'Comparisons of academics working in private offices with those sharing offices found no significant differences in how well their office met their requirements'

DESIGNING A BETTER WORKSPACE: WHAT DO ACADEMICS WANT?

Heidi Lee at her own desk, is investigating work space requirements of academic staff. Image: John Liu, DesignInc

How do our workspaces affect our satisfaction and productivity? This question has been extensively researched in commercial environments. Now Heidi Lee, a graduate architect and Masters student in the School of Architecture and Building, is researching the workspaces of academics.

"The impetus to doing this research was the fact that academic work environments have changed little in response to new technologies and processes, while commercial workplaces have adopted new designs in response to changes in the way people work," she says.

"Architects designing for academic environments are rarely commissioned for extensive consultation programs with the staff using the space," says Heidi. "As a result, detailed information about academic workspace use is both rare and highly valued by designers and facility managers of universities."

Through an anonymous online workplace satisfaction survey, Heidi collected information about the types of work done in different locations and the qualities that were most important to the academics in their work environment. She also asked academics to describe their workspace and how well it supports their work.

Heidi compared her findings for academics against research in the published literature for commercial workers. She then further analysed her sample of academics to compare different groups.

Heidi is in the early stages of analysing her data, but she can reveal some preliminary patterns. As expected, academics responded differently to workers in commercial environments. Academics spend much less time in their offices on average than commercial workers, and they tend to do a large portion of concentrated work off-campus. Academics also placed much less emphasis on their interactions with others.

Surprisingly, academics, but not commercial workers, rated daylight, good air quality, temperature control and ergonomic comfort as more important than the 'ability to do distraction-free solo work' for their workspace. Some academics even rated the quality of the campus as more important than the quality of their office. The academic's lower rating for privacy could be because they typically have an enclosed office where privacy is maximised and distractions minimised.

In the more detailed analysis of Heidi's academic sample, she found more unexpected results: comparisons of academics working in private offices with those sharing offices found no significant differences in how well their office met their requirements, both for privacy and interaction.

Heidi's results will be used to determine which workspace influences apply in an academic setting, and will allow architects to design workspaces which will maximise productivity and satisfaction for academics.

FURTHER INFORMATION:
School of Architecture and Building
Principal supervisor: Dr Hilary Davies
E: hilary.davies@deakin.edu.au
www.deakin.edu.au/scitech/ab