

Oh My Pod! Designs on Open Plan Privacy (Transcript)

Open Office Truth Podcast Series: Episode 3



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This episode features: 360 Magazine Editor Chris Congdon, Orangebox Creative Director Gerry Taylor and Steelcase pod portfolio expert Niki Watt

INTRODUCTION

Chris Congdon: Collaboration really cannot be a group sport the entire time. And so if we have all of our spaces designed where you can never get apart and you can never get kind of alone to be able to process, then you're inhibiting that whole process.

Host Katie Pace: Welcome to What Workers Want, the new 360 real-time, a Steelcase 360 podcast about how the places we work, learn, and heal are changing to help people thrive and ideas flourish at work. I'm your host Katie Pace and today I'm collaborating with our producer Rebecca Charbauski.

Co-host Rebecca Charbauski: Hi.

Katie: We're in the midst of our most ambitious podcast yet, a five part series on the Open Office Truth.

Rebecca: We are, and we don't collaborate all the time because as we heard at the top of the show, if we did, that wouldn't work either.

Katie: Yep.

Rebecca: So for those people who are just joining us, they can join us right now. Listen to this episode, you won't be lost. But if you're looking for our previous episodes, we've put the entire series at steelcase.com/openofficetruth. In our last episode, we got to hear brand new research that teaches us how we can focus better in the open plan. And Katie, you got put to the test that you passed.

Katie: I passed.

Rebecca: You did a good job.

Katie: So today we're going to focus on how teamwork is changing and what that means for the way we work and how that impacts the open office. We're going to spend some time with experts and solutions for privacy in the open plan. So that means what does it look like when we need four walls and a door. And we're also going to hear from the creative director of Orangebox, the UK-based company that's been designing for work away from the desk from its inception in 2002. And we'll also hear about an emerging privacy solution pods and how to find the best pod for you.

Rebecca: Have you found your best pod, Katie?

Katie: Oh yes. I love my pod.

Rebecca: We're going to start with new research on teamwork and you and I work together on a team and we know teamwork is very different than it was even 10 years ago.

Katie: True, yes.

Rebecca: It's very fast paced. It requires a lot of collaboration back and forth. 360 Magazine recently published an issue called [New Work, New Rules](#), and it says the average person spends more than half of their day at work working with other people.

Katie: Yeah, that's really true.

Rebecca: Yeah. But for some people, the truth about the open office is, they're just trying to figure out how to do that.

Katie: Well, to figure all this out for real in a way that doesn't involve pizza boxes for privacy-

Rebecca: Or scored snaked across the floor.

Katie: Or scored snaked across the floor. Yes. I sat down with 360 Editor, Chris Congdon, and she told me about this fundamental shift from designing for an individual in the open plan to designing for teams. So it's a very different way to think about the workplace. Let's listen in.

Chris, thanks for joining us.

Chris Congdon: Thanks Katie. It's always great to be here.

Katie: So teamwork isn't new, but your article reports on how teamwork has changed. So why is that?

Chris: Well, I think there's a lot of factors that are kind of coming together at one time. I mean, one, every organization feels pressure to innovate. We've got to come up with something new, different, faster, better. So all of us are on a quest for innovation, but it's got to be fast innovation. So, we can't dawdle about getting solutions out to market.

Katie: Right.

Chris: So everybody's feeling the pressure for speed and just go faster and faster and faster. And you add to that, that it's just a lot more complex. There aren't easy answers for everything that's out there in the world, so the problems that we're trying to solve are just a lot trickier. And so you have these things coming together where it's the speed, the intensity of the need to innovate and the complexity, and that's causing teams to have to work fundamentally different than we ever have before. And how is that different?

And the analogy that just popped into our heads as we started thinking about, of course a sports' analogy, and started thinking instead of being like a sport where each of you is doing your own thing, like running a relay, you're running your leg of the relay and then you're handing off the baton or the project to the next person and having this very kind of linear progression through your work. It's a lot more like playing soccer or basketball where it's like this super fast pace. You can't do your thing alone. You've got to have a team around you. And it's constantly going back and forth and back and forth. And it's just a fundamentally different way of working than what we did, even five years ago.

Katie: Yeah, it's more intense.

Chris: So much more intense. Absolutely.

Katie: So with this new kind of teamwork, is it fueling some of these frustrations? Is this some of the reason why there's so much frustration? And we just heard a little bit earlier, like so much anger about the open office.

