Workplace Strategies for Dynamic Organizations

The Open vs. Closed Office Debate

Fifty years after the introduction of panel-based open plan office systems, we still vigorously debate the value of open vs. closed offices. Phrased this way, the question makes no sense. Both open and closed offices serve useful purposes. The meaningful question is, "What's the right balance between open and closed offices?" Close on its heels is, "What do we mean by 'open' offices, anyway?" Is it a high-paneled cubicle (one cannot see over a panel when seated)? Is it a low-paneled cubicle (one can see over a panel when seated)? Is it a cluster or "pod" of low-paneled workstations separated from another pod by higher panels? Is it a shared enclosed office (2-12 people in an enclosed space)? Is it a team-oriented bullpen, with a small group of desks in a completely open area?

It is, of course, all of the above. Which is precisely why describing a work environment as "open" serves so little purpose. It is like using "meat" to describe everything from hot dogs to filet mignon, or "car" for everything from Ford Escort to Rolls Royce. It is correct, but learning that some people hated "meat" or "cars", and others loved them, would not be terribly edifying without knowing which kind of meat or car each group had experienced. The same holds true for understanding people's reactions to "open" office environments.

Finding the right balance of open and closed offices requires understanding the purpose of the office, and even more so, the nature of the work being done. We don't buy a Porsche to haul pianos. We buy (or rent or borrow) a pickup truck. We consider the purpose, the intended activities. One vehicle cannot serve every purpose equally well, but it can serve several purposes, hopefully the primary one, to the highest level. Why not look at the office environment in the same way? The office's primary (not only) value, we believe, is as a place for face-to-face interaction: a place to meet co-workers and managers, to inspire, coach, be motivated, share information, debate goals and

objectives, socialize, make friends, and so on. It is as much or more a social setting as it is a refuge or technical or information center.

Given this way of thinking about what an "office" is, we need to understand, first, how different forms of office design, from closed offices to a variety of forms of open plan offices, affect communication and interaction. Secondly, we need to understand how communication and interaction affect valued organizational outcomes such as decision speed, organizational learning, and employee job satisfaction and commitment.

The Closed Office
Our research, done with employees in job functions ranging from software development to marketing and business development, indicates that the more open the "open" plan office environment, the more conducive it is to overall work effectiveness, when communication and interaction are critical elements of the work process. Few jobs or professions don't qualify. Yet for most employees the closed, cellular office is the preferred office type, for well-known reasons. With few exceptions, it is easier to control unwanted distractions and interruptions, and noise is typically less of an issue. Comments from several software engineers capture this view of the closed office.

SOFTWARE ENGINEER: For me personally, if I'm focused on the given task at hand, peripheral noise is really distracting. It takes away from the thought process. There's sort of a momentum that builds up that, with constant interruptions, it's like stop and go traffic. You never quite get up to that cruising speed where you feel like you're being productive.

SOFTWARE DEVELOPER: I find I work better as well when I'm alone. I find I code betterŠI think better when I'm in a closed office, especially in the design stage when I'm thinking about the program. Before I start programming, I need some quiet time, like a white board or something, and (a place to) just go and think on my own. If there are people continuously interrupting you, the process is much slower.

Few would argue that most employees, whether software developer, web designer, business strategist, or human resource professional need time to think, concentrate, and reflect, as well as to communicate, share information, and interact socially. But as Kellner argues, the reasons for feeling more effective in a private, closed office reflect deeply held values as much as simple utility: "Several forces conspire to keep software work an individual activity, including; desire for autonomy; a culture that rewards individual efforts far more than team efforts; concentration of crucial application knowledge by a few individuals; desire for privacy regarding individual development efforts; the Not Invented Here syndrome and its more personal form (not invented by

me); large productivity differences between individuals; political considerations of powerful individuals and of managers." The Holy Grail is finding the right balance.

