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When the Walls Come Down, Collaboration Goes Up

Skills and Professional Development





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Last year, ACC made the decision to move our Washington, DC headquarters to a space that would offer more opportunities for collaboration, staff engagement, and natural light. We moved to an open workspace environment, and I couldn't be happier — with the outcome or the sunlight!

I had some anxiety, even fears about the move, and I'm sure those feelings were shared by staff. Not having an office door to close can be scary, especially for those of us who've worked behind walls and doors for many years. Did I mention that no one has an office? Yes, this includes me. Although some colleagues tried to talk me out of it, I can honestly say that I feel more energized and connected to our team now than I ever did from my office with four walls and a door.

While the concept of open workspace is not new (it was invented in Germany in the 1950s), its prominence in the United States only goes back a decade or so. According to a report by the International Facility Management Association, 70 percent of US-based office workers currently work in an open office environment. While this set up is typical and may work for large global companies

like Google or small tech-based startups, how can you know if this environment is the right fit for your organization? Perhaps you're hesitant about such a drastic change and have some questions about the positives and negatives of such a move. Hopefully, ACC's experience can help illustrate how to successfully make the transition.

Companies move to open workspace for a variety of reasons, including attracting and retaining top-quality talent, encouraging cross-functional collaboration, providing accessibility to peers and upper management alike (creating a lesser sense of hierarchy), as well as encouraging creativity, innovation, and flexibility (one of my favorite meeting places is the Starbucks in our building downstairs). While intentions are always good, there can be drawbacks — a lack of privacy is often noted, as is noise and more opportunities for distractions. According to a January 2018 Harvard Business Review article, the success of open offices has a lot to do with how people feel about the space. Often referred to as “place identity,” the term refers to the thought that if staff feel connected to the work they're doing, in the space where they're doing it, positive outcomes (increased engagement, collaboration, and communication) are more likely.

When considering open workspace, it is important to consider how your team will react — or connect — to the change. While we can't make everyone happy, we can make sure everyone has a voice and feels included in the process. I have to give credit to ACC's wonderful human resources department, along with our construction team, who made sure to incorporate staff's input on everything from the desks and chairs, to the design and capabilities of conference rooms and private areas. We understand that people sometimes need a door to close or that others may need a quiet space for certain aspects of their work. Therefore, the team made sure those areas exist (and they are some pretty cool areas, at that), and we implemented a “quiet” side of the office. These are just a couple examples, but what matters is for staff to feel empowered by the flexibility an open workspace provides. They can move to a private area or, in our case, the rooftop, where I've personally held meetings and noticed how creativity gets fueled by sunshine and fresh air. Again, providing options goes a long way.

Something else that goes a long way is being open and sharing your vision for the new space before the move. Let your team know what you hope to gain and be as open as possible about the process. Further, encourage the team to make the space, even if it's shared, their own. And most importantly, be enthusiastic about it! While I may have had my concerns, I honestly believed that the move would be good for ACC, and I said so frequently.

And, I am happy to report that ACC's open work environment seems to be working! I can personally attest to what a positive change it has been, and several members of staff have told me the same. In fact, Ramsey Saleeby, ACC's assistant GC and senior manager of program development, expressed his appreciation for the access he now has to myself and other members of the executive team. He told me, “I wouldn't have crossed the threshold of your office, without a very good reason.” While one often aspires to a corner office during their career, I never aspired to have a team that was hesitant to enter it! Today, I see ACC staff all around the office, including stopping by my desk. The fact that I am seated at a work station just like everyone else makes me more approachable — more of a partner to collaborate with as opposed to the boss in a corner “cage” of an office. The new office space is welcoming, and I hope all ACC staff “feel invited to speak” as Ramsey now does.

I think it's important to note that we are just getting started in this space. We will continue to make tweaks and seek the input of the team. If something isn't working, we can change it. The open environment is all about flexibility and innovation, right? New ideas will emerge, especially if your company culture supports that. We work hard to create an environment where employees feel valued

and respected, and where executives are as approachable as a contemporary. If you do the same, chances are, an open workspace will encourage the creativity and collaborative workforce you hope to foster. The move has made me a better executive, and it can do the same for you.

[Veta T. Richardson](#)



President and CEO

Association of Corporate Counsel

Veta T. Richardson is the president and chief executive officer of the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC). Headquartered in Washington, DC, ACC is the world's largest legal association dedicated exclusively to serving the interests of in-house counsel. With an international membership of more than 45,000 in-house lawyers at more than 10,000 organizations in 85 countries, ACC serves as the "voice of the in-house bar" for corporate lawyers at 98 percent of the Fortune 100 and 51 percent of the Global 1000.

With more than 60 chapter operations around the world, Richardson's top priorities as CEO involve continuing to increase ACC's global footprint and charting the organization through a strategic plan and vision designed to strengthen its position as the global voice for in-house counsel. Members look to ACC to advocate in support of their rights and interests as in-house counsel, as well as to offer the practice resources, education, global legal and regulatory analysis, and networking opportunities needed to advance their professional development.