

Ethnographic Assessment of Individual and Group Privacy Needs: Phase I and II Studies

Virginia W. Kupritz, Ph.D.

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To better understand how to manage workplace privacy for optimum job performance, two studies were undertaken to identify architectural privacy features that impact individual and group work. Overall, the findings of these studies enhance organizations' ability to target the most critical design features that support privacy and collaboration needs to support individual and group work.

Project Overview

Corporations face complex decisions as they attempt to provide work environments that support the highest productivity. They want to know where to channel their finite resources to facilitate work practices. Two studies were undertaken to identify architectural privacy features that impact individual and group work to provide a better understanding of how to manage workplace privacy for optimum job performance.

The research questions for the two studies asked: "What architectural privacy features do workers perceive as impacting individual and group work?" and "How do individual and group privacy needs compare with group collaboration needs at work?" To answer these questions, the study utilized an ethnographic approach to examine environmental (architectural), behavioral (overt and covert), and social (cultural norms and institutional policies) mechanisms used to regulate privacy in the workplace. The Phase I study provided a macro examination of cultural knowledge about perceived privacy and collaboration needs. This type of ethnographic approach decreased the likelihood of overlooking significant chunks of information about privacy that an initial micro study might have overlooked. While environmental mechanisms were the primary focus of the studies, behavioral and social mechanisms were also examined in the Phase I study to provide a balanced perspective of how privacy is regulated in the workplace.

Building upon the Phase I study findings, the Phase II study provided a narrower examination of architectural privacy features identified in Phase I that impact individual and group work. The Phase II study measured positive and negative relationships between a broad range of design features and work activities and the relative importance given to office design features by office workers at a large Midwestern manufacturer.

Participants. The Phase I and II studies were undertaken to identify architectural privacy features that impact individual and group work across four job types: business professionals, technical professionals, managers, and administrative support services. These job types were selected for their broad relevance to organizations at large. The job types reflect a taxonomy which identifies workstyles as being concentrative/ collaborative, concentrative/technical, consultative, and transactional:

- Business professionals consisted of marketing and sales, human resources, accounting and finance, purchasing, and customer service professionals that support the infrastructure of the organization.
- Technical professionals consisted of engineers, computer systems engineers, engineering designers, and industrial engineers that support information systems and engineering.
- Managers hold lead positions and supervise and evaluate direct reports for the work functions that support the company's business activities.
- Administrative support services personnel consisted of workers who provide administrative support including reporting business functions of a routine or recurring nature; managing and archiving paper work, electronic data, and people's schedules; transcribing and entering data; and coordinating and collaborating with work groups to help them achieve their goals.

Procedures. Utilizing an ethnographic approach, 248 office workers participated in the privacy studies. In Phase I, 48 office workers across the four job types were interviewed for approximately one hour each. This provided a macro examination of cultural knowledge about perceived privacy and collaboration needs from which a questionnaire was built to use in Phase II. The questionnaire was designed to measure positive and negative relationships between a broad

range of office design features and work activities, and to prioritize where privacy fits into what is important to office workers for performing work. In Phase II, 200 office workers across the same four job types completed the survey questionnaire. Both phases had a 100 percent response rate. The questionnaire consisted of 329 questions that generated 65,800 responses, reflecting its depth.

Concept of Privacy. Privacy is the regulation of interaction between the self, others, and environmental stimuli, which is a dynamic, boundary-regulating process that changes depending upon the particular situation and circumstances at the time (Kupritz, 2000a). While architectural privacy is most commonly associated with visual and acoustical isolation (Sundstrom, Burt, & Kamp, 1980), it also involves olfactory and tactile isolation supplied by the physical environment. For example, the physical environment can provide isolation from unwanted environmental smells such as cigarette smoke or food smells originating from a dining or break area. The physical environment can also provide tactile isolation from uncomfortable HVAC conditions and fluctuating temperatures in a workspace.

Architectural Privacy Features that Impact Individual and Group Work

The following discussion outlines the main discoveries of the Phase I and II studies.

1. Workers across job types strongly perceive that certain field characteristics (orientation and distance) are more important in regulating individual privacy activities than barriers such as walls, panels, or doors. While the office workers in this study strongly perceive that certain field characteristics dealing with orientation are higher in importance than design barriers, this finding may depend upon the relevancy to the particular work situation and circumstances. Prior research in

another manufacturing industry involving engineers determined similar findings (Kupritz, 1998); however, research in a service industry involving workers with supervisory skills ranked design barriers much higher than design features dealing with orientation (Kupritz, 2003a, 2003b).

Organizations should not infer that the importance given to certain design features dealing with orientation means that the office workers in this study prefer physical openness. Indeed, the Phase I study findings determined that the opposite is true. The open floor plan layout was one of the most frequently elicited design features perceived as impeding individual privacy (and group privacy as well).

