



# HOW WE WORK

For the first time we asked our survey audience about how they prefer to work, we found the answers surprising.

The **Senator** Group

# How workplace design is more closely reflecting how we actually work

by **Adrian Campbell** •

In years gone by, a 'one size fits all' approach to office design might have been the norm, but as the decades have progressed, so too have the options available to businesses designing 'homes from home' for their office-based workforces. As new interpretations of the office environment proliferated, so the open plan model came to into being and eventually evolved into the default office design model. This initially brought greater variety than ever before but, ultimately, a one size fits all mentality in workplace design ultimately prevailed – every worker was expected to work in certain ways, utilising the equipment and furniture supplied and designed for them. From inception through to occupancy, the average new office involves a six-year period of design and construction involving varying teams of people discussing the best and most attractive solution for the actual end user.

This can involve everyone from architect, building contractor, interior designer, fit out contractor, developer and furniture manufacturer – all deciding what the end user needs. But while the design process relies on its different schools of expertise, it does not always receive the direct contribution of its most important influencer: the end user.

Given that every office is filled with individuals that have their own preferences and unique approach to the working day, The Senator Group decided to commission a comprehensive survey of the UK's office population that would evaluate the current approach to office design. The aim was to establish how we work, relating to tasks we undertake every day and how we differ individually.

The answers proved illuminating, as while some popular perceptions were cemented by the findings, we also found that some were challenged by the new influences shaping the modern workplace.

To ensure a fair and robust representation of the UK's offices, we surveyed 2,000 UK employees, taking into account their gender, age, sector, size of employer and location. Using a consumer agency to do so, we put ourselves in the hands of the UK workforce. More importantly, we capped respondent numbers based on the proportionate UK figures from the Office for National Statistics.

We also created a questionnaire that was based around a conversation, rather than an instruction, where respondents indicated how they would ideally like to complete a given task – not how they currently do it. Using graphics to represent the various options, they were then asked to select their preferred seating position, height of working and office environment when carrying out various tasks, also taking into account the different technologies available.

So what did we discover?

Firstly, it's important to dispel some preconceptions: Our results proved that, despite suggestions to the contrary, gender, location and the differing private and public sectors have very little impact on the preference of how people want to work.

While the design industry has focused heavily on the influence of millennials in the workplace, the proportion of 18-34 year olds in the average office has actually decreased by nine per cent, accounting for just over a third (34 per cent) of the workforce. Moreover, ONS figures suggest that the '35 and overs' will continue to make up the majority of office inhabitants for the next 10 years, so we should be considering them first and foremost when analysing our findings

While there was much to take away from our How We Work report, the greatest insight was that the biggest influencers over preference are age and seniority. As an extension of this, there is a natural discord that has developed between the older generation – which is used to a territorial way of life – and the sharing economy that younger employees have become accustomed to.

However, despite these fluctuations, one thing remains a constant: our love of the desk. New ways of working have come and gone but the task chair and desktop remain central to the UK doing business in a comfortable and efficient manner. Our How We Work research also identified that ‘sharing’ has become a buzzword led by the influence of social media. Privacy remains a huge concern for all concerned – an issue that has been exacerbated as floorplates have become smaller and divides broken down.

## AGE & SENIORITY

The issue of declining floorplates is one that has become more relevant since the onset of the recession, so it's of no surprise that businesses are finding themselves with less space to work with and more of a creative challenge in terms of space and occupancy.

This is particularly true of the public sector, which has faced dramatic cuts under the past two governments and now accounts for just 17 per cent of the UK's office space. But, according to our findings, while space in the sector is at a premium, it doesn't affect how public sector employees want to work.

The How We Work report has also allowed us to dispel the myth that London should lead the way in terms of office design trends. Based on the figures used to create our survey sample, office space in the capital only accounts for 16 per cent of the UK as a whole. On the basis that the highest grouping of office workers should dictate how best to work, it's in fact the Midlands that come out on top, totalling nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of the UK's office space.

With these misconceptions corrected, we can begin to address the biggest influence over how we work: age and seniority.

Analysing the results of How We Work, it became apparent that, above all else, seniority (largely linked to age) and the individual's position in an organisation dictated how they wanted to work. In comparison to clerical and administrative roles, when writing an email at a personal computer or presenting to a group, senior managers and directors were far more likely to have the confidence to adopt a more relaxed posture.

Clerical workers, on the other hand, were more likely to default to adopting the traditional posture associated with a task chair and desk. Tying in with this, they also picked desk level as the optimum height to operate at rather than perhaps being stood up, reclined or perching.