Chris: Well, I think part of what's going on is it's pushing people in different ways. So for example, if work used to be kind of this linear paced kind of thing, the office used to be designed around that. And it's not so much about the open plan overall, but some aspects of an open plan space might be having lots of people kind of sitting in rows and kind of sitting individually, whether it be in cubicles or benches or that kind of thing. And that's okay when the work that you're doing is very individual and I just do my own thing and I kind of keep my nose down.

But now when you've got people who are needing to be together and interacting, not just two people shoulder to shoulder, but a group of people, where do you go to do that? And a lot of open plan spaces haven't been designed to really create a home for teams. So a lot of times teams are feeling like, they just don't have the kind of space that they need to work in. So it's not designed for the kinds of interactions they're having. They don't even actually have their own space where they can do that kind of work.

And then I think another thing that people are really starting to feel is, because they're being asked to innovate, a lot of the spaces that we have to do work weren't really designed for innovation. And I think we're still frankly figuring out what it takes spatially to help people come up with new ideas. But some of the things that we know for sure is sitting in a very traditional conference room is not going to cut it, because people tend to be in very kind of passive behaviors that we sit, we listen, we watch a presentation, but that's not innovation. That's just being a bystander. To actually get people engaged in innovation, they have to get more physically engaged, standing up, moving around, trying new things. And our workspaces for the most part just haven't been designed to support that.

Katie: Yeah, and they haven't been designed to support the individual. Right? So now we have all of this teamwork and, "Hey, we're all going to work together all the time. We're going to take down the conference rooms. We're going to have collaboration all the time." And that's good and right, but you also have to think about the individual. Right? You have to think about me. I need to work alone sometimes too.

Chris: Yeah. I mean, collaboration really cannot be a group sport the entire time because we know enough from our work on collaboration that it's an ebb and flow between being together as a group and then you need to go away as an individual to develop your own thoughts and your own ideas or just to digest some of the ideas that you've generated as a group. So it's this kind of dance, if you will, between together, apart, together, apart. And so if we have all of our spaces designed where you can never get apart and you can never get kind of alone to be able to process, then you're inhibiting that whole process.

So, individuals need to be able to have that freedom to be able to be in close proximity where we can see each other and work together, but I also have to rapidly toggle into a mode where I can focus and concentrate and then be able to go back and forth and back and forth.

Katie: Right.

Chris: Yeah.

Katie: Well Chris, thanks for joining us.

Chris: Thanks Katie.

Rebecca: So that sounds like just how our team works, Katie.

Katie: Yes, we are totally a basketball team.

DESIGNING FOR WORK AWAY FROM YOUR DESK

Rebecca: We are. So the question is how do you design for these spaces? We caught up with Orangebox Creative Director, Gerry Taylor on the phone. He's been with the company since it began in 2002.

Katie: And if you aren't familiar with Orangebox, they're a new part of the Steelcase family. They're based in South Wales and since the beginning they've been designing for this work away from the desk.

Rebecca: Gerry, can you start by telling us how you approached design as a creative director?

Gerry Taylor: Well, I think it's a unique [inaudible 00:08:32] of Orangebox and it's intrinsic to our success. I always described that the circle completes itself. We all talk to each other. And part of the success of Orangebox is we're not a hierarchical company, but a flat company and that circle has always completed itself in the sense that ideas don't go on for years before they're coming around and having discussions with the senior sales guy.

And my job as a Creative Director is to try to always be pushing, sometimes just maybe pushing a little bit too much, but one great asset I tell everyone about the company is a great CEO is someone who directs a company but then needs enough space for everyone to occupy and to rise in and do a great job. And for me that's a perfect description for the way that Mino has always setup and run the company. And he's just allowed me the privileged position of being incredibly close to the development of Orangebox.

Rebecca: I love something you've said to me in the past. If you're going to ask people to work away from the desk, which is a very mature piece of furniture, very refined, then you're going to want the places they're moving to, to be serious as well. You want them to have comfort, performance and function. How do you do that? How do you know when you have a great design idea?

Gerry: I think design struggles when it isolate its sales and it becomes a little bit too precious about itself. I think great ideas should always be able to stand up. Sometimes you have to not share something. You have to let something mature before you expose it too much, but I actually believe good ideas should be communicable, even quite early on in the process. I mean, in fact, I'm doing that now. I'm working on new projects now for Orangebox and what I'm actually doing is writing a narrative for what this product is about before based on research, based on observations, before even starting to think about what might this look like. It's describing the culture and I've always found that more important because something I fundamentally believe is you don't sell furniture, you sell narratives.

