

## **When the walls come a tumblin' down**

### **Staff at a Toronto ad agency embrace the new office chic: open space aimed at fostering collaborative work**

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The workplace is being renovated and, at long last, it's your chance to march into the boss's office and demand your own private space, with a door. It's what we all want, right? Not any more.

When staff at advertising agency **Wunderman Canada** were asked to envisage the company's revamped workplace, the majority requested an open concept - space they believe will foster group work and collaboration.

"It came as a bit of a surprise because I thought most people wanted their own offices," Wunderman president Trish Wheaton says.

Many of her top executives had raised concerns that the old layout - private offices mixed with cubicles - wasn't conducive to teamwork. "The physical space was getting in the way of creativity and productivity."

This wasn't the case 20 years ago, Ms. Wheaton says. "Back then, much of the work was solo, but today we're working in teams of five to 10 people."

Teamwork, collaboration, an open-concept office - this is how companies work today, says Don Crichton, vice-president of workplace solutions at HOK Canada in Toronto, the firm hired by Wunderman to design the new space.

The open-environment thrust began about 12 years ago, partly because companies realized fewer private offices meant reduced construction costs. In addition, Mr. Crichton says, "companies realized they'd be more productive if employees were interacting with one another rather than working in isolation."

Schools have adopted this group work plan, placing students in clusters to share ideas rather than sitting them row upon row. So it makes sense that workers in their 20s and 30s prefer this method of work, Mr. Crichton says.

Working with HOK, Wunderman has devised plans for more "teaming" areas to facilitate group work: boardrooms and offices with built-in, wall-size whiteboards where teams can meet for morning status meetings and cluster throughout the day.

Some Wunderman employees will retain their own offices, based on position, not seniority. For example, work that requires confidentiality, such as human resources, supervisory or accounting, will have private offices or isolated suites.

"The old mentality - 'I've been with the company for eight years so I deserve an eight-by-eight office with a table and chairs, even though I don't meet with clients' - is outdated," Mr. Crichton says. "It's less about entitlement and more about the type of work being done."

Going to an open environment isn't for everyone.

"It depends on the business sector and the company culture," says Carol Smith, senior partner at Smith Grimley Harris Design Partners in Toronto, whose clients include Coca-Cola Ltd., Xerox Canada Inc., Petro-Canada and Redwood Custom Communications Inc. "It wouldn't be appropriate at a law firm, for example, where there's a high level of client confidentiality."

Department placement is key in an open-concept design, the experts say. Finance and administration departments should be in quiet areas conducive to heads-down work, not beside the main meeting room or kitchen.

"They spend most of the day at their desk working on transactions, so they need lots of natural light with a mix of high and low [cubicle] privacy screens," Mr. Crichton says. "The creative departments spend only half their day at their desks, so they don't need the same level of privacy or quiet. They spend most of the day roaming around, meeting in groups, so they should be close to lounge areas and meeting rooms."

But some workers see disadvantages in an open concept, including increased noise and visual distractions. "When I had an office, I could close the door, which meant 'do not disturb' but now anyone who needs my attention expects to get it right away," says Aviva Abramovitz, a proofreader at Toronto ad agency MacLaren McCann, which recently went through a renovation from private offices to open space. "There is constant noise. People keep telling me to wear headphones, but I don't want to. I shouldn't have to."

"If you're taking away privacy, you need areas for employees to go to for quiet work," Ms. Smith says. "You need space for collaborative work, but also spots employees can use to make private phone calls and so on."

She helped design Redwood Custom Communications' Toronto office, which now sports a hallway with about five phones for private calls, as well as breakaway areas for quiet, undisturbed work. "The whole idea is to make your staff comfortable and able to work efficiently," Ms. Smith says.

Adding white-noise generators helps muffle common workplace noises, such as conversations and keyboard clicks, Mr. Crichton says.

Another way to cut down on ambient noise is incorporating a high, open ceiling into the design; as sound travels up, it gets lost in the ceiling crevices, as opposed to bouncing back from drop ceiling tiles.

"An open ceiling creates more volume, which is easier on the eye because it's less repetitive and lets in more natural light - if you don't mind seeing the mechanical system," Mr. Crichton says. "Again, it depends on the company culture. An open ceiling wouldn't be appropriate at a law firm."

High, open ceilings will be incorporated in some of the Wunderman renovation. Wall colours will include a cheerful, energetic yellow.

"Finishes - paint, lighting, art, furniture - depend on the image you want to present, to the employees and to the clients," Ms. Smith says. "Heavy, dark wood looks great in a law firm because it projects a feeling of security and confidentiality, whereas an advertising agency wants to project a creative flair, with vibrant colour."

So what kind of image will Wunderman want to project? "When you step off the elevator, you will know we are a creative agency," says Lianne Grady, the company's director of client operation and senior vice-president. "It's going to be spectacular."

## THE OFFICE RENO DIARY

This is part three of a monthly series as Wunderman Canada renovates its Toronto workspace.