



Will This Open Space Work?

by Jacqueline Vischer

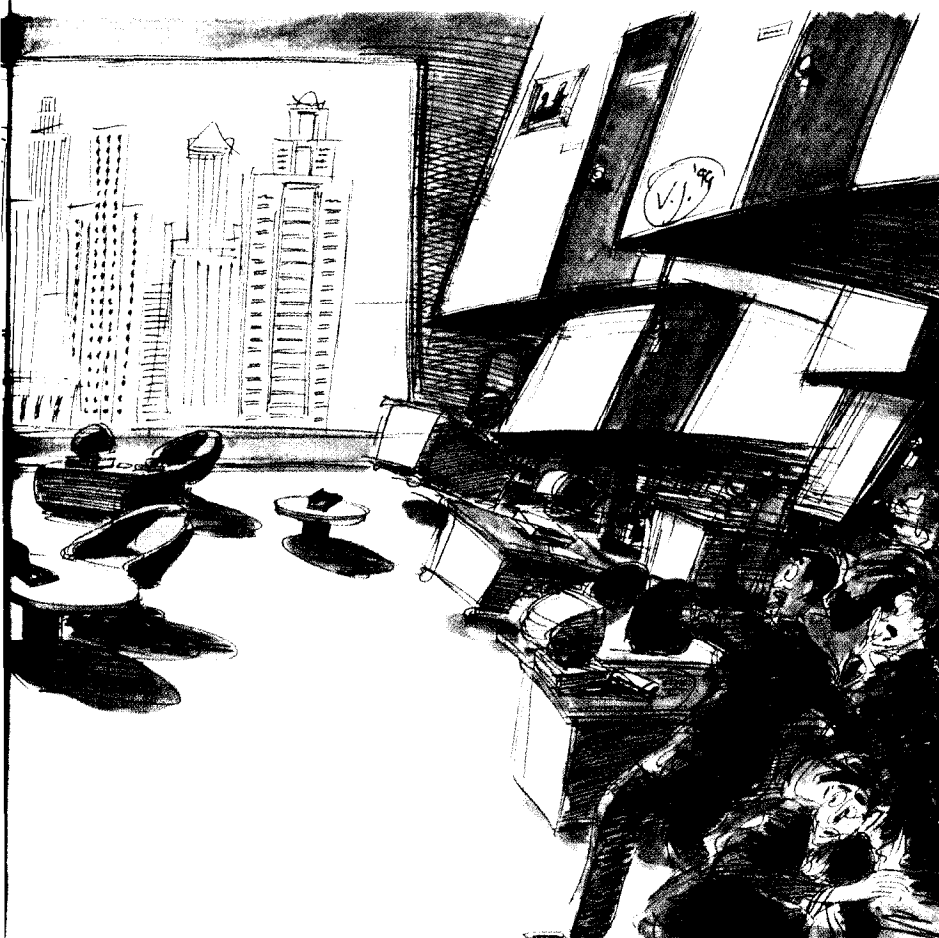
SASHA PASTERNAK, GENERAL manager of facilities for Northern Oil, was pleased with the innovative office design being developed for the new head office. As she helped Abby Eliot, senior architect, pin drawings up on Northern's conference-room wall, she reflected that the wide-open, interactive concept responded well to CEO Fritz Schumacher's request for space that cost less and supported more collaborative work.

"This redesign is as much about reinventing how we work as it is about reducing space costs," Fritz had said at the first project meeting. "I want to send a message to employees: This is a new era. We need to be smarter, faster, and more collaborative."

The new downtown facility was being designed to foster casual meetings and off-the-cuff conversations. There were three times as many conference rooms as in the current space, as well as a library, a dining room with a fabulous view, and dozens of small meeting spaces, both open and enclosed. Sasha liked the way Abby's design helped flatten the organization: everyone from senior executives to administrative assistants had the same amount of space, the same access to natural light, and the same ergonomically sound furniture. She didn't think that the unit heads were going to be happy about giving up their private offices, but Fritz had been very clear that eliminating individual private offices was a priority.

