The Possibilities of Privacy

How to Meet Employees' #1 Need

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Privacy is the top thing people say they need at work and spaces to support wellbeing are a close second, according to Steelcase research. The two issues are connected – lack of privacy contributes to wellbeing issues as people struggle to keep up with demands at work, stay focused and engaged, collaborate effectively, and cope with increasing stress and anxiety. It's not a new problem, but it's become more urgent.

Lack of privacy options for individual contributors and managers is a shortfall at many workplaces, and it's been an ongoing complaint since open-plan offices became popular. In 2014, Steelcase dubbed it "The Privacy Crisis" and identified the toll it was taking on employee engagement. In the years leading up to the pandemic, news stories reported on how much people hated open offices where they felt overexposed and overwhelmed by noise and distractions. Then the pandemic hit and people suddenly found themselves working from home, where they got a taste of what it was like to have more control over their physical environment. Even if kids and dirty laundry were calling, people felt they had more autonomy.

> The addition of elements such as Steelcase Flex Active Frames create visual and territorial privacy in the open for teams to work uninterrupted.

A growing problem

As people returned to offices, the privacy problem became more acute. In some cases, workplaces hadn't changed significantly, or at all. In other cases, people were asked to give up assigned desks in favor of more collaboration spaces, and the number of private spaces shrunk. It's been 11 years since Steelcase first published research about privacy, and work patterns have changed even more. Among the most significant changes are the increase in the number of meetings and the surge of video calls.

When they're in the office, 50% of people stay at their desks to join video calls, not only because they are booked back-to-back but also because there's often no place nearby that offers a higher level of privacy. But, individual workspaces rarely meet people's privacy needs throughout their workflows. They struggle to focus when doing individual work, effectively collaborate without disturbing others, or simply find respite during the day.

As distractions have increased, the need for privacy has grown. But this doesn't mean that organizations should go back to preopen-plan norms and give everyone private offices — in fact, this won't meet people's needs today.

> Design elements such as screens, shelving and strategically oriented workstations shield employees from distractions in the open plan without isolating workers.

Employees want variety

Access to a variety of different space types helps people most, according to research from Leesman, a workplace experience consultancy firm. The Leesman Index, also called the Lmi score, ranges from 0 to 100 and indicates how well the workplace supports employees in their work.

People with assigned private offices are slightly more satisfied than those with assigned desks in the open plan. But, people are significantly happier, even with an unassigned desk, if they have a range of shared spaces they can choose from.

* The Leesman Index assesses employees' experience within their workplace, indicating how well the office design supports work activities and their sense of pride, productivity and community at work.

Privacy takes many shapes

Privacy isn't a one-size-fits-all issue. For most people, the kind of privacy they need ebbs and flows throughout the day as they toggle between different activities. Working individually, people need to focus without distraction, have sensitive conversations without being overheard, participate in a video call without disturbing others, and find a calm place to recharge without leaving the office. Teams need access to places for confidential strategy sessions and spaces to brainstorm and problem-solve without being interrupted or interrupting others.

These activities require different types of privacy. Addressing these diverse needs requires a holistic solution that goes beyond individual workstations or traditional conference rooms and enclaves. People need access to a range of spaces that provide varying levels of privacy throughout the work environment that cater to both individual and team requirements. But it doesn't have to be daunting or complicated.

Need to bring in remote team members or work on a confidential project? Enclosed meeting spaces equipped with hybrid solutions like Ocular® and Share It Media Wall provide acoustic and informational privacy teams need to brainstorm and work distraction-free.

A common frustration in many offices is the lack of available private spaces, especially in workplaces that rely solely on traditional enclosed rooms. However, privacy doesn't have to be limited to closed-door spaces.

By incorporating a range of spaces with varying layers of privacy throughout the workplace, organizations can more affordably and more easily meet various needs and preferences that are also more accessible, ensuring people have the right level of privacy for different kinds of privacy they need throughout their day:

Acoustical Privacy

The ability to work undisturbed by noise or to create noise without disrupting others.

Visual Privacy

Ensuring you're not visible to others and can avoid distractions caused by what you see.

Territorial Privacy

The freedom to claim and control a space as your own.

Informational Privacy

The ability to protect the confidentiality of both conversations and analog or digital content.

Exploring diverse approaches to personal and team privacy

Private spaces can be fully enclosed, shielded, or even in the open to support solo work and team efforts.

In addition to enclosed spaces such as enclaves, pods, meeting and huddle rooms, open spaces can provide varying levels of privacy by adding screens, shelving or other boundary elements and soundscaping to support visual, acoustic, territorial and informational privacy.

The use of cloaking technology, an architectural film for glass walls, can obscure digital screens to outside views. Design elements such as acoustic panels, strategically oriented workstations, and high-backed seating can shield employees from distractions. These features blend privacy into open spaces without isolating workers. Enclosed spaces must be thoughtfully distributed across the floorplan to ensure they're accessible when and where needed most.

Everyone needs privacy, but personal preferences, the space around them, and cultural norms play a significant role in designing the right environments. The ability to control stimuli, especially for those who identify as neurodiverse and need to control sensory experiences better, is also critical. Different settings let people pick the best spot based on what they're doing, their mood and personality, making privacy feel more personal.

Lounge spaces near workstations make it easy to connect with colleagues for an impromptu meeting or to rejuvenate. Screens, such as those featured in the Coalesse Ensemble Lounge System, create a visual boundary and keep distractions out.

Many Ways to Create Privacy

Privacy is essential in today's work, whether you're working alone or with a team. And there are many creative ways to achieve it — it's not just about enclosed rooms, though those are important too. Here are some ideas for creating a range of spaces in close proximity to one another where people can control their privacy and comfort and easily connect with their peers.