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EXPLORING IDEAS THAT SHAPE THE PLACES WE
WORK.

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"WE" VS. "ME": DOES YOUR WORKPLACE INTERFERE WITH WORKING?

Bernice Boucher shares four open layout tactics that champion heads-down work, too.

North Highland Worldwide Consulting renovated its headquarters to become a desirable workspace for top talent, incorporating alternative meeting and workspaces into the design to promote exchange of knowledge, collaboration, and a fresh approach to tasks. Source: "Every Building Tells A Story", by JLL.

Open office design is a balancing act between promoting collaboration and triggering chaos. Happily, the pendulum has swung away from the "cube farms" of decades past to an embrace of the open office layout. But, has it swung a bit too far(http://workdesign.com/2015/02/video-asked-bunch-workplace-experts-think-open-office/)? Are office layouts nailing the "open" part of the concept, but sabotaging employees' ability to focus?

As open offices become the norm, workspace privacy, or the lack thereof, has become a significant workplace productivity concern. A recent **Steelcase** workplace study conducted by the global research firm **IPSOS** of more than 10,500 workers in Europe, North America, and Asia showed that being able to concentrate, work in teams without being interrupted, or choose where to work according to the type of work being done are frequently unmet needs.

Yet, choice of workspace is a key characteristic of a great workplace(http://www.us.jll.com/united-states/en-us/Research/JLL-Great-Work-Places.pdf?fd194111-3efe-45cb-96dd-1af74f516929). In the Steelcase study, the 11 percent of workers who report more choice and more privacy options also

report greater satisfaction and therefore greater engagement with their companies. These are hallmarks of productivity.

> " Are office layouts nailing the "open" part of the concept, but sabotaging employees' ability to focus? "

To achieve the holy grail of workplace productivity, more businesses are adopting workplace strategies that focus on activity-based planning concepts that better support employees' varied work styles and goals, balancing collaboration-oriented areas with quieter spots that cater to "heads-down" work. Done well, mixing in such concepts as "hot-desking" and "free-seating" with other flexible workplace design approaches can cut costs, reduce carbon footprints, and ensure that both quiet and buzzing workspaces are available when diverse duties call.

Above and below: With its high ceilings and open space, the Time Warner Cable Sports office was designed to support the company's brand values of collaboration, communication, and connection. It provides a mix of workspaces, from collaboration seating and open desks to glassed-in conference rooms and

offices. Source: "Every Building Tells A Story", by JLL.

Activity-based workplace options not only provide an employee with the right spaces in which to do their jobs, but also can help motivate them to work harder. Giving workers the power of choice can contribute to their satisfaction and support recruitment, retention, and engagement.

To win at being focus-friendly is more complex, however, than simply mixing in a few private reading rooms (though those may also be in order, too). The key is to provide a menu of accessible workspace options that can be open or private, quiet or stimulating, formal or casual, as needed. The types of workspaces needed will differ based on the types of work being done, whether that means individuals seeking quiet writing or thinking space, one-on-one meetings, or close teams in need of small collaboration areas in which they can focus on tight deliverable deadlines.

Four steps to more focus-friendly spaces

Here are four considerations for cultivating a work environment that is both engagement- and focus-friendly.

1. Mitigate noise

It's no secret that an entirely open layout can be noisy, which can cause stress and irritation, negatively affecting employees' ability to concentrate. Productivity gains of up to six percent can be achieved simply by providing quiet workstations, according to a 2014 JLL workplace research. (http://www.us.jll.com/united-states/en-us/Documents/Workplace/green-productive-workplace-perspective.pdf) Yet, the Steelcase/IPSOS study shows that the number of employees who lack access to quiet workspaces has grown by 13 percent in recent years.

The solution? Provide small, private spaces for concentrated solo work. These could include reservation-based private spaces, small meeting rooms, or designated quiet zones, comparable to the "quiet cars" on commuter trains, where clear signage mandates noise-free or even cellphone-free work.

2. Promote "membership" over "ownership"

By shifting the focus from "owned" desks to non-territorial workspace options, employees are free to choose the space that best supports their task. However, shifting from the "ownership" to the "membership" model requires thoughtful change management. While some workers may embrace the change, a common reaction is "*You're taking my desk away*!" The key is to convey the advantages of the activity-based workplace, and to implement workplace policies that help ensure productivity in the new environment.

3. Mix up communal space offerings, too

Individuals aren't the only ones who need focus. Offering flexible communal areas with designated spots for formal and informal meetings enables workers to convene for heads-down solo work or small-group collaboration, scheduled meetings, spontaneous chats and informal networking.

4. Reinforce workspace design strategy with policy

Smart layout is integral to focus-friendly space—but the environment is also a product of the thoughtful policies and culture behind it. For example, creating mobile phone-free zones or requiring mobile phones to be set on vibrate-only can minimize distraction. Providing an easy, real-time reservation system for private rooms can help employees take advantage of their space options.

More than the one-size-fits-all open space concept of yesteryear, a modern, dynamic activity-based workspace that fosters collaboration and concentration can make for a happier workforce and a more productive enterprise. First, companies and their workplace strategist must plan for employees' needs for peace and quiet during heads-down work.

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