"So long as there's a private space I can escape to when I have to prepare for a board meeting—that's good enough for me," he'd said. "I am totally committed to being accessible the rest of the time. The team is stronger than the individuals that make it up—and what kind of a team can it be if people work alone behind closed doors!"

Northern Oil was being challenged by a number of small, aggressive oil- and gas-exploration companies that were entering what had been a pretty narrow field. The company definitely needed to cut costs and increase productivity in its core business. And yet Northern certainly wasn't stagnating. It had recently acquired a midsize competitor and was



The CEO wants to increase collaboration and cut costs with an open-plan work space, but the knowledge workers say they need their walls, their doors, and their privacy.

looking at other deals. And the stock market had responded well to Fritz Schumacher's recent appointment as CEO.

The head office was staffed largely by engineers, geologists, geophysicists, computer programmers and analysts, and administrative staff. People were attached to their current space— a mix of private offices and roomy cubicle workstations. Sasha had sat in on meetings between the architects and Northern employees, and she had to admit that those sessions hadn't yielded much support for open space. She suspected that nobody knew exactly what Fritz meant when he talked about "reinventing how we work." But she also thought he was on to

something: she'd read that productivity goes up if work space is changed and staff is retrained at the same time. (She'd read, too, that productivity goes down if one's done without the other.)

Sasha believed that her job as facilities manager would be easier, and that her budget would stretch further, once Northern had a standardized workstation size and used fewer walls and more partitions. The costs of future reconfigurations would go down, too. At the end of the year, she'd be evaluated on the basis of whether she'd cut costs and increased flexibility, so she was motivated to make the new plan work. Of course, she also knew that she'd hear from employees if they weren't happy.

"How do you think people will respond to the drawings!" Abby asked Sasha as they finished pinning up the last one.

"I was just wondering about that," said Sasha. "We'll get some push back from all the people losing private office space, I'm sure. But everyone knows that Fritz is behind this initiative one hundred percent. And— bottom line — they don't have a lot of choice, do they? I think people will be realistic."

"I wish he could have been here today," responded Abby. "I've been at these meetings before, and they can get ugly. Nobody likes giving up space."

"Yeah. But everyone here has been complaining about the lack of meeting space for years. You and your team have certainly fixed that."

As Abby and Sasha looked over the plans together, the conference room filled with the business unit heads and a few of their staff. Sasha opened the meeting by introducing Abby and conveying the CEO's regret about missing the meeting. Then she turned the floor over to Abby. The architect began by pointing out that the new workstations translated roughly into a 40% reduction in square footage. She showed how some of the saved space was being used for more group work space and for informal areas like kitchens, project rooms, and seating alcoves off the main corridors. Overall, there would be a space savings of about 20%. Abby explained that lower partitions were necessary to keep people from feeling claustrophobic in the new cubicles, and that people working in open-plan designs spend less time inside private cubicles and more time in group areas working with coworkers.

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What would you do if you were in CEO Fritz Schumacher's position! To discuss this case, go to the HBR Forum at [hbr.org](#)

She continued by noting that certain groups of office workers spent a lot of time off-site. Those employees would no longer have dedicated office space; they'd work from "hotel" spaces located within their professional work-group areas. Instead of having 35 offices in a 35-person group, there would now be 20 workstations. People in those groups would reserve a workstation from their laptops or when they arrived at the office. The reservation system would automatically route their phone calls and e-mails. Employees would pick up their mobile file cabinets, or "cubbies," on their way to the day's work space.

There was silence when Abby finished talking. Finally Gary Neeley, Northern's CFO, said, "That's not as much space savings as we had hoped for. But it is enough to affect the bottom line."

Sasha pointed out that they would have to spend more on telecom support, which would partially offset the lower cost of the new space. And even though the new furniture would eventually translate into savings, she said, it was expensive on a first-cost basis. Other companies, however, had found that people worked more efficiently with well-designed furniture.

