FAD OR FANTASTIC? THE OPEN OFFICE ENVIRONMENT IS A BIG VARIABLE



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The Open Office concept has gained tremendous popularity in the past decade or more. In the spirit of better communications, greater transparency and lowered business costs, walls are going away and per employee spaces are growing smaller. Business owners who are keen to reduce or manage rents are asking realtors and landlords to find and improve spaces to meet the growing demand for the 'open office.' What does it look like and how do you know what is right for the tenant?

Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reveals a consistent downward trend from 204 square feet in 2002 to just over 190 square feet per employee in 2014. This trend will continue with several sources predicting future offices of 100 square feet to 150 square feet per employee. Telecommuting, hoteling and job sharing influence this number, but the prime enabler is the 'open office.'

Google 'open office' and you will see a growing backlash, particularly against the very, very open, minimal privacy environment. Depending on the business, that might be taking it too far. The extreme of the open office looks, and probably sounds, like a cafeteria with rows of tables and chairs. Work stations are unassigned, impersonal and cramped with little delineation. It's okay for lunch, but for most of us, not all day with calls to make and deadlines to meet. Artificially-lit cubicle farms with perimeter offices for the lucky few are equally unpleasant.

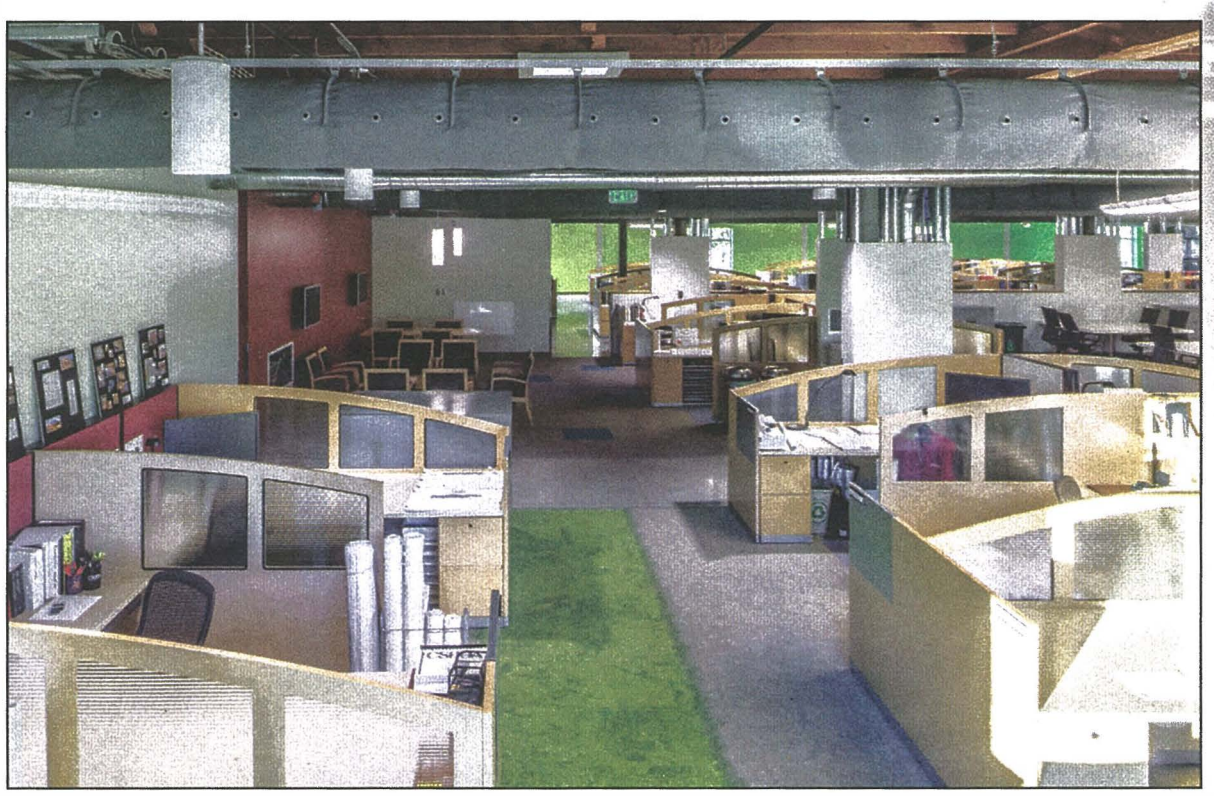


Photo by Marc Walters

BALANCE IS KEY

Privacy versus openness. Collaboration versus quiet intensity. Noise versus energy. Personal versus shared. A successful and collaborative open office requires balance – the right design for the business. It seeks to create a work environment where focus (research, thinking, getting the 'work' done) is supported equally with collaboration (sharing, teaching, ideation, solving the 'problem').

A simple per person calculation is not adequate. Designers need to ask a lot of questions up front, including:

- **How many and what types of employees? Sales, R&D, customer service, design?**
- **How many 'open' seats versus offices? How much square feet for each?**
- **How does the space sound? Can we mask excess noise with layout and materials?**
- **How large is the footprint? Can we create sub or studio spaces?**
- **What do you need for support space? Conference rooms, storage/filing, IT/ communications, printing, lobby, restrooms, break room, flex space for special projects, casual space, retreat/quiet space?**
- **Is there potential for ample natural light?**
- **Do you have an elevator core or central lobby to design around?**
- **Can the business culture handle the egalitarian nature of same-sized workspaces?**
- **What kind of engagement does the business have with its clients?**