Rebecca: I love that you don't sell furniture, you sell narratives and not just because I'm a storyteller. You're always thinking about how people fit into what you're doing, so the stories behind the products you're making. And I'd love to hear the story behind one particular system that you have. It's called Away from the Desk and that's the actual name of the system, Away from the Desk. So for listeners who haven't seen it, it's a soft upholstery system. It can have really high backs so it can feel really private or it can have a low back and feel more open. It lets two people sit across from each other or next to each other in a lounge posture. There's just a ton of options. Can you tell us how that came to be?

Gerry: I think one thing that we knew was important is this idea of away from the desk being a system and systems come alive when you give an intelligent matrix to really good designers and really engaging clients who can then take that product and use it in their way, even using the fabrics on the product. And one really clear asset with Away from the Desk is the ability to use the [block 00:12:22] upholstery and to play with the fabric specification within that block upholster. We're all trying to make great work environments that allow people to work in a better, happier, more fulfilled way.

WHAT PRIVACY LOOKS LIKE WHEN IT MEANS FOUR WALLS AND A DOOR (PODS)

Rebecca: It was great to talk to Gerry because one of the things Orangebox also does so well is pods and while for a lot of people, pods are this new addition to the workplace landscape. Orangebox's actually on its fourth generation of pods.

Katie: And it's really this interesting, emerging solution and we can see why. We asked our Instagram followers if they had a place to go to make a personal phone call and 66% of people said, yeah, they do.

Rebecca: Really?

Katie: But what's amazing is that more than one third, 34% of people said no, they don't actually have a place to go if they can make a personal phone call. I mean, could you imagine if you had to walk to your car to make a personal phone call?

Rebecca: That would break the workflow for me. For sure.

Katie: Yeah.

Rebecca: Yeah. I mean sometimes you just have to call your doctor or check in on your kid. I mean, there are things you have to get done, right? And you don't want to have to leave the building. So pods are a good answer, but pods are not chairs and tables, they're a very different kind of solution. And people have to ask different kinds of questions. Like, have you ever been outside a pod, and you can actually hear the person inside the pod?

Katie: Yes.

Rebecca: So the acoustics aren't so great and it's actually disruptive instead of helping with privacy.

Katie: Yeah. It's not effective at all.

Rebecca: Yeah.

Katie: There's no visual privacy so you feel like you're in a fishbowl.

Rebecca: Totally. What makes a good pod?

Katie: So we sat down with Niki Watt, the Steelcase Category Manager for Architecture about just that. What makes it good and what questions should we be asking ([Take the Interactive Quiz](#))? Well, Niki, thanks for joining us.

Niki Watt: Thanks for having me.

Katie: The news articles about our industry recently are about pods. Right? They're everywhere. So in the most recent article, the BBC reported that in 2015 only one company showed a pod at NeoCon, which is our big industry show. And then this year there were more than a dozen companies that did. And for anybody that goes to this show, there was like pods everywhere, in the hallway in everybody's showroom. There were just pods everywhere. So tell us a little bit about why is this, why are the pods so popular right now?

Niki: I think they're growing for a couple reasons. Just from a people perspective, we're all so very overwhelmed with information and work to do, in charge with creating and innovating that I think individual people are looking for a little bit of respite to make a private call, to think for 15 minutes without any interruption.

Katie: Right.

Niki: So I think there's that side of that. I think from a organization standpoint, they know that this demand for enclosed spaces is continuing to grow. So how do they solve it and how do they solve it quickly is at the forefront of how they're making decisions right now.

Another benefit to organizations is really quick installation. So if you need an enclosed space, if you need a room, if you built that out of traditional construction or drywall, that would take two weeks for a smaller pod. And these pods in the market, including ours, they're installing in half a day. So there's a real benefit there just in terms of time and money and loss of productivity for being in a space.

Katie: Yeah. Talk a little bit about what they're used for because I also wonder, do people put pods in and then somebody sits in there all day and it's like, "Forget the open plan. This is my office."

Niki: Yeah. So what we're seeing really is two main types. We're seeing these foam booth pods that are really designed for individuals, stand up, quicker phone calls or meetings or a place to recharge. And then there's pods that are more suited for smaller teams. So think in terms of two to six people is what we're seeing a lot of. And I would say depending on what type of work, how long you're going to be in there, that's typically how we see people making decisions on which one they're going to use.

Katie: So a lot of it is, it's just bringing that choice, right?

Niki: Absolutely.

Katie: Like, I need a place to make a phone call or call my doctor or sometimes I'm on the phone with Europe and not everybody wants to hear that conversation. Right?

