

Issues of privacy in the office continue to remain top of mind. And depending on who you are, what you do, and even your cultural background—the overall topic of privacy can carry varying degrees of importance. For some people it is a very big deal. In fact, according to a Steelcase survey almost sixty percent of respondents indicate a preference for a work environment that is away from the distraction of other people. And, in another survey, over sixty-three percent of respondents noted “constantly” when asked how often they found themselves being interrupted at work.

Interruptions can take the form of an overheard conversation, a ringing phone, a simple question from a co-worker or even the visual distraction of someone walking by your desk. They come in many shapes and sizes. And curiously, what one person

The Privacy Factor

By Pamela (Brenner) Hamp

recognizes as an interruption might go unnoticed by another. I remember working next to a woman named Sue who had the innate ability to block out noise. Even when the office was a buzz, she just huddled down and did her work. I, on the other hand, often found it necessary to get up, leave the space and find a quiet location in which to work. When it comes to interruptions the

phrase “one size does not fit all” holds true. Violations of workplace privacy often break concentration, cause frustration and lower the overall effectiveness of an organization.

Types of privacy

Many things go hand-in-hand.

For example, as teamwork and communication become more important to organizational performance so will the rise of interruptions and distractions. Unfortunately, in the typical open plan, finding a workspace that provides adequate levels of privacy can be a real challenge. One reason is because



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many working spaces are not always designed to support the various types of privacy.

For example, acoustical privacy has to do with noisy distractions, like ringing phones, overhearing co-workers conversations, office machines and even outside sounds like car traffic and building construction. Visual privacy is about “line of sight” and deals with motion interruptions like sudden movements, foot traffic and other visual distractions. Territorial privacy is about negotiating physical space and the natural human inclination to establish spatial boundaries. This is often depicted when people “box themselves in” and set up physical barriers (screens, chairs, tables, bookshelves etc.) to help keep others out of their work area. Finally, things like confidentiality and proprietary information fall into the category considered informational privacy. In effect, all of these types of privacy often overlap and play off each other. The point is—balance (between all of these different types of privacy) needs to be a primary driver when designing a ‘private’ space.

Bottom line:

The culture of an organization can have a significant impact on an individual’s ability to negotiate their own level of privacy. If the space is excessively noisy, people need to know that it is acceptable to wear headphones, put up “do not disturb” signs, ask a co-worker to be quiet or even physically move to another space where they can concentrate and get their work done. And while this all sounds very good, Steelcase research indicates that even though over 68% of respondents note “access to quiet” as very important, less than 50% were satisfied with their current level of accessibility to quiet spaces.

It is also important to note that too much privacy can result in isolation and feelings of being disconnected. It can also hinder interaction, relationship building, and the development and sharing of new ideas. When one is never in contact with others—information is easily lost and the transfer of knowledge is severely hindered.

Bottom line: since two people rarely have exactly the same job, work exactly the same way, or feel exactly the same about distractions,

big picture solutions for privacy issues must be smart and they must be flexible.

The Good Stuff

There can be tremendous benefits to an organization that tackles the issue of privacy, including the security of proprietary information (both paper and audio), and perhaps most importantly, a more focused workforce. In order to deepen the overall knowledge of the benefits of good privacy, a recent Steelcase research project reported the following “Big Ideas.”

- If space extends and enhances minds, great private space should increase productivity for the organization’s most expensive minds.
- Since new generations use technology more fully, great private space should give dramatic leverage to technology and people investment.
- When work dictates architecture, furniture, and technology, great private space should increase agility of both individuals and the organization.
- When organizational esteem is wired to self-esteem, great private space should be key to motivation and retention of the best people.

In essence, proper privacy should encourage productivity, leverage technology investments, increase agility and help motivate and retain good people. So, how is this done? As mentioned, degrees of privacy often depend on individual preference and the task at hand. It’s a balancing act. And the best

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way to find the right balance is to provide people with the level of privacy necessary to get their job done as effectively and productively as possible while at the same time negotiating the range of privacy that's reasonably available.

Creating true private environments can be complex. One reason is because they carry the burden of much negotiation. According to Albert Mehrabian in the book *Public Places and Private Spaces*, "The complexity of an environment has to do with how many elements, features, or changes it contains. The more elements or changes, the greater the uncertainty and hence the higher the load. Elements that are asymmetrical rather than symmetrical, intermittent rather than continuous, random rather than alike, crowded rather than uncrowded, or close up rather than distant, all have more load."

Fortunately, privacy needs are being heard. In fact, increasing numbers of architects, designers and space planners are addressing privacy issues and understanding the load private spaces bear. And fortunately, as more and more people express their interest and desire for private spaces, creative solutions and deeper understanding will continue to evolve.

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What can be done today:

1. Add privacy screens or stacking panels to home bases and open team areas.
2. Improve acoustics via sound masking throughout the work environment.
3. Devise a signaling system to indicate a need for quiet work areas or enclaves.
4. Introduce behavioral protocols (rules, guidelines, standards) to reduce excessive noise.