

# Rules for Etiquette in the Open Office

An organization's decision to move from private to open office space is sometimes driven by cost considerations but is more typically linked to strategic goals. Businesses want to enhance the flexibility of their work space, to reshape the environment to meet evolving business needs, to support collaboration, or to reduce hierarchy. Employees can benefit such a move in terms of reduced hierarchy, improved collaboration and a greater sense of belonging to the organization.

However, when employees are transitioning from private or other traditional enclosed work spaces to open offices, it is useful to establish guidelines for office behavior before the move occurs. Basic guidelines for behavior can help to minimize stress and downtime while employees are learning to work effectively within the new space. This paper provides advice on the process for creating effective workplace guidelines and some examples of "hot button" issues that you should address when you create your guidelines.

## Involve Employees in Creating Guidelines

The most effective means of establishing guidelines for appropriate open office behavior is to involve employees in creating them. At least 90 days before the change, pull together a small group of employees that represent different areas of the business that will be moving

to the new space. Using the examples we have provided in this paper, brainstorm a list of no more than 5 to 8 issues that the group feels should be addressed. Your human resources representative should be involved to ensure that any guidelines you create align with existing policies. Create a short "rule" or guideline that addresses each issue. Some issues may require more than one guideline. Depending on the number of employees involved in the change, you can incorporate the guidelines with other training meetings related to the move, or if that is not practical the guidelines can be posted on the corporate intranet. In summary:

- ▶ Define the shortest simplest set of guidelines that you feel will address the most potential issues
- ▶ Ensure guidelines are in compliance with existing corporate policies
- ▶ Deliver the guidelines through training and posting on the corporate intranet

## Hot Button Issues for the Open Office

The ultimate goal of workplace guidelines is to promote a set of agreed-upon behaviors that will foster effective work without stifling individual freedom. The following are key issues that you should consider along with sample guidelines:

- ▶ Noise
- ▶ Confidential Conversations
- ▶ Distractions
- ▶ Clutter
- ▶ Odors

### Noise

Most complaints about the open office center on problems with noise and distractions. Since sound carries easily in an open work environment, create a guideline related to

behaviors that reduce noise in the office such as: *"In an open environment, noise can carry. Remember to modulate your voice – people don't always want to hear your conversations and phone calls. Keep in mind that people in workstations forget to modulate their voices because they perceive a level of sound privacy they do not have."*

### Confidential Conversations

In an open office environment confidential matters should be discussed in a setting that

supports the privacy of that conversation. Create a guideline that encourages employees to move this type of conversation to an appropriate location: *"If you need to have a sensitive face to face or telephone conversation, use the small conference rooms located throughout the space."*

### Distractions

Speaker phones, ringing cell phones and office machines (fax, printers, etc) are just a few of the sources of noise that cause distraction in the open office environment. When your team creates a guideline for this issue, ask them to solicit input from other employees about common sources of noise in the office. An example guideline: *"Refrain from using speaker phones in the open work areas. Set your cell phone to vibrate within the office. If you have a large quantity of copies to be made consider running during times when there are fewer people in your area."*