Niki: Exactly. And I think the one thing that's really interesting, pods have come to the market so quickly. I think some of the user experiences and workers or employees while they're in there are really discovering, "Oh, while I'm in there, I would really still like a nice experience."

Katie: Yes. So talk a little bit more about that because there are some quirks in designing for pods like, I think we've heard people like, "We just took two by fours, we put it up in the office and we said that's good because we just need some privacy." But you have to think about these things, right?

Niki: Right.

Katie: It's not just visual or acoustic privacy.

Niki: And I think there is a little bit of that, well, something is better than nothing. And you're right, something is better than nothing, but as more and more people use pods, how do you create that great experience inside there? Because the two by four is not creating a great experience for work ticket done or thinking to get done.

Katie: So how do I know? How do I know this is the one I should be looking for? What should we look for?

Niki: From that standpoint, organizations are looking at how to choose right now in terms of do they need a foam booth, do they need larger pods? And one of the big things that we're seeing and that we offer with our portfolio is UL certification, Seismic Certification, ADA requirements that we're meeting. And just because these pods are new to the market, doesn't mean it negates the need from a safety standpoint for those things within your workspace.

Katie: Right.

Niki: So organizations are making decisions on who is new to the market, who is new and fancy, and now they're starting to peel that onion back a little more and go, "Okay, if these things really are going to live within my floor plan, how do they meet those top line needs?"

Katie: Talk a little bit about some of the implications related to a power and maybe fire safety that people wouldn't think about.

Niki: Sure. And it's one of those things. They're new to the market so we always say check local codes because we're seeing some different things. But we also offer some great products. So Orangebox pods for instance and the air pod and the Weber ceiling that opens up and closes, typically negates that need for the fire suppression and to be hooked up to the sprinklers of the building system. So that has been fantastic and a game changer in terms of the pod market.

Katie: Right?

Niki: And how organizations are making decisions and choosing them.

Katie: There's also sort of the plug and play, like I need to plug it in and go and have power and I need that power to be like, not burn my building down. Right?

Niki: Exactly.

Katie: That's what we have in SnapCab, right? Which it's a plug and play solution that's safe.

Niki: It is. It is a plug and play solution. It's also on casters. So in terms of future flexibility for it, it works out great for a lot of organizations.

Katie: Right. And it's small enough. And what I love about SnapCab too is the way that... in our partnership with them is that we've been able to customize it. Right? So you can really express your personality in that.

Niki: Absolutely. Yeah. So we offer a foam booth size, that smaller size unit for someone and then up to supporting six people inside the pod very comfortably with technology, access to power, great air circulation.

Katie: So that's good when I'm, "Okay, I need to make a phone call, I need to go away." I pop in a lot of SnapCabs here and then in our space in Chicago too. So the third pod solution that we offer is from our partner IRYS. And that's great because then if just you and I need to have a quick connect, we can go away. And they also have this really nice front porch where we could kind of go under the quote unquote front porch. Right?

Niki: Yeah. The excellent thing about the IRYS pod is it ships in two weeks. So when we talk about quick responses to organization needs, it really solves for that very well and a very architectural way. It's a very beautiful pod. And to your point, there's two spaces in one there. You have that front porch underneath the canopy and then you have inside the pod, too, with access to marker boards or technology if needed.

Katie: So when we think about providing privacy, it's more than just shutting the door. Right? Do you want to talk a little bit about what else we need to consider with these pods?

Niki: Sure. There's usually when we're looking at products in what they can offer organizations or people that are working inside of them, there's four types of privacy we typically talk about. Visual, territorial, acoustic and informational, and with the pods, the two that really stand out the most would obviously be the acoustic number one. I don't want to hear you. If you're outside the pod, I don't want you to hear what I'm saying inside the pod and then the visual privacy. So to what extent, the amount of glass, do you feel like you're in a fishbowl when you're inside that pod or is there three solid walls and yet some glass offer access to light? We think about that quite frequently too, because you want that almost psychological safety in order to be focused or in order to be rejuvenating yourself, giving yourself a break from your day.

Katie: It's interesting. So I feel like more organizations are starting to learn that and think more intentionally about that with pods. I think you've said one time we may think of pods as this is a bandaid solution. Right? Like, "Oh shoot, we went too far open. Let's put some pods in here so we give people some privacy." And certainly we're seeing organizations use pods like that, but we're starting to see this more strategic shift. Right? Where they're actually being planned thoughtfully and thinking about these different types of privacy that people need.

