

## Beyond Four Walls and a Door

Understanding Privacy in the Office



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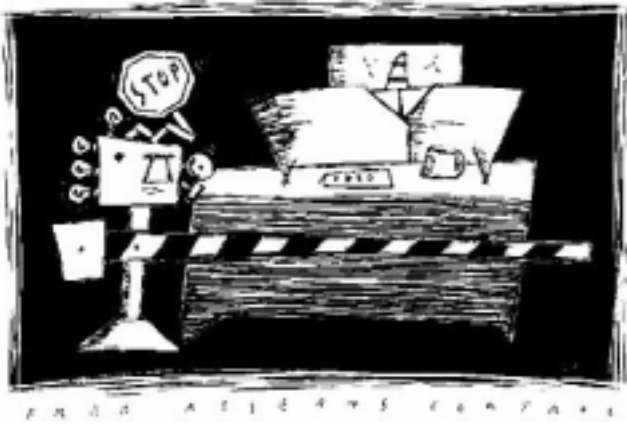
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If you ask people who work in offices whether they need privacy to do their jobs, most of them will say yes. If you ask them whether they have enough privacy, many of them will say no. A recent British study found that more than one in four office workers complains about lack of privacy on the job.<sup>1</sup> In a major American study, only ten percent of the people surveyed (those whose offices had four walls and a door) said they had as much privacy as they need.<sup>2</sup>

Definitions may vary from job to job and person to person, but privacy is almost invariably connected with having a private office, which is almost invariably connected with having four floor-to-ceiling walls and a door. One study found that people in offices perceived a direct correlation between the amount of enclosure an office offered and the amount of privacy it provided (they also believed enclosure had a positive effect on their job performance, ease of communication, and comfort).<sup>3</sup>

But, in reality, the relationships aren't that simple. Organizational consultant Fritz Steele finds that status issues are often inextricably involved with perceptions of privacy and private offices. Private offices may be perceived as "better" simply because it is the people at the top of the organizational structure who typically have them, when in fact, as Steele points out, "Closed offices provide visual separation, but they are no guarantee of aural privacy. In fact, they may provide a false sense of security when people should instead be aware that they can easily be overheard."<sup>4</sup>

There are other instances in which enclosure, or architectural privacy, may not directly translate into psychological or perceived privacy. In his studies of how people experience their office workplace, researcher Ronald Goodrich found that "some design solutions may have the unintended effect of reducing *perceived* privacy by creating more *spatial* privacy. When partitions are used for visual privacy, the individual is 'blind' to his or her surroundings. Noises and movements outside are sudden, unanticipated, and surprising. They are more likely to stand out from surrounding sound levels and to be more distracting."<sup>5</sup> In another example, one company found that going from glass-enclosed cubicles to opaque panels actually reduced privacy, as managers were afraid to talk to anyone in their offices for fear of who might overhear; in their "fishbowl" offices, they had at least been able to determine who was within earshot before speaking confidentially.<sup>6</sup>



Of course, there are many instances when enclosure does enhance privacy; in his studies of office workers, researcher Eric Sundstrom found a correlation between architectural privacy and psychological privacy. But his conclusion—that this may be “because people in private quarters can control their accessibility to others more easily than in open and visible places,”<sup>7</sup>—suggests that the real issue is not enclosure, but control over accessibility. Another study of 600 people working in the same office landscape environment found that people’s reactions to the amount of privacy they had (some thought it was adequate, others didn’t) really reflected not their physical space (for they all had the same size and type of office) but the degree of control they felt they had over their interactions with the environment.<sup>8</sup>

The ability to control access and interactions is not entirely a function of the physical environment—secretaries, for example, play an important role in screening access. And in some cases, social pressure may keep people from taking advantage of the privacy a physical structure does offer; it is generally considered unacceptable, for instance, for a manager to close the door to the office when he or she is inside working alone.<sup>9</sup>

And the need for privacy is often dependent on a person’s job activities. One study of middle management executives found that, as their responsibilities varied over the course of the day, their desire for privacy and the actions they took to ensure privacy also varied. The researchers concluded that the experience of privacy is “a function of what is required, what is available, and what is acceptable.”<sup>10</sup>

Privacy in the office is clearly *not* a one-dimensional issue.

