



The Hoteling Experiment: Lessons and Questions



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Working outside of the traditional office offers many potential productivity benefits. Instead of wasting time commuting or putting in face time at the main office, workers are free to be where they need to be and use their time in ways that seem most efficient for their particular responsibilities and work styles.

Alternative Workspace Options

When they do need to come back to the main office, generic spaces are often made available to them on a reservation basis through workspace concepts known as hoteling, free address, and shared spaces.

- Hotel spaces are work stations reserved for specific days. This can be known as moteling when reserved for less than a full day.
- Free address spaces are available on a walk-in basis. This is also called hot-desking or just-in-time office.
- Shared spaces are offices that two or three workers share. They may work in shifts, on alternating days, or occasionally work together in the space.

Increased independence in choosing where one wants to work can make the occasional trip into the main office even more challenging. Workers who opt for non-traditional office arrangements often face a big adjustment when returning to hotel or shared spaces at the main office.

While office-based workers have their own personal work settings, arranged to suit them, drop-in workers have to borrow an unfamiliar setting which may not reflect their workstyles. A stripped-down "hotel" workspace usually does not allow personal cues about priorities, reference items, or personalized ways to sort papers and other materials. Free address spaces may vary every time the worker comes in. In addition, there can be mismatches between ever-changing groups of co-workers and the amounts and types of space available.

A home office worker has free run of a floor or two of personal space and is always first in line at copy and fax machines. They also know where supplies are, and can keep everything commonly needed close at hand. It doesn't matter at home if you move furniture to suit a task or meeting, leave things out, yell across rooms, or have multi-media equipment playing at a high volume.

When the home-based worker does need to drop back into the main office for a day or two, supplies, copiers, and meeting areas can be hard to locate. There can be competition for equipment and meeting spaces. Noisy co-workers can cause distraction. In the worst case, there can be more drop-ins than spaces, leaving the drop-in worker balancing a laptop in an area that does not provide appropriate support for the tasks or interactions that prompted the commute to the main office in the first place.

Good Behavior Eases Alternative Officing Transitions

Office layouts and strategies will continue to evolve, and the behaviors they intentionally or unintentionally promote will continue to evolve along with them. In hotel, free address, and shared spaces, courtesy takes on added importance. Several rules of the road have been found to be particularly helpful:

- If there's a concierge or reservation system, make it clear that people are expected to use it. Although it's not always possible to know in advance when remote workers will need to be at the main office, they should be strongly encouraged to plan and book space at least a day ahead of time.
- Workers should not overstay their space reservations. Vacating on schedule allows space to be cleaned or otherwise set up for the next person who reserved it. If nobody is waiting for the space, staying on may be an option, but workers should be clearly told not to expect to be accommodated at whim in any particular work setting.
- Borrowed supplies should always be returned to storage areas. Surfaces should be cleared off when leaving on the last day of a reserved time. Users of the space should be encouraged to get rid of junk, erase personal notes on marker boards, pack up all personal items, and let whoever is in charge of space reservations know the space is ready for cleaning and reassignment. If anything is moved, it should be put back.

- For shared equipment, make sure someone has responsibility to routinely check for discs, memory-consuming documents, presentations, viruses, or non-standard software left behind.
- Hotel, free address, or shared-space workers should be reminded to retrieve and delete all voice mail messages from desk phones before leaving the space.
- If workers find a colleague's files or e-mails, they should be asked to notify the concierge or some other designated person who can retrieve and forward them. Common courtesy requires that people not read each other's messages and work in progress.
- For shared printers, post which papers the printer takes and where to find refill paper so large queues of documents don't back up behind one that won't print. Ask that printing of very large or graphic-heavy documents wait until lunch or other off hours as a courtesy to the rest of the staff.
- When hoteling, free address or shared space workers use another person's PC, it is common courtesy to leave screen formats, printing instructions, etc. as the owner prefers. If any changes are made, they should be reversed immediately after a document is complete.
- Encourage space users to request cover sheets on incoming faxes and full names on other types of messages or deliveries. People might be located far from any particular fax machine, and dispersed workers don't always know each other well enough to sort messages based on first names or subject lines.

If there's a dress code, make sure non-office-based workers understand it. It will help home-based and main office-based workers to feel more comfortable with each other if they know the standards and are encouraged to use them. Even if the normal rule is "casual", there may be certain days, events, or circumstances when more formality is required. Rules and exceptions need to be clearly communicated.

