

The Hybrid Privacy Crisis

Steelcase Flex Personal Spaces gives people the comfort and control they need to focus

Even before the pandemic, people complained the open plan office was noisy and distracting and it wasn't uncommon to hear people say they were going home to work because they could not find a place to concentrate in the office. Fast forward to 2022, and the problem has only worsened.

The way people work has significantly changed as video meetings have become a norm and people working in the office have flooded to enclosed spaces so they can avoid disturbing others and have the acoustic and visual privacy to stay focused.

According to the most recent Steelcase survey of global workers, when asked what's become more important in the office now (compared to pre-pandemic), four of the top five were related to privacy and places to do individual work:

- 64% - Spaces for hybrid collaboration**
- 62% - Single-person enclaves for hybrid meetings**
- 61% - Privacy**
- 58% - Workstations with full or partial enclosure**
- 57% - Reservable workspaces**

With so much conversation about the office of the future becoming a destination for collaboration and social interactions, organizations may find this new research surprising. Yet the Steelcase research, conducted in 11 countries with 4,986 office workers, uncovered what employees really want - an office that helps them easily do both collaborative and individual work, where they feel a greater sense of belonging and control over their work experience.

In fact, most people want their own, dedicated desk so much they are willing to trade remote work days to get it. When asked which they would prefer, 55% would work from home two or less days per week if they had an assigned desk in the office, while only 45% prefer to work from home three or more days a week and not have an assigned desk. The desire for a dedicated workspace reflects people's need to feel like they have a home in the office, where they feel like they belong and have the privacy they need to do their work.

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Unable to find the privacy they're seeking at work, it should not be surprising that 45% of people prefer working from home. Their work-from-home experience during the pandemic has shown them the value of having a place to call their own – 70% of people globally have either an office or a dedicated zone within their home where they have more control over their environment. While spaces in the office for hybrid collaboration ranked first on the list of things people feel are more important than before the pandemic, it's clear that spaces where people can effectively work alone, without distractions, are critically important for people to feel their office is a great place to work.

Yet, many organizations are considering designing their offices primarily for collaboration and social connection and not realizing people's increased need for privacy. In addition, organizations are shifting to more unassigned spaces as they adjust to hybrid work and new office occupancy patterns. At large organizations (10,000+ employees), 15% of employees have lost assigned desks, compared to pre-pandemic; overall, regardless of the size of the organization, there has been a 10% decrease in employees with assigned desks. The unintended result is people feel a sense of homelessness if they come to the office and can't find a place to work alone.

A New Home at Work

The data is clear: People want and need a place to call home where they can control and adapt their environment and the new Personal Spaces addition to the Steelcase Flex Collection offers them just that. Whether they need to get on a video call or do some heads-down focused work, Personal Spaces can be easily and quickly adapted to achieve the level of privacy people need. The simple and flexible set of products allows changes to be made fast and on demand.

“Having time to focus is a precious resource and Personal Spaces enables you to more effectively use that time,” says David Cooper, director, product marketing. “People need more than just any individual workspace – they need it to be better.”

When the Steelcase Flex Collection was introduced in 2019, it included a collection of moveable desks, tables, markerboards, carts, screens and accessories that could be easily rearranged on demand to create dynamic neighborhoods for hyper-collaborative teams. “By adding Steelcase Flex Personal Spaces to the collection, we're giving people the heightened level of privacy, control and comfort they need to effectively do hybrid work,” says Cooper.

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DAVID COOPER | Director, Product Marketing

Personal Spaces is created with two key elements – desks and privacy wraps – that make the workspace feel more like home, as well as provide a range of privacy levels and space planning approaches. When combined they can support over a dozen possible configurations and create clusters of individual workspaces within a larger team neighborhood.

The privacy wrap provides visual, territorial and acoustic privacy leaving people feeling less exposed and more in control of their environment. It also creates a nice, distraction-free background for video calls. An integrated light in the privacy wrap provides ambient lighting people can control. A nametag accessory helps people personalize the space and communicate to passersby when they do not want to be disturbed. A hook provides a place for people to hang small items like a bag or headphones.

Materiality and the use of organic shapes, like those used for the privacy wraps, create a comfortable and inviting environment for people to work. The privacy wrap’s patent-pending tufting process produces a warm and homey feeling. The freestanding privacy wraps are made using 100% recycled polyester yarn, which is knit to fit, producing no scrap material.

By adding Personal Spaces to a larger Steelcase Flex Collection team space, people can easily shift between individual and team work. “These are the types of spaces people really need now,” says Cooper. “Personal Spaces really responds to the individual’s needs to give them more flexibility and control over their work experience – all while providing a comfortable place to work. Exactly what people working in offices need today.”

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