and visible places,”—suggests that the real issue is not enclosure, but control over accessibility.<sup>18</sup>

Private office dwellers must balance control with accessibility. For example, there are norms about having the door open. It is generally considered unacceptable, for instance, for a manager to close the door to the office when he or she is inside working alone.<sup>19</sup>

Even with an open-door policy, managers rate their availability far differently than their employees do. Employees rated a manager who believed his door was open 95 percent of the time as having the door closed 95 percent of the time.<sup>20</sup>

#### Privacy Sequencing

BOSTI (Buffalo Organization for Social and Technological Innovation) research into workplace quality found that the number-one predictor of job performance and satisfaction was having the ability to concentrate in one’s own workspace. While this evidence lands squarely on the side of the private office, the number-two item on BOSTI’s list of performance predictors is the ability to have easy, frequent, and informal interactions with others.<sup>21</sup>

It’s not surprising, then, that people slightly prefer shared space above other types of work environments<sup>22</sup> and growing numbers of companies continue to provide their staffs with open-plan offices.<sup>23</sup> As the office shifts from a place where the focus is on keeping track of things (administrative work) to a forum for exchanging, evaluating, expanding, and exploiting knowledge as a means to create and retain customers (knowledge work), open layouts will replace industrial-era priorities such as entitlement, rigid meeting rooms, and an absence of places to think.<sup>24</sup>

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Audrey Kaplan suggests thinking of privacy as a continuum from “none” to “total.” Kaplan notes that open office plans almost always include alternative spaces that are more private than an individual’s workstation, from casual seating areas to fully enclosed meeting rooms.<sup>25</sup> In effect, people need not one workplace but several, each offering different gradations, or sequences, of privacy to match varying needs at any given time.

“High-quality settings,” says office consultant Fritz Steele, “allow people to control contacts and to have a choice about when and how much interaction they have with others.” To achieve this in the workplace, he suggests a “cave and court” design that includes small, private withdrawal spots (caves) for work that requires concentration or confidentiality, and a variety of public workspaces (courts) such as conference rooms, sitting rooms, and open common areas for meetings and group projects.

“Very confidential conversations and telephone calls can occur in the caves, as can high-concentration tasks; stimulative, contact-oriented activities can occur better in the court areas than in layouts that are essentially just an aggregate of workplaces which are a little of each and not very good for either function,” Steele writes.<sup>26</sup>

Space for “courts” or shared-activity areas could be found by limiting the “caves” or “home bases” to very small areas with just enough space to write, make phone calls, and store personal files. Creating the full range of settings would require various combinations of permanent and movable walls and freestanding and systems furniture arranged to form private offices, open-plan environments, and bullpens.

Phillip Stone and Robert Luchetti propose a workplace that offers a variety of “activity settings”—each of which supports a limited range of activities rather than trying to meet all of a person’s privacy needs. These specialized settings “span the variety of often contradictory office worker requirements.”<sup>27</sup> Activity settings might include private offices with doors to serve as “home bases,” bullpen areas with rearrangeable tables for shared work, and quiet spaces or library areas where people can reserve tables to spread out on, lounge chairs for reading, or a secluded corner for concentrated thinking.<sup>28</sup>

Various planning techniques can support privacy sequencing on the individual level, as well. In bullpen areas, for example, layouts that use line-of-sight guidelines to prevent people from having to stare directly at each other when seated in their normal working positions can reduce distractions and diminish feelings of a lack of visual privacy.<sup>29</sup>

Mobile furniture is another way to give people some control over access and interactions. Movable screens or other furniture that can be arranged for visual privacy are sometimes more effective than a door, allowing passers-by to see enough of what the person inside is doing to tell whether or not he or she is available for consultation.<sup>30</sup> Screens or other movable partitions have the added benefit of flexibility—they can be relocated when privacy requirements change.

Boundaries other than full-height walls can serve to mark off personal territory and provide a sense of enclosure that contributes to privacy. In fact, research has shown that a waist-high wall is perceived to be as effective as a full-height wall in reducing the perceived level of crowding in a space.<sup>31</sup> As long as they provide a feeling of enclosure, a clear distinction between “inside” and “outside,” and only one entrance into the space,<sup>32</sup> symbolic boundaries may be articulated by a combination of many elements, including signage, lighting levels, colors and materials, aisle width, ceiling height, and strategically placed plants, furniture, or low walls.

Whether it be through direct means, such as opening or closing a door, or indirect means, such as moving to a more appropriate space, the more control mechanisms workers have at their disposal, the more satisfied they are likely to be with the amount of privacy they have.<sup>33</sup> Once people have experienced an office environment that truly meets all their requirements for working, solo, in groups, privately, publicly, and everything else in between, the basic human need for privacy will have been well met.

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## Notes

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