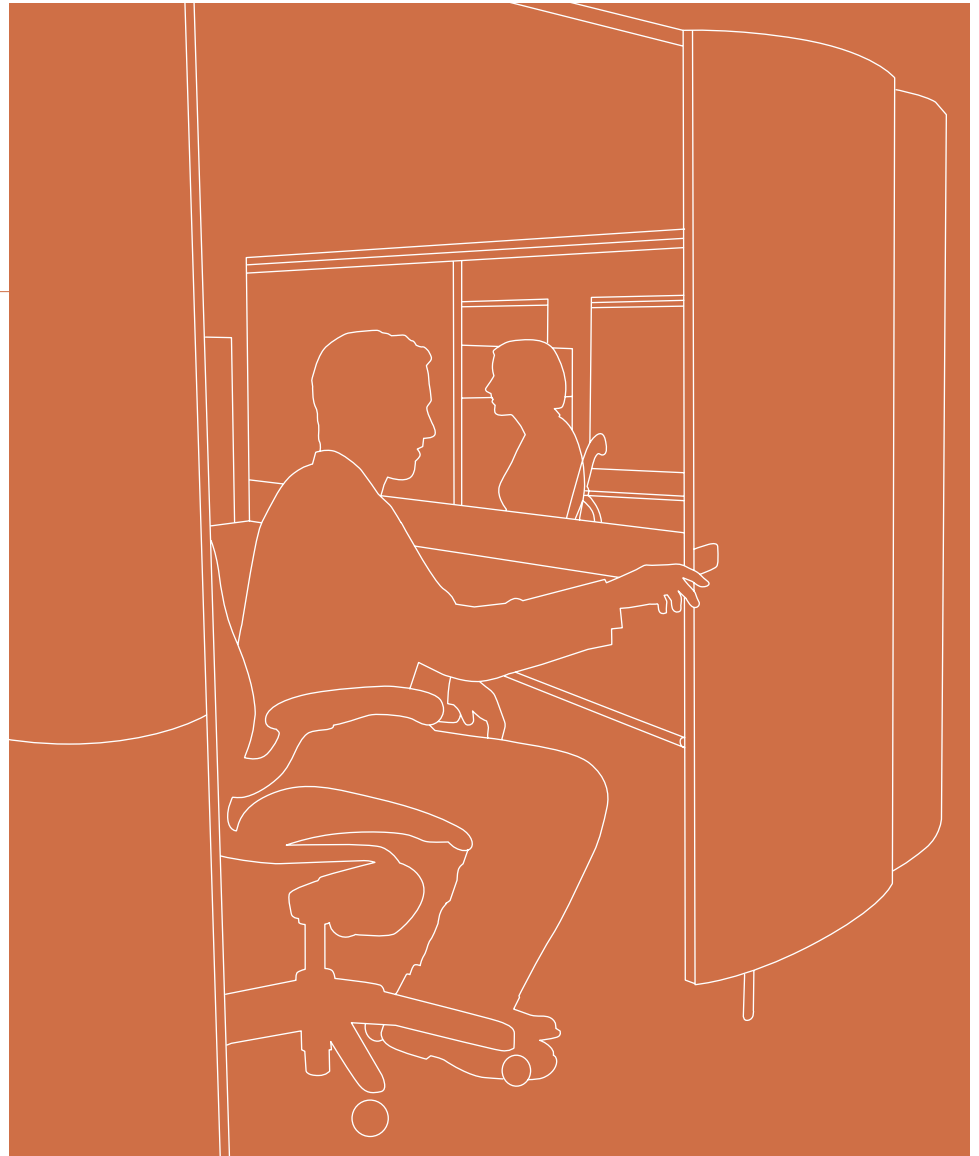




Taking Control

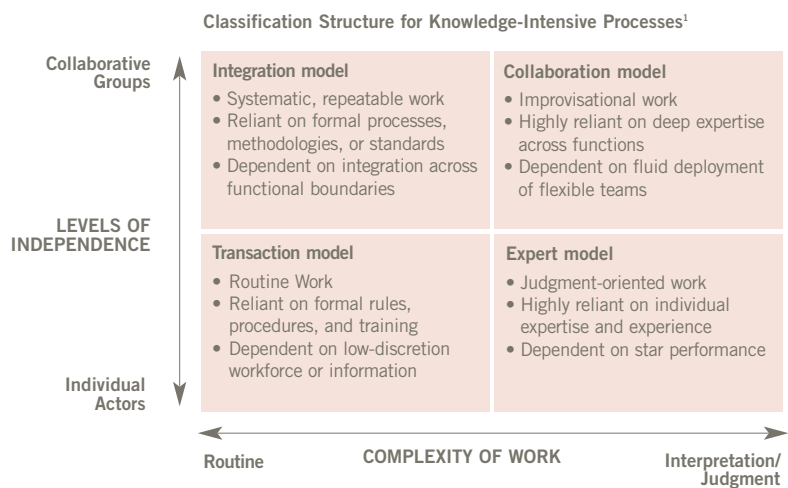
Balancing privacy and connection in
My Studio Environments™



An office should belong to the person working in it. My Studio Environments gives people the ability, within their own offices, to control levels of access, supporting both concentrated individual work and collaborative group work.

Figure 1

Levels of independence can influence the degree of structure and interaction in a job; levels of complexity address the amount of knowledge required to perform a job successfully.



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What We Know: It wasn't such a long time ago that white-collar workers began to fill the offices and skyscrapers that came along with an emerging business economy. Their name—office workers—was both obvious and ambiguous. It was clear where they worked, yes, but what did they do in those offices, behind those desks? What was—is—office work? And what happened to white collars?

Even today, we struggle to define office workers. Work has become more specialized, requiring greater technical and intellectual skills. Increased competition has put greater demands on organizations to innovate. Knowledge workers, as we've begun to call a subset of the office-worker category, are becoming a growing and influential presence.

People who “think for a living” is how author and educator Tom Davenport describes this group.² They are, he says, “the horses that pull the plow of economic progress,”³ responsible for creating, producing, and sharing information. They include programmers, researchers, engineers, customer service representatives, industrial designers, educators, healthcare professionals, and financial analysts. And they constitute a significant portion of the workforce in countries with advanced economies. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates 34 percent of the workforce are managerial, professional, or technical workers.⁴ Davenport estimates there are 36 million knowledge workers in the U.S., based on his job categories.⁵

Among this influential group, however, lie great differences. The type of work they do, and how they get it done, begin to form a means for differentiation among knowledge workers. Some of their work may be routine and based on established processes. Other work, such as the type that creative directors or publicists do, is far from routine.

At Herman Miller, this understanding of work process and worker types is important because it influences the criteria used to design workplaces that are most productive, supportive,

and effective for knowledge workers. From research conducted on knowledge work, knowledge creation, and work process among office workers, Herman Miller identified groups of knowledge workers. While some groups spend their days doing work that requires little autonomy or previous training, the research revealed that most knowledge-intensive work is rarely static or routine. On a regular basis and depending on specific jobs or tasks, a single knowledge worker will do different types of work that require varying degrees of expertise and direction.⁶ Davenport has also classified models of knowledge-intensive processes. (Figure 1)

Both Herman Miller and Davenport's work point to this fact: There is a great variety of work processes among knowledge workers. The activities of their day and the methods by which their work gets done involve both individual time and collaborative time. Knowledge workers need both concentration and stimulation to do their work and their thinking. Most important, they need to be in control to invite or discourage interaction.

