

PRIVACY AND WORKSPACE DESIGN

BY BRADY MICK, ARCHITECT AND WORKPLACE STRATEGIST, BHDP ARCHITECTURE

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The rate of change and increasing complexity in today’s marketplace demand innovation for companies to thrive. At the turn of the twenty-first century, many business leaders believed collaboration would stimulate innovation and therefore structured the workplace accordingly, removing walls and barriers in favor of open-concept workspaces. Today, however, employees voice a need for increased quiet time for reflection and productivity. For this reason, architects, designers and employers are scrambling to find the optimal balance between collaboration and privacy.

Subjectively defined

The meaning of privacy in the workplace varies with the individual as much as with the company culture. For example, someone who complains of too much distraction in an open office layout workplace may seek refuge at a local coffee venue. Yet in these high activity environments, the individual’s monitor may be visible to prying eyes and personal data vulnerable to hackers. In this scenario, the worker is able to exert *personal control* over interruptions by merit of anonymity in the workspace and is less concerned with the ambient noise or security of information. For him/her, privacy has connotations of control. Synonym and antonym pairs provide useful reference points for discussing office privacy. Each sheds light on how some people might define privacy and how they view its importance.

Privacy Synonyms	Privacy Antonyms
Closed	Open
Control	Powerlessness
Isolation or Asocial	Social
Quiet	Noisy
Focus	Collaboration

Work behaviors, and the meaning workers individually ascribe to the word “privacy,” need to be addressed and reflected in the workplace in order to maximize worker satisfaction, productivity and engagement.

Privacy and design

Harmony among privacy, collaboration, optimal space utilization, and worker productivity has yet to be achieved. A Harvard Business Review 2014 report¹ on workspaces reinforces the need to find the right balance. The authors Christine Congdon, Donna Flynn and Melanie Redman write, “Companies have been trying for decades to find the balance between public and private workspace that best supports collaboration.” The complexity of the work being performed today has increased, necessitating more meetings. As such, workers report spending too much time in meetings, both in person and virtually, thereby restricting the time needed to concentrate and think about complex problems. Open collaborative office designs are not helping.

A 2012 study indicated that CEOs deem the need to innovate as imperative. Three out of every four CEOs identified collaboration as the most important trait that they were seeking in their employees.² Innovation is a way of thinking and acting that alters the fundamental DNA of a business and its management so that creativity becomes the core fabric of the enterprise. Innovation requires both privacy and collaboration in order to foster new ideas and problem solutions. Accordingly, it is important for design firms to wrestle with how best to optimize clients’ cultural effectiveness, by making sure privacy and collaboration are creatively integrated. Without innovation—without creativity—companies may face severe underachievement within increasingly complex work, highlighting the vital importance of well-planned workspace.

Designing for workplace needs

The answer *appears* simple: construct a working arrangement that has adequate square footage of both private and public spaces with frictionless access to whichever is needed for the function and the role in question. Yet the allocation of square footage isn’t the only consideration in a strategically designed workplace. Just as a computer has both hardware and software, workspace is comprised of both limited hardscape and corporate cultural challenged. Business leaders strive to facilitate the best environment in order to obtain the highest performance and degree of engagement from their employees. Consequently, it is essential for corporate real estate leaders and their design firms to factor both hardscape and culture when designing space to optimize productivity across the privacy needs spectrum. To accomplish that goal, consider these two important variables:

1. *Seats and doors.* What privacy means to individuals in the organization might be different from what it means to the company. Where a person sits, in what type of space, whether near a door or a window are variables that have both personal and professional connotations. How much “heads-down” privacy does a programmer or storyboard creator need to be creative and productive? How much of that need is driven by personality not role? Privacy and collaboration need to coexist in a balanced environment that lets both

¹ <https://hbr.org/2014/10/balancing-we-and-me-the-best-collaborative-spaces-also-support-solitude>

² <http://www.optimityadvisors.com/insights/blog/why-companies-struggle-innovation-and-collaboration>

introverts and extroverts, for example, thrive. Does privacy drive policies around proprietary information that, in turn, governs where employees can work?

2. *Balance and blend.* How will the competing needs of privacy and collaboration be handled? Is there an ideal ratio of hours spent in collaboration versus privately? Of square footage allocated to the type of space? Company mission, vision and culture drive the answers to those questions. How does the blend of art and science impact both the physical space and the state of mind one experiences within it?

Hardscape, the “hardware,” including walls, cubicles and doors, may require experimentation and adjustment. No perfect office paradigm has been created as the nature of work continues to change. Measuring workplace results, and responding to the information by making physical changes, may aid in achieving the optimal mix of privacy and collaboration. It is important for architects and designers to work with their clients’ management to physically support and encourage the behaviors that will meet their clients’ goals. Perhaps color, material and texture integrations would be important to one company, but not to others. Design elements are explored for suitability, but also with sensitivity to budgets and problem solving.

For the future

There are potentially competing costs vs. value to when it comes to achieving an integration of collaboration and privacy in workplace design. Giving workers the ability to choose interchangeable one or the other, by designing spaces for both, affords companies the ability to achieve the optimal mix for productivity and cost management. Designers must realize that while open-space layouts promote collaboration, a loss of privacy sometimes translates into losses in innovation for individuals who require more privacy to be fully engaged in the complex problem-solving aspects of their work.

Hardscape alone isn’t the answer to integrating privacy behaviors into design. The solution involves the “soft-scape” behavioral sciences as well. Designing environments that affect the key behaviors necessary to achieve strategic results can be done with effective engagement in the design process. That design process includes a strategic design analysis of the organizations’ needs, their employees’ work behaviors, and an analytical appraisal of the current and an intuitive imagination for the future work. Human behavior in the workplace is complex, and when utilized, positively impacts the bottom line.

About the Author:

Brady Mick is an architect and design strategist for Cincinnati, Ohio-based BHDP Architecture. Established in 1937, BHDP is an experiential design firm that focuses on creating environments tailored to the client culture and work process. For more information, visit [BHDP.com](http://www.bhdp.com) or call 513 271-1634.

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