

Gensler Research

Emerging Workstyles

Can individual work survive in the “collaborative” workplace?



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EFFECTIVE FOCUS INVOLVES:
managing individual preferences and cognitive style, collaboration and team dynamics, organizational culture and policies, and the environment and circumstances in which one works.



WHAT WE DID

We conducted both primary and secondary research to understand the nature of, and challenges to, individual work with a particular focus on open-office environments. We targeted software developers as our primary study group and one comprised of focus-oriented, knowledge-based workers. In partnership with a major technology company, we conducted interviews, focus groups, surveys, observational studies, and acoustic measurements to gather information about the conditions that prevent and enable individual work.

From our findings, we developed focus task typologies and work style profiles to define common work modes and areas of frustration in the workplace. We used these typologies, in light of current research on individual and collaborative work and their impacts on employee performance and experience, to develop a series of recommendations—from design strategies to behavior and cultural shifts—to improve employees' ability to focus.

THE CONTEXT

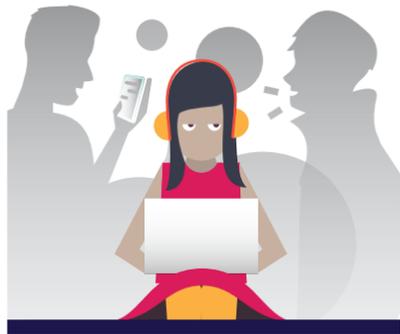
As organizations become more distributed, more collaborative, and more outsourced, the ways we work and connect are changing. The workplace had, and has, no choice but to evolve to meet new demands and realities. But even as companies and the workplace evolve, **the ability to focus at work has never been more essential for knowledge workers and for companies looking to compete in the global marketplace.** Workers who are able to successfully focus in their workplace report significantly higher levels of engagement than those who cannot.

Yet the ability to complete one's individual work is, in the minds of many, under siege in the workplace. Why? Many of today's workspaces are often built explicitly in pursuit of collaboration, efficiency, and flexibility—all top-of-mind issues for real estate managers and executives, and rightly so. At their worst, these same spaces compromise quiet “heads down” work, and ultimately employee productivity. But this isn't always the case: our prior research also shows that the right balance between focus and collaboration leads to greater innovation and higher performance overall. Understanding the behavioral, organizational, and spatial requirements to achieve this balance was a driving force of our investigation.

“Speech is the most disturbing type of sound because it is directly understood in the brain’s working memory.”

– Valtteri Hongisto, Acoustician,
Finland Institute of Occupational Health

THE RESULTS



DISTRACTION IS UNIVERSAL.

One of the biggest challenges to effective focus work is distraction, and the primary sources of distraction in the workplace are interruptions by coworkers and overheard conversations. These factors can be a significant detriment to workplace satisfaction, particularly when out of an employee’s control.

Addressing distraction doesn’t necessarily mean making it quieter, however—developer interview results showed a marked split between those preferring quiet, private spaces and those who work better in “buzzy” environments.



ONE PERSON’S DISTRACTION IS ANOTHER’S INTERACTION.

Noise isn’t always bad. Some impromptu interruptions by coworkers are highly productive in terms of overall team performance, even if they undermine a certain amount of individual performance in the process. Similarly, overheard conversations—among team members and in the right context—can speed decision making and problem-solving on team projects.



MANAGING DISTRACTION REQUIRES DISCIPLINE.

What constitutes a distraction, and how disruptive that distraction is, varies—acceptable levels of distraction often relate more to individual preference or expectation than to the specifics of environments or noise levels. And many work process interruptions are self-imposed—upwards of 44 percent according to a study out of UC Irvine, noting employees’ tendency to switch tasks frequently throughout the day (and particularly those in open plan environments).

WHAT THIS MEANS

SUPPORT INDIVIDUAL, TEAM, AND ORGANIZATIONAL WORK PROCESSES.

Finding effective strategies for improving people’s ability to focus in the workplace requires taking into account not only the physical environment and workplace setting, but also team dynamics, work styles, and organizational culture. Workplace design must align process, culture, policy, and management for employees to perform at their best.



SOMETIMES, GROUP PERFORMANCE SHOULD TRUMP THE INDIVIDUAL.

Some distraction ultimately becomes productive interaction, and employees who work in teams know it. Help them filter out unproductive distraction and know when and how to accommodate the productive kind.



EMPOWER EMPLOYEES TO MATCH PROCESS TO PLACE.

Working effectively as an individual and team requires discipline and choice. Spaces and policies that support making these decisions are imperative. Employees know intuitively when they are open to interaction or distraction and when they’re not—let them communicate among themselves and make their own plan.



WHAT’S NEXT

Undisciplined collaboration can be a significant hindrance to individual focused work. As future work trends predict that knowledge workers will increasingly adopt agile and flexible work styles, understanding the impact of disorganized collaboration will become more valuable to our clients.

We are exploring opportunities for user autonomy in design solutions that can apply to diverse client needs. We are also studying how focus and individual effectiveness are directly impacted by team efficiency and collaborative behaviors. We believe that when the team collaborates efficiently, there are fewer distractions and interruptions in the workplace, improving the ability to focus and, ultimately, employee productivity.

Team

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As architects, designers, planners, and consultants, we partner with our clients on some 3,000 projects every year. These projects can be as small as a wine label or as large as a new urban district. With more than 5,000 professionals networked across 46 locations, we serve our clients as trusted advisors, combining localized expertise with global perspective wherever new opportunities arise. Our work reflects an enduring commitment to sustainability and the belief that design is one of the most powerful strategic tools for securing lasting competitive advantage.

Gensler's Research Program supports research investigations important to our firm, our clients, and to the ongoing learning and development of Gensler professionals. Research projects are practitioner-led with involvement across the globe. Our teams bring thought leadership to the table as we seek to solve our clients' and the world's most pressing challenges by creating high-performance solutions that embrace the business and world context in which we work, enhance the human experience, and deliver game-changing innovation.

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