*Privacy*

# The Enterprising Private Office

**While the private office has been fixed in place, most everything else about business has changed.**

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## WHAT GOT US THINKING…

Private offices are usually thought of as traditional work spaces that force some difficult trade offs: workers get more privacy but less interaction with others, plenty of quiet concentration but no collaboration, and great image and status but limited function and flexibility. Since private offices usually house a company's highest paid workers, how effectively those workers are supported in private offices is an important business issue.

Steelcase research shows that new strategies for planning private offices, leveraging technology, and supporting the diverse ways people work today, can make the private office more effective, not only for the people who work in these offices but for the organization overall.

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Private offices have changed little over the last century. Four walls, a double ped desk and credenza, a desk chair and a guest chair or two. Yet while the private office has been fixed in place, most everything else about business has changed. The tools people need, the kind of work they perform, and the ways people work are dramatically different from fifty — or even ten — years ago. People have long sought peace and quiet at work, usually envisioned as a private office. Steelcase's Workplace Survey[1] reveals that 92% of workers today say it's important that they have control over the level of privacy in their primary workspace, yet two thirds of those people say they don't have that privacy.

About one-third of all office workers have a private office, but many of those pricey spaces haven't kept up with the times. They're like an expensive dress watch that looks stylish and is fun to show off, but really just shows the time.

Now, wristwatches have evolved into web surfing PDAs. It's time to apply some innovative thinking to the private office, and there are substantial business benefits for doing so.

## DRAGGING THE PRIVATE OFFICE INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

Private offices typically house the highest paid workers in an organization, with larger per-person footprints than open plan workspaces. And while many private offices have remained essentially unchanged for decades, the rest of the workplace has become a mélange of cross-functional teams, group projects, and multitasking.

Many private offices today fail miserably at supporting these new ways of working. They provide no separation between the private, contemplative area of the space, and the public, collaborative area, making it hard for workers to easily engage others. They also lack easy access to tools and visual displays for communicating ideas and information, a key to switching from individual work to collaborative work.

For example, in many offices the only area for guests is across the desk from the host. Sharing documents means one person must view everything upside-down. This tends to put the host in the dominant position. A computer stuck in a corner is also a frequent sight in a private office, but this layout hinders side-by-side collaboration, the posture shown to improve collaborative meetings.

## DIFFERENT THINKING, DIFFERENT WORKING

It's a challenge to meet the demands of today's private office worker. To begin with, no office, including a private one, can afford to be an isolation tank. Workers need support for multitasking, focused individual work, information sharing, and collaboration. A range of work styles means that private offices are often messy places.

The private office worker tends to be older, more educated, and earning a higher income, and these workers are more often pilers than filers. A study by Ajilon[2], a subsidiary of human resources giant Adecco Group, says that about two-thirds of employees making $35,000 or less call themselves "neat freaks." Among workers making $75,000 or more, however, only 11% call themselves the same. And the Steelcase Workplace Index[3] shows that younger (18–34 years) and older (55 years and up) workers are most likely to feel they are "neat freaks" (40% and 37%). Middle-aged workers (35–54 years) tend to be "pilers."

Steelcase research shows that workspace piling arrangements may seem random, but they're usually purposeful. People tend to pile work by priority. What's hot is often stacked next to the phone. Materials needed soon are arranged near the edges of the worksurface. Back-burner stuff — completed projects, just-in-case materials, etc. — stacks up on any available horizontal surface. Pilers are reluctant to "hide" materials in files, because out of sight means out of mind.

The key lesson from private office is this: space can support, enrich and stimulate the mental functions of thinking, memory, imagination and learning. Or shut them down. A user-centered, flexible private office can boost the productivity of an expansive and expensive mind. And better doesn't necessarily mean bigger. Steelcase design studies reveal many opportunities to trim square footage while making space work smarter.

Other issues in planning better private offices include the demands of technology, worker generational differences, the need to give users more control over their workspace, and how the workspace expresses worker self-esteem.