There was also much greater variation in senior staff's willingness to experiment with posture – only when it came to sitting at a desk did they come in below the mean figure for reading an email on a personal computer.

However, with this greater ambition to experiment also comes a greater desire for privacy. Taking into account our habits when on the phone or reading and writing emails, senior figures had a higher expectation that they would do so in enclosed surroundings.

Much of this leads to a focus on the types of roles carried out by individuals within a business. Clerical staff are more likely to spend time at a personal computer, so it seems only right that they should have a preference for a traditional 'task chair and desk' combination. Senior figures on the other hand may be more inclined to be mobile, conducting their day-to-day activities on the go – affording them the option to read emails in lounge chairs, perched at a coffee bar or perhaps stood up. Our research shows that the variety some might consider luxury becomes more appropriate as people rise through the business, as the tasks vary and the outputs are defined.

Similarly, the greater a person's seniority, the more likely their work is to be of a confidential nature, accounting for their greater need for privacy.

The issue of seniority therefore brings us round to the argument of task-based working, where different roles require variety to suit their functions. The further up the business you go, the more likely you are to carry out non-administrative tasks and begin to explore more transient options – perhaps in breakout space – going beyond the desk.

## SHARERS VS TERRITORIALISTS

In most workplaces, the professional hierarchy exerts significant influence on a company's processes, output and internal office culture. Those higher up naturally act as the driving force behind key corporate decisions, whilst more junior employees take their lead from those at the top.

When we inspect the modes of work favoured by staff in senior positions, we see a marked elevation of confidence, entitlement and efficiency that is gradually mirrored by junior staff as they climb the corporate ladder.

This could suggest that developing feelings of seniority are applied to the surroundings selected by those with decision making power, which is perhaps why our findings saw higher-ranking professionals select relaxed postures, private offices and personal devices in their working preferences.

The more surprising, and potentially problematic, finding in *How We Work* is that the greatest divide in working preferences exists between the older and younger generations, as the boundaries drawn by workers of different ages can vary depending on the sector and can transcend seniority levels. Older workers, though not necessarily senior in position, chose similar working preferences to heads of businesses, putting a higher value on privacy and ownership far more than those chosen by their younger counterparts.

With an ageing workforce and a sharp decline in the number of available professional roles for those aged 18-25, it might seem reasonable for suppliers and designers to prioritise the older end of a workforce. Indeed, with the younger age bracket making up just 12 per cent of the overall office workforce, it could be the more practical, bankable route for businesses to take when commencing a redesign.

However, the correlation between seniority concerning both age and professional stature indicates that much of this preferred pattern is determined by attitudes towards territory and superiority. Younger generations typically embrace what is termed a "sharing economy" in which they are comfortable sharing desks, devices and the wider workspace, in what is most likely an extension of their not owning property or other material assets.

Though it might ruffle the feathers of an older workforce accustomed to having their own property outside and within work, the sharing economy remains the more cost efficient working model. This means the professed need for privacy and ownership could make it difficult to establish a balance against the cheaper option of shared desks and facilities.

That said, this research also highlights a deceptive design trend, as appealing to the “younger” model of work has been a prominent theme throughout the design world in recent years, despite the decline in available graduate jobs. Though the rise of creative industries in the UK has seen some ground breaking new takes on interior design, modern office elements such as open plan space, breakout areas and in-office entertainment are proving to be a lower national priority than we might have anticipated.

To the intelligent business owner, or office designers and suppliers, this should point towards a joint endeavour to create custom workplaces that adequately meet the needs of a multi generational workforce.

There remain plenty of working characteristics shared by younger and older workers – for example, both prefer to take calls in private than in open plan surroundings – but it is important that designers work with businesses to establish which settings will achieve best results for their particular demographic.

If theirs is a mixed office, this could mean keeping certain traditional elements, such as isolated spaces for private work and reflection, but also introducing some of the innovative new practices that support the younger generation of professional staff. This may help reduce feelings of alienation, whilst supporting modern practices that aid collaboration and delivery of a company’s objectives and goals.

## LONG LIVE THE DESK

It’s clear to see that over the past decade, office trends have moved ever further from the standard desk environment. Consensus suggests that the cubicle is very much dead now that hot-desking, mobile working and standing desks have become widely accepted by businesses.

However, despite the cubicle rapidly heading towards extinction, our How We Work research found that the desk still remains one of the most vital aspects of the UK’s office, regardless of a person’s job role or seniority in their company. To some, the results should be of no surprise: we’ve become accustomed to working at a desk from such a young age and therefore conducting work from a desk has become habitual. But it is also still extremely functional, so why has it become so decried?