What is surprising about our data is that the more open type office environment, what we are calling team-oriented bullpens and pods and shared closed offices, may come closer to achieving this balance than either closed offices or high-paneled cubicles. In part, this comes from the recognition, even from employees in closed offices, that while communication certainly occurs in closed offices, the pace, frequency, and nature of that communication is significantly different than what occurs in team-oriented bullpens and workstation pods and shared closed offices.

SOFTWARE ENGINEER: Email and phone...we're really collaborative that way.

SOFTWARE ENGINEER: Communication with colleaguesŠI think my door is open all the time if I don't have meetings. So, anybody could stop in for a chat or whatever.

SOFTWARE ENGINEER: I think it is important in an enclosed office you are able to do conference calls more easily with the speaker phone on.

Conference calls, email, and scheduled meetings were viewed by those in closed offices as providing sufficient communication. The same types of communications occur in open plan environments. The difference is the value attributed by those in closed vs. more open environments to short, frequent, and fast communication. In more open environments, such communication patterns were viewed as contributing to one's own and the team's (project's) productivity--both quality and speed. In closed offices, respondents' focused on the perceived benefit of not having to interact with others serendipitously, and the benefit to their own concentration. Yet some of those in closed offices recognized that their privacy came with a price, in terms of reduced communication with colleagues that weakened the project or team's performance.

SOFTWARE ENGINEER: We suffer because we don't have much of a sense of team. And I don't think people understand the relationship of their work to others and how if they don't execute well it will impact others. Or if they're negligent and not getting their job done right, it has impact and consequences to others. Because they don't have this fabric of a team, they don't understand when they're not performing well that they're impacting somebody elseŠ I don't think people are as committed to getting things done and helping their teammates, because they often may not even know who they are.

Communications Subtleties
More surprising than that more and different kinds of communication occurred in more

open environments was that such offices also could reduce unwanted interactions and disruptions. Had we relied only on our survey data, we might well have concluded that there were no differences among open plan offices of various sorts in terms of how they influenced employees' communication and interaction patterns or their ability to concentrate. That is because almost all respondents, regardless of the type of office they were in, reported in the survey that that they had high levels of communication and interaction, and that privacy and the ability to concentrate was more difficult in more open types of offices. The focused interviews, and systematic observation data, painted a different, subtler picture.

When we looked at transcribed interviews, we found that respondents in closed office said something to the effect that "Yes, I communicate a lot. I often email or talk with co-workers by phone, and whenever I need to see someone, I can easily drop in on them or arrange a meeting." In effect, "frequent" communication for those in closed offices meant interacting several times a week in a scheduled meeting, but not often on the fly. For those in workstation "pods" and small scale, team-oriented bullpens, "frequent" communication and interaction meant literally dozens of quite short communications throughout the day. Without understanding the employees' underlying internal metric, relying on the survey data alone is a bit like asking an obese and an anorexic person whether they ate a lot, and if they both said "yes", assuming the amount of food consumed was comparable.

The interviews revealed more than just differences in frequency of communication. They revealed subtleties in the communication process itself. Respondents in high-paneled cubes described what they called "pseudo-privacy." The high panel supposedly created privacy, yet one could overhear all of a neighbors' conversations.

DESIGN MANAGER: When we were in[high-paneled] cubicles we still sat very close to each other and I would overhear bits and pieces and I would either have to interrupt by standing on my desk and peering over a cubicle wall or running around the corner. And it felt invasive. I felt like I was stepping into a conversation that I wasn't invited into. And my choice was I could either be obnoxious or I could sit there and pretend I didn't hear it. And that was problematic. I was really afraid that I was going to have to Š. let people kind of flounderŠ

What do you do when you overhear a telephone conversation and you realize you have information that could help resolve a problem, but you don't want to admit that you overheard the conversation? Is this eavesdropping or just the unfortunate by-product of minimal acoustic separation? What does being "civilized" mean in this kind of situation? If you cannot see over a panel, how do you know if your neighbor is there or not, and therefore whether you need to modulate your speaking voice, or just not have

certain kinds of conversations? High-paneled cubicles exacerbate these kinds of problems, while more open team-oriented bullpens and pods, with their unobstructed visibility from a seated position, provide useful cues that govern interaction, build trust, and reduce unwanted interruptions.

