

Balancing workplace design for extroverts – and introverts

by Pallavi Shrivastava

One in every three people is an introvert. Each one of us falls somewhere on the introvert-extrovert spectrum. Our place on this spectrum determines the kind of personality we are and how, in turn, it influences our choices in everything we do: the kind of work we do, how we choose to do that work, how we interact with others, and how we resolve conflicts within ourselves or with our teams. It also determines what kind of leader we might be and how high or low our risk-taking might be.

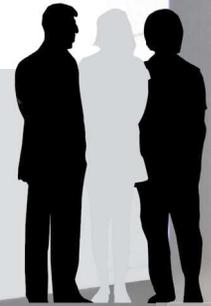
It is imperative in our current world that we understand different personalities, and understand what motivates introverts and extroverts differently and how they lead and work differently as companies try to leverage each one's potential to the best possible way of their abilities and temperament, all of which reflect their true nature and personality. It is important that we translate this understanding into our workplace design, both physically and behaviorally.

In recent times, more importantly and gradually post-industrial revolution, we have increasingly come to celebrate gregarious and noisy extroversion as an ideal aspiration, and routinely praise people who enjoy limelight and prefer to be the center of attention over quiet, reflective people. This is the case even though there is a pool of scientific research that indicates no correlation between extroversion and level of measured success or a higher degree of creativity or innovation.

This becomes evident in (Apple co-founder) Steve Wozniak's statement when he puts across in his memoir: "Artists work best alone where they can control an invention's design without a lot of other people designing it for marketing or some other committee. I don't believe anything revolutionary has been invented by a committee." This explains that introverts prefer to work independently and in solitude, many times, and can be a catalyst to their innovation and creative problem solving. And, it can easily be applied to leaders from all walks of life.

Against the current grain

Introverts are more attuned and sensitive to external stimuli than extroverts and, hence, to work effectively, they need quieter, more-private spaces that are often missing in our modern collaborative workspaces. This constant demand on cross-regional, across-time, energy-sapping, collaborative expectation has become so demanding that people are often less productive; in return, quality of work suffers significantly. Still, businesses are trying to become global and cross-functional by increasing connectivity, and teamwork is seen as a key organizational success. Teamwork in itself is a strength and



a stepping stone for success, but not how it has come to be seen and valued in current days. The modern way of collaboration has excessive amount of leaks and waste from actual work. We are all so familiar with the communication overload, meetings overload, calls overload, emails overload; does it not affect our output of quality work?

We are making categorical mistakes in understanding what is productive collaboration against what is plain noise and distraction. This is true in both the physical and behavioral environment, and both are equally significant for people to perform at a higher level. What's been overlooked in the push for collaborative work is the value of individual time in contributing to the collaborative effort. As Donna Flynn, director at Steelcase's Workspace Future Research Group, points out, "The value of collaborative work isn't going away. Our research has shown that when you have diverse minds coming together to solve a problem, you tend to solve that problem with a higher-quality solution. But we need to recognize that collaboration eight to 10 hours a day is going to lead to burnout."

To begin with, we have shifted significantly from enclosed, quieter office spaces to open offices and routinely passed over quiet zones and pushed for barrier-free desks under the pretext of collaboration and in an effort to get better results out of individuals and teamwork. But, it is imperative that we understand these subtle differences in personalities that are inherent to each of us and how those differences should be considered assets while we design office spaces. Formulaic or identical workplaces have not worked effectively for all. Studies have shown that 70 percent of offices in North America are designed in the open-plan format, where all employees occupy only cubicles and open workstations with only few additional meeting rooms for team conversations.

The shifting trend has given rise to a perception that leadership, so to speak, is a public domain. But a lot of introverted leaders have spent tremendous amounts of alone time to arrive at breakthrough thinking or explored a deeper knowledge of a subject, knowledge that became possible only through solitude and private spaces.

Can we support both work environments?

Let's take a step back and see if this is something we should be pushing for uniformly to all of us in all work settings. Open-plan offices have been found to reduce productivity and impair memory. Constant noise and gaze proves harmful to an extent, depending on the kind of work we are engaged in. They also contribute to higher staff turnover, according to research. This is not to suggest that we do not need collaboration and teamwork, but we need more of a yin-yang relationship between extroversion and introversion for better results.

So, open offices combined with quiet zones, café-style interactions with spaces for focus work and solitude are just as important. For when there is a symbiotic relationship with different kinds of personalities at their natural strengths, we tend to thrive as a team, as rightly pointed by Donna Flynn, when she says, "There is no single type of optimal work setting. Instead, it's about balance. Achieving the right balance between working in privacy and working together is critical for any organization that wants to achieve innovation and advance."

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As much as we value face-to-face interactions and huddle environments of collaboration, we must also provide and design spaces that enable silence and solitude. And, we as designers can strive for flexible workplaces that offer a balanced mix of casual meeting rooms, reading rooms, huddle spaces and collaborative zones to encourage communication where people can simply chat and exchange ideas because knowledge-sharing happens best in an organic format over brief exchanges of ideas and discussions.

Purposefully designed spaces that serendipitously enable people to interact with each other benefit us by breaking silos and allow us to become more collaborative in ways that open offices cannot. Having diverse, hybrid workplaces benefits introverts and extroverts alike and helps employees be more productive.

Consider what makes the introvert tick

It is worth considering the behavioral demands that are placed on introverts while they collaborate; it can be taxing at times because they would rather contribute in actual work, spending time to think and strategize on matters instead of an excessive number of meetings, calls, reviews and approvals. It calls for enabling people and teams to make certain low-risk decisions and holding them accountable, freeing up time best used for actual work. Fewer bottlenecks of heavy processes in running projects will result in more efficiency. Introverts will hold themselves accountable more than extroverts; extroverts come up justifying and explaining failures, where introverts go back and analyze to do better next time.

As workplace and ergonomics educationist and researcher Tim Springer highlights, "Workplaces, and especially the office, have focused on and done a pretty good job of satisfying the physical ergonomic needs of the population of users. Now it's time to take a holistic ergonomic view and pay attention to the cognitive ergonomics of work. What does this mean? It means understanding the variety of ways in which work gets done – the different cognitive demands, the different ways in which people can accomplish the same tasks."

To sum it up as Professor Tim Springer crisply advises, "If the place doesn't work, the space doesn't matter." Allow the power of introverts to unfold in the world that cannot stop talking.



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