Gary turned to Abby. "What about the executive floor? Will it be any different from what you're showing us here?"

"No, it'll look the same," said Abby. "That will get your space costs down to where you want them, and it'll help members of the executive team communicate better, too. And it will help other employees accept the new space."

Gary looked doubtful. "Fritz likes it?" he asked.

"He's very enthusiastic," Sasha replied.

Gary left the meeting after a few more minutes, and the business unit heads talked more freely. Jill Bainbridge, head of Geodata Analysis, sounded belligerent. "My team does highly detailed work that calls for extended periods of concentration. The open plan is bound to be noisy, and the quality of people's work is sure to go down. Isn't quality just as

much a factor as quantity when you're measuring productivity?"

Abby explained that employees could reserve any one of numerous "just in time" enclosed rooms that would be equipped with telephones and networked computers. "Other companies have found that one JIT room for every four or five employees works out pretty well, and that's what the plan provides," she said.

"We'll upgrade telecom support to make the JIT rooms work," added Sasha. "Obviously we can't ask people to move around if they don't have transparent, reliable computer and phone support wherever they go in the building."

Tom Greenthal from Regional Networks spoke up. "I see no reason to buy expensive new furniture. Surely the money's better spent on giving people decent space. Furthermore, I don't see how our engineers are going to accommodate all their files in such small work spaces. Everyone needs copies of the technical documentation - where are they going to put them?"

In responding, Sasha noted the CEO's desire to see the office become less paper-based. "Abby's plan gives each team shared-not individual-file storage space."

Michael Spence from New Business Ventures chimed in. "My people handle a lot of confidential material; they're negotiating deals that no one can know about until we sign on the dotted line. Are they supposed to excuse themselves every time a call comes in and retreat to those private spaces? Why not just give them private spaces, since that's what their work requires?"

"And, by the way, why did the architects bother to interview us if they weren't going to listen to what we said?"

Sasha and Abby exchanged a look and agreed, wordlessly, to let people vent. The discussion soon became general: Where will people hang up their posters, plaques, and photographs? How can people have confidential meetings with their bosses? And what about Continental Oil across town, which constantly courts Northern's best people? At Continental, all of the engineering

professionals and technical specialists are given private offices with windows.

"Why would people sit in these little cubbyholes when they could have an office with their name on the door?" asked Jill.

When people began to talk about telecommuting from home, Sasha intervened. "Okay, folks," she said. "This is just the first cut. Thanks for coming."

The next day, Michael Spence stopped by Sasha's office. "I think you should know that people are talking about refusing to move to the new space. Jill told me that some of her people are circulating a petition," he said.

Sasha checked in with other unit heads she was friendly with and found that people were indeed in a dither. She filled in the other members of the project team and then called Abby.

"I've never seen this place so jumpy," Sasha told Abby. "People are getting hyperfocused on whatever status symbols they've gained over the years - walls, doors, visitor chairs. We should probably slow the project schedule down some and work on getting buy-in. We need to show people what they'll gain from the new space."

"That's your call," said Abby. "But remember, I'm an architect - not a change management consultant."

A New Plan?

One week later, Sasha, Abby, and Gary were seated around a table in the executive conference room, waiting for Fritz to arrive. Sasha was updating the CFO.

"Abby and her team have developed some new layouts for us, Gary. I'm not necessarily suggesting that we go with these changes- they're here to help us think through the issues.

"You'll recall that the drawings we saw last week depicted a mixture of small workstations, shared open space, meeting rooms, and JIT rooms available on an as-needed basis. They've now developed a choice of office layouts to meet the needs of different work groups. There is an open cluster arrangement pretty

close to what you saw; there's a more linear arrangement that gives individuals more privacy and less collaborative space; and there's an option that gives people much higher workstation partitions – essentially these are private offices- and much less team space.

"Now we have to decide whether to vary workstation size and partition height for different groups – depending on what kind of work they do -or to give everyone the same and hope they adjust," said Sasha.