Building Trust

Trust and comfort among team members is a theme that came up repeatedly in interviews with employees in team-oriented bullpens and pods. It mirrors the recent interest in the concept of "social capital." , which argues that social and emotional relationships affect everything from work output to organizational commitment. From this perspective, effectiveness cannot be defined solely by individual talent, effort or output, despite the fact that for most of the last 100 years or longer most firms in this country have conceived, evaluated, and rewarded performance on an individual basis. In a world dependent on the constant flow of information, and the need to attract and retain the best workers possible in a sellers market, the connection between social relationships and performance takes on new meaning. Recent research shows that people are about five times more likely to turn to friends or colleagues for answers than to other sources of information such as databases or policy and procedures manuals. Our interviews captured the value of social relationships to productive work.

VP: I think we all like each other. I think we all laugh at each other and we also respect each other. Like I know my strengths and weaknesses, but I think Beth and Nancy know them better than I do. And I know their strengths and weaknesses probably better than they do. It's cool. We play off of each other very well. You consider you may be taking 20 minutes out of your workday to get to know somebody, but it's worth it.

Others commented:

ENGINEERING MANAGER It helps build a stronger team, having an open area. They interact with each other a lot more, so they know each other a lot better. I think that helps them be more productive and to have a better attitude.

WEB DESIGNER: Being able to establish social relationship definitely helps me work better. I feel like it's much less of an imposition to ask questions and I can save time. And I feel more comfortable asking for help or getting input.

QA ENGINEER: I think a productive work environment includes being able to take little breaks and just turn around and talk to your neighbor and check in and see what's going on. So, I think that helps with productivity because you develop a relationship with that person. It's easier when

you know someone and you have a relationship with them and you see them all the time. "Hey I need some help with this. Do you know how to do this?"

QA ENGINEER: The ability to solve problems and feeling comfortable asking other people for help is what I consider productive.

PRODUCT DESIGNER: I think my satisfaction with coming to work is much higher now, because I feel like I'm working with a group of people who are interested in the same topics of quality of work that I'm interested in. I have more social interaction, so I'm just happier coming to work. So, therefore I'm much more likely to stay at (this company).

DESIGN MANAGER: Everyday somebody says to me that they stay because they've got friends here or because they like so and so's sense of humor. It's a big deal - a big part of the job.

QA ENGINEER: I'm more shy asking people for help. If I don't know them that well and I don't interact with them, it is harder. It's easier for me to approach somebody if I know them.

PRODUCT MANAGER: I think because I know people fairly well and they know me fairly well I do tend to throw out an idea that I might have been scared to before or sometimes be more honest. Whether it's throwing out an idea or whether it's saying I think you're crazy or whether saying in all honesty I have no idea what you're talking about. I think I do because I know them on a level that's beyond just the professional.

Within a scientific management framework, socializing at work has been viewed as "wasted" time because it is "off task." In organizations where teamwork and collaboration is critical, socializing is the glue that binds a team together. It builds the trust that is absolutely essential to effective collaboration.

Interruptions, Visual Access, and Behavioral Cues
Without doubt, the biggest complaint about cubicles is that they are noisy, full of distractions and unwanted interactions, and make concentration difficult. The antidote recommended is typically a closed office. Our research suggests, counter intuitively, that more open offices can help reduce unwanted interactions while still facilitating effective communication.

Think about how we learn to "read" family members' or roommates' behavior and moods when we share a house or apartment. One glance at "Dad" and you know this is not a good time to interrupt. We learn to interpret facial expressions and body language, to understand the flow and pattern of different activities. Conflict is avoided by understanding the subtleties of non-verbal behavior. The same process operates in office environments that make visual access of others possible without leaving one's

workstation or standing up. Being able to just look up and see what teammates were doing made it possible to avoid interruptions and maintain concentration.

