Change Management: Readiness for Private Office Shifts

Are you changing your approach to private offices? Increase acceptance with these considerations.

No matter how effectively you're managing your workplace change, if you're making changes in your approach to private offices—and potentially reducing the number of private offices—you'll want to attend to your organization's readiness for this shift. You may encounter some resistance related to this particular area of your workplace strategy.

Taking a holistic approach to change management—providing business context and vision, engaging stakeholders and motivating end users—is critically important and contributes to overall reduction of resistance. But how should you handle questions specific to private offices?

A NATURAL CONCERN

There are plenty of reasons companies choose to move away from private offices. Some organizations are seeking to reduce costs or increase flexibility in terms of their real estate and facilities. In other cases, companies want to foster more transparency or greater collaboration. If private offices were on the perimeter of the building (which is typical in traditional plans), a reduction of private offices can also contribute to an environment with greater access to light and views for more people. Whatever the reasons for the change, sharing them clearly and connecting them to overall business strategy will be important.

But no matter how solid the business case for shifts in private offices, people may still be resistant at a personal level. This is natural, because people may perceive private offices as a signal of status and as one of the most tangible demonstrations the company values their contribution. In addition, people can resist losing a private office because they aren't sure how they'll get their work done without one. They wonder where they'll do focused work or take a private call.

Ultimately, they are concerned their productivity and effectiveness will be negatively impacted. Pushback may also be related to attraction and retention—a concern people won't be as likely to join or stay with an organization in which private offices aren't part of the way the company rewards employees. These kinds of reactions are typical and understandable, and your response will help pave the way for acceptance.

RESEARCH AND PERSPECTIVES ON PRIVATE OFFICES

In reality, private offices are rarely used. Average utilization rates tend to be only about 20%. In addition, Steelcase research demonstrated there is a gap between the way people perceive they use their offices and how they actually use them. For example, observation showed people generally do less private conference calls than they reported and rarely use the side tables within their offices—more often leveraging them for piling stacks of paper or files rather than for meeting with colleagues. In addition, sometimes "private" isn't as private as people think. It was typical to hear "private" conversations outside or next door to the "private" offices because acoustics didn't afford the confidentiality users thought they did.

It is also helpful to realize there are different kinds of privacy. From acoustical privacy (others can't hear me, and I can't hear them) and visual privacy (others can't see me, and I can't see them) to territorial privacy (my space is my own) and informational privacy (others can't see/hear what I'm working on)—all of us need all kinds of privacy at one time or another. However, we rarely need all of these kinds of privacy at the same time. Creating multiple spaces where people can choose the kinds of privacy they'll need based on the tasks they must accomplish can empower people and ensure their productivity.

It's also helpful to think of both visibility and access. In some cases, people need to be completely away from the fray—neither visible nor accessible. In other cases, people may be able to get plenty of work done while they are visible but not accessible. It's also possible to be out of visual range, but accessible through text, phone or IM-type technologies. Finally, there are times when people are both visually available and accessible, for example if they are working in the open.

Understanding these differences in visibility and accessibility can be helpful in educating people about how space can support the different kinds of work they do throughout the day.

Learn more about Change Management and our Applied Research and Consulting team.

A RANGE OF SPACES

A full ecosystem of spaces helps support all kinds of work—focused, collaborative, learning, social and rejuvenating types—and the different levels of privacy necessary for each. In fact, the more open, collaborative space you have, the more options you'll need to provide for people to get away and focus or do confidential work. A full breadth of spaces best supports the various needs of employees throughout their work day.

RESPONDING TO PRIVATE OFFICE CONCERNS

As you're getting people on board for the shift away from private offices, here are a few suggestions:

- **Listen**. Be sure to give people the chance to share concerns and be heard. Understand their points of resistance so you can provide empathy and respond to move them to a new place of readiness and positive acceptance for the upcoming changes.
- **Give** people information about your new work experience. Without a vision of what your new workplace will be like, it's hard for people to feel secure about how they'll get their work done. Be sure to share what's coming and paint a thorough picture (think: pilots) of what they can expect in terms of the kinds of spaces where different types of work can get done. Share information to help them imagine where they'll focus, collaborate, learn, socialize and rejuvenate throughout the campus.
- **Educate** people about the different kinds of work and different kinds of privacy. Help people to think more consciously about the work they do and the types of privacy they actually need. Also help people to understand how much of their work can be done across an enriched floor, building or campus.
- **Be clear** about the tradeoff. Avoid sugar-coating your communication. When people no longer have private offices, they will need to change the ways they work, and this may be a legitimate challenge. Provide information on what will be better in the new space—for example, having more variety of spaces, having more spaces in which to connect and collaborate, enjoying a greater range of choices for where to focus or do contemplative work.
- **Ensure** you're being clear about how you value people in ways other than through the reward of a private office. A holistic work experience includes attention to tools and space, but also to process and culture. People can have a sense of status based on many factors—from other rewards and recognition to having more resources or more choices about their responsibilities. Overall, if private offices are a source of status for people, consider and attend to the other ways they are validated and valued by the organization.
- **Give** people choice and control. Steelcase research demonstrated when people have a greater sense of choice and control about where and how they work, they tend to be more engaged. Give people a variety of spaces from which to choose and ensure the culture embraces them using the spaces—giving permissions for them to work wherever they can be most productive based on the task at-hand.

Change is rarely easy, but workplace change which helps you create a great work experience and accomplish business goals is worth it. You may encounter resistance, but taking a holistic approach to change management and focusing on key issues—like private-office-related concerns—when they arise will help you increase your organization's readiness and make the journey a successful one.

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