

Enterprise-Quality Phone Booths in the Post-Pandemic Workplace

An industry overview and best practices guide for
office phone booths in the wake of COVID-19



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An industry overview and best practices guide for office phone booths in the wake of COVID-19

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Pillar Booth



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Progressive open office plans, while intended to inspire transparency and foster collaboration, are often rife with privacy and productivity challenges. To combat these issues, office phone booths have rapidly evolved from trade show novelty to utilitarian staple of the modern workplace.

As enterprises rethink headquarters' layouts amid ongoing COVID-19 concerns, open offices present new hurdles. Companies redesigning their spaces to meet CDC recommendations and assuage employee apprehensions may find that modular furniture including phone booths and privacy pods play a key role in facilitating both privacy and personal space at work.

The following report answers three main questions:

- What problems do phone booths solve in open offices?
- What constitutes an enterprise-quality phone booth (i.e. what features must companies prioritize re: compliance, sanitation, materials, and cost)?

- What additional considerations for cleaning phone booths must companies take into account in the post-quarantine workplace?

Additionally, this document synthesizes pertinent research and anecdotal evidence of various use cases for phone booths, as well as projections for the future growth of the industry.

“We need to create spatial diversity so users can choose where and how they work most productively... Design is responding to those needs by providing modular furniture and flexible architectural products that are easily movable and can provide various privacy settings, work settings, and team environments.”

- Jenny Kang, designer, and Neil Schneider, design director, at IA Interior Architects in Chicago, IL



How phone booths mitigate privacy issues inherent to open offices

“The power of choice has always been important in the workplace, and phone booths can help deliver a different meeting space experience. Employees are often looking for alternative meeting areas where they can collaborate, meet, and take calls with ease. Because of the current global climate, there is a growing need for spaces to take calls, virtually collaborate, and participate in video conferences.”

- Jenny Kang, designer, and Neil Schneider, design director, at IA Interior Architects in Chicago, IL

The open office debate

You can thank—or blame—architect Frank Lloyd Wright for popularizing the open office plan that’s become ubiquitous in modern corporate culture. Wright subscribed to the idea that physical walls represent metaphorical barriers to collaboration; he extolled the benefits of open offices throughout the early 20th century.¹ The dot-com bubble ushered in another era of even more progressive layouts—the shared desks, benches, and “hoteling stations” that the HQs of tech behemoths like Facebook and Google are synonymous with today.

But sometime between 1939 and now, Wright’s vision went awry. In a 2018 study² of more than 1,000 working adults in the U.S., a full 76% reported negative feelings toward open office layouts, with 43% citing lack of privacy as a major concern. Employees noted discomfort overhearing others’ personal conversations (34%), an inability to fully concentrate (29%), and concerns about the security of sensitive information (23%). Other research³ has found open architectures actually decrease face-to-face interactions among employees, increase the use of email, and hinder productivity.

Not all consequences of the open office are negative. For one, the configuration presents considerable cost efficiency compared to traditional private offices. Businesses migrating to open office plans experienced a 33% drop⁴ in average square footage per employee between 2010 and 2017, leading to significant savings on overhead. Another study⁵ found that employees in

open offices enjoy greater levels of physical activity and lower levels of daytime stress compared to cohorts working in private offices and cubicles.

It’s not necessary to go back to the drawing board to optimize the open office. Several companies are developing innovative structures with modular designs to combat the common issues of the popular layout. These solutions include things like moveable barrier walls that slide into different positions to temporarily close off workstations, as well as specially designed breakout areas that offer employees a dedicated place to focus or take calls. Office phone booths have also emerged as highly effective solutions with the added benefit of being fully self-enclosed so as to promote privacy and dampen noise pollution.

What does “progressive” look like post-pandemic?

“The need for having a variety of settings in the office and the need for focused space, that’s not going to go away. We shouldn’t see the pendulum swing back to everyone having a private office. I think you’re still going to see open, collaborative environments that have a necessity for things like phone booths, which allow workers to have that quiet time.”