ENGINEERING MANAGER: Most people approach me, I think, with less awkwardness, because I can see them and I can see them coming. So, I can look up and acknowledge them and acknowledge their humanity. Whereas when you're approaching somebody in a cube and their back is to you, you don't know what they're looking at on the screen. You don't want to interrupt if they're writing code. Whereas if I walk by somebody I know and they look like they're really busy and intently studying or doing something, then I can just pass by and come back later. Where, in the cubes, you walk all the way over there, and you think if you're there you may as well interrupt them.

ENGINEERNG MANAGER: Probably productivity would go down if my whole team were in closed offices. Even though you get a lot of distractions when you're in an open area, you can ask questions so quickly. . If somebody has an office and the door is closed you kind of think, "Should I be knocking on this door or not." In this case [open layout] I can just see if they're there and kind of see if they're busy. You can see whether they're in a bad mood and know when to approach them. It makes productivity a lot higher.

MANAGER OF QA: I turned around and waited for eye contact, making sure that it was okay to enter there. It definitely feels like eavesdropping when you're overhearing through a cubicle.

DEVELOPER: [You] can see when someone's working. You can just look at them. I could be sitting at my desk and I can see everyone in the company. You can tell if someone's working very hard. And it's a nice gauge. It's a nice indicator to know when it's okay to go to that person. If I were in a cubicle all day I would never see their daily routines. I might try to initiate some sort of dialogue or conversation at a really bad time. But the way this is set up, I can look at them all day and be like, "Okay, this looks like a good time. I'll walk over there right now."

Unexpectedly, as these data suggest, more visual contact actually contributes to fewer unwanted interactions, not more, by changing not so much the frequency as the timing of conversations. For managers, "interruptions" can also be positive, providing opportunities for developing social relationships underlying effective dialogue and feedback.

MANAGER OF QA: I feel like I'm getting more interrupted now. It's easier for people to come up to me. I think there's give and take. I think it absolutely benefits my relationship with people. I feel as though I'm not viewed as much as the manager who's coming into their space. It doesn't feel like they are having to come over to the manager's cubicle.

In their research on effective leadership, Komaki and Desselles used an empirically based model to identify what leaders ought to do to effect optimal team performance. They found that leaders who collected performance information or gave feedback were more likely to be successful than those who did not. Secondly, leaders who let their teams know when they were doing right or wrong things were more likely to succeed. In fact, the frequency with which leaders monitored and provided consequences was a basis on which to predict their success.

ENGINEERING MANAGER: I don't generally like scheduled meetings (with the people I manage). I like to talk to them individually and the open space has made it easier for me to do that.

DESIGN MANAGER: It helps me build relationships with each of the people who report to me versus having big meetings where each person says what they're doing. And I think having that relationship with me is actually very important, because I can also let them know what's going on.

ENGINEERING MANAGER: I think the open desks are really good for managers coming to just talkŠAs a manager I felt like I was walking down to the little houses (and interrupting).

DESIGN MANAGER: And I know from meeting with my staff it's a lot easier just to catch somebody's eye and say, "Where are we on that?" And it's a lot less loaded, because I'm not sending an email saying, "Can you update me on the status of this project?" and having somebody panic on the other side of that email.

Tacit Learning
Knowledge comes in different forms (explicit and tacit) and is maintained by organizations in a variety of ways in the form of organizational memory. Explicit knowledge is captured and conveyed in things like specification manuals and formal organizational policies and practices. Explicit knowledge can be easily replicated and distributed throughout an organization, though it is often quickly outdated, and subject to the organization's inherent bureaucracy.

Tacit knowledge constitutes the majority of human knowledge. As Mascitelli describes it, "[t]acit knowledge lies below the surface of conscious thought and is accumulated through a lifetime of experience, experimentation, perception, and learning by doing." It is rooted in personal experience, and is often filtered through one's own perspective, beliefs, and value structure. It is also more difficult for organizations to grasp and transmit because it is shared only with the consent and participation of the individual who possesses it. , , In short, the propagation of tacit knowledge, which is absolutely

essential to innovation and the flow of information, is dependent on relationships and communication among individuals. "New knowledge is continually created through complex processes of social interaction that link the tacit knowledge embodied in individuals and the explicit knowledge resources that the organization possesses".

