

What height is the best for office screens and partitions within open plan environments to promote communication and collaboration?



Screens and partitioning heights have always been a discussion point when establishing or renovating an office. Like most things in office design, one size doesn't fit all and recent studies by the IWSI have provided a few indications about ideal heights and construction materials when it comes to office partitioning and screening.

Traditionally most offices since the 1970s have looked to provide partitioned or screened environments for employees since the advent of open plan offices. These originally started in the form of cubical environments with partitions at standing height (approximately 1800mm or 6ft).

Over recent years we have seen several innovations in corporate screen heights and configurations based on many drivers including:

1. Type of work being performed
2. Age Demographics of employees
3. Organisational Culture
4. Cost
5. Construction

The type of work performed by individuals strongly determines partitioning and screen height. For example computer programmers, IT consultants, Engineers, Accountants and other similar professional job roles where tasks tend to require higher levels of concentration and freedom from distraction. The workers preference in open plan environments is to provide 'standing height privacy,' meaning the ability to stand without seeing over the panel. Conversely workers in industries like communications, call centres and customer service who tend to be more social and collaborative at work, prefer open plan workstations with 'seated height privacy'; in other words, one cannot see over a panel while seated.

Age Demographics also affect workers preference for partitioning and screening. Studies have shown IGen or GenY staff (anyone who's birthdate is 1980s or more recent) prefer a more collaborative work style and appreciate lower height partitioning. Gen Y and IGen generally enjoy ready-access or immediacy of information and don't seem to get bothered by ambient noise as they are used to multitasking across many mediums.

The Baby boomers aged demographic prefer higher screens as they prefer to work undisturbed. The Baby Boomers also have an affinity with offices as a sign of hierarchy and status so their preference is private working conditions.

Research suggests that younger workers, particularly Gen Y are more interested in learning from their peers and more experienced workers than are older employees are (Becker, 2000; Wymer, 2008). Thus, the workspace should be designed to support learning and encourage mentoring opportunities.

The traditional practice of locating more experienced staff in enclosed private offices or higher partitioned cubicles, while increasing their comfort level, could reduce learning and development opportunities for younger employees. Also, the concurrent effect of

developmental atrophy if they lose the benefit of being pushed by younger staff to learn new skills and think in new ways about problems.

Both of these demographics and preference styles yield both positives and negatives for the corporate landscape especially when mixed together. The modern challenge is how to cater for mixed demographics without exposing your company to 'Intergenerational Estrangement' occurring when an environment is skewed to one particular demographic.

Organisation culture, the internal culture of any company, can affect the ideal height of Screens and partitions. Some companies encourage interpersonal engagement and collaboration and others do not. An organisation will benefit greatly when it has set the agenda via its culture and how it manages the needs of the individual, versus the needs of the organisation, and how that is translated to the designed environment.

A seminal three-year research project conducted by UCLA revealed that companies who had modified their business design, layout and processes to encourage higher collaboration and supported new work processes by moving from private working spaces to more open, collaborative environments realised performance increases (speed and accuracy of work) by almost 200 percent (Majchrzak and Qianwei,).

The symptomatic effect of this business design however is an increase in ambient office noise. To combat this, specialist screen and partitioning is constructed.

Fixed, Gyprock and plasterboard type partitions are not desirable due to their inflexible nature and lack of sound absorption qualities whilst demountable partitioning that encases sound absorbent fabrics and or foams are most likely to offer the best ambient noise reduction as opposed to glass or laminated finishes. Construction is also considered in terms of screen thickness. Thickness of partitions will have many effects; the thicker the partition or screen will resultantly cope with reducing sound overflow. Generally a construction that accommodates a multilayered screen base of 50-100mm will offer the better sound qualities as well as technology integration.

The other important consideration is Green or sustainable product choices. In selecting partitions and heights you must look at life span and reusability.

Many products like the Corporate Living **S Series** range offer the maximum in reconfiguration ability as the system is a scalable series of partitions available in differing heights, thickness and constructions. In a statement by the Green Environment Council of Australia proclaims that 'the concept of relocatable partitioning is an Environmental breakthrough for the fit out industry. It means that over a 10 year period, one initial fit out and any number of re-configurations can add up to significant savings, both financially and environmentally.'

The next consideration in selecting the correct Screen and partitioning height is cost. Today's workplaces are characterised by high churn rates, a desire for high density to match increasing square meter rates, workers with different levels of mobility and work styles, and a sophisticated technology infrastructure. All of these are conditions that are

addressed by open plan furniture solutions in a more cost effective manner than hard-wall interiors.

Through the years, many organisations have demonstrated the business value of investing in screen and partitioning systems products because they greatly reduce the cost of change. Now, open plan offices can positively impact organisations in a broader manner by aiding strategic business issues such as attraction and retention, support for mobility and other needs related to high performing workers (Venezia and Allee, 2007). Other research suggests a shift by leading edge companies from a primarily 'cost perspective' to a view in which the workspace is positioned as an investment in employee performance (O'Neill, 2007; Vischer, 1996).

Ultimately the best height for screens is based on the many reasons listed in this article however the first question must be 'What is in the best interest of the Role'. Meaning, what needs must be provided for by the organisation in the environment to achieve the goals set down for it and how does this interact with others within that environment. Holistically the ideal height for partitioning and screens as recommended by researchers is one of seating height privacy. This allows for privacy and collaboration in the one environment. This is generally viewed at about 1200-1350mm or 4 to 4.5 feet high. These screens should be 'Spinal' or screens that you face while working. Where by peripheral screens such as side screens should be graduated downwards to allow for more knowledge sharing across a linear path way.

In an ideal environment these could be supported by dedicated collaboration spaces and concentration rooms whereby the space has a purpose to its communication style. This can also be coupled with a focus on inbuilt acoustic and noise buffering inside partitioning and screening systems and the surrounding environments by using sound baffles and plants to absorb sound over flow.

Employee expectations and preferences related to workspace type are complex and continue to evolve over time. Staff should be accommodated for in the future proofing of an organisation, providing solutions that are in the roles best interest will determine the future height of partitioning and screens.

When considering partitioning or screening in your office environment it is best to consult an expert, like the team of experienced system furniture designers at Corporate Living. We offer a FREE consultation and analysis of **your needs** so you can avoid the common pitfalls of office design.

To speak to one of our consultants TODAY call 9354 0199 or email info@corporateliving.net.au.

Articles References and Acknowledgments: IWSI & Knoll