- Margie Baran, senior vice president of projects at JLL in Chicago, IL

The continued evolution of the modern office—particularly in the post-COVID-19 landscape—is up for debate. While the pandemic’s long-term impacts are difficult to predict and still largely speculative, findings⁶ from commercial real estate firm JLL show that as of April 2020, office workers wanted the following provisions in place to feel safe at work:

- Space design that allows for more privacy
- Flexibility when it comes to schedule and office location
- A “hyper-focus” on health and safety
- Spaces conducive to collaboration and concentration

Anecdotally, IA Interior Architects reports that their clients tend to find productive office environments include a mix of flexible, dedicated spaces for activities like professional development, training, mentoring, and innovation. Clients also stress a need for sequestered settings that are suitable for “extreme focus.”

Soundproof phone booths are a creative and cost-effective solution to employees’ need for privacy and a place to concentrate. Over the past five years, these structures have gone from a niche trend to the mainstream, and they’re part of many coworking spaces, as well as the progressive offices of companies like Samsung, Intel, Capital One, Pandora, and Lyft.⁷

Several types of phone booths of varying qualities and across a wide range of price points have emerged on the market. Costs range from about \$3,450-\$20,000. The primary benefits of office phone booths include:

- 1. Privacy.** Phone booths allow employees a respite from noisy open office environments. They’re a quiet and safe space to field delicate client calls, make a doctor’s appointment, or simply take a few moments of solitude to mentally reset.

- 2. Flexibility.** Modular phone booths are significantly cheaper than “stick built” or permanently installed options. They can be moved throughout an office space as a company’s needs evolve. Whereas stick-built booths require HVAC integration, as well as complex ventilation, electricity, plumbing, and sprinklers, modular booths are more turnkey. A model like Pillar Booth can be delivered and installed within about four to six weeks.

- 3. Productivity.** Study after study⁸ demonstrates that productive and focused employees are happier. Peace and quiet may be a key component of this equation. Research from 2018 found that 65% of creative people need a quiet environment⁹ to do their best work.

- 4. A dedicated place to take calls.** If companies weren’t using teleconferencing technology before COVID-19, they are almost surely embracing those tools now. Data suggests all-time highs¹⁰ for work-related video calls. Popular conferencing services like Zoom reported active users increasing from 10 million to more than 20 times that number in the first three months¹¹ of quarantine during the first two fiscal quarters of 2020. As workers return to the office, it is likely they’ll do so at reduced capacity and density¹²—meaning teleconferencing will probably be part of company culture for the foreseeable future.

- 5. Single occupancy.** Establishing single-occupancy spaces is a priority for reopening offices¹³ amid the ongoing threat of COVID-19. Phone booths designed to accommodate just one person at a time can help enterprises comply with CDC recommendations¹⁴ and ensure employees remain physically distant.

“Because we are (and will be) meeting virtually with increased frequency, users may want to have a virtual or a neutral background, a space with strong acoustics, and the ability to participate in large team sessions.”

- Jenny Kang, designer, and Neil Schneider, design director,
at IA Interior Architects in Chicago, IL

Perhaps due to their sheer practicality—or perhaps in response to the growing trends of increasing urban rents and decreasing square footage of commercial office space—phone booths have become a hot commodity. In 2019, some of the top industry players reported a doubling of revenue year over year.¹⁵ Fast Company speculates¹⁶ that if phone booths replace even a fraction of traditional office furniture like shared tables and benches, the industry may be poised to become a multibillion dollar market.



What is an enterprise-quality phone booth?

“When examining phone booth options, some of the differentiators include... What’s the price? How easy is it to assemble? How simple it is to move? What kind of circulation and airflow does it have? What is the level of cleanability? These are some of the considerations that we are trying to help our clients navigate.”

- Russell Frees, president and CEO of Henricksen

Office phone booths come in a variety of shapes and sizes, as well as at a range of price points. As the market for privacy pods and call booths continues to expand, knowing the features that are critical from a compliance, comfort, and cost perspective can make the decision-making process more streamlined.

When considering integrating phone booths into a professional environment, it's important to note the features that constitute an “enterprise-quality” piece of furniture—something that will not only effectively meet the needs of employees, but also meet rigorous standards for safety, cleanliness, and practicality.