Like tacit knowledge, which is informal and unstructured, tacit learning occurs in a serendipitous, unplanned way as a by-product of our routine, daily activities. It is learning that depends on being able to see and hear and observe how others handle different situations. How does your supervisor handle upset staff, or respond to difficult questions? How does the crack programmer on your team tackle difficult problems? We learn by watching and hearing, not just by being formally "instructed". Not many parents hold "seminars" for their children on manners! Important knowledge about how to be "civilized" in a family context is passed on dozens of times a day to children, without parents thinking about "teaching" or children thinking about "learning." This same form of tacit learning occurs in and is critical to the success of organizations. Work environments that are more open create more opportunities for observing and learning from those with more experience and different skills.

COMPUTER ENGINEER: I knew right from the second when I walked in there that "this is a pretty cool (team-oriented bullpen)". I could hear people talking. As you are learning, you are picking things up from hopefully everybody you're working with. You're working with them because they bring other talents and so forth to the table. So when I'm listening to how other people are working on deals or business negotiations, not only am I working on mine, but I'm learning how they're doing it. You still pick up the knowledge that other people have that you don't have.

Easy visual access serves another purpose: it makes it easy to learn what is going on in one's own group, other departments, and the firm as a whole.

WEB DESIGNER: I hope to never leave the technology room (bullpens). I don't need any more space. I don't want any more space. I feel it would be very detrimental to my personal life, my career, my company and the organization overall if I ever left that bullpen. I function there. I thrive there. I want to be there. I can focus when I have to. But otherwise if I miss that link to the network of information that's flowing in there I lose tremendously. There's no way I could keep up with phone, fax or email on the volume of content that is moving through that space. There's just no way.

MARKETING ASSOCIATE: I like it a lot. Because it opens up the communication. I feel more of a sense of team and I like the idea that I can - not that I eavesdrop - but sometimes you may be too busy to always be conscientious about communicating things. So this way I find out things

that eventually I'm sure Sam would get around to telling Š I hear more of what's going on. I can be more involved. And Š especially if you have the case of people who are poor communicatorsŠyou just overhear the conversation over the phone. At one time I used to think that that was not a good thing to do. You just minded your own business, but now you have to (pay attention to everything going on) in order to do your job better. So, I may get a phone call asking about a certain topic and, overhearing a conversation, can put two pieces of the puzzle together.

Visual Access, Communication, and Interruptions

More open types of offices:

- Allow an individual to time the initiation of conversations better, in order to reduce disruptive interactions.
- Enable one to see actual work occurring in other business units or departments, facilitating a greater transfer of information both within and across teams.
- Enables one to assess a situation before fully committing to an interaction.
- Reduces the likelihood that someone will be left out of a conversation in which he or she should be a part.

SENIOR MANAGER: [an open workplace] keeps you aware of what'sŠ going on for everybody who's in your earshot. In finance that matters just because you know what people are spending things on, and if people are committing to things, you want to find out why they're committing to it or what they are committing to and is it in the budget.

IT ENGINEER: I think if it was any more sectioned off like a floor in an office building with cubes or offices I probably wouldn't know other people in the company as well as I do just because I wouldn't have that visual contact.

DEVELOPER: We all started out in the technology room when there was 8 or 9 of us, and that was an interesting and a dynamic environment because you didn't have to be directly involved in the conversation to learn and to keep a sense of direction or plan or scope. Now that we have the physical barrier (over time, the group grew to the point where some of them were relocated outside the original team-oriented bullpen), I find that we need a lot more formal organization and communication of what the left hand is doing compared to the right hand.

For younger staff being able to learn what is going on from senior management without having to attend formal meetings or be the recipient of formal messages had a lot of appeal.