### New ways of thinking about privacy needs in the office.

A workable definition of privacy needs in the office has to include not only the traditional notions of isolation and seclusion, but also the seemingly opposite concepts of communication and interaction. John Archea, writing on “the place of architectural factors in behavioral theories of privacy,” says that “privacy is not simply a matter of curtailing exposure to prevent invasions of the self. It must also include sufficient access to interpersonal opportunities and obligations to enable one to present oneself in a favorable manner. . . . Matching one’s spatial and behavioral conspicuousness with one’s intentions is a key element of privacy regulation.”<sup>11</sup>

According to Archea, then, loss of privacy can result from either too much “conspicuousness” or too little. “In effect,” he writes, “the way in which we present ourselves to others is a function of our position relative to the organization of our physical surroundings. And how we present ourselves to others is the essence of privacy.”<sup>12</sup>

To environmental psychologist Franklin Becker, “The essence of privacy is the control of information flow,” and is thus both an input problem of distractions and interruptions and an output problem of confidentiality.<sup>13</sup> Sundstrom defines privacy as “the ability of individuals or groups to satisfactorily regulate their accessibility to others.”<sup>14</sup>

In all cases, control seems to be the operative concept, and the ability to control information flow, conspicuousness, and accessibility to others is dependent upon a number of variables in addition to the physical environment. As Goodrich puts it: “Having a private space does not necessarily mean that a user has privacy.”

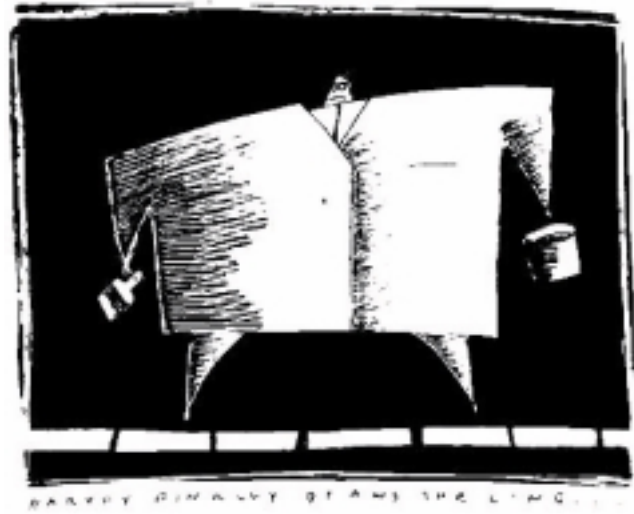
Among the other variables that affect perceived privacy, he lists— (1) norms regarding the acceptability of closing the door; (2) social variables (for instance, individuals working in cohesive work groups reported less need for privacy); (3) size of the work group (people in larger open spaces reported a greater sense of personal privacy related to feelings of anonymity); and (4) task variables (jobs that require intense concentration or creative thinking require more protection from distractions than routine jobs where too much isolation leads to stress, boredom, fatigue, and reduced morale).<sup>15</sup>

Different job requirements affect not only how much privacy people need, but also what they perceive privacy to be. Sundstrom found that, depending upon the requirements of their particular jobs, people’s definitions of privacy might emphasize control over social contact, control over distraction and interruption, autonomy from supervision, or conversational privacy.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, a person’s “need” for privacy may reflect any one of a number of complex human needs. Jon Lang and Walter Moleski show how privacy requirements can be assessed using psychologist Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs for safety, belonging, esteem, and actualization. Privacy, they argue, “is not a simple response to a single need level; it may be a need for security from unwanted intrusion, or for belonging in terms of intimacy, or for the esteem of holding private territory, or actualization for pursuing one’s own creative goals.”<sup>17</sup>



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Given all the variables that affect privacy, it becomes clear that, as James Russell and Lawrence Ward write: "Places cannot be categorized as offering or not offering privacy. Places simply differ in numerous ways that facilitate or hinder attainment of various goals."<sup>18</sup>

### Privacy sequencing: new ways of addressing privacy needs in the office.

To create offices that meet all of people's various privacy needs, then, would seem to require the development of a number of different types of spaces. Since privacy requirements vary from moment to moment and day to day, what people really need is not one office but several that offer different gradations, or sequences, of privacy to match their needs at any given time.