Niki: Yeah, we are starting to see it earlier in the thinking about workspace and just more of a proactive strategy I would say versus a solve a problem to your point. And with the proactive strategies, organizations really are starting to think through where can we use these today? Where might we move them next month? How could we take them with us when our lease is up? That type of thing. And we're starting to see more and more projects where there's hundreds of pods that are on there. So it's nice to see that organizations are thinking about how do you balance that open plan and what does that look like? Whether that's with demountable walls or with pods. And that strategy's starting to take off.

Katie: There's been a lot written about the culture of pods. Right? So some of this is kind of quirky. I go in the pod at lunchtime and I eat a tuna sandwich and then the pod smells like tuna for the rest of the day. So there's been a lot of like news articles that have been written that are sort of poking fun at pods. And I'm curious, do you have any thoughts about the culture of pods? Or maybe this is even like, things organizations should think about as they're putting pods into their workplace.

Niki: Yeah, I think you're right and people are having fun with it. Right? It's something new that we're seeing over the past two years. So that aspect of it's less formal and that has been fun. So knowing what you're putting into your space again is really important. And what is that user experience? Especially here at Steelcase, right, we're offering our expertise to help design IRYS, to partner with SnapCab and share our research and insights, and the same thing with acquiring Orangebox, giving them feedback on what we know for the North American market to really create those great user experiences.

And then the third thing I would say is more around warranty and quality too, because as organizations are looking at these as flexible assets that can be used past an initial installation, what does that look like longer term?

Katie: Right.

Niki: And how you manage that asset is important.

Katie: And it feels like there's this balance too, right? If you have an organization where people are camping in these all day, maybe there's some other unmet needs that we should explore too. Right?

Niki: Absolutely. [crosstalk 00:24:27]-

Katie: Pods are a great solution, but let's make sure we're meeting all the needs of our workers.

Niki: Right. It's definitely a balance and we're definitely continuing to see this increase in demand for enclosed spaces. That's not going to go away.

Katie: That's interesting. Well, Niki, thanks so much for joining us and being here today.

Niki: Thanks for having me.

Rebecca: So when we talked to designers, they made an interesting point about pods that they should go in high trafficked areas so that people feel like they can use them and they see other people using them. And I know Katie, I talk to you a lot on video conferencing in Chicago and you use a pod a lot. Why do you think?

Katie: I do. I love my pod. I really, really love my pod.

Rebecca: You have a nice pod.

Katie: I do. I have a beautiful IRYS pod and it works for me because I'm on the phone a lot with you guys here in Grand Rapids or our teams all over the world. We do a lot of videos, so people need to see me and people in the open plan that I work with in Chicago, they don't want to hear our conversations. As interesting, as exciting as they maybe. Right? So when we're on the phone, when I have those meetings, we're able to pop in the pod, shut the door. I know that it's acoustically sound. I don't feel like I'm in a fishbowl because there's good visual privacy. It's really been designed for those needs. I will say I use it a lot, but it is not my private office.

Rebecca: Okay.

Katie: Right? So you do have to share and that's the thing.

Rebecca: There's some rules.

Katie: Yeah, there are some rules. You have to set up a culture around it, right? You have to clean up after yourself when you leave. You have to not hog it and sit there all day. Right? You want to be courteous when you're using a pod.

Rebecca: That makes a lot of sense. I think you're courteous when you're using your pod.

Katie: Thank you.

CONCLUSION

Rebecca: So we want to let everybody know if you want to learn more about pods or Orangebox or anything we've talked about in this episode, or if you want to listen to one of the other episodes of the Open Office Truth, please go to steelcase.com/openofficetruth where we've put everything you need. And we want to thank everybody who is included in this episode, Niki Watt, Gerry Taylor and Chris Congdon. And we want to remind you to subscribe to What Workers Want so you don't miss anything.

Katie: So this episode had a heavy focus on creating privacy with four walls and a door because sometimes you just want to shut the door. Right?

Rebecca: Right.

Katie: But our next episode is going to explore what privacy looks like when it doesn't mean four walls and a door. Why do we have all these beautiful Instagram spaces? Is that the best thing for people to sit in? And sometimes why are those spaces empty?

Rebecca: Yeah, you walk by them, no one's there. So we're going to actually hear about a new framework. It's almost a checklist where you can diagnose what's really going on in those spaces. And especially as companies spend more money and real estate on those types of spaces, you really want them to work.

Katie: Well, I can't wait to hear that. So for now, thanks everyone for joining us.

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