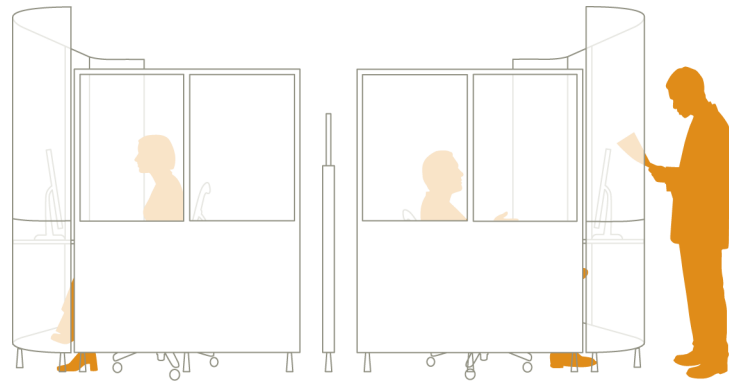
Knowledge workers are responsible for fueling the information pipeline of our economy, and organizations are aware of the need not only to attract, but also to retain the people who will develop the services, products, and intellectual capital that grow their business. Knowledge workers know this, too. Demand offers them freedom to move among organizations until they find the right fit. Businesses vying for the talents of these workers are increasingly attentive to the things that create that right fit. One is an environment that knowledge workers want to work in. The costs of not doing this are high. Employers can expect to spend twice the salary of the departing employee to recruit and train a replacement.⁷

Workplace design can also influence—positively or negatively—the flow of creative and innovative ideas. Explains business writer James Rice: “A high-performance workplace can make a significant contribution to boosting productivity, improving

Figure 2

Inverted landscape:

Taller perimeter walls create a personal boundary from activities outside the office. Lower interior walls still define office boundaries but facilitate interaction within a team cluster.



profitability, and creating a competitive edge. To achieve this exceptional performance, facility executives are finding they must shift their focus from the space their people occupy to the nature of the work their people do and how they can support it most effectively.”⁸

BOSTI Associates, a Buffalo, N.Y., workplace research group, found that the number-one predictor of job performance and satisfaction was having the ability to concentrate in one’s own workspace. While this evidence lands squarely on the side of the private office, the number-two item on BOSTI’s list was the ability to have easy, frequent, and informal interactions with others.⁹

The means to control access—to signal “I’m available” or “Leave me alone”—is critical to giving knowledge-intensive workers what they need to do their best.

Therefore: Independent, autonomous knowledge workers need the organization, environment, and tools “to support their idea generating, *not to direct* their idea generating.”¹⁰ Organizations that give knowledge workers control over their work environments send a strong message: “We understand your need for autonomy, and we trust you.” Doing so can increase the sense of loyalty between employer and employee.

An organization that wants to attract the best talent to create a competitive advantage must provide a workplace that gives knowledge workers the ability to control interaction and privacy. If we “think for a living,” in Davenport’s words, our work environments should let us control our time to think alone or think together.

Design Problem: Knowledge workers will spend their days alone and in various levels of interaction—from a two-minute conversation to an impromptu discussion to a longer work session with team members. Knowledge workers also need private work time and the means to limit interaction. Yet offices traditionally do not provide methods for easily controlling accessibility or for accommodating varying levels of interaction.

Design Solution: My Studio Environments addresses these dual and opposite needs. Permeable Privacy™ provides a means to control external distractions through filters such as doors, shutters, and translucent walls that let people be open or closed to the world around them. The inverted landscape creates a team boundary and an interactive group space. (Figure 2)

Herman Miller conducted user tests of My Studio Environments prototype product with a group of Herman Miller employees and with employees at six early-adopter locations. Early-adopter organizations represented a cross section of industries, from a medical equipment company to a consumer goods business. All groups tested prototypes for three to four weeks. Participants were surveyed throughout the test period and asked to compare their permanent work environments to the prototype product. Many noted that My Studio Environments improved the ways they could signal accessibility. One participant mentioned that once the private, concentrated work she needed to do was complete, “it was great to be able to open back up and connect once again with the larger workplace.”¹¹

Group Control

Humans, by nature, are social, and so is their work. A conversation among coworkers can help to stimulate and clarify ideas. Interaction also advances innovation and business opportunities. Since creative work is often emergent, opportunities for serendipity and unplanned activities need to be designed into the office space. Open sharing, socialization, and an informal atmosphere are some of the key ingredients for collaboration.