Two designers from IA Interior Architects, a global architecture and design firm, cite the top features their clients typically prioritize for phone booths as sound absorption, diverse power offerings, overall design aesthetic, and price. Add-on seismic kits, sprinkler heads, and quality of air flow are additional logistical considerations.

The term “enterprise-quality” takes into account four primary buckets:

1. Code and compliance. Products should align with building and local regulations regarding electrical and fire codes, sprinkler requirements, and any environment-specific necessities. For example: Can the unit be hard-wired if need be? Can it be anchored to a floor or ceiling if the office is located in a seismically active region? An enterprise-quality booth will accommodate these features out of the box

without the need for expensive modifications, invasive construction, or drilling for sprinklers.

2. Quality, sustainability, and practicality of materials. In addition to antimicrobial materials that are comfortable and easily cleanable, enterprises should consider factors like the eco-friendliness of fabrics, surfaces, and packaging. Pillar Booth, for instance, is crafted with sustainable wood products, and its acoustic panels are made from recycled jeans.

Modularity comes into play in regards to longevity, too. Unlike stick-built structures, modular furniture is adaptable. This quality is arguably more important than ever in the aftermath of COVID-19 as companies seek to temporarily reduce density in shared spaces—a trend no one is sure will be long-lasting. In the near-term, however, single-occupancy spaces that are well ventilated, moveable, and easy to clean are likely to become valuable office real estate.

3. Total cost of ownership. While some lower-cost models on the market may be appealing from an up-front cost perspective, there are other factors to take into account including assembly costs, compliance tweaks, and overall utility including ease of use and the ability to connect to ethernet.

A critical component under this umbrella is the strength of the warranty. Enterprises should seek out phone booths that come with a multi-year warranty that covers product defects and any damages that occur during shipping.

4. Ability to properly sanitize. It's important that a cleaning crew is able to disinfect every inch of the product's surface, including interior acoustic panels, floors, and ceilings. Enterprises should look for bleachable—not merely cleanable—fabrics, and prioritize products with antimicrobial materials.

Lastly, ventilation is of particular importance. Models with multiple vents that simultaneously pull air in and push it out of the enclosed space are suitable for optimal circulation.

On top of these essential features, other must-haves include an ethernet and/or power connection, sleek design that is complementary to existing furnishings, interior LED lighting, and integration of an enterprise desk.

“At the end of the day, clients want phone booths that not only perform well, but can seamlessly integrate with the design aesthetic and concept of the office.”

- Jenny Kang, designer, and Neil Schneider, design director, at IA Interior Architects in Chicago, IL



Evolving office environments to assuage COVID-19 concerns

“One trend that will continue to accelerate is the idea of having a healthy workplace. Pre-COVID, we were just starting to see the forefront of the wellness and healthy workplace movement, and now I think that’s going to be an expectation.”

- Margie Baran, senior vice president of projects at JLL in Chicago, IL

“Distanced by design” may very well define the next era of office architecture. In a post-pandemic world, companies are finding creative ways to give employees the necessary space to meet CDC recommendations to keep six feet between individuals¹⁷ whenever possible.

JLL, a major commercial real estate firm in the U.S., is seeing the modularity trend that’s become a buzzword in the architecture and design sphere gain traction in the real estate world in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In June of 2020, JLL’s Chicago-based team was overseeing about three million square feet of office space being designed or already under construction for multiple large corporations in the area.

Instead of going back to square one for their office designs, some JLL clients decided to integrate or substitute in modular furniture—two or three chairs with easily cleanable fabric versus a large velour sofa, for example—in order to emphasize distance in amenities rooms or collaboration spaces.

IA Interior Architects is another architecture and design company that’s seeing new asks from clients calculating how and when to bring employees back to physical workspaces. Enterprises’ top prioritizations include designs that consider higher air quality, an increase in durability of materials, stronger sanitation policies, new cleaning protocols, touchless technologies, and environments that allow for virtual collaboration within a built space.