MANAGER, STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT: When I sit in between my boss and my CEO, I hear a lot. I learn a lot just by watching it. As for a company that's evolved as quickly as we have and as much as we have; I don't think we could have done it if each person worked in their own office. Everything that we did was because we had our ears open.

Decision Speed
Our interview data showed that office type was an important factor in decision speed, largely because it affected the speed with which one received information and/or feedback. The proximity and access available in team-oriented open plans fostered an ability to communicate and resolve issues and make decisions as they arose, rather than relying on formal mechanisms and scheduled meetings that by their nature only occurred periodically and, then, for longer periods of time. Other research has shown that software developers took less time to communicate when they were familiar with one another and when they worked in close proximity.22

VP OF FINANCE: [In] a setting like this [team-oriented bullpen] we have impromptu meetings. No formal planning, 'Let's have a meeting at 3 o'clock. Because we are talking about it anyway, why don't we just do it right now.'

VP OF PRODUCTS: [In a closed office] You would save up all your questions and once a day you would sit down and go over all of your questions. That doesn't happen when you're in this kind of team-oriented bullpen environment. If you have a question you ask it. And sometimes that's better, because if a person's working on something and they need your input, it gets your input immediately.

WEB DEVELOPER: For some things [a bullpen is] faster because you can get feedback. I think the quality is higher because you can get more feedback and get it more often and more timely. I don't have to wait as long.

DESIGN MANAGER: I think it has saved a lot of time. It has prevented a lot of unnecessary meetings. It's enabled us to move a lot faster.

Individuals in closed offices or cubicles relied more on formal mechanisms such as meetings, phone calls, and email to gain feedback or accomplish their work, and even to socialize. Scheduled meetings tended to take longer and be much less frequent than the

shorter and more frequent exchanges that were part of daily life in pods and team-oriented bullpens.

DESIGN MANAGER: At (this company, with closed offices) there was a lot of email. There were a lot of scheduled meetings. And then the meetings also tended to be very people heavy because you want to pull everybody into it who might have an opinion. So, that makes them longer, too, and less efficient in a lot of ways. And what happens in this environment and in the room with many people (team-oriented bullpen) is that you tend to do it quickly. You tend to pull people in; just the people who need to be there; just the person you need to talk to at that moment. There's less secrecy too. When a big change is coming down, the word gets out faster. This might be a little frustrating to the higher-higher ups; but I think people work better when they know more.

WEB DESIGNER: I think the open environment facilitates me getting things done even quicker, because I can ask questions quickly where you may get stumped on something and spend a long time trying to figure out what was the right way to go and you can just ask somebody and get a little bit of an idea and take off with it and come up with a quicker solution or whatever solving the problem is.

Employees at all our sites commented on how easy it was in a team-oriented open environment to know what was going on. One way that increased speed and quality of work was by being able to understand and incorporate a supervisor's intentions and goals earlier into the development of projects and reports.

COMPUTER ENGINEER: I'm hearing what's going on with what they're doing. As I hear what's going on, I'm incorporating those things (into what I'm working on) and it just makes it that much closer to what they're really looking for. So, it's not all scheduled meetings. I can stop by his desk and ask him in a 30 second time period 5 or 10 questions that I need to have some quick answers to, and go back and do my work. I'm not constantly waiting to talk to that one person to give me feedback. Because if it's always going through one person and you're waiting for them, there's a bottleneck and that just slows down the whole decision making process.

In more closed environments feedback and project reviews occur, but formal meeting mechanisms and scheduled meetings become a necessity.

IT ARCHITECT: We rarely have ad hoc meetings here [closed office]. Usually we'll pick some times to meet. In our group, we have a standing, every other day meeting. Even if we don't have a defined agenda. We make sure that we have face time to talk about any issues that are going on. It becomes kind of a necessity because of walls, because you sit in your office and email and talk on the phone.