My Studio Environments creates a boundary in the form of higher perimeter walls that define a group space and lower interior walls that create individual offices but also connect the people who need each others’ ideas to stimulate their thinking and move their work forward. Providing the means for easy and comfortable connections improves the likelihood of short conversations and information sharing without the need to leave the office or the

Figure 3

I'm available:

Shutters and lower interior walls provide a means for easy and direct interaction among team members and coworkers. Perimeter walls define a group space; this boundary offers its own form of group control.



work in process. (Figure 3)

My Studio Environments designer Doug Ball recalls an experience that opened his eyes to the benefits of comfortable and easy access among coworkers.

We were sitting in an early prototype of My Studio Environments having a meeting with three or four engineers, and I became aware that in the next office, just over the wall, there was another group talking about the same thing. We then carried on a meeting for half an hour with this larger group of people, sitting in our offices, feeling quite comfortable. Then, like rabbits, at a certain point all our heads dropped down and we were back to where we'd been.

With My Studio Environments, there is a sense of enclosure defined by the higher perimeter walls. Contained within that larger perimeter we have individual offices filled with people who communicate and cooperate. And you can do that without having to move away from your office. You can move if you want, but you don't have to. You can stay in your own space.¹²

In an ethnographic study conducted by Herman Miller, 70 percent of the conversations between coworkers average two minutes or less.¹³ It often takes more time to dial a number, send an e-mail, or get up and find someone than the time it takes to have the actual exchange. My Studio Environments facilitates the brief interludes that happen regularly among coworkers.

Test participants at one early-adopter site felt this was an important feature of My Studio Environments. Team members would frequently open their shutters, talk for a few minutes, close their shutters, and go back to their individual work.

The design of My Studio Environments, when four or six offices are connected within a boundary wall, builds a sense of community. As one test participant said: "It feels like we're part of a neighborhood but have our own homes." Another participant noted she felt like part of a cohesive team for the first time,

that she "belonged to a group."

Permeable Privacy also gives a group seclusion or connection to the organization beyond its group space. "We can open our perimeter wall shutters to connect to the larger workplace or close them and work privately as a team."

Herman Miller workplace researcher Michael O'Neill talks about the importance of boundaries in defining and giving individuals or teams a sense of their own space. "Boundaries can be used both to integrate the team into the larger organization and differentiate the team from the organization."¹⁴ Connecting teams who do problem solving or confidential R&D teamwork, for example, also improved team effectiveness when they could isolate their activities from outside interference.¹⁵

Individual Control

There are also times when individuals need to isolate themselves from everyone—including team members. Knowledge-intensive workers, particularly when they are interpreting information or making judgments, need an even greater ability to focus and concentrate. "Having the opportunity to be creative, develop a complex strategy, or have a logical train of thought is dependent on uninterrupted cognitive flow," writes the author of an article on office distractions. "We are all at our best when we allow the brain to explore a problem without distraction."¹⁶ (Figure 4)

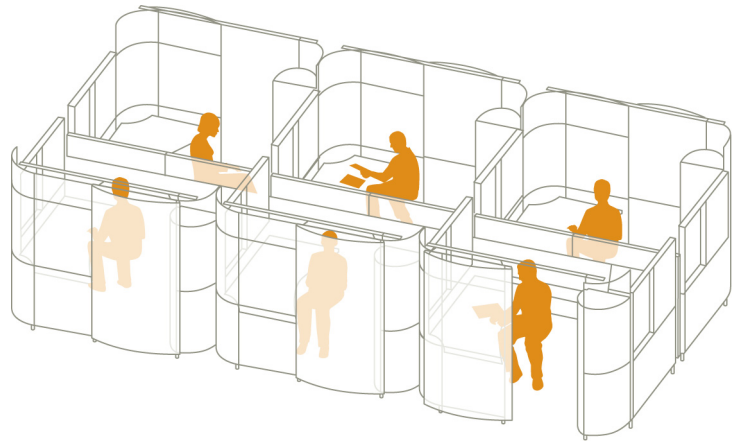
Workplace and distraction, unfortunately, are often two sides of the same coin. A study conducted by Basex, a research firm that focuses on knowledge sharing and collaboration issues in the workplace, found that office distractions accounted for 2.1 hours of the average worker's day. The report went on to quantify that distraction: 28 billion hours a year, using U.S. labor statistics and wages, for a loss of \$588 billion a year.¹⁷

Turning away from those distractions by forwarding phones or checking e-mail less often is a matter of self-discipline.

