

Don't be fooled: Seats are not people

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In an office planning world where seats no longer automatically equate to people, ratios matter. Concurrent shifts toward greater workplace density and desk-sharing are challenging a decades-old notion that “people” and “seats” are interchangeable for planning purposes.

Anyone who has ever been involved in an office planning, design or construction has—undoubtedly—encountered the real estate industry’s most common metric: workplace density. A deceptively simple measure, density is typically expressed in square feet of space allocated per person (“square feet/person”) and commonly used to indicate the number of seats present (or soon-to-be present) in a workplace, relative to the total area.

Notice how we said that the allotted square feet per person usually means square feet per seat? Did you find that strange or confusing?

No? Then, there’s something you need to know

Critical ratio miscalculations have become common with the open workspace adoption, desk-sharing schemes, and higher daily office attendance. These missteps can be costly upon the overprovisioning or underprovisioning of resources, as it can impact employee productivity and experience.

Yet, architects and designers don’t always get it right.

In addition to challenging which variable—seats or people—we use in workplace planning calculations, new ways of working also impact how those variables influence our projects.

From furniture to technology to building services and amenities, traditional ratios no longer apply.

Where’s my stuff?

An increase in desk-sharing programs has led to a shift in thinking about how and where mobile workers should keep personal belongings and sensitive files if they no longer have dedicated, lockable desk drawers. The most common response is to install office lockers. But how many do you actually need? The number of lockers required for your project can vary depending on your company’s workplace strategy and intended protocols. For example:

As a first step toward implementing desk-sharing in the future, you might choose to provide lockers to staff who still have assigned seats. In this case, only one locker per seat is required.

When providing “day lockers” for mobile workers, as most fitness centers do for members, you only need one locker per person you expect in the office on an average day.

When assigning permanent lockers to staff in a new shared seating environment, often to ease the impact of the workplace change, you now need one locker for each person assigned to the shared seating environment, regardless of how many are in the office each day.

The right tech in the right places

In legacy workplaces, you’d assume that the IT department would provide a complete desktop set per desk. A typical workstation would include a desktop computer, monitor(s), telephone, headset, and peripherals. Traditionally, every worker would use the same equipment each day.

In modern workplaces, particularly those with shared desks, a mixed approach is required.

For example, fixed items, such as computer monitors, keyboards and other peripherals, telephones, laptop docking stations, and peripherals (e.g., mouse and keyboard) will still be allocated according to the number of individual seats because they generally “live” on one desk; mobile workers typically don’t feel a sense of ownership for them. By contrast, many organizations provide personal telephone headsets for mobile workers to overcome health and hygiene concerns. In a shared-desk setting, this would mean every mobile worker assigned to that office would receive a personal headset.

Fine-tuning parking ratios

Assigning spaces by average seat density no longer supports today’s workplaces.

Traditional parking ratios—often stated as the minimum number of spaces required per 1,000 square-foot office space (e.g., “3 per 1000”)—are stressed by higher workspace density and desk-sharing programs. Combined, these practices increase the number of desks and people in a given office daily. As a result, a company may find it has not quite enough parking spaces after years of having too many.

Depending on your situation, you might not be able to change the supply of parking spaces allocated to your company, but you can be smarter about forecasting demand. By monitoring how many workers are present in the office each day, you can identify peak times and seek workarounds such as carpooling, shuttle services, and public transit incentives. Of course, identifying the right workplace utilization strategy for your organization carries its own challenges. No matter which approach you take, it’s clear that simply assigning parking spaces by average seat density no longer supports today’s dynamic workplaces. Instead, it’s better to focus on people and occupancy patterns.

And as it goes for parking, the same applies for restrooms and other facility features.

Keeping ratios on your radar

To avoid making an embarrassing and potentially costly mistake, you must build a culture of awareness, vigilance and permission within your project teams. Consider nominating a “Ratio Reviewer” to challenge assumptions across the board, and publicly share examples of where potential mistakes were caught early (e.g., forgetting that everyone is going to need their own headset).

Don’t be shy: The next time someone hands you a floor plan with a workplace density metric calculated as square foot per person, cross it out. Write “You mean seats,” and send them back to the drawing board. Your workplace program will thank you.

Source: futureofwork.jill/en/oe/occupancy-planning/global/dont-be-fooled-seats-are-not-people/