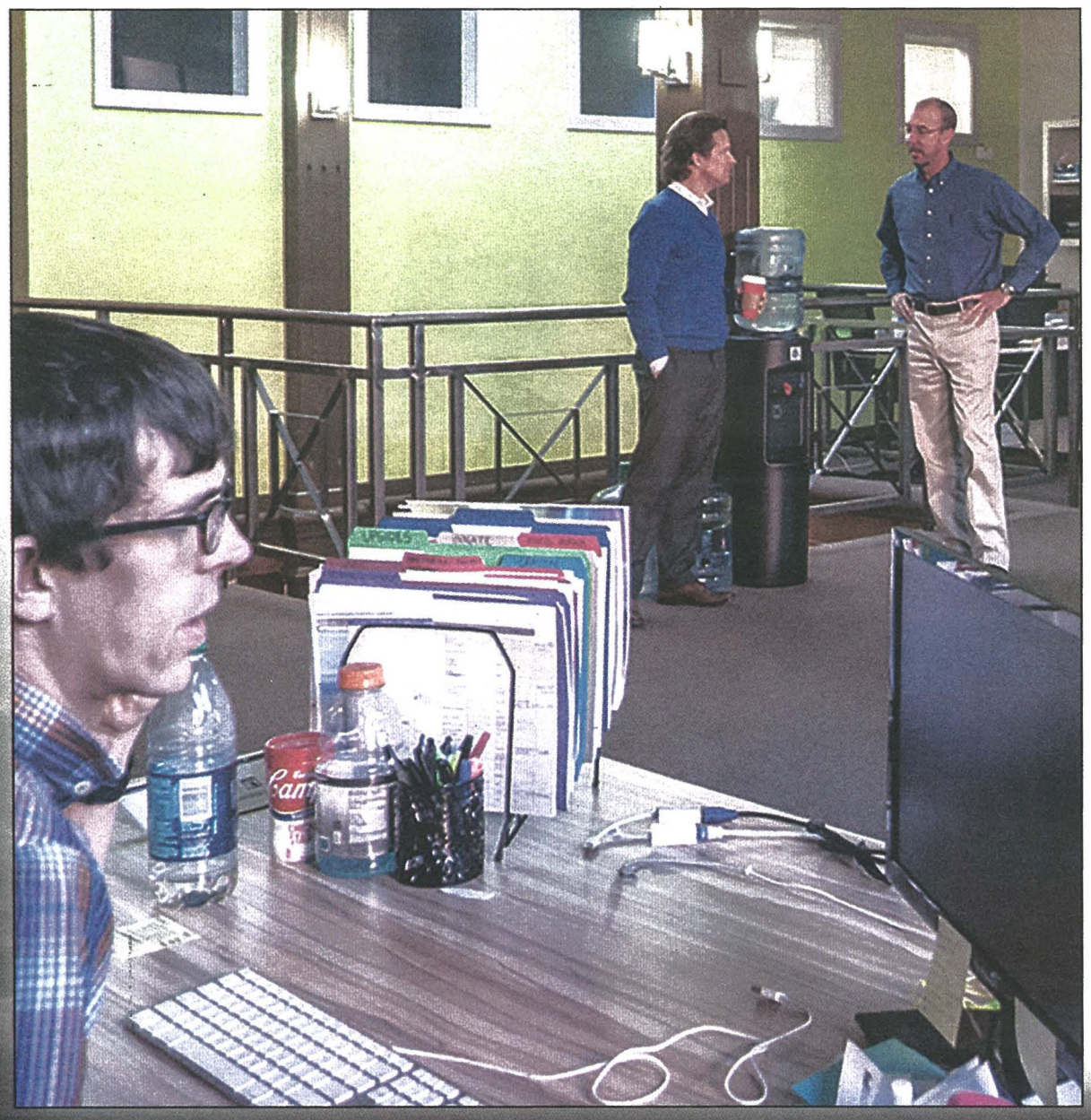


Photo by Pete Grady

From working with clients and our own experience, we have learned a great deal. Lessons include:

The open office environment has taken on a life of its own. There is no set criteria. There is only a balancing act where design must be appropriate to the business. Forcing people to work contrary to their nature is not healthy. Offering a healthy, positive environment where co-workers accomplish more together than apart makes for an intangible secret sauce.

Nicole Cecil, ASID, LEED AP ID+C *has 20 years of interior design experience and is a strong advocate for healthy, sustainable environments. She is nationally certified by the National Council for Interior Design Qualification and has volunteered for this and other professional organization including ASID and USGBC.*

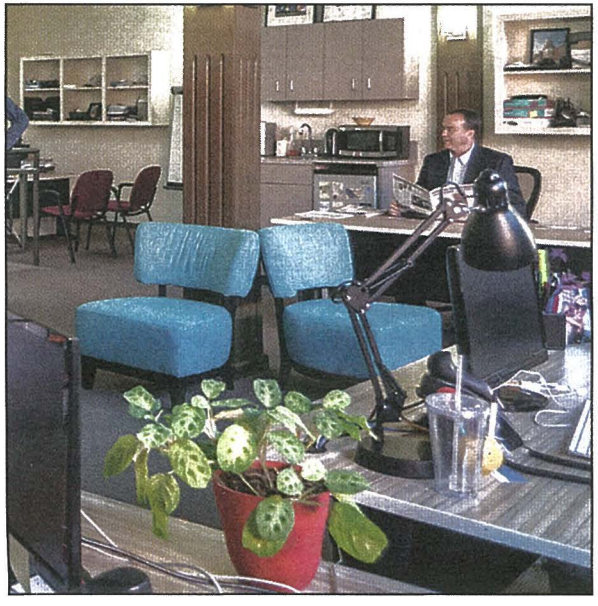


Photo by Pete Grady

- **Short walls /work cubicles are good. Choose wisely.**
- **Don't skimp on good chairs, task lighting or ergonomic support including keyboard trays.**
- **Don't skimp on energy efficient HVAC systems geared toward keeping air fresh.**
- **Don't go vanilla. Color is an essential element to define space and support mood.**
- **Employ glass walls, skylights or clerestories to move natural light through the space.**
- **Provide a separate break space for food prep and a non-work atmosphere.**
- **Assign workstations and allow personalization.**
- **Provide private telephone booths.**
- **Create collaboration spaces apart from the workstations.**
- **Integrate conference room reservations into a scheduling software.**
- **Cultivate a culture of thinking before interrupting. Do I need this person now?**
- **In general, meetings belong in meeting rooms.**
- **Set and enforce policies including decorating standards, headsets for music and respectful conversations.**
- **Be open-minded and willing to challenge the status quo.**
- **Offer opportunities for continuous employee feedback.**



Photo by Marc Walters