

Zoom In, Zoom Out: International and Generational Differences in Perceptions of Occupancy Quality in Office Workspaces

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Many voices continue the rich, intriguing conversation about “the workplace of the future.” In the majority of cases, economic and financial considerations guide these opinions and shape business priorities; this is as it should be. However, because employees represent fully 70% of yearly costs to any and all organizations, it will always be important to understand their needs & preferences in addition to minimizing costs.

To contribute to this understanding, this paper describes the important differences in office workers’ preferences, expectations and perceptions about office workspaces in the USA, China & India, and the UK & Australia (see Appendix for the major characteristics & demographics of this sample). We will also compare younger with older employees’ ratings to determine whether there are important trends and implications for design from generational differences. Hopefully readers can derive and leverage critical success factors from these data to align their global clients’ office design needs with their workplace strategy, informed by business priorities.

Four broad areas serve to organize the discussion of these results: 1) Collaboration; 2) Creativity and Job Performance; 3) Workspace Preferences; and 4) Privacy. Collaboration was chosen because many executive leaders and workplace experts believe that collaboration will increasingly become what workplace strategy needs to support and encourage. Creativity and job performance were chosen due to the central importance of organizational creativity and innovation as differentiators within the global marketplace. Workspace preferences are important because they reflect the priorities of employees—the occupants of the workspaces we design. Finally, privacy was chosen because perhaps more than many other design characteristics, the physical environment can provide the necessary conditions for privacy; in contrast, environments cannot provide collaboration.

Collaboration

The mantra for workspace that “more open = more collaborative” needs some reflection and refinement based on these data. In fact, a very slight trend in the opposite direction—favoring enclosed workspaces—may be seen. However, the trend among younger workers, particularly in the UK & Australia, suggests the ability to hold small, impromptu meetings in one’s workspace or work area, may be a U-shaped function—improving somewhat for completely open workspaces (no partitions) as well as for private (enclosed) offices. This support for spontaneous, impromptu conversations around individual workspaces is one of

the most important ways the physical environment can support collaboration in corporate offices.

Perceptions regarding the availability of co-workers important for getting one's job done did not improve in more open work environments in any of these countries. However, employees in China and India work in groups/teams compared to individually more than those in the USA, UK or Australia—particularly in more environments. This seems to reflect an underlying trend among younger workers compared to older workers, especially in China and India.

Employees in China and India also reported higher group morale (a measure reflecting, among other things, feelings of belonging to the group) compared with those in the USA, UK and Australia. Group morale was not influenced by openness/enclosure in any of these countries among younger workers, but older workers' group morale was directly related to enclosure—more enclosure = higher group morale. Group cohesiveness (a measure reflecting work groups' ability to coordinate their activities) was slightly lower among employees in the UK and Australia; employees in completely open environments (no partitions) in China had slightly higher group cohesiveness. Younger workers rate their group cohesiveness slightly higher than do older workers; this is most true for workers in the USA, the UK and Australia compared with China and India—particularly for younger workers in more open environments.

Creativity and Job Performance

The assumption that in order to be creative, employees must metaphorically “think out of the box” and therefore more open environments support this goal better than enclosed ones was not supported by these data—in any of these countries. Furthermore, younger workers showed the same slight advantage for creativity in more private, enclosed workspaces as older workers. Ratings of job quality were highest in the USA compared to the other countries, but was not influenced by openness of workspace for either younger or older workers.

Ability to organize work areas to work effectively was rated highest in the USA and lowest in China; this feature was also rated slightly higher by employees in more private, enclosed workspaces in all countries; the only exception were workers with no dedicated/assigned workspace in the USA. Although very speculative without further investigation, the ability to decide where to work may offer at least some of the advantages that private, enclosed space has provided in the past. This factor was less a function of enclosure/openness for younger workers, but decreased among older workers in more open workspaces.

Employees in the UK and Australia reported the most difficulty concentrating on their work; employees in India reported the least. Only a slight trend favoring enclosure/privacy was obtained; this trend almost disappeared for younger

workers but was very clear among older workers (favoring enclosed/private spaces). Again, there was a very slight advantage for workers without assigned/dedicated workspace in the USA, again suggesting there might be some advantages in allowing employees to select where they can work best.

