Balancing "We" and "Me"

The best collaborative spaces also support solitude. *by Christine Congdon, Donna Flynn, and Melanie Redman*

Spotlight

ARTWORK Michael Wolf
The Transparent City 11, 2008

Balancing "We" and "Me"

The best collaborative spaces also support solitude.
by Christine Congdon, Donna Flynn, and Melanie Redman

THE OPEN OFFICE

has a lot of critics these days. But it remains the dominant form of workplace design for a reason: It can foster collaboration, promote learning, and nurture a strong culture. It's the right idea; unfortunately, it's often poorly executed—even as a way to support collaboration.

There's a natural rhythm to collaboration. People need to focus alone or in pairs to generate ideas or process information; then they come together as a group to build on those ideas or develop a shared point of view; and then they break apart again to take next steps. The more demanding the collaboration task is, the more individuals need punctuating moments of private time to think or recharge.

Companies have been trying for decades to find the balance between public and private workspace that best supports collaboration. In 1980 our research found that 85% of U.S. employees said they needed places to concentrate without distractions, and 52% said they lacked such spaces. In response, thousands of high-walled cubicles took over the corporate landscape. By the late 1990s, the tide had turned, and only 23% of employees wanted more privacy; 50% said they needed more access to other people, and 40% wanted more interaction. Organizations responded by shifting their real estate allocation toward open spaces that support collaboration and shrinking areas for individual work. But the pendulum may have swung too far: Our research now suggests that once again, people feel a pressing need for more privacy, not only to do heads-down work but to cope with the intensity of how work happens today.

The open plan is just one of the culprits assaulting our privacy. The increased focus on collaborative work means we're rarely alone, and the ubiquity of mobile devices means we're always accessible. In light of these pressures, it's not surprising that the number of people who say they can't concentrate at their desk has increased by 16% since 2008, and the number of those who don't have access to quiet places to do focused work is up by 13%. Meanwhile, people are finding it harder to control who has access to their personal information, at work and elsewhere.

In fact, 74% of the people we surveyed said they're more concerned about their privacy now than they were 10 years ago.

Leaving the office to work at home or in coffee shops or libraries isn't the answer—at least not for the long term. Too much remote work creates its own set of problems, such as diminished knowledge transfer, decreased engagement, cultural disconnect, and a slew of new distractions. And, of course, it makes collaboration more difficult.

Steelcase has been exploring the issue of privacy since the 1980s, and over the years we've worked with thousands of organizations in many industries to develop open office environments. Recently we conducted a study of workplaces and workers in Europe, North America, and Asia, using surveys, ethnographic research, observations, and interviews to update our understanding. Here we present new insights into the nature of privacy and offer strategies that allow employees to get away without going away.

Redefining Privacy at Work

Researchers—and architects—have traditionally defined privacy at work in physical terms: acoustical (Can we hear each other?), visual (Can we see each other?), and territorial (Do I have a place that's just for me?). But in today's workplace, we're always connected, always reachable, and to some extent always findable, in both the physical and the virtual sense. That accessibility can enhance our interactions but can also leave us feeling overexposed.

So we need to rethink our basic assumptions about privacy. At Steelcase, we believe that privacy has two distinct dimensions.

Information control. Employees today wage a constant battle to protect and manage access to their personal information. Over the course of a day, we shift constantly between revealing and concealing aspects of ourselves and our work to and from others: Who needs access to these project files? How can I keep coworkers from seeing sensitive information on my computer screen? Where can I have a confidential conversation without being overheard? Can I read an article or check my Twitter feed at my desk without fear that people will think I'm slacking?

Technology has further challenged our sense of personal sovereignty. Social media in particular have done more than any other force to compromise our ability to control our information. Facebook, for example, allows us to curate what we share about ourselves—but only up to a point. Even those who opt

Idea in Brief

THE CHALLENGE

Open offices are supposed to promote collaboration, but people just don't like them much. Companies have been trying for decades to find the balance between public and private workspace that best supports collaboration.

THE FINDING

Privacy has traditionally been defined in physical terms, but we need to think about it differently. Privacy is really about the individual's ability to control *information* (what information others need to know, both personal and professional) and *stimulation* (any sort of disruption).

THE SOLUTION

Privacy does not compromise collaboration but can nurture it. By improving privacy—providing spaces where employees can be by themselves and tune out distractions—you enrich and strengthen collaborative activities.

out of popular social media sites have a hard time hiding from Google. What if we really don't want coworkers to know where we live, what religion we practice, what music we listen to, or how old we are? We have to make conscious decisions about how we manage our personal information and act on those decisions vigilantly. If we don't—and most of us don't—then we're left feeling uncomfortably vulnerable.