Gary looked doubtful. "Wouldn't adding these options increase the cost of the project?" he asked.

"Absolutely," said Sasha. "There would be less of a space reduction. Abby's original plan had it down to 160 square feet per person (we're at 270 right now). This would bring it closer to 200. We'd have to purchase a greater variety of furniture and then decide who gets what. Future reconfiguration will be more costly. And, while people aren't happy with the current plan, at least they're all in the same boat. Creating choices might stir up internal warfare."

Gary asked, "Well, what's the advantage of going this route?"

Sasha replied, "People will feel less threatened if they have some choice, and maybe they'll work better in space designed specifically to meet their needs."

Gary stared at the new plans for a minute, then shook his head. "I think this would be a big mistake. Fritz is excited about the new open work space. Heck if the CEO is willing to work in an open plan, then everybody else in this company should be, too."

"Hey, I heard that," said Fritz, walking into the room. "And I also hear we're behind schedule and that some of our people are kicking up a fuss. Fill me in, please."

HBR's cases present common managerial dilemmas and offer concrete solutions from experts. As written, they are hypothetical, and the names used are fictitious. We invite you to write to Case Suggestions, Harvard Business Review, 60 Harvard Way, Boston, MA 02163, and describe the issues you would like to see addressed.

What should the project team decide about the company's new plans, and how should it implement that decision?

Five commentators advise CEO Fritz Schumacher and his team on the uses-and abuses-of work space.

The nature of a person's work should dictate decisions about space. Form should follow function.



NICK MACPHEE
is general manager of corporate services at Microsoft in Redmond, Washington.

Sasha Pasternak, head of facilities at Northern Oil, has made a common mistake: she's adopted an "expert servant" mentality. When CEO Fritz Schumacher said, "Let's build an open-space office – it'll make everyone work more collaboratively, and we'll save some money," she saluted smartly, hired a design team, and tried to do just what the CEO wanted.

But what if she'd acted like an expert instead of an expert servant? What if she'd said, "Look, I know what you're thinking, but you're not taking into account some important

considerations"? Rather than take his directives at face value, Sasha might have urged the CEO to define his objectives, define the measurement criteria, analyze the different options, and assess the impact of each option over time.

The fact is, very few managers rigorously analyze their decisions about work space. Instead, they make decisions based on a limited set of quantifiable metrics, such as efficient use of space and cost per person, and fail to consider broader measures, such as productivity and employee retention. It's true that the latter are difficult to measure, but it's dangerous not to make the effort.

Clearly, no single type of space fits all knowledge workers. At Microsoft's research and development headquarters in Redmond, for instance, most people work in private offices, and that leads some people to think we're private-office proponents. But it's not that simple. We believe strongly that the nature of a person's work should dictate decisions about space- in other words, form should follow function. We've found that software developers do their best work in private, quiet spaces – hence the private offices in Redmond. But our sales and marketing people work in a mixture of private and open spaces; the emphasis is on facilitating interactions among sales and marketing personnel and providing good spaces for meetings with customers, because that design works best for them. And our product support offices are about 90% open space.

All of those people are knowledge workers, but they don't all need the same kind of space. Most respond well to the form-follows-function argument (although you can never entirely eliminate the "private office equals productivity" view). Marketing people, for example, know that most of their work gets done in meetings, not when they are alone in a quiet office with the door closed.

Creating work space that supports the needs of people in the context of their tasks makes particular sense when talent is scarce. At Microsoft, we compete hard for R&D talent. We probably spend \$100,000 to hire a software developer, and it takes several months to get that person up to speed. Would it be smart to save \$5,000 over the course of a year by putting a highly valued, expensive employee in open space, where that person won't do the best possible job? We don't think so.

