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The Transition from Closed Offices to Open Plan

Moving out of closed offices into open plan is one of the more difficult workplace changes to make.

Managing that change will require addressing three aspects: the personal concern for status and territory, issues of control over noise and disruption, and satisfying functional requirements. Successful change will also depend on a communication plan that explains the reasoning, grounded in what desired behaviors the open plan will foster and what the workers will "get out of it," not just what the economic value will be to the organization.

The Case for Open Plan

The most often cited benefit to open plan is to encourage greater levels of collaboration – widely believed to be critically important to organizational effectiveness.

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 integrate into an organization (Heerwagen, p. 513). But the trade-offs are also well known – noise and disruption 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.

> 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.

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. The "trick", if you will, is to have it become the new norm, which is, not surprisingly, a lot easier when leadership leads by example.

Control

That office door lets workers control interruptions, often signaling the occupant's willingness to be disturbed. They're also protected from distraction from their neighbors by their four walls.

Those organizations committed to open plan should address these very real issues in a variety of ways – reducing distracting ambient noise with high-performing ceiling materials and/or white noise, and 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 data, or make calls. Those quiet rooms can be designed for one or many occupants, as long as everyone obeys the rules about no conversations or cellphones.

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 music or a podcast and block out other distractions. In addition, "zoning"-like planning strategies can 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.

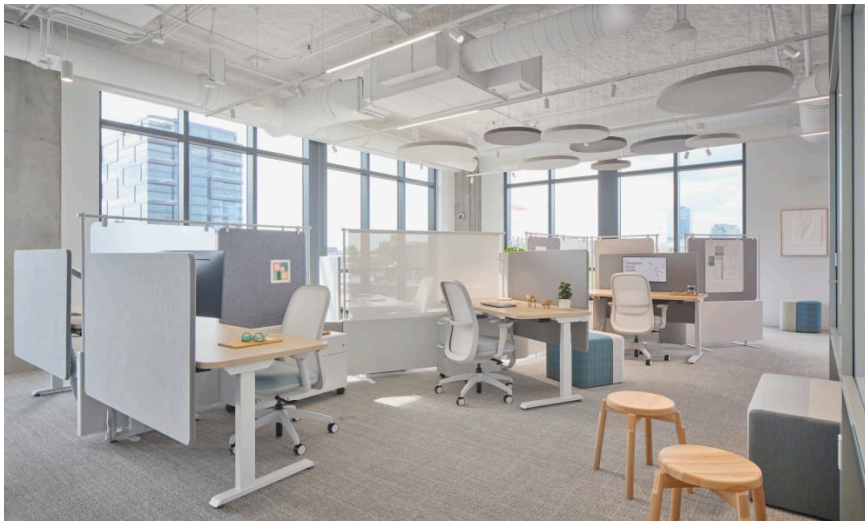
There is also data that seems to suggest that when panels are low enough for workers to be aware of their neighbors, most modulate their voices accordingly; and as they also pick up on the non-verbal and behavioral cues that their neighbors use to indicate concentration, they are less likely to interrupt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

Reinforcing those non-verbal and behavioral cues with negotiated protocols among the team (new social norms) should also be encouraged. While the organization may make formal rules – like no speaker phones in the open plan, EVER – teams should be emboldened to develop more situationally-specific norms. Things like "if you're going to stand and talk to someone at their desk for longer than 2 minutes, get a room" or "our first-come-first-serve small meeting areas should not be commandeered for longer than an hour. If you need to hold a longer session, schedule a room."

Function

In addition to the traditional rationale that we assign offices to signify rank, we have tended to assume that the space assigned to an individual is where they do the vast majority of their tasks: heads-down work, small meetings, phone calls, paper processing tasks. But what has turned out to be the case is that, on average, offices and cubicles are only occupied around 40% 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 on campus: in meetings or brainstorming sessions, in labs, or simply in hallway conversations; or elsewhere: home, on a plane, in a coffee shop. Technology has enabled work to happen anytime, anywhere. That freedom to "move about the office", plus the expansion of team and community settings in the office provides many more options for finding the right spot for any 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, giving 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.

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