Stimulation control. The second dimension of privacy encompasses the noises and other distractions that break concentration or inhibit the ability to focus. Stimulation control is in some ways more variable and idiosyncratic than information control. One person's distraction may be another's comforting white noise. And on any given day, our notion of distraction can change. Sometimes we might find background music soothing; other times it might be annoying. However we define them, we all need ways to manage distractions.

Fundamentally, stimulation control governs the ability to focus attention. In thinking about office design, it's helpful to understand that neuroscience research identifies three basic modes of attention. The first is *controlled attention*: working on a task that requires intense focus, such as writing or thinking deeply, while willfully avoiding unrelated thoughts and inhibiting external stimuli. When we are in this mode, interruptions and other distractions are unwelcome, and our need to control the environment around us increases.

The second mode is *stimulus-driven attention*: switching focus when something catches our attention. When we're performing routine tasks—responding to e-mails, scheduling meetings, or catching up on other administrative work—we may tolerate or even welcome interruptions or distractions. Many people choose to perform routine tasks in open, social, or active settings.

GO TO HBR.ORG
Visit this article online to take a short survey and see how your workspace compares with others'.

Inside the U.S. Workplace

Today more than **70%** of employees work in an open office environment, and the size of their individual workspaces is shrinking.

SQUARE FEET PER WORKER

225 IN 2010

190 IN 2013

SOURCE INTERNATIONAL FACILITY MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION AND CORENET GLOBAL

We call the third mode *rejuvenation*—the periodic respites from concentration that we take throughout the day. It's a time-out for our brains and bodies and often a chance to engage socially with others or express emotions that we've kept on a tight leash. For rejuvenation, people may seek either a highly stimulating environment or a quiet one, depending on personal preference.

The need to control stimulation as we switch among the three modes means that we require a variety of workspaces that afford more or less privacy. The challenge is to find the right balance of social and private and to provide spaces that enhance all three modes.

Privacy Across Cultures

While the need for privacy is universal, the ways it is experienced across cultures vary. To better understand the similarities and differences around the world, Steelcase partnered with the global research firm Ipsos to conduct surveys in 14 countries; we then synthesized the data with our ongoing ethnographic research. Most findings were consistent with earlier research, but a few surprised us.

Attitudes toward personal space differ greatly from country to country. Germans allocate an average of 320 square feet per employee; Americans, an average of 190. For workers in India and China, the figures are 70 and 50 square feet respectively. Yet despite their relatively dense workspaces, both Indian and Chinese workers rated their work environments highly in terms of their ability to concentrate and work without disruption.

That finding points to a significant cultural difference. In China people don't think about individual privacy in the same way that Westerners do. Chinese workers are most concerned about information control: keeping personal data private and seeking refuge from the feeling of being watched. Thus, in China, where offices are organized so that managers can easily keep tabs on workers, people tend to duck into hallways or bathrooms for a moment alone. Offices that allow workers to have their backs to the wall are considered prime real estate. In India it's not uncommon for workers to seek out pockets of privacy—in unoccupied nooks on the periphery of workspaces, in storage areas, or along walls.
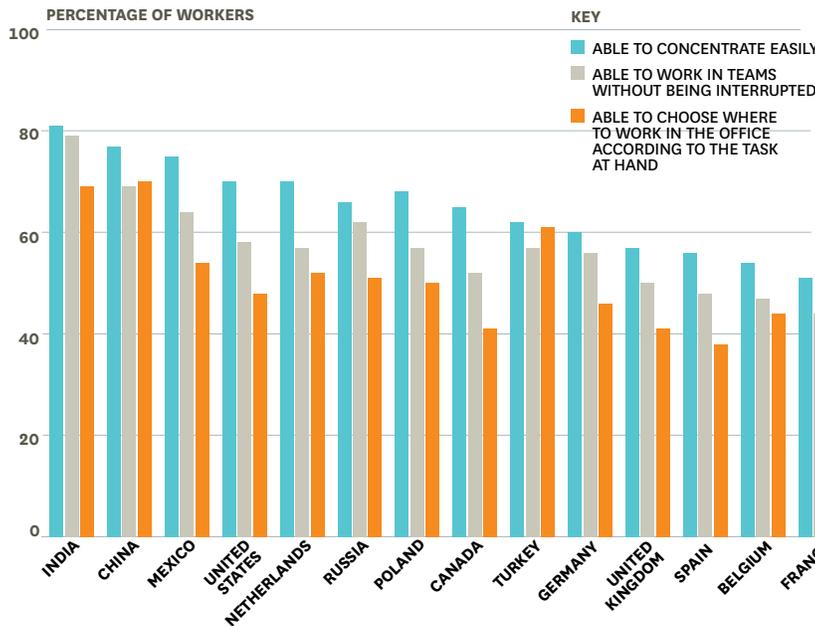
Among Western workers, by contrast, the issue of stimulation control tends to take center stage: Only 55% of the workers we surveyed said they are able to work in groups without being interrupted. Less than half say they can choose where they want to work within the office on the basis of the task at hand. In our research, the adjective Americans used most frequently to describe their workplaces was "stressful." The adjective Chinese workers used most was "calming." (Then again, it's perfectly acceptable in China to take a nap at work.)