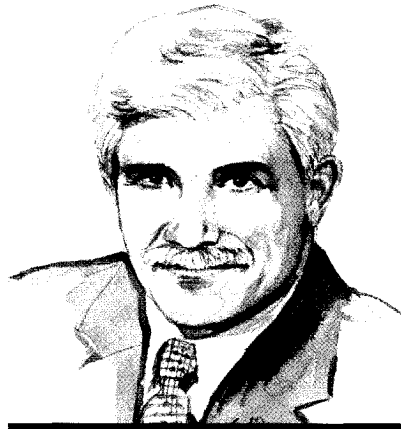
Sometimes you do have to take space away from people - maybe because the company is forced to cut costs, or maybe because there isn't enough room for meeting with customers. You have to manage the process extremely carefully. Nobody I know has ever been happy about moving from a private office to an open one.

If you're in charge of the process, try to get a couple of things right. First, don't lie. Most of the time, managers present changes in work space as necessary for greater collaboration and productivity, but 99 % of the changes are really driven by the desire to cut costs. If you're trying to save money, don't pretend otherwise. Second, give people choices. You probably can't let them choose the big things, like the size of their work spaces or the furniture that will fill them. But let them decide on the size and configuration of common spaces, and give them an allowance for customizing space - some of our groups have jukeboxes and foosball tables in common areas, for example.

It takes a lot of emotional stamina to be an expert rather than an expert servant. But **Sasha** needs to change her own thinking and influence the senior executives to change theirs.

Northern Oil should put away its plans, define both its objectives and its measures for success, and develop an analytical framework for assessing the full range of choices and their impacts. My guess is that Northern will come up with a more sophisticated plan than the one-size-fits-all solution it currently envisions.

You may succeed in business despite your space, but you seldom succeed because of it.



DONALD J. CHIOFARO
is president of the Chiofaro Company, a real estate development firm in Boston, Massachusetts.

My company has developed more than 3 million square feet of office space over the past 20 years. We've seen companies configure their offices in every possible way. What we have learned is that you may succeed in business **despite** your space, but you seldom succeed **because** of it.

We've seen CEOs and other senior executives get all caught up in the layout of their new offices. For some reason, they're convinced that the space itself will make a significant difference in productivity or teamwork or efficiency- but that's rarely the case. Most often when we encounter high-level people who are really focused on the design of interior space, it is a sign that trouble is on the horizon. More than likely, the reason behind Fritz's desire to move Northern Oil to an open-space design

is this: he wants his company to undergo a complete personality change.

Moving people who are accustomed to private offices to an open plan is very controversial. Afterward, nothing is the same. Trust is usually compromised, and the culture changes. Some people will quit right away; many others will eventually leave for jobs at companies that give them back their private offices. Efficiency and productivity often plummet. In essence, the former company vanishes.

I can't imagine why Fritz would want to do such a thing to Northern Oil. The company seems to be in pretty good shape. And given the tight labor market in his industry, he may have a difficult time replacing engineers who bail out of their new cubicles. He certainly won't be able to hire people away from companies that provide private offices. People, especially knowledge workers, really value their private offices; they believe that such space is necessary to do certain kinds of work. When you take private offices away from them, you compromise their ability to do their jobs well.

I would challenge, too, the premise that an open-space office plan will save money. We have found that you sometimes end up using more square footage for open-plan designs because you need more space for people to circulate and you have to build in more meeting spaces and community areas. And open-space workstations aren't cheap; the top of the line can cost \$15,000.

In other words, Northern probably won't save any money up-front with an open-space plan. Moreover, it will have costs down the road-first, from the inevitable turnover, and second, from the refitting of the newly built space with private offices. The latter often happens when executives realize that open space doesn't make people more productive, but it does make them very angry.

It surprises me that Fritz doesn't know that. The CEOs I know are extremely eager to keep their people happy. Take the situation at International Place, two office towers that my company developed in Boston. International Place consists of 1.8

million square feet of office space, and most of it is occupied by the top law, financial-services, and accounting firms in the city. Ninety percent of International Place is configured with private offices around the perimeter of the building. Much of the remaining 10% is configured as open space for operations that are traditionally conducted in open areas, such as securities trading. The tenants of International Place use the private-office layout to recruit and retain smart, talented people who could work at any company they want. When such people have to choose between competing offers, the lure of a private office can help make the difference.