## TECHNOLOGY CHANGES THE WAY PEOPLE WORK

Y-generation workers may be first to embrace technology, but all age groups quickly adopt it and adapt to it. For example, contrary to the popular image of grey-haired employees who are clueless at the keyboard, many office workers over 50 embrace technology. This was clearly demonstrated in a study conducted by the Helen Hamlyn Research Centre at the Royal College of Art in London, in partnership with Steelcase, IDEO, and DGEW[4]. The study also showed that older workers, to a much greater degree than their younger counterparts, want both access to, and separation from, new technologies as their work and lives demand.

This trend will continue since greater numbers of older people are remaining in the workforce in the U.S., Europe and Japan. Driving the trend are an aging workforce, the need and desire for many workers to work longer, and the realization that businesses need to retain and tap the knowledge of experienced workers. Many of these workers are found in private offices, and they expect easy access to technology — whether they're working alone, with another person, or collaborating with a small team in their space.

Simple ways of improving technology access can produce significant results. During Steelcase research into how to best support the work of people in pairs, or dyadic work, a test group was provided dual monitors. At the end of the research, participants reported improved productivity of up to one hour per day. At the end of the study, it's not surprising that the entire test group was reluctant to give up their dual monitors.

## USER CONTROL DRIVES WORK EFFECTIVENESS

What happens when a person's natural ways of working aren't supported? People create "workarounds." Often these are inefficient time-wasters that are accepted without much question as necessary to get the job done. Workarounds include getting down on your hands and knees to find a power outlet. Or trying to keep mental notes of an impromptu collaboration with a colleague because there isn't a whiteboard handy.

One workaround the private office is supposed to fix is avoiding distractions — visual and acoustical — that intrude on the work day, and can strain comfort and constrict productivity. While most people crave connections with co-workers, they also require space and time for reflection. According to Steelcase research, even people who typically think aloud need 15 minutes of uninterrupted quiet to reach peak concentration and performance. And once disrupted, most of us require an additional 15 minutes to reach it again. Says time management coach Joy Baldridge of Baldridge Seminars International, "Interruptions are the biggest time robbers and focus busters."[5]

One way to minimize distraction yet invite collaboration is to plan private offices in terms of zones: a zone for conversation closest to the door, a zone for concentration (alone or working in a dyad with another person) farther inside the space, and a sheltered zone for private, contemplative work in the area farthest from the door.

Not enough “us” space is another common problem in private offices, too. People have to work in cramped corners just to access power and data outlets on the wall, and annoying cords, cables and power strips often hinder access to storage, documents and other parts of the office. People want to be able to take control of their space and have technology access, where they want it. Giving workers more control of their workspace enhances productivity, creativity, comfort, and satisfaction with the office.

## “99% OF MEETINGS ARE INFORMAL”

Professional services firms in accounting, law, advertising, engineering, architecture & design, and consulting, were the subject of a recent Steelcase research study. While firms in these industries show significant differences in cultural values, their work goals and styles are similar.[6]
A private office for these workers must support two ways of working. One moment the worker focuses in quiet concentration, the next finds a colleague stopping by to review some work, seek an opinion, kick around an idea, or ask for assistance. It’s the nature of the work in these businesses: intense personal concentration combined with peer review, collaboration, team work. As one advertising copywriter remarked, “99% of meetings are informal.”

**Minimize distraction — yet invite collaboration — by planning private offices in zones: for conversation by the door, collaboration farther inside, and concentrated work farthest from the door.**

Private offices in these businesses are sometimes shared by two workers. It’s a way to maximize real estate, but it’s also a way to help two workers who work closely together, such as an art director and copywriter team in an ad agency, or an auditor and a tax professional in an accounting firm.

The challenge is helping the workers switch quickly between solo concentration, which requires a certain amount of workspaces, access to information, and acoustical and visual privacy, and teamwork, which means additional seating, ways to display and present information, and oriented space that supports working side by side.