Artistic breakout spaces are fast becoming a common sight within the workplace as employers create additional areas as alternatives to working at the desk. However, our research suggests that the demand for these alternative workstations may not be as high with the majority of the UK population when it comes to completing concentration-intense activities. We adopt relaxed postures during refreshment times, which can still be used for collaborative exchanges, but there is little to suggest that this preference has successfully translated to standard working processes. So while the breakout spaces certainly still have huge value, functionally they serve a very different purpose.

What does coincide with current trends within the office market place is that even though the majority (81 per cent) of the population would prefer to be sat at a desk when carrying out intense tasks like writing, our research found that 41 per cent of those would prefer the option to change their working height. This would revolutionise the way many businesses design their workplace, and could be an ideal change in attitude for businesses looking to campaign against a sedentary lifestyle.

Another point employers need to account for is the high proportion of the UK population that prefer to write an email in a traditional environment, with 75 per cent of employees choosing to send emails from their desk. As mobile working becomes more widely encouraged, employers need to be wary of the pressures it puts on employees needing desk space to work. Equally, providing adequate desk space may need to be a consideration for those dropping into the office to hot-desk.

While the desk remains extremely popular – task seating for thought-intense tasks received the highest total preference figure in the survey (86 per cent) – the research highlights it is losing its appeal when it comes to making and receiving phone calls.

Our How We Work survey found that the majority of employees conducting calls on a landline phone preferred to do it in privacy. So while we've broken down the cubicle, employees are feeling more exposed at their desks, with fewer places to go due to the increase in open plan design.

### 'TALKING IN SILENCE'

No matter which office trends and technological changes affect the way we conduct work, one thing that will always stay a constant is how we communicate over the phone.

This might not always be apparent in the modern office, where the rise of email and text use has built offices in which colleagues often correspond via technology within the same space instead of speaking to each other.

Why do we do this? It could simply be due to the current generational workforce being so accustomed to communicating via text that email is the most familiar method to communicate, or people are more confident of getting their points across when they are written down. But for all of the new technological innovations, many businesses still understand that there are few methods of communication more efficient and effective than picking up the phone.

We have already established the preconceptions many office designers and employers have about their workforces love for open plan offices, which provide no privacy in their environments, to concentrate. But what the research further highlights is an employee's need for private spaces when on the phone, whether mobile or fixed landline, (60 per cent) would prefer to not be sat at a desk. This brings the role of solitary spaces and of telecommunications into a new perspective, as the issue with phone use has more to do with privacy than other employee habits.

The research found that the majority of employees (81 per cent) would prefer to be alone when speaking on the telephone regardless of the technology, with (60 per cent) wanting physical shielding when they are conducting the call. This should be an alarming result for companies that require their workforce to spend a significant time on the phone, and do not have isolated breakout spaces for them to conduct these calls, as it has the potential to delay the organisation's day-to-day processes.

These findings could now influence new trends in the design of office space, as businesses could achieve a surge in productivity by further adapting and changing the layout, design and furniture selection within offices. Physically, this could translate into more incorporation of private areas or development of screen technologies to provide private spaces for telephone calls to be taken.

How We Work also established that the more senior the position in the organisation led to the increased preference for privacy, with 48 per cent of senior managers preferring to be in an enclosed space while on the telephone. But still the greatest desire for privacy throughout the whole UK workforce is when working on tasks that require focus and concentration.

So, as office designers and suppliers continue to implement open plan workspaces throughout organisations nationwide, we need employers and employees taking more involvement and responsibility in communicating their needs to create spaces that are adaptable as well as suitable for the needs of the workforce.

Adrian Campbell is Head of Workplace Design at Senator Group

# How You Work.

This report is based on the premise of asking straightforward questions of real users' thoughts on everyday tasks that happen in every workplace across the country.

Rather than the expectation that work can only happen at a desk, we have flipped the question to ask staff to consider the task first and then identify the desired posture with the result that while the desk is still important to us, it is by no means the only place we want to work.

This survey forms part of our database and we are able to conduct the same survey on your organisation to assist with identifying the preferences in your organisation and then benchmark the findings against our national database.

For further information please contact:

Adrian Campbell,  
[acampbell@thesenatorgroup.com](mailto:acampbell@thesenatorgroup.com)



# The Senator Group

Head Office - Altham Business Park Accrington,  
Lancashire, BB5 5YE. T +44 [0]1282 725000

[www.thesenatorgroup.com](http://www.thesenatorgroup.com)