

Press Releases

New Steelcase Research Reveals: Lack of Privacy in the Office Takes Toll on Employee Engagement

NEW STEELCASE RESEARCH REVEALS: LACK OF PRIVACY IN THE OFFICE TAKES TOLL ON EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Grand Rapids, MI, October 9, 2014—In organizations around the world, employee engagement has reached alarmingly low levels. A key factor, according to new research by Steelcase, is the lack of privacy employees experience in the workplace and the impact it has on their overall ability to become deeply engaged in the work they are doing.

In many workplaces today it's difficult for employees to find the privacy they need to concentrate, reflect or rejuvenate – all critically important activities in the quest to innovate and for overall wellbeing at work. The number one complaint from office workers is now a lack of privacy.

Of the most highly-disengaged and dissatisfied employees only 17% said they have “the ability to concentrate easily” at work, according to Steelcase, the global leader in the office furniture industry. Conversely, 98% of the most highly engaged employees say that they do have the ability to concentrate easily which is one of the drivers of their high levels of satisfaction with their work environment and their engagement. These findings came from a 14-country study the company conducted with IPSOS, the global market research firm, as part of Steelcase’s overall research about the issue of privacy in the workplace. The study revealed, that there is a distinct correlation between employee engagement and privacy. The more satisfied an employee is, the more likely he is to be highly engaged, and privacy is a key component to workplace satisfaction.

Collaboration needs privacy

More than 10,000 workers were questioned about their office environments and working patterns, in addition to ethnographic studies and interviews conducted by Steelcase researchers. Further key findings from the research include:

- Privacy and engagement are ultimately linked
- Privacy is a universal, basic need, People need privacy also in the office
- Privacy today is about information and stimulation control
- Achieving the right balance between working in privacy and working together is critical for any organization

Many of today's workplaces are set up as open plan offices to encourage collaboration. This type of design is highly efficient but the imbalance between interaction and privacy at many offices has reached crisis proportions, taking a heavy toll on workers' creativity, productivity and engagement. Steelcase research has found that workers not only need places that support interaction and socializing, but also need private places to focus and rejuvenate in order to do their best thinking.

"Over the years we have seen office preferences shift from more enclosed spaces to more open. But in some organizations the pendulum has swung too far," notes C. Congdon, director research communications at Steelcase. "Many people do not realize that effective collaboration actually requires individual private time."

Steelcase research has found that for people to collaborate with their colleagues more effectively they need less 'we' time and more 'me' time than they are often getting today. It also shows, that the reasons people seek privacy vary depending on their personality, state of mind, culture or task. For most workers privacy needs to be present and flow throughout the day as they shift between routine tasks and deep focus or rejuvenation.

It's about control

"While privacy traditionally was thought of in acoustical, visual and territorial dimensions, organizations today have to think more broadly," notes Donna Flynn, director, Steelcase WorkSpace Futures. "Privacy today is the ability to control internal and external stimuli. Employees should be empowered to control what others can know about them (Information Control) and to manage distractions (Stimulation control)."

Workers are not, however, looking to turn back the clock to the days when they were isolated in closed individual offices. Privacy cannot be achieved by simply going back to an outdated model of hallways lined with enclosed offices but by choosing a more balanced approach to the workplace.

The solution Steelcase advises is an ecosystem of different open, shielded or enclosed spaces where employees can choose the level of privacy they require. This is fundamentally about empowering individuals with choices and giving them control over their work environment. It's about establishing a culture that values and respects a person's need to find privacy throughout their day.

"Collaboration is essential to innovation and workers' need to be with their colleagues is as compelling as their need for privacy", explains, Chris Congdon. "The key is to achieve a balance and provide workers with the ability to choose a work setting based on the individual's needs of the moment."

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