## MY OFFICE SPEAKS FOR ME AND THE ORGANIZATION

Professional services workers also demonstrate another typical requirement of the private office: that it help represent the accomplishments and personality of the individual.

Status, achievement, and hierarchy are often expressed through a person’s workspace. Many people believe that a private office formally recognizes achievement and communicates a person’s standing in an organization. Therefore, offering private offices may help bolster recruitment and retention efforts in an organization.

The blurring of the lines between “work” and “home” contribute to the need to personalize the workspace. As people work flexible hours to accommodate demanding personal and professional responsibilities, they need to create an environment at work that they feel more comfortable in. Unless there’s a regulation against it, people will personalize their spaces. This is especially true in the private office, where workers tend to take more ownership of their space.

Private offices also send a message about the overall organization. These offices typically house key employees who are often visited by important external audiences: customers, strategic partners, prospective employees, et al. So it’s especially important to integrate the furnishings and design to present a coherent organizational aesthetic and a clear brand message.

## SHARE IT FORWARD

Improving private offices delivers benefits to the organization not only today, but also in the future. Private offices that welcome and support collaboration help nurture one of the organization’s most valuable assets: institutional memory. The company’s collective experience, knowledge, beliefs, and culture, represent critical information that’s often communicated almost entirely through personal conversation.

Younger workers learn much from older colleagues. They absorb an institution’s heritage and huge amounts of other business wisdom from veterans, who usually work in private offices. It’s critical to make their workspaces accessible. Sequestering these workers in private offices that discourage conversation and mentoring can limit learning opportunities, and may even slow the development of new employees. According to Frank Becker, author of “Organizational Dilemmas and Workplace Solutions — Workplace Cost, Density, and Effectiveness,” it also has the distinct potential to support the freezing of the older workers’ development and skills, since they also lose the benefit of being pushed by younger staff to learn new skills and think in new ways about problems they have developed a fixed way of approaching over the years.[7]

## THE PRIVATE OFFICE IN PRACTICE

Private office issues range from how people store and access information to how they access technology. From how the workspace reflects their standing in the organization to how well the space helps the organization’s culture endure.

Given such diverse demands, Steelcase research and design consultants explored design strategies for rethinking and reshaping the private office, making it more effective for the private office worker, coworkers, and the organization. It’s not an exhaustive list, but rather a starting point for applying innovative thinking to this critical real estate.

**Maximize efficiency of space**

Eliminate dead space and maximize usable vertical space to make a small office feel larger, more open. Put areas for conversation and collaboration close to the entry. Place heavy storage low, and tall storage only on one wall. Choose guest seating that nests under the worksurface. Even just a cushioned top on low lateral storage can provide space-efficient guest seating.

**Provide zones for different work modes**
Throughout the day, people switch back and forth between concentration and contemplation, then collaborate and converse. Back and forth. Zones for different activities help workers smoothly transition from working alone to working with others. Simple tools can help manage and display information: tackboards, markerboards, and sliding screens that can hide or reveal information as needed.

Desk chairs are not going away, but research shows that people want to modify their posture during the day. Provide standing areas, places to perch, lean or lounge. Lounge seating supports individual contemplative work and also welcomes colleagues.

**Enable smooth work flow**
Research shows that people typically map their work flow as anticipated, active, and archived work. Some people are filers but the majority of private office workers are pilers. Making work visible and easily accessible simplifies organization and helps workers manage their day. Orient surfaces for future work to the left or right side of the user, not behind. Archival information storage goes behind the user, out of the way.

**Support mobile workers**
Laptops, mobile phones, PDAs, and other portable devices are used not only on the road, but in the office, too. Private workspaces should accommodate these workers with space for both quick interactions and for longer working sessions. Equip private office furniture with worksurface power and data access, ergonomic keyboard supports and monitor arms.