2. Workers across job types strongly agree that certain design features are related to privacy activities in many instances. These architectural privacy features include, "having a personal workspace with 64"- or 68"-high panels," "a personal workspace with 80" panels," "a personal workspace with floor-to-ceiling solid walls," "a conference room available when needed," "having the personal workspace facing away from foot traffic," and "having the personal workspace located away from high foot traffic aisles."

This finding enhances an organization's ability to target design features that workers across job types strongly perceive as relating to privacy. The priority rankings for these features, however, determined that some of these features are more important to accommodate than others. This difference suggests that organizations should pay careful attention to both the strength of relationships between design features and privacy activities as well as the relative weighting of importance for these design features.

3. Workers across job types strongly agree that certain design features

are not related to privacy activities in many instances. Negative relationships were particularly strong across job types for these design features, "having a window to see natural daylight and views outside the building," "informal meeting areas, including break areas," "a collaborative area for group work with no panels or walls," "sufficient office equipment/reference materials/supplies and easy access to them," and "coworkers who work together located close together."

This finding suggests that certain design features do not accommodate privacy activities and provides organizations with a better understanding about design features with marginal benefits to privacy. This does not mean that these design features necessarily impede privacy. Rather, they are not perceived as related to privacy.

4. Worker perceptions about relationships between certain design features and privacy activities vary across job types in some instances. While workers across job types often relate similar design features with privacy activities, in other instances job types vary in their perceptions about certain design features related to privacy activities. Recognizing job type similarities and differences between design features and privacy activities for performing individual and group work alerts and directs organizations to where they should channel their resources to accommodate differences and facilitate work practices.
5. Workers across job types generally do not perceive similar weightings of importance for design features including architectural privacy features. While workers across job types perceived similar strengths of relationship between design features and privacy activities in many instances, workers across job types did not perceive similar weightings of importance for most design features including architectural privacy features.

Workers across job types were consistent with each other in their priority rankings for only three of the 21 design features, two of which were related to privacy activities: “having coworkers who work together located close together,” “having my personal workspace facing away from foot traffic,” and “having my personal workspace located away from high foot traffic aisles.” Technical professionals and managers were the most similar to each other and ranked seven of the remaining 18 design features the same or within one or two positions of each other. Except for technical professionals and managers, job types that shared similar perceptions with each other ranked one or two design features the same or within one or two positions of each other.

This finding suggests that providing a generic template of office design features for all job types will not accommodate architectural privacy needs across the board. That is, certain work practices appear to have particular architectural privacy needs that other work practices do not have, in addition to architectural privacy needs that all work practices share in common.

6. Architectural privacy features are not consistently perceived as supporting both individual and group work across job types. While workers across job types related some architectural privacy features to performing both individual work and group work, other architectural privacy features were related to only one type of work.

For example, workers across job types perceived “having a conference room available when needed” as important for performing group work and most privacy activities but not important for performing individual work. That is, workers perceived having an available conference room when needed as a way to accommodate

group work but not individual work. Organizations need to accommodate environmental differences between individual and group privacy needs. The finding suggests that workers do not perceive certain design features as accommodating both individual and group work.

7. While the interview questions in the Phase I study were designed to elicit more information about office design features than behavioral and social mechanisms, the institutional policy for flextime was consistently elicited across job types as supporting individual and group privacy needs (and especially individual privacy needs).

This finding suggests that allowing for flextime opportunities can help support individual and group privacy needs. The finding, however, also suggests that organizations should consider flextime arrangements outside of prime business hours. In this way, workers are more readily available for group collaboration and incidental learning opportunities and supervisors are physically available to answer immediate work questions from direct reports during prime hours.

8. The cultural practice of workers interrupting individuals and work groups was consistently elicited across job types as hindering individual and group work in the Phase I study. This consistent practice suggests that organizations should involve human resources professionals to train workers on effective ways to regulate privacy, such as when it is appropriate to interrupt and when it is not, and help employees establish norms and protocols for the workplace. Training employees on appropriate ways to use the environment is both a teaching and a learning process (Kupritz, 2000b).

How Individual and Group Privacy Needs Compare to Group Collaboration Needs

1. Particular design features that support basic job functions, collaboration, and privacy appear to be highest in overall importance across job types in the Phase II study. Certain design features that support basic job functions — “having flexible furniture and equipment that can be rearranged to fit work needs” and “having sufficient worksurface to spread out work” — were ranked in the top eight design features across job types. Three of the four job types strongly agreed that having flexible furniture and equipment that can be rearranged to fit work needs related to privacy and concentrating for performing individual and group work. All job types strongly agreed that “having a sufficient worksurface to spread out work” related to concentrating for performing individual and group work.

A specific design feature that deals with collaboration — “having coworkers who work together located close together” — was ranked in the top six design features across job types. Workers across job types strongly agreed that this design feature was not related to multiple privacy activities for performing individual and group work.

Certain architectural privacy features that deal with orientation and distance — “having my personal workspace facing away from foot traffic” and “having my personal workspace located away from high foot traffic aisles” — were ranked in the top four to seven design features across job types. “Having my personal workspace located away from high foot traffic aisles” was ranked in the top four features and “having my personal workspace facing away from foot traffic” was ranked in the top seven features. All job types strongly agreed that these two design features related to most privacy activities for performing individual work.