- If someone is obviously deep into concentrated reading or other work, it's not polite to interrupt. This is very difficult in an open space because people like to interact with those they can see -- especially after working remotely. Without a communicated understanding of the need for quiet times however, productivity will suffer.
- Often the primary reason home-based workers come into the main office is for interaction and team meetings. When these gatherings occur in shared spaces, the noise can disrupt others in the area. For large meetings, or sessions that could get boisterous, workers should be encouraged to seek accommodation in closed conference rooms or other areas with acoustic support that's up to the challenge.

This is Only a Test

Now that many organizations have some experience with alternative officing, some aspects of the earliest hotel, free address, and shared space concepts are proving to be more difficult than anticipated, while others are better than imagined.

The thing to remember is that these ideas are experiments in space planning and usage. This is about the evolution of the concept, not just the first-pass space configuration.

If, after months or years of hoteling or another approach, an organization starts to struggle with it, it may be worth reconsidering the underlying assumptions behind the original plan to see if they are still valid. It may be time to fine-tune the program.

Assumptions and Realities

The earliest organizations to disperse workers to be closer to their customers could assume access to customers' spaces for meetings. But have your

customers also dispersed their people to be closer to their customers? Have your customers' customers also done the same? If so, quality space for meetings may no longer exist. Signals that this is happening could include more home-based workers coming in, or coming in more often specifically for customer meetings, higher rental costs for office suites or hotel spaces, or higher restaurant bills as people rent tables.

Another major assumption has been that people don't need to be in the office to be productive members of teams. Empty offices inspired the quest for better use of space and those who were already on the road became the likeliest candidates for alternative office applications. The assumption was that they were fine on their own. For some workers, this has not been the case. They need regular face-to-face interaction in order to feel like part of the team and to learn from colleagues. Some also have a strong territory preferences. They want to be in the same place whenever they come in to reduce adaptation time and feel like they have a place in the organization.

These social needs are causing more workers than anticipated to drop into many main offices. Enlarging shared spaces to accommodate team building may be a good move if it improves results. Use of acoustic lounge areas where people can freely interact may be just what they need. Adding permanent personal storage so hoteling workers feel more connected to the organization can also be helpful. Providing moveable furniture to accommodate impromptu interactions also takes pressure off fully-booked conference rooms and allows customized spaces for interactions.

A common understanding of courtesy was also assumed. In reality, a mix of different jobs, personalities, generations, and cultures can lead to very uncommon understandings of what courtesy is. Some organizations have solved the mystery by communicating what is expected.

People have also generally assumed that home is a great place to work. For some workers it is. For some it isn't. Distractions, other family members' demands, isolation, and the inability to separate work and home time have driven many people back to main offices, satellite offices, or office suite rental options. If some hoteling workers are coming back in more often, they may be dealing with these issues and may need to build more in-office time into their work schedule. They are not failing at hoteling when they start coming in more often, they are just doing what they need to do to get their work done.

Finally, it was often assumed that services could be provided to dispersed workers, or that they could get adequate support from copy centers. Copy centers require driving, ordering and picking up, paying, and expensing, whereas in a main corporate office it's usually simpler to get things done. There's nobody close by when your computer goes down at home, unlike the corporate office where somebody right around the corner knows what to do. If more hoteling workers are coming into the main office, it could be worth checking to see the role that services play in their decision to come back in. Are adjustments in service levels or providers needed? What would it take.

Making Alternative Officing Perform Better

To better support distributed workers, it's important to check the usability of alternative office spaces from the standpoint of someone just arriving for the first time. Are supply cabinets labeled? Is there a map to meeting rooms? Are the rules about check-in and check-out procedures written down? Is it easy to quickly feel at home in the space or is the visiting worker made to feel like an alien?

When groups randomly gather, noise may be an issue. Workers may need to be reminded about keeping their voices and equipment noise levels down so they don't interrupt others. Spaces may

also need to be reviewed for acoustic support quality to make sure white noise, ceiling tile, carpet, panels, and so forth are all working together effectively.

Workers are individuals, with individual needs, methods, and preferences. The goal of a business is to meet its objectives, so accommodating work in ways that are most effective for individuals, the groups in which they have membership, and ultimately the business as a whole is a critical responsibility.

The odds of a first-pass effort at hoteling, or any alternative office concept, being immediately perfect are slim. Evolving work groups and projects may also be forcing changes in the original program, regardless of how successful it may have been.

Watch closely and listen to workers using these experimental workstyles. See where they need them to go. Timely adjustments to officing strategies and spaces are key to productive work amid evolving global markets and continuous change.