When it comes to heads-down focus, however, American workers give their office environments relatively high marks, despite the vocal complaints heard in social media and other forums. A surprising 70% of workers in the United States say their workplace provides the ability to concentrate easily. Because cubicles still dominate the North American office landscape, and more real estate is allocated for individual workspaces than for collaboration activities, we believe that the reported frustrations are quite likely being exacerbated by factors other than the physical environment—such as the intense pace of work.

Overall, workers in European countries (except in the Netherlands) were the most dissatisfied with

HOW EMPLOYEES FEEL ABOUT THE WORKPLACE

We surveyed employees around the world on three dimensions of privacy critical to workplace satisfaction. Surprisingly, Indian and Chinese workers, who have significantly smaller individual spaces and denser office environments, ranked highest.

PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS

KEY
- ABLE TO CONCENTRATE EASILY
- ABLE TO WORK IN TEAMS WITHOUT BEING INTERRUPTED
- ABLE TO CHOOSE WHERE TO WORK IN THE OFFICE ACCORDING TO THE TASK AT HAND

their ability to control their privacy and were more likely to be dissatisfied with their work environment in general. Of the workers in our survey who ranked as the most highly dissatisfied and disengaged, 53% came from France, Germany, Spain, and Belgium. The cultural norm in those countries is that work happens in the office, generally at an assigned workspace, and opportunities to seek solitude or achieve greater levels of privacy are often limited. In the Netherlands, by contrast, there's greater comfort with letting people work from a diverse range of spaces, inside and outside the office. Moreover, the Dutch are more egalitarian than their neighbors when it comes to office design. Privacy considerations are not based on status, and leaders work alongside employees of all levels in open spaces. This might explain why the Dutch accounted for almost half of satisfied and engaged employees. (For a country-by-country comparison, see the exhibit "How Employees Feel About the Workplace.")

While privacy means different things in different cultures, our study showed that workplace satisfaction and engagement are deeply connected to a sense of control over one's environment. In our study, 98% of the most highly engaged employees reported that they had "the ability to concentrate easily" in their workplace and that this attribute is a top factor in their satisfaction. They also scored high on "being able to work in teams without being disrupted" and "being able to choose where to work according to the task at hand"—other factors critical to high engagement and satisfaction. Conversely, highly disengaged and dissatisfied employees struggled with disruptions and felt they had very little control over where or how they worked. Only 15% said they could concentrate easily.

Personal Strategies for Privacy

In addition to local culture, factors such as organizational culture, the type of task one is engaged in, mood, and individual personality shape how much privacy people require and the way they achieve it. For example, introverts tend to gravitate toward places where they feel that they have the most control over stimulation. Susan Cain's recent study of introverts argues that they are not shy; rather, they are more sensitive to stimuli than extroverts are. Our research pointed to five privacy strategies that people use, sometimes unconsciously, to control both stimulation and information.

REDEFINING PRIVACY

The ubiquity of electronic devices and connectivity means that privacy in the workplace can no longer be thought of strictly in physical terms. Today privacy is about employees' need to control *information* and *stimulation* in three key realms.

Outgoing
INFORMATION

Incoming
STIMULATION

	Outgoing — INFORMATION	Incoming — STIMULATION
SOCIAL	How much do I want colleagues to know about my personal interests? / Should I connect with colleagues on social media?	How can I limit interruptions by coworkers? / How can I avoid constant exposure to the noise and activity of others?
TECHNOLOGICAL	Can I opt out of giving biometric data used for security purposes? / Can I shield my name from feedback to superiors?	Do I want pop-up previews of incoming e-mails? / I need to focus: Is it OK to turn off instant messaging?
SPATIAL	Can people see my computer screen while I'm working? / What personal photos or artifacts do I want to display?	What space configuration minimizes my exposure to flickering fluorescent lights? / How can I block out my neighbor's phone conversations?