Like all developers, we come at space from a business standpoint. When we lease a building, we are selling square feet. We don't care if our tenants have walls or not. We don't care where they put their walls.

But if people ask us for advice about interior layout, we remind them that while cost per square foot is important, it's nowhere near as important as revenue per square foot. Revenue is generated by efficient, effective people. And happier people are both more efficient and more effective.

Still, if Fritz feels he must go ahead with open space- that is, if he is determined to blow up his company and start again from scratch- I suggest he move swiftly and unilaterally. His plan is never going to get consensus, let alone support. People just won't buy in to a change of this magnitude. And just as important, every minute he spends thinking about interior design is time he's not thinking about his business- its quality, the competition, potential new markets. His decisions on those issues can have a positive influence on Northern's future. His fingerprints on the new office design cannot.

they champion fact-based (rather than top-down) decision making. We have all the ingredients needed to join those companies, but I am convinced that our current space arrangements are holding us back.

I have seen a few examples of how open space can be designed so that we can work more effectively, and I am sure this direction is the right one for us to take. However, now that I have heard your comments and reviewed the detailed plan, I have decided to make changes to both the plan and the process.

First, the plan. When I studied it carefully, I was struck by the label on one drawing: "executive floor." That designation and the baggage that goes with it are the antithesis of what I believe we need to create. Therefore, I want to develop the idea of designing our new space around natural work groups. My idea is that people should be in close physical proximity to those they interact with most often.

Second, the process. I envision two major changes. Number one: I will be the project leader on the new building. I will designate a ten-person cross-sectional team to work with me, and we will schedule two or three benchmarking visits to see how other companies have handled similar space issues. The team will be responsible for telling you what we have learned and for listening to your ideas. To make this process clear and constructive, we will seek your input on negotiable issues and carefully explain to you why certain aspects of the project are nonnegotiable.

Major change number two: I will ask the designers to break the project into two parts. First they will design new space for the senior management group and their natural work teams. We will be the guinea pigs to make sure that the new arrangements work- that we can concentrate, keep our confidential conversations private, deal with any noise concerns and, most important, that we can see a large improvement in our effectiveness. After we have lived in the new environment for three or four months- assuming all goes well- we will implement the ideas for everyone.

Alcoa successfully implemented an open-design concept. Everyone, including me, now has 81 square feet of personal work space; the entire building is our office.



PAUL O'NEILL

is chairman and CEO of Alcoa in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Alcoa has recently lived through the kind of change being contemplated at Northern Oil. At our new corporate center in Pittsburgh, we successfully implemented an open-design

concept. Everyone, including me, now has 81 square feet of personal work space; the entire building is our office. We've seen wonderful changes in terms of both culture and quality of work. Still, the process wasn't always easy. Based on my own experience, I would urge Northern's CEO to write the following memo:

To: All employees
From: Fritz Schumacher
Re: Changes in work space at Northern Oil

As you know, a few months ago I commissioned design work to convert our office space into an open environment. I understand some of you have seen the initial design and, to summarize your comments, you hate it.

I apologize to you for the way we have proceeded. I should have written this letter to you before we began.

The change I have in mind is part of a broad series of actions we have under way that will enable us to achieve our vision of being a great company through the next century. Today's leading companies have certain characteristics in common: they are quick, they are collaborative, they de-emphasize hierarchy, and

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Significant change is never easy. We've made some mistakes, but we're going to fix them. Our commitment is to making Northern number one for decades to come, and we are confident that -with your cooperation-our new work space will help take us there.

There are at least ten arguments against rushing into the fad of high-density, open-plan offices.