Other companies rearranging their open-plan spaces are erecting plexiglass barriers¹⁸ or using floor stickers to direct foot traffic throughout the office. A number of organizations are relying on privacy pods or phone booths to serve as single-occupant alternatives to benched workstations or multi-occupant enclosed conference rooms.

Modular structures are a simple solution for meeting the demand for distance without extensive renovations like the construction or removal of walls. They’re easy to install and move around; they can ebb and flow with the needs of the organization. Modular phone booths, for instance, arrive just weeks after companies order them—and some models like Pillar Booth can be assembled in as few as 30 minutes. They can be spaced throughout an office to encourage privacy and personal space, and moved around if the initial placement proves clunky. One Pillar Booth takes up just about 12 sq ft of office space.

Modular solutions are considerably more cost-effective than redesigning the bones of a space to accommodate private offices or, as one JLL client that’s mid-construction is doing, installing permanent fixtures such as hand-washing stations in the lobby. Many companies are reluctant to make design choices likely to last decades based upon the dynamic situation of COVID-19. But some of the trends that were already gaining steam before the pandemic struck—including modularity and a partially distributed workforce—may easily stick around.

Best practices for cleaning and sanitizing phone booths

“When you talk about the pandemic/post-pandemic environment, clearly cleanability is a big deal. Solid surfaces that can be cleaned on a regular basis between users are critical.”

- Russell Frees, president and CEO of Henricksen

When considering how to use phone-booths post-COVID, there are a few steps companies can take to ensure their employees feel safe and comfortable.

- 1. Deploy signage to encourage workers to use booths safely.** Create and prominently display signs that direct employees to engage in healthy behaviors like regular hand-washing, use of sanitizer, and wiping down surfaces after use. Employees should take all papers and personal belongings with them when leaving the booth for the day; this way, cleaning crews can disinfect every surface.
- 2. Set up a reservation system for half-day or full-day bookings.** Consider a scheduling system that allows only one employee to access a booth for an entire morning, afternoon, or full day. The worker can come and go as necessary throughout their reserved window—but no one except the reservation holder can enter the space during that time.
- 3. Clean booths after each employee session.** After an employee’s reservation window has ended and they have vacated the space for the day, have the booth professionally or deep cleaned. This process should include thorough sanitization with solutions that contain at least 70% alcohol or professional-grade, EPA-registered disinfectants¹⁹ known to kill germs and bacteria. Professional cleaning teams should be able to treat a phone booth as they would any other piece of furniture in the office.

4. Ensure proper ventilation. Good air circulation is critical. The Pillar Booth, for example, includes two fans on the bottom and two on the ceiling, which simultaneously pulls air in and pushes it out. The air inside is replaced more than once per minute.

5. Every surface must be cleanable. Every inch of the booth, including the floor, ceiling, and exterior, should be easy to wipe down. Acoustic paneling should be fully cleanable; booths with integrated foam insulation do not have this property, so look for models with removable panels. Fabrics on any seating or interior wall should be bleachable.

“Clients are going to want to be super flexible to be able to either expand or contract any type of furniture system to support rapid change.”

- Margie Baran, senior vice president of projects at JLL in Chicago, IL

While the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic upon overarching work trends including remote and satellite offices, workplace density, and office furniture design remain unknown, a heightened focus on wellness, flexibility, and office cleanliness are likely to be factors of significant importance for the coming months and years. Easily cleanable products, antimicrobial surfaces, a variety of modular and flexible work stations, and strict sanitation protocols will help those returning to

physical offices feel more at ease—and thus more likely to be productive—in the aftermath of this unprecedented global health crisis.



“At the end of the day, you want your employees to feel comfortable with where they’re going to work. I don’t see the trend of ‘remote work only’ being a ‘forever’ phenomenon. So, as we return to the office, it is important that companies value the anxiety their employees may be feeling. There are two components to re-engagement after this pandemic: One is the medical component of, ‘Hey, it’s all clear.’ But there is also a psychological element of, ‘I’m not sure I feel all clear yet.’ We can help employees work through their anxieties with our environmental choices.”

- Russell Frees, president and CEO of Henricksen

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