

While it may be easy for firms to change their offices and their technology, they shouldn't forget something that is a bit harder to change. Human nature.

Don't touch me

The received wisdom is that, behind people, property is the second largest item of expenditure on the balance sheet of most organisations. Organisations are always keen to sweat their assets and buildings are no different. So it should come as no real surprise to discover that the density at which buildings are occupied is rising. For example, recent research from property firm Knight Frank has revealed that corporate occupiers in the South East are adopting a more intensive use of space with historic allocations of 140 – 190 sq ft now reducing to 120 – 130 sq ft per person.



Inevitably it is technology that is in part giving firms the means with which to do this. The not so lingering death of the cathode ray tube VDU over the past few years and its replacement with flat screen monitors and laptops has allowed organisations and the people that design their workplaces to completely rethink the way that space is used.



The need to accommodate CRT monitors was the main reason why heavily-engineered core-unit desks with large corner sections were developed as a standard during the 1980s and 1990s. TFT monitors allow furniture designers and space planners to work with rectilinear workstation footprints and the effect has been profound; typically resulting in a net space saving of up to 20 per cent and 25 per cent per workstation. In short, more people in the same space.

Now this may make good, logical business sense but it may be overlooking a less mutable element of the workplace; its people. Human beings are incredibly sensitive to pressure on their personal space. So sensitive in fact that it is possible to measure to the inch the point at which they feel it is being violated.



The godfather of personal space, or proxemics, is anthropologist E. T. Hall who developed the idea in the 1950s and 1960s and laid out what he considered to be the levels at which personal space functions with four interpersonal zones.

- intimate (0 to 18 inches)
- personal (18 inches to 4 feet)
- social (4 feet to 12 feet)
- public (12 feet and beyond)

Violations of these zones are likely to provoke strong reactions in people including feelings of anger, stress and embarrassment

and make communication far more difficult, even

impossible. Even without this possible encroachment on their personal space, people are already resentful enough of their colleagues. According to a recent survey by recruitment specialist monster.com, the thing that annoys people most at work is their colleagues.

On the surface, it may make business sense to fit as many people as we can into the building, it may be

counter-productive if we don't take into consideration the way people respond to their environment and the people around them.