Our research does not show that open type offices have no disruptions. It underscores the importance of distinguishing between individual and team performance, and of understanding the relationship between the two. As individuals, we typically focus is on what we produce in any given unit of time. Open office environments, especially cubicles, reduce individual performance or productivity in a given unit of time. Individual performance, and that of the team, benefit over the life of the project in more team-oriented environments. In other words, this minute's interruption can be annoying, but over the life of the project such "interruptions" contribute to faster decisions, more timely feedback, stronger social relationships, greater trust, and a better sense of what is going on outside of one's own group.

In summary, though the survey results showed very little difference between office types with regard to team-based organizational outcomes, the interview data indicated that more open offices did a better job of fostering increased comfort with and trust of team members, and more informal communication and cohesiveness than did the cubicle environment. Repeatedly, people commented that the ability to have a quick informal conversation increased their knowledge and understanding of other team members, and contributed significantly to their effectiveness. This was supported by the observational data that showed more interactions of shorter duration in team-oriented offices. On most measures, the most common and stereotypical open plan environment, high-walled cubicles, performed the poorest and was least liked. Somewhat surprisingly, individual closed offices, often seen as the Shangri-La of office designs, were not universally viewed as the best or most effective work environment. Age is likely to influence this view.

Age Demographics
Attraction, commitment, and retention of employees represent a major challenge for dynamic organizations, notwithstanding the current economic downturn. Comeau-Kirshner and Wah report that seventy-two percent of nine hundred executives surveyed listed finding exceptional employees as one of their top concerns, followed by motivating their employees (55 percent). Deveshwar named recruitment as one of the key change-drivers for the 21st century.

During the height of the dot.com surge, the country witnessed an exodus of talented individuals from companies like IBM and Procter and Gamble to startups such as Amazon.com. People were attracted to a startup culture in which they could "come and go as they please, wear what they like, work the hours that suit them...work in small groups and be part of every decision." . Even though many of these companies have not survived and people are moving back toward the security of mature organizations, large organizations have and continue to adopt many of the more fundamental

characteristics of dot.coms, including minimal formal status, the value of free-flowing communication and debate, and more open and flexible work settings. Younger employees are not attracted to hierarchy, to formalized communication, or to "waiting their turn."

Common wisdom has it that older people are more change resistant than younger ones. Perhaps. My own experience is that people, regardless of age, resist change that undermines their sense of self-worth, fails to deliver what they feel entitled to, or conveys what the employee considers is the wrong message about their role and authority in the organization. We also resist change that takes us out of our personal comfort zone. For many older workers, the comfort zone is the high-paneled cubicle or closed office, despite the fact that the cubicle is widely reviled. Organizations must ask themselves whether it is in their best interests to support the status quo with respect to comfort levels, status desires, and professional identities when these conflict with organizational priorities. Do you risk alienating some of your more experienced employees when their personal satisfaction requires using more corporate resources than might be necessary; and more importantly, when the preferred environment might not be the most productive environment?

Our research sites offered us relatively few opportunities to look at age across the full range of office types. That was because in the few sites with closed offices, almost all the occupants were middle aged (and in the technology and engineering positions, men). Not surprisingly, we found that middle-aged men in closed offices liked them, found them supportive of their work effectiveness, and believed that they supported effective communication patterns. We did, however, have in our sample what we called "shared enclosed" offices (fully-enclosed rooms with from 2-12 people occupying the room) occupied by a wide employee age range.

The data showed that younger workers liked these kinds of offices more than older workers. The reason was instructive: they felt they could learn more from their "officemates" in this kind of office. This makes sense, since in interviews a common reason for wanting to join a company was the opportunity to work with "great" people. Having great people around that you rarely see and with whom you even more rarely talk has limited value. Respondents talked about the much greater learning opportunities in a more open environment. Older respondents, in contrast, evidenced less thirst for being "stretched" intellectually to develop new skills and competencies than did younger employees who knew they had a lot to learn and realized they could benefit from being around and interacting with more experienced workers. Older workers also found it harder to concentrate in the more open environment.