Workspace Preferences

Workspace preferences were first investigated using job satisfaction—a very broad measure that reflects many other things in addition to satisfaction with the environment. Nonetheless, job satisfaction was slightly higher for more enclosed/private workspaces for workers in all of these countries, and this trend was identical for younger and older workers. Overall, job satisfaction was lowest among workers in the UK and Australia compared to employees in other countries.

When asked directly whether they're most effective in a private/enclosed or open, barrier-free kind of workspace, workers in the USA preferred more privacy than employees in other countries—although the ratings for all employees in every country were toward the “private/enclosed” half of this measurement scale. Preferences in this regard tended to reflect current workspace conditions—particularly for workers in the UK, Australia and China compared to India. That is, workers in more open workspaces preferred slightly more open spaces; this trend was slightly more evident among younger than older workers in China, the UK and Australia—but not for USA employees. Thus, more private/enclosed workspaces were favored overall, but to a certain extent this preference was slightly less among workers in more open environments.

What if workers are asked directly to compare workspaces that are “completely open (no partitions) with more typical cubicles?” Employees in the USA heavily favored cubicles, although this preference was slightly influenced by their current workspace (those currently in a completely open workspace had slightly higher preference for more open). In India, this preference was U-shaped, with employees currently in either completely open or private offices preferring more open workspaces. Workers in China had the highest preference for open workspaces, but all countries and age groups favored cubicles over completely open. However, overall, younger workers' preferences were less toward cubicles than older workers'.

Privacy

We evaluated privacy because among the important goals for corporate office environments, the design of workspaces can most easily provide privacy (as compared with collaboration, for example, which is more a function of culture, work practices, management style, and organizational design than workspace design). As expected, perceptions of adequate privacy were a direct, almost linear function of level of enclosure for both younger and older workers in all

countries—favoring private offices and decreasing with the openness of the workspace(s). However, privacy ratings among younger workers were higher for more open environments than older workers’—particularly in China and India. Once more, there was an advantage (somewhat higher privacy ratings for open workspaces) for employees in the USA, UK and Australia who did not have an assigned/dedicated workspace, again perhaps indicating an advantage for personal control/choice over workspace.

Implications and Suggestions

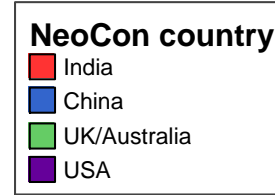
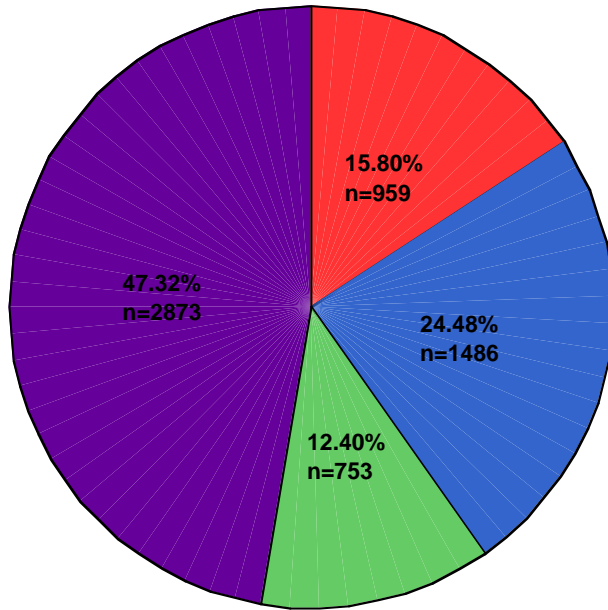
Design implications and suggestions from these data remain difficult to elucidate due to these measures reflecting mostly subjective experience. But at the very least, we can question the oft-repeated mantra that “more open = more collaborative” for workspace design—although this may be more valid for younger workers. More open kinds of workspaces also do not seem to be more effective—although this seemed to be more true in India than elsewhere; to a certain extent, this preference reflected current workspace. There appear to be more trends favoring more open kinds of workspaces among younger than older workers, especially for employees in China, India, and the UK.