Strategic anonymity. Some of us find deep privacy in the middle of a crowd of strangers. When people go to a café to do focused work, they are often trying to inhibit the social distractions they face in their workplace. Recent research by Ravi Mehta, Rui Zhu, and Amar Cheema in the *Journal of Consumer Research* shows that working in an environment with a moderate level of ambient background noise can enhance performance on creative tasks. Many people enjoy the hum of activity in cafés or airports, where they can work, read, or relax without disruption. The key is that it's strategic: Individuals choose when and how to make themselves anonymous.

Selective exposure. In today's world, where our personal information is being shared and demanded across new channels in exponentially higher degrees, the boundaries between what is and isn't private are constantly shifting. People choose to

MANAGE DISTRACTION

% of respondents who agree that their work environment allows them to concentrate easily

MOST SATISFIED WORKERS
98%

HIGHLY DISSATISFIED WORKERS
15%
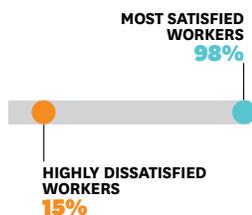
TAKE A BREAK

% of respondents who agree that they can socialize and have informal, relaxed conversations with their colleagues

MOST SATISFIED WORKERS
96%

HIGHLY DISSATISFIED WORKERS
35%

reveal some information to certain people or groups, while sharing different information with others. In the physical sense, this may mean choosing whether to share a particular document with a coworker or deciding what personal artifacts to display at work. It could also be about making a decision to use the phone instead of video chat if we don't want others to be able to see us.

Entrusted confidence. Privacy doesn't just mean being alone. There are many contexts in the workplace where groups of individuals need to have private conversations. Some moments of entrusted confidence, such as performance reviews, may be scheduled and planned. More often, they happen spontaneously, such as when colleagues need to discuss a sensitive problem that has cropped up; and at these times it can be difficult to find an available conference room. In workplaces that are highly open, we see greater demand for dedicated conference or project rooms that teams or individuals can easily access, where they feel secure sharing confidences.

Intentional shielding. People talk about feeling "violated" when they think they're being watched or eavesdropped on. They use a variety of shielding tactics to protect themselves. We often see people go to an enclosed location to take a call, or walk in public areas where they are less likely to be overheard. Many people avoid working in spaces where they can't see coworkers approaching. Others engage in intentional shielding by keeping their own counsel, protecting their individual thoughts and ideas so that they can develop a point of view without the distracting influence of "groupthink" or peer pressure.

Purposeful solitude. Isolation is largely a matter of circumstance and state of mind: Your physical location, your habits, and your attitudes can all conspire to make you feel isolated from a group. But solitude is intentional; you make a conscious choice to separate from a group in order to concentrate, recharge, express emotion, or engage in personal activities. Some people may choose a closed space where

they have visual and acoustical privacy if they need respite or to focus intently on a project. Others may choose to eat lunch in the farthest empty corner of a cafeteria. Stepping outside to sit in a quiet courtyard and taking a short walk are other ways people seek alone time.

Organizational Strategies for Privacy

As organizations come to understand the need for privacy at work, they must also recognize that privacy does not compromise collaboration. By improving privacy you can actually enrich and strengthen collaborative activities.

Organizations have a range of strategies they can implement, but the success of any of them depends on a supporting culture that gives employees control over where and how they work and how they manage their privacy. Cultures are built and reinforced when people exhibit certain behaviors over time and those behaviors are articulated, adopted, and embraced across the organization. Leaders who model the desired behaviors give implicit permission to others to follow suit and send the message "This is how we work here."

Some strategies demand an investment in new kinds of space, but others require only modest reconfigurations along with behavioral and cultural changes. Here are four effective options:

Protocols. Organizations can lay down rules that define acceptable behaviors about privacy. Protocols can be companywide or specific to certain departments, times, or places. For example, an organization might choose to designate a particular time for quiet work in one or multiple locations. Or it might decide that music or videos should be a headphones-only experience. Leaders should communicate the protocols clearly and explain the rationales behind them. Many workplace protocols have gone by the wayside when people don't understand them or forget what type of behavior is appropriate. To sustain the adoption of these practices,

Employees can use a host of props or devices to establish boundaries, but gadgets won't work unless they're backed up by a culture that respects the need for privacy.

encourage supportive but honest conversations when protocols are broken and clearly communicate the consequences for repeat offenses.