If the office environment does not provide for privacy sequencing, people will often use other means to attain the level of privacy they need for a given task. Anthropologists have identified several mechanisms—in addition to physical devices like doors, walls, and curtains—that people use to control their interactions with others. These include social rules or manners: By avoiding eye contact, for example, a person may signal his or her desire not to be disturbed. People may also "move away," like nomads, abandoning their offices for the quiet of the library or the anonymity of a cafeteria. Or they may use time to structure their activities, planning to do their "quiet" work before or after normal office hours.<sup>19</sup>

In the absence of four walls and a door, people also use other physical means to achieve the level of privacy they require. They may attempt to control stimuli by tuning in to their Walkman portable stereos to help screen extraneous sounds. They may structure their space to limit the activity that can take place by barricading themselves behind piles of boxes and books. They may even display symbols—"do not disturb" signs or curtains of beads—that communicate their desire for privacy.<sup>20</sup>

Whether it is through direct means, such as opening or closing a door, or indirect means, such as moving to a more appropriate space, the more control mechanisms workers have at their disposal, the more satisfied they are likely to be with the amount of privacy they have.<sup>21</sup>

"High-quality settings," says Steele, "allow people to control contacts and to have a choice about when and how much interaction they have

with others." To achieve this on a macroscale in the workplace, he suggests a "cave and court" design that includes small, private withdrawal spots (caves) for work that requires concentration or confidentiality, and a variety of public workspaces (courts) such as conference rooms, sitting rooms, and open common areas for meetings and group projects. "Very confidential conversations and telephone calls can occur in the caves, as can high-concentration tasks; stimulative, contact-oriented activities can occur better in the court areas than in layouts that are essentially just an aggregate of workplaces which are a little of each and not very good for either function," he writes.<sup>22</sup>

In their article for the *Harvard Business Review*, Philip Stone and Robert Luchetti call "privacy versus participation" and "independence versus inclusion" the "basic quagmires of office design" and argue that while compromise cannot resolve the tensions between these needs, "multiple activity settings" can.<sup>23</sup> Instead of an office design that assigns a workplace to one person, Stone and Luchetti propose a workplace that offers a variety of "activity settings"—each of which supports a limited range of activities rather than trying to meet all of a person's privacy needs. These specialized settings would "span the variety of often contradictory office worker requirements. For example, for some tasks people need to be included and to participate, but for others they need quiet to think things through."<sup>24</sup> Activity settings might include private offices with doors to serve as "home bases," bullpen areas with rearrangeable tables for shared work, and quiet spaces or library areas where people can reserve tables to spread out on, lounge chairs for reading, or a secluded corner for concentrated thinking.<sup>25</sup>

Space for "courts" or shared-activity areas could be found by limiting the "caves" or "home bases" to very small areas with just enough space to write, make phone calls, and store personal files. Creating the full range of settings would require various combinations of permanent and movable walls and freestanding and systems furniture arranged to form private offices, open-plan environments, and bullpens.

Privacy sequencing can also be supported on the individual level through a number of planning mechanisms. In bullpen areas, for example, distractions can be reduced by layouts which use line-of-sight guidelines to prevent people from having to stare directly at each other when seated in their normal working spots—a situation

which can lead to a felt lack of visual privacy.<sup>26</sup>

Mobility of furnishings is another mechanism that gives people some control over access and interactions. Movable screens or other furniture that can be arranged for visual privacy are sometimes more effective than a door, allowing passers-by to see enough of what the person inside is doing to ascertain whether or not he or she is available for consultation.<sup>27</sup> Screens or other movable partitions have the added benefit of flexibility—they can be relocated when privacy requirements change.

Boundaries other than full-height walls can serve to mark off a person's personal territory and provide a sense of enclosure that contributes to privacy. Research has shown that a waist-high wall is perceived to be as effective as a full-height wall in reducing the perceived level of crowding in a space.<sup>28</sup> As long as they provide a feeling of enclosure, a clear distinction between "inside" and "outside," and only one entrance into the space,<sup>29</sup> symbolic boundaries may be articulated by a combination of many elements, including signage, lighting levels, colors and materials, aisle width, ceiling height, and strategically placed plants, furniture, or low walls.

Although people are likely to continue equating privacy with four walls and a door for some time to come, once they have experienced an office environment that truly meets all their requirements for solitude and interaction, privacy in the office will probably simply cease to be an issue.

Walkman is a registered trademark of Sony Corporation of America, Park Ridge, New Jersey.

## Notes

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