

## Office Personal Space Is Crowded Out Workstations Become Smaller to Save Costs, Taking a Toll on Employee Privacy

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The office cubicle is shrinking, along with workers' sense of privacy. Many employers are trimming the space allotted for each worker. The trend has accelerated during the recession as employers seek to cut costs and boost productivity.

"The majority of our clients are moving in the direction of reducing the amount of personal, or what we like to call 'me' space," says Tom Polucci, group vice president and director of interior design for HOK Group Inc., a global architecture and design firm.

He says new workstations designed by HOK average 48 square feet, down from 64 square feet about five years ago. Partitions between cubicles also are shrinking, to 4 feet high or less, from 5 feet high.



Steinreich Communications LLC -- Mark Clemente, a Steinreich Communications vice president, in the firm's smaller Hackensack, N.J., office.

Rivals Stantec Inc., DEGW, Mancini Duffy and M. Arthur Gensler Jr. & Associates Inc. report similar findings. They say companies of varying sizes in multiple industries are reducing per-employee office space by as much as 50%, and their total footprint by as much as 25%.

Some companies are removing cubicle walls to create open floor plans. Others are eliminating assigned workspaces for employees who primarily work off campus or spend most of their time in meetings. At any given time, Gensler estimates that 60% of employees are away from their desks.

In September 2008, [MetLife Inc.](#) moved roughly 1,200 employees to a 300,000-square-foot office in Manhattan, 25% smaller than their previous 400,000-square-foot building in Long Island City, N.Y. Cubicles are 40 square feet, down from 64; offices are 100 square feet, down from 150. Common areas such as conference rooms and lounges increased by about 20%, and roughly 300 employees no longer have assigned desks. "We'll find them a place to work and get connected," says John Vazquez, the insurer's vice president of corporate services.

With help from Gensler, MetLife sought to make the smaller workspaces more useful. Mehmet Ozpay, a MetLife assistant vice president, says his new 100-square-foot office feels roomier than his old space because it offers more storage and has glass walls. "It promotes more interaction," Mr. Ozpay says, adding that mostly solid panels had blocked views in or out of his old office. "If [co-workers] see that you're not immersed in a conference call, they can walk in or make a hand signal to ask if you're busy."

Many companies are shrinking workspaces to save money, but some are also trying to promote collaboration. Two years ago,

Steinreich Communications LLC relocated its 15 employees to a 3,000-square-foot space from a 5,000-square-foot office in the same Hackensack, N.J., building. The change reduced the public-relations firm's rent by about 25%. The company also installed 6-foot-tall partitions, instead of its previous 8-foot ones.

"We found that a significant amount of mentoring was going on as a result," says Stan Steinreich, president and chief executive officer. He says junior employees began adopting techniques they heard more senior employees use.

Brett Widness, a senior programming manager for AOL Real Estate in Dulles, Va., says he has become more productive since moving in October to an office with 4-foot-6-inch-tall cubicles, from one with 6-foot partitions. He says he can now make eye contact with and talk to nearby colleagues, instead of emailing and waiting for a reply. "Everything's more direct," he says.

Tighter quarters and open floor plans also can present challenges. David Lewis, president of OperationsInc LLC, a Stamford, Conn., provider of human-resources services to more than 300 U.S. companies, says open floor plans and low cubicle walls can create discord and lead to increased turnover.

"Now everybody knows everybody else's business," he says. "It actually starts to create a level of tension in an office that never existed before. People can't focus on work because they're on top of each other."

In May 2008, Minneapolis advertising firm Fallon Worldwide abandoned the open floor plan it created in 2000 and re-installed cubicles that give workers roughly 21 square feet less personal space than the open plan. The open layout was "disruptive" to creativity, says Carrie Donovan, director of office administration. Linus Wright, a project manager for a small legal-services firm in Minneapolis, uncovered another problem after moving last year to tighter quarters, leaving an 8-by-7-foot cubicle for one that is 6-by-6. Personal phone calls and Web surfing are more challenging, Mr. Wright says. "You really have to keep your ears to the ground," he says. "It's a lot easier to get busted."

Others adapt. Monica Haley, a marketing associate for VoicePulse Inc., says she has become used to her colleagues' habits since the telecommunications company moved in June to a Jamesburg, N.J., office without cubicles. A co-worker who taps his desk like a drummer initially "drove me crazy," she says. "But it's pretty much become part of the background."