Direct design suggestions that would be consistent with the overall pattern of these results include separating “individual” from “group” tasks/activities across the floor-plate—preferably with floor-to-ceiling (glazed?) walls. Enclosure is not the enemy of collaboration. It’s also important to “under-promise” and “over-deliver” in terms of the “affordances” (unconscious cues provided by the physical environment about its performance) and the objective performance of work environments. Although somewhat complex, this idea ultimately leads to the possibility that glazed, moveable floor-to-ceiling walls (for space definition) provide work areas representing a nice compromise between open and private workspace, between collaborative areas and good speech privacy.

There also may be useful similarities in workspace needs & preferences around the world; however, country and age group tend to interact in important ways. What this implies is that responding to differences across worker generations with workspace design should perhaps differ depending on the country/geographical area. But in general, younger workers’ ratings favor more open workspaces than older workers’ with some notable (and important) exceptions (e.g., job satisfaction). Additionally, local/regional corporate culture may influence these broader, country-level and age-group differences in workspace quality. Finally, the ideas and concepts behind “combi-offices” and “flex-offices” at least at first blush seem to be broadly consistent with these results; thus, such design concepts might represent good “benchmarks” against which to compare particular organization’s (or work group’s/team’s) functional and psychosocial needs.

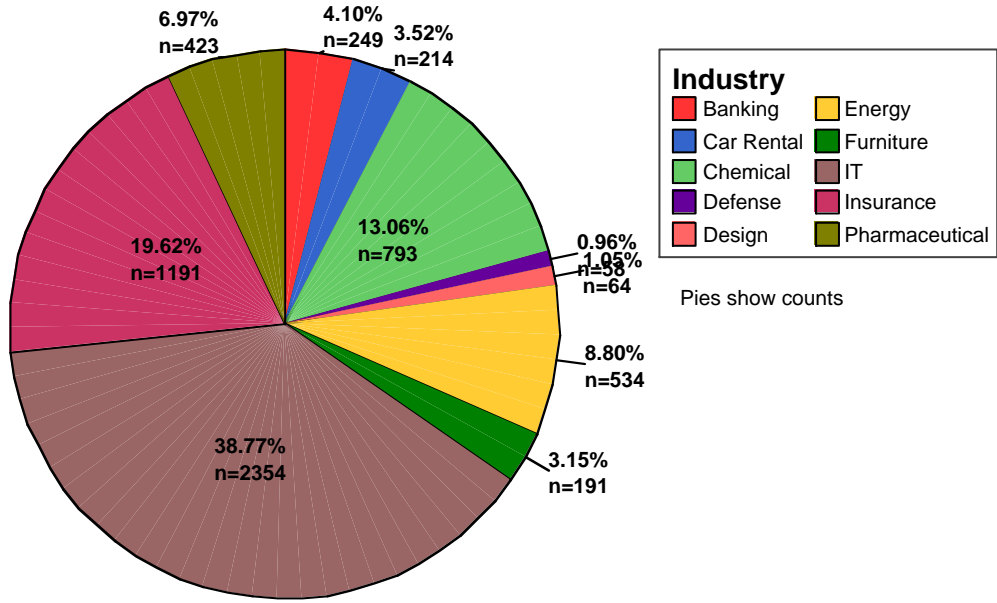
APPENDIX

Country

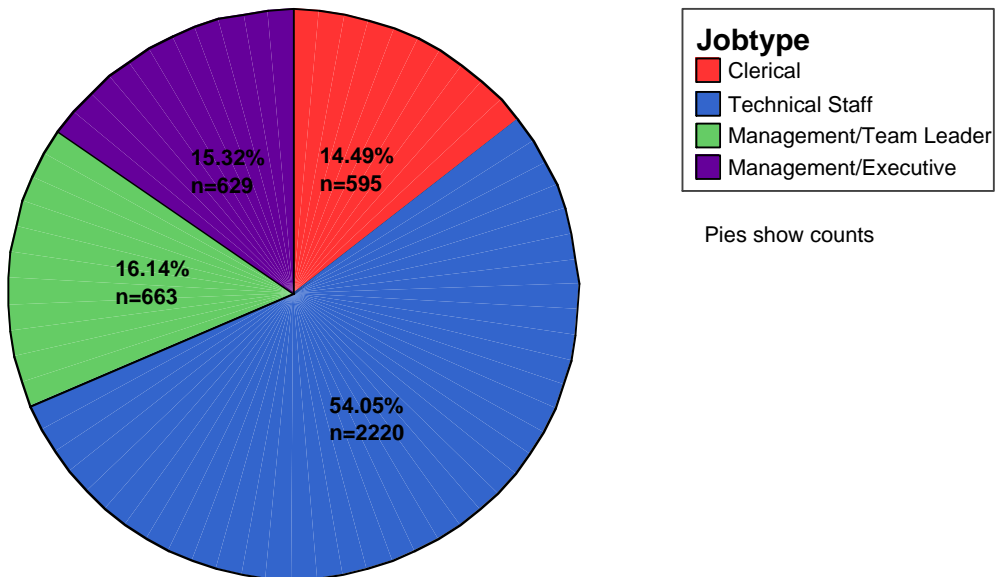


Pies show counts

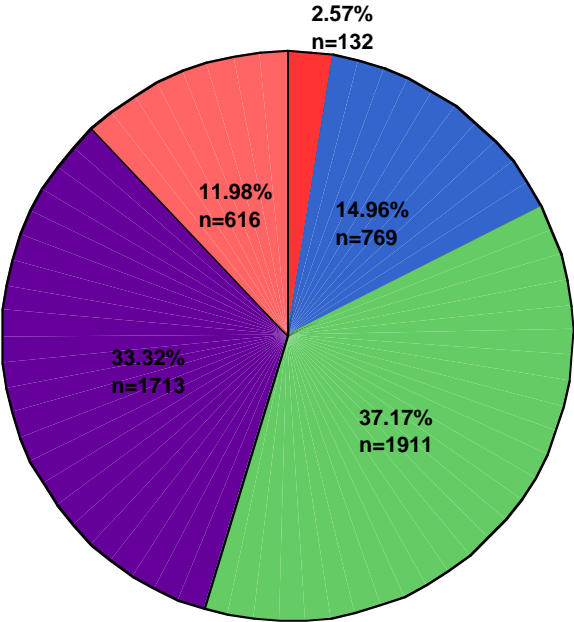
Industry (vertical market)



Job Type



Current workspace

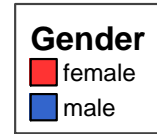
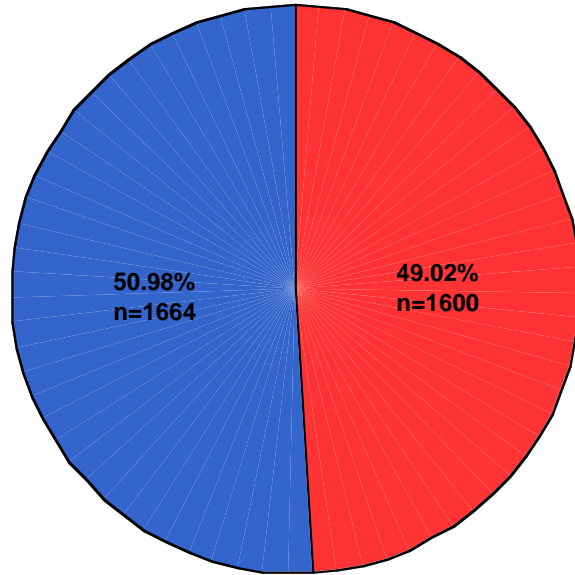


Workspc

- No permanent workspace
- Open office (no partitions)
- Low panels/cubicle
- High panels/cubicle
- Private office

Pies show counts

Gender



Pies show counts