VIVIAN LOFTNESS

is a professor and the head of the school of architecture at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The possibilities offered by high-density, open-plan offices are a pervasive topic of discussion among CEOs, CFOs, and asset managers. Despite rhetoric about productivity and collaboration, the debate is driven above all by the desire to reduce real estate costs. But do such offices really cost less?

The answer is no. The shift from "roomy" ten-by-ten workstations and closed offices to small workstations, low partitions, and a variety of informal team-meeting spaces does not cost less-not in first costs, operational costs, or organizational costs. In fact, there are at least ten arguments against rushing into the fad of high-density, open-plan offices:

1. Moving from 200 square feet per employee to 150 square feet will save

only \$1,000 per year per employee in rent or mortgage payments. Meanwhile, according to Forrester Research, corporations are spending \$8,000 to \$10,000 per year to keep desktop technology current. There is little question that connectivity costs will go up in denser workplaces.

2. First costs will be higher because of the need for more HVAC, telecommunications, and power infrastructure. The infrastructures of existing buildings were not designed for the number of people and amount of equipment in a high-density office. (Just as elevators have labels indicating their maximum capacity, so should floors in office buildings.) To remain code-compliant, one must invest more in the building's infrastructure; the added costs will offset several years of savings.

3. There will also be first-cost increases to shift from the norm of 3% team space to the 15% promised in high-density, open-plan schemes. Incidentally, despite anticipations to the contrary, the extra team spaces do not get used heavily. That may be because they cause distractions for all the employees in adjacent, low-partitioned workstations or because they have inadequate wall space for making presentations. Within one year, many of these team spaces are replaced by microworkstations or closed offices. If most working meetings consist of only two or three people, the extra chair in the more generous workstation (if one can call 100 square feet generous) makes for a better collaborative environment.

4. Smaller workstations cost more in employee downtime. Today's employees need to organize multiple media to complete their assignments. Desk size is being cut at the very time when desktop technology is proliferating (employees often have deep, 17-inch monitors with six or more items connected to their PCs).

5. Paper has not disappeared. In fact, the use of paper has increased tenfold since the advent of the computer. Most tasks now require side-by-side management of paper and electronic media.

6. The increased density and low partitions cause too much distraction and disruption for employees

whose work requires great concentration (the hallmark of "gold collar" productivity). In their book *Peoppleware*, Tom DeMarco and Timothy Lister found that software programmers' performance was significantly lower in small workstations that have no way to shut out visual and acoustic distractions.

7. There is some evidence that health care costs may go up. Increased density and low partitions have been linked to greater stress in employees as well as to a higher number of cold and flu cases.

8. Concerns about confidentiality will be raised. The provision of a few closed meeting rooms and telephone booths does not adequately deal with the number of negotiations and working sessions that collaborative organizations need to pursue. This is not "reinventing how we work" - it is hampering collaborative work.

9. "Nonterritoriality" - in which people play an adult version of musical chairs because there are 30% to 40% fewer workstations than employees - is the next logical step in real estate downsizing. It can have disastrous results. TBWA Chiat/Day recently discovered the downside of nonterritorial offices; it lost its best employees and executives after incessant bickering over ownership of work spaces. The company has since reinvested in new enclosed workstations that are assigned to individuals and in team spaces that are assigned to work groups.

10. The real clincher, however, is that the costs to attract and retain good people will go up. As Jill Bainbridge asks, "Why would people sit in these little cubbyholes when they could have an office with their name on the door?" Attracting a top university graduate can cost a company as much as six months of the person's salary. And the average tenure of that graduate is only a little more than two and a half years. Therefore, a savings of \$1,000 per year that comes from providing less square footage for the employee quickly melts away.

Space is as critical to productivity as technology is. Fritz should not jump on the bandwagon of executives who think they should reduce

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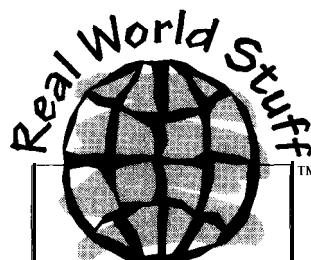
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real estate costs by increasing the density of workstations and eliminating private offices. That strategy is shortsighted, and it will backfire. There are architectural strategies that allow individuals in workstations to be effective while also sponsoring higher levels of collaboration. They do not have to depend on a bigger **variety** of furniture or less flexibility or higher reconfiguration costs.