Signaling. Signals are similar to protocols, but rather than being established by the organization, they are adopted by employees themselves to communicate their privacy requirements to others. In many offices earbuds are an accepted way of signaling "do not disturb"; some people wear noise-canceling headphones to make their point even more obvious. People can also signal a desire for privacy by how they orient themselves in a room: Facing others encourages interaction; tucking behind a screen or a large plant says "I'm trying to be alone."

Employees can find a host of props or devices to help them establish privacy boundaries with their coworkers. But even the most sophisticated gadget won't work unless it's backed up by a culture that respects the individual's need for privacy. Leaders should make it clear that employees must respect privacy signals in open spaces and support individuals' efforts to control their information and stimulation.

Strategic space planning. There are two primary design approaches for accommodating privacy needs in the physical workspace: the distributed model and the zone model. In the distributed model, spaces that support stimulation control are blended into areas for both individual and group work. This model makes it easy for people to shift quickly between modes of work. For instance, a worker may need to focus deeply while preparing for a meeting, move to a nearby project room to collaborate, and afterward break away with one other person to concentrate on a task. Physical proximity of these spaces facilitates quick switching between work modes.

The zone model defines certain locations within the larger workplace as private, quiet spaces. Organizations may designate a particular area or even an entire floor or building as a sort of "library" or quiet hub. In this model, the private zones are physically separate from open areas. This approach can be especially useful in managing noise disruptions.

An ecosystem of spaces. Our studies show that the most successful work environments provide a range of spaces—an ecosystem—that allow people to choose where and how they get their jobs done.

In some situations, individuals need their own enclosed space for regular use. But design and allocation of such space needs to shift from being hierarchy-based to being needs-based. For example,

many executives are granted spacious, enclosed offices that often sit empty because of travel or meeting schedules. These could be redesigned to allow other people to use them productively when their primary users are off-site. Like others in the organization, many leaders simply need access to an enclosed space for certain tasks when they are on-site.

Whether owned or shared, enclosed spaces are more effective when they allow users to control stimulation. Sound, for instance, travels like water, seeping through partitions and gaps in walls and ceilings. Enclosed spaces make it easier to avoid overhearing conversations that everyone prefers to keep private. Such spaces should also take into account visual distractions. The trend toward greater transparency has led to more glass walls, especially in spaces that are situated near windows, but they can lead to the unpleasant feeling of "working in a fishbowl." A simple band of frosted glass does a great deal to reinforce the privacy of such areas.

"Shielded" spaces can also be used to provide sufficient privacy for many tasks. These areas are generally semi-enclosed, made with partial-height walls or portable screens. When combined with appropriate protocols, the boundaries signal "Do not disturb." They are particularly effective when placed in quiet zones. They're also a low-cost solution: In one of our spaces, designers used everyday objects such as books and plants and simple configurations of the furnishings to discourage conversations. Without any explicit communication, the space clearly told people that it was intended for individual, quiet work.

OPEN OFFICES are not inherently good or bad. The key to successful workspaces is to empower individuals by giving them choices that allow control over their work environment. When they can choose where and how they work, they have more capacity to draw energy and ideas from others and be re-energized by moments of solitude. Providing the ability to move easily between group time and individual private time creates a rhythm—coming together to think about a problem and then going away to let ideas gestate—that is essential to the modern organization. �

HBR Reprint R1410C

Christine Congdon is the director of research communications at Steelcase. **Donna Flynn** is the director of Steelcase's WorkSpace Futures research group. **Melanie Redman** is a senior design researcher with WorkSpace Futures Explorations at Steelcase.
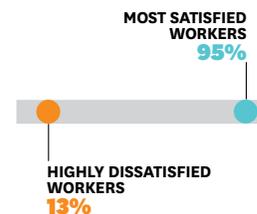
WORK WHERE YOU WANT

% of respondents who agree that they can choose where they wish to work within the office according to the task at hand

MOST SATISFIED WORKERS
86%

HIGHLY DISSATISFIED WORKERS
14%

AVOID INTERRUPTIONS

% of respondents who agree that they can work in teams without being disrupted

MOST SATISFIED WORKERS
95%

HIGHLY DISSATISFIED WORKERS
13%

SOURCE 2014 WELL-BEING IN THE OFFICE STUDY, STEELCASE AND IPSOS