



## More Employees Work in the Open

### A Trend That Promotes Collaboration—and Brings Challenges

The San Francisco Bay Area leads the world in open and shared workspace designs for offices, according to a recent Building Owners and Managers Association tenants survey. Twenty-six percent reported that at least one-fourth of their workers share space, compared with an 18% national average, says Phil Mobley, whose firm, Kingsley Associates of San Francisco, conducted the research.

Brad Gates with BCCI Construction Company says tenants are requesting much more shared or collaborative spaces. “Cost increases have come with open (exposed) ceilings vs. suspended t-bar ceiling grid systems: higher audio-visual costs with the increase in collaborative spaces and more conference rooms.”

“Shared space and workers who are often remote and then come together during peak periods and collaboration is a trend that continues to be integrated into design requirements,” says Rob Melinauskas of BNBuilders.

“The best designs have created more collaborative spaces and phone rooms to accommodate for the tangential space that is required with the open office environment. As the designs have evolved even greater emphasis on quality and aesthetics of lighting systems has developed. We have recently completed a project using a LED cat 5 driven lighting system,” he continued.

BCCI has seen square footage per employee go down dramatically. “We’ve seen it as low as 115 (square foot per employee) when the norm used to be 200-250.” BCCI has also been asked to provide more benching solutions rather than full workstations. They have seen more conference rooms, phone rooms, cabanas and pods. “Many of the larger tenants are adding full-service cafes with chef/cooking staff, smaller are going to warming kitchens and having food brought in. Exposed ceilings and concrete floors are popular. However, they create acoustical issues, especially when combined with the higher employee count per square foot,” said Gates.

The BOMA survey also tracked employees working increasingly from home some days, then into the office for meetings and creative sharing time. “Shared space and

workers who are often remote and then come together during peak periods for collaboration is a trend that continues to be integrated into design requirements,” affirmed Melinauskas.

#### Aren't Open Workspace Noisier?

Acoustical trends are also evolving, say engineers at Charles A. Salter & Associates. “Today’s collaborative, flexible workplaces can have significant acoustical challenges. It is common for tenants, particularly those in the high-tech sector, to specify denser office layouts, featuring bench workstations with cubicle barriers that are low or nonexistent, interspersed with ‘collaboration,’ ‘teaming,’ and ‘war room’ spaces, all of which aim to bring groups together for free-flowing exchanges of ideas.

These new layouts bring occupants into close quarters with each other. Close proximity can lead to speech privacy problems if groups such as sales teams (who can be boisterous) are close to quieter groups such as human resources, legal, or engineering,” says Ethan Salter.

He says the pervasive use of technology can also impinge upon privacy, interfering with videoconferencing and conference calls at individual workstations. “Some owners are not concerned about speech privacy, calling such potential conflicts ‘serendipitous interactions,’ where people overhear nearby conversations and join in,” says Salter. He adds, “If owners, user groups and designers do not discuss and collaborate on such issues, conflicts can arise. For example, if an owner assumes that users will use telephone handsets when, in actuality, more users employ videoconferencing, speech privacy goals may not be achieved.”

Excessive noise can degrade employees’ amenity spaces. Salter says, “While offices of the past had simple kitchens (with perhaps a hot plate and coffee carafe), to entice top talent, firms now offer amenities that include gourmet food, games, and other ways to make the workplace more fun. The latest collaborative office attributes include multiple kitchens with loud appliances like blenders and espresso machines, larger coffeehouse-style cafes, game rooms, music practice rooms, gyms, and other amenities.” Acoustical challenges require acoustical solutions if collaboration is to be productive—and not distracting.