Moreover, Fritz should never hire an architect who claims, "I'm an architect — not a change management consultant."

Fritz sees space as a tool to help his people think and work in forward-looking ways. But he hasn't successfully communicated his broader vision to Northern's employees.



DAVID LATHROP
manages the Knowledge Initiative Group at Steelcase North America in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

It sounds to me as if Abby Eliot has actually designed a good space for Northern Oil. However, the process of getting employees to accept and even embrace the new design has broken down. Space changes are almost never easy for an organization, and I see a number of problems that are common but avoidable in this case study.

Employees don't understand the CEO's vision. Fritz, like most CEOs, is thinking about where his company should be in five years. He sees space as a tool to help his people think and work in forward-looking ways. Doubtless it's one of many tools he plans to use to achieve that goal. But he hasn't successfully communicated his broader vision to Northern's employees, and his push to change work space is only confusing them. Someone needs to say, "Look, Fritz, nobody knows what you mean when you talk about reinventing how we work, and nobody sees how that relates to the new space."

The CEO has forgotten what it's like to do "head down" work. CEOs spend most of their time talking and listening. But the people at Northern's main office—geologists, engineers, and analysts—spend a lot of time alone, thinking. They add much of their value during long periods of quiet concentration. CEOs often want to erase the mind-set that says "privacy equals status," but they shouldn't forget that there is a legitimate, functional need for quiet. Some employees may need private, enclosed offices; others will do fine with just-in-time enclaves, which have been allotted generously.


The process is too top-down. So far, Northern is following what I call the "told" model for introducing workspace change. It's true that Sasha and Abby met with people to get their input, but they took the CEO's directive as marching orders. As a result, the employees feel that they have been ignored. Although the space Abby designed is not hierarchical, the process itself has been. The CEO needs to communicate his vision better—and he needs to listen better, too.

Managers don't realize how emotional people are about their space. There's something almost primal about the emotion that people bring to the space they occupy. Space has all kinds of symbolic meaning for people, at conscious and unconscious levels. So if they feel railroaded, as they do here, they will not just let the matter rest; they'll kick and scream until someone notices. Any fault lines in an organization tend to break open during a change in space.

People can't read two-dimensional drawings. Very few people can visualize a real space when they look at an architect's plan. They look for their name, find it, and say to themselves, "I'm in the middle of a sea of lines. It's going to be horrible. My worst fears have been realized." They slide right off that emotional cliff.

The ticking clock makes any rethinking next to impossible. Once a project clock is in motion, there's virtually no time to discover what space will best serve a work group. Because you've signed a lease, or you have to be out of your current space in 12 months, or whatever, there's huge pressure to keep moving. Slowing down or stopping costs a lot of money. The discovery process—during which you figure out how the new space will align with the organization's needs—must take place before the clock is ticking. It almost never does.

People don't have any tires to kick. People need to be able to look at, sit in—ideally, even work in—new space before they can react to it intelligently. So if you do schedule some time for discovery, it's extremely useful to build prototypes. The prototypes don't have to be expensive—you can use existing furniture, foam, plywood, and other cheap materials. If the designers and users can go through iterations together before the plans get locked in, you'll end up with a design that works better and you'll get buy-in from your people. If time is short, then scale models, CAD walk-throughs, and local site visits can all help remove the blinders.

Changing space is often hard for people because they fear that their needs will get lost. The strength of the reaction shown by Northern's workers means that Fritz has found an important pressure point that can be used constructively. Fritz needs to remember that the biggest bang in space comes from cultural and behavioral changes. If he manages those changes effectively, he can help transform the way work is done at Northern Oil. 

Reprint 993 12

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