Careful planning and foresight is needed in the search for the happy medium that allows groups of individuals to remain private enough to be productive while enhancing their ability to collaborate. While some privacy is inevitably lost in the transition from individual to group work, design solutions incorporating certain design features that support all three issues — basic job functions, collaboration, and privacy — may allow groups of individuals to remain private enough to be productive and still collaborate effectively.

2. This finding redirects organizations to deploy a three-pronged solution that accommodates all three issues — basic job functions, collaboration, and privacy — rather than accommodating one issue without taking other issues into account (such as design solutions made to increase collaboration and task flow without addressing privacy needs.) Organizations should target the most critical design features supporting basic job functions, collaboration, and privacy that job types share as well as provide for differences among job types.
3. Workers across job types perceive that they spend more time performing individual quiet work, including computer work, than any other job activity in the two studies. Business professionals, technical professionals and administrative support services reported that they spend nearly half of their time performing individual quiet work, including computer work: 47, 50, and 56 percent respectively. Managers reported that they spend about 1/3 of their time (32 percent) performing individual quiet work, including computer work.

This finding suggests that one's own workspace is still the primary spatial tool for work rather than collaborative work areas. Further, in the studies, it was in or near one's own workspace that at least 1/3 of noise-producing activities occurred that caused privacy problems with acoustical and visual distractions — one of the main complaints impeding job performance and satisfaction in the workplace today. While worker perception is subjective and does not measure actual time spent, such perception carries heavy weight. Another extensive study of 13,000 office workers across similar job types found similar results, even for companies with high levels of collaboration (Brill, Weidemann, & BOSTI Associates, 2001).

4. Workers across job types appear to give a higher priority to certain design features related to collaboration even though they spend less time performing collaborative work in the two studies. The amount of perceived time workers across job types spend performing collaborative work is disproportionate to the weighting of importance given to certain design features related for collaboration. Workers across job types reported that they spend considerably less time performing group work when they are collaborating with coworkers: Business professionals and administrative support services — 10 percent; technical professionals — 13 percent; and managers — 14 percent.

Workers across job types appear to make choices about the relative importance of certain design features for collaboration based upon the importance a job activity has in their work rather than making choices solely based upon the amount of time they spend collaborating.

Organizations should examine the importance workers give to job activities as well as the duration of those activities in considering design solutions that facilitate work practices. The importance workers give to certain design features related to collaboration reflects the crucial role that collaboration plays in many industries today. This importance may be relative to the particular situation and circumstances. Prior research in a service industry determined that certain design features related to collaboration were ranked much lower in importance (Kupritz, 2003a, 2003b).

5. The level of job complexity does not appear to determine the amount of perceived time workers across job types spend performing individual quiet work, including computer work. Workers across job types reported that they spend similar amounts of time performing individual quiet work, including computer work, even with different levels of job complexity.

This finding suggests that corporations should not assume that job types with less complexity need less individual privacy. Classic earlier research supports this finding (Sundstrom, Burt, & Kamp, 1980). The need for individual privacy may have more to do with the types of privacy activities, such as concentrating, talking privately face-to-face, and talking privately on the phone, and the duration of these activities that workers engage in rather than job complexity alone. For example, a data entry worker who spends most of the day concentrating to enter data on the computer may need as much or more privacy as a job type whose tasks are more complex but require less concentration.

Conclusion

The Phase II study provides further insight into what design features appear to support groups of individuals to remain private enough while enhancing their ability to collaborate. Linking the qualitative data and analysis from the Phase I study with the more quantitative data and analysis from the Phase II study helped extend theoretical considerations about design features that impact individual and group privacy and how these features compare to other design features that impact collaboration. Building upon the results of the Phase I study, the Phase II findings identified a broad range of design features that workers across job types strongly agreed relate to privacy activities for performing individual and group work. The Phase II study also identified design features that workers across job types strongly agreed were not related to privacy activities. These findings provide organizations with a better ability to differentiate architectural privacy features from design features with marginal benefit to privacy.

What appears to differ is not that a greater need for privacy or collaboration exists across job types, but the ways in which workers perceive that need to be met through design features that support privacy and collaboration. It is through design features that workers across job types vary in their perceptions, not in their need for privacy or collaboration. Worker perception about the strengths of relationship between design features and privacy activities was similar in many instances and varied in other instances. Workers across job types, also did not perceive similar weightings of importance for most design features, including those related to privacy activities.

The inconsistency in strengths of relationship and different weightings of importance for design features related to privacy activities suggests that certain work practices appear to have particular architectural privacy needs that other work practices do not have, in addition to architectural privacy needs that all work practices share in common. Recognizing job type differences and similarities alerts and directs organizations to where they should channel their finite resources to facilitate work practices. These findings enhance organizations' ability to target the most critical design features that support privacy and collaboration needs to support individual and group work.

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