Figure 4

I'm not available:

My Studio Environments gives people a means to discourage interruption by closing the door and shutters of the office; the translucent wall allows visitors and team members to see that a person is in the closed office, a clear signal not to interrupt.



Interruptions from coworkers or distractions from external stimuli are more difficult to control. Control of distractions is essential for creating a sense of privacy and a place for concentrated, heads-down work.

My Studio Environments gives people a place of their own. Designer Doug Ball's goal was to provide not only a sense of dignity but also a sense of privacy. My Studio Environments lets people shut out the world if they need to. People are given the opportunity to take care of confidential work or have a self-imposed "time out." And each office has one entrance and exit and four walls—offices do not become public pathways to someone else's office.

My Studio Environments test participants mentioned that even with their doors open, there seemed to be a greater degree of formality. The psychological aspect of being able to control the environment became important. A door, for example, gave the worker immediate control over the space. Coworkers had to knock and slide open the door instead of simply walking into the office. Test participants mentioned that potential collaborators tended to stop at the threshold rather than walking into the office. This increased the residents' sense of independence and control.

Collaboration helps to get work done. But the ability to control when and how it happens is critical to allowing knowledge workers to concentrate and work in effective, focused, and dignified ways.

Balancing Privacy and Connection

My Studio Environments gives workers a means of controlling privacy levels. Shutters, doors, and the orientation of the occupant all act as visual cues: "I'm busy" or "Come on in." My Studio Environments translucent materials allow workers some ability to see out, but not to be disrupted. At the same time, they let people see that someone is in a neighboring office, closed off and working.

"One type of person is best served by a soothing sanctuary, another by a more stimuli-laden environment. And when different

temperaments share the same roof, as families do, the problem for designers is whether they can provide micro-environments that complement each."¹⁸ Doug Ball's design solution—My Studio Environments—addresses some very old and basic human needs: privacy and connection. Knowledge-intensive work requires a mix of concentration and stimulation. The right mix. Neither uncontrolled interruption nor total isolation produces the constantly varying mix that people find productive. My Studio Environments, says Ball, "gives people what they want, which is the private office, but one that is also designed to deal with the realities of today." It gives knowledge workers, those people who are responsible for creating and fulfilling the ideas that are at the heart of an organization's ability to innovate, succeed, and grow, a means of controlling their work environments.

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Credits

Doug Ball is the designer of My Studio Environments™. He is a lifelong resident of Canada, and now lives and works in Senneville, Quebec. The challenge of continually breaking new ground and solving problems with a fresh eye keeps him coming back to office-furniture design. His contributions have received numerous awards throughout Canada and the U.S. Ball is also the designer of Vivo™ interiors, a frame-and-tile system. Both systems were introduced by Herman Miller in 2006.

Bill Dowell, C.P.E., is the director of research at Herman Miller. He leads a multifaceted team that examines and evaluates Herman Miller products as they are developed. The team also explores future trends and issues and analyzes their impact on the creation of product and service innovations. His recent work includes studies of seating behaviors, anthropometry, the effect computing has on seated posture, the components of subjective comfort, and methods for pressure mapping. He has published numerous articles on ergonomics. Bill is a member of the Human Factors and Ergonomic Society, the CAESAR 3-D surface anthropometric survey, and the committees that published the BIFMA Ergonomic Guidelines for VDT Furniture and the BSR/HFES VDT Workstation Standard.

Brian Green is a research program manager at Herman Miller. He works closely with product development teams to influence product direction and champion the use of valid evaluation techniques. He is the liaison between the customer and Design and Development during product development. Brian is a certified New Product Development Professional (NPDP) and holds degrees in business management and product development.