**Enhance alternative posture**
The conventional private office typically provides a work chair behind the desk and guest seating in front. But people are most comfortable if they adopt a variety of postures throughout the day. Private offices can provide standing-height surfaces, collaborative seating side-by-side or at ninety degrees, plus support formal and relaxed postures. Worksurfaces that adjust from seated to standing height add ergonomic and productivity benefits.

**Better accommodate technology**
This means allowing workers to select the best locations for their technology tools. Often, private offices limit worker access to power and data. However, the office’s usable space expands when it allows flexibility for primary and secondary technology tools. Provide power and data outlets that let people work away from walls and corners (e.g., out from under the credenza) and closer to visiting colleagues.

**Make space personal**
Private offices often reflect professional achievements. This may influence the size and design of the office itself. A flexible private office lets people make space their own by choosing how they host guests, what personal items they display, and how they stay connected to coworkers.

To help them maximize productivity, provide display space that doesn’t interfere with work. Shelves are commonly used for personal display, but consider an alternative: long worksurfaces that extend beyond the primary work area. This extra space provides ample room for work, and additional display space at seated eye-level.

**Provide privacy and control**
A traditional advantage of the private office is the ability to concentrate and protect confidential information. Yet this security and control is compromised if workers are approached from behind by guests entering the office. And while privacy is often an advantage, it can become a barrier to connecting with coworkers. The primary chair should face the door, or be in profile to the door. Define a collaborative zone and a private work zone, and provide piling areas that are out of sight to guests, but accessible to the primary worker.

**Plan for solo and team Work**
In shared private offices, provide acoustical privacy for phone and laptop work, and a collaboration zone for working on documents with others, and for displaying information for group review and editing. Storage between workstations can provide both seated privacy and a common worksurface when standing. Place monitors where two people can easily view them in a side by side, collaborative posture.

Smaller private offices need access to nearby meeting spaces, which provide both group collaboration space and a refreshing change of venue.

## METHODOLOGY

The data and insights forming the basis of this paper come from two major research projects. First, the Steelcase Workplace Survey, an ongoing research project to study and analyze workplace and worker needs, issues, and attitudes. Begun in January, 2004, the Workplace Survey includes surveys of employees in over 50 different organizations around the world. Feedback on about 40 different workplace issues allow benchmark comparisons of employee satisfaction levels, what affects the performance of the workplace, the causes of lost work time, the implications of different work styles, and the different ways people manage information in a knowledge economy. The Survey results are tabulated on an ongoing basis, and currently are based on responses from over 9,300 workers.

Steelcase's ongoing user-centered research is the second information source. Using a proprietary process — Understand/Observe/Synthesize/Share — Steelcase researchers transcend focus groups and questionnaires to observe workplaces in use. Researchers take thousands of photographs, conduct video ethnography, use time lapse photography, and carefully document their observations, then synthesize their observations to identify important patterns and trends. They distill these key findings into principles that guide user-centered design. By sharing this research in papers such as this one, and through other methods, we hope to inform and inspire others interested in workplace planning.

Additional insight was provided by "Capture It: Knowledge Interactions and the Flexible Older Worker," a study conducted by the Helen Hamlyn Research Centre at the Royal College of Art in London1, in partnership with design firm IDEO, architects DEGW, and Steelcase.

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## FAST PAC

- **Space extends and enhances people's minds.** How we organize our workspaces reflects and supports how we think and work. People want their work made visible and accessible.

- **All generations work differently today.** Regardless of age, all workers feel the effects of technology, globalization, multitasking, workplace informality, increased teamwork and collaboration.
- **User control drives work effectiveness.** A lack of control forces workers to create workarounds, slows work, and frustrates everyone.
- **Space expresses esteem.** It’s the outward sign of achievement, status, and organizational rank. And the private office is the icon for it.

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## REFERENCES


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5. Joy Baldridge quoted in “Regain Your Focus,” by Laurence Roy Stains, Men’s Health Magazine, 2005
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