

## The Workplace: One Size Does Not Fit All

Researchers studying office design have concentrated on open-plan workplaces. Many companies began migrating away from fixed wall private offices in the 1970s because of the reduced construction and maintenance costs and the flexibility that the open plan concept offered. It was also believed that by removing physical barriers, open plan would facilitate communication between individuals and groups, thus improving morale and productivity.

### How private should an office be?

A significant body of research conducted over the past 30 years reveals that open-plan cubicle designs only minimally facilitate communication and do so at the expense of privacy.

The absence of a door and four walls compromises the privacy of employees when compared to a traditional office setting. In a longitudinal field study of traditional versus open office design, Brennan et al. found that open offices do not facilitate communication among coworkers. In fact, employees often feel that open office designs decrease communication because they prohibit confidential conversations.

In the early 1980s, the Buffalo Organization for Social and Technological Innovation (BOSTI) Associates, Buffalo, NY, surveyed thousands of employees across the nation to determine how office design affects productivity and the quality of work life. Results confirmed that nearly two-thirds of workers in open offices are frequently distracted by conversations around them, resulting in reduced productivity and a host of other problems. BOSTI concluded that the most significant factor affecting individual performance, group performance, and job satisfaction is an individual's ability to work in a setting that is free of distractions.

The lack of privacy in today's work **environment** is even more problematic as workers experience the physiological changes of aging such as hearing and vision loss.

### How much variety is needed in workplace design?

That depends on what is being done. According to a study by Thompson, on "The Cultural and Physical Environment as Drivers of Workplace Design," Task complexity determines the appropriate design of a workplace. Thompson reported that, "People whose work is fairly routine and repetitive perform better when they are in a stimulating environment with easy access to other people. Social interaction helps them through days that might otherwise be boring and anonymous. On the other hand, this type of setting is a relative disaster for people whose role requires intense thinking and analytical work for which they have to constantly draw upon their memory and unique, creative thoughts. These people need quiet time, but must eventually re-engage with their community and external stimulation."