# Space Requirements for Office Work Fact Sheets

**WHAT IS MEANT BY "WORKING SPACE"?**

Office jobs involve a great variety of physical and mental activities. Often, the core activities of any office job take place at the desk or at the workstation.

This document discusses a traditional office space.

In addition to the physical dimensions of the workspace and furniture, other features should also be considered in any design, reorganization or relocation. Some questions to ask are:

- Does the workspace provide acoustical privacy (for example, can people talk in privacy, according to the level of confidentiality required; do noises and conversations interfere with their concentration; do noises or conversations make it difficult to hear or understand speech if much of their work involves using the telephone?)
- Are the walls permanent (i.e., fixed) or is the workspace in an open office environment?
- Does the workspace provide visual privacy?
- Can an employee personalize his or her individual work space?
- Is there access to natural light or only artificial lighting?
- Is the workplace layout designed to facilitate interpersonal contact?
- Is there need for space for storage or equipment (e.g., immediate access to physical documents, or a second computer screen)?
- Is there room for furniture, including room for a barrier free turning radius (e.g., the person and a chair)?

**How much space do we need?**

There is no one clear-cut answer to what seems like a simple question because the answer has to deal with many aspects. Major aspects include:

**Nature of work.** If most of the work day is spent on field assignments, meetings, site visits and consultations, a smaller office space may be satisfactory. However, for office workers who perform their job at their workstation most of the time, a small space may create discomfort due to feelings of confinement. Some job functions that, for example, include frequent meetings in their office space or require the use of multiple sources of material for consultation, research, writing, etc. or require multiple pieces of equipment (e.g., multiple computer monitors) may be assigned more

work space.

**Cultural aspects** influence our perception of sufficient space. For North Americans including Canadians, as well as northern Europeans “adequate” personal space is an important factor. For people from other cultures often associated with dense population, much less space could be considered “adequate”. These differences can be a significant issue in a multi-cultural society such as Canada.

**A corporate climate.** Our perception of a designated personal space is a matter of comparison. Employees generally accept the fact that those at higher levels in management positions may have larger offices. However, regardless of how large an individual’s space actually is – if it is not as big as what our peers have – then, it is too small.

**Individual perception.** The amount of space available can have profound psychological meaning. It is natural for people to strive to occupy more space, for “more” space may signify importance, respect and more authority or power. In the workplace the amount of our personal space is often linked with our status within the organization.

**Anthropometry (body dimensions**). Actual office space requirements depend on the size and shape of employees simply because an office has to accommodate them, enable them to move safely and unhindered in the workspace, and allow them to complete their jobs.

**Are there guidelines on how much space a workstation should be?**

Office spaces should allow for easy movement, accommodating visitors where necessary, and storage. The table below provides some ranges:

**Table 1**

| **Application** | **Minimum Requirement Ranges*** | |
|---|---|---|
| **Two people can meet in an office with a table or desk between them – such as a supervisor and an employee** | **60-72″ x 90-126″** | **152-183 cm x 228-320 cm** |
| **A worker has a primary desk, and a secondary surface such as a credenza or a filing cabinet** | **60-72″ x 60-84″** | **152-183 cm x 152-213 cm** |
| **Executive office: 3-4 people can meet around a desk** | **105-130″ x 96-123″** | **267-330 cm x 244-313 cm** |
| **A basic workstation – such as call center** | **42-52″ x 60-72″** | **107-132 cm x 152-183 cm** |

Government of Manitoba’s “Office Space Planning Standards” document (2018) suggests

that staff workstations should be about 6.7 square metres or 72 square feet (approximately 244 x 274 cm, or 8 x 9 feet), and can be either open or surrounded by screens. Screens are appropriate when sound and visual privacy are needed when seated. Visual privacy is provided by 127cm (50 inch) high screens. This space will allow for some storage of materials in lockable cabinets as well. Larger, private offices may be provided to directors and above.* All sizes are from Panero, Julius and Zelnik, Martin. Human Dimension & Interior Space, New York : Whitney Library of Design, 1979. (Although this is an old reference, it is presented as an example of physical dimensions since dimensions are rarely included in more recent references.)

However, the allocation of the amount of working space for offices, and for workplaces in general, is complex and it is difficult to find standards that would apply to all kinds of work situations. This fact is why existing standards and guidelines similar to the ones mentioned here specify only the general requirements, if any.

The amount of space needed for any one individual should consider:

- reach – being able to place equipment and work materials according to importance and frequency of use
- working height – placed according to visual or task activities
- sequence of use – how items are used within the workspace
- movement within the area, including both the occupant and the chair, for example
- communication needs
- safety
- access for maintenance
- various tasks performed
- overall size of the work surface
- other furniture required, such as visitor’s chair or stool, filing cabinets, etc.
- other storage needs
- how the furniture will be arranged and put together
- need for privacy (e.g., verbal/auditory, visual, or if there is a need to discuss personnel issues)
- need to concentrate on work (e.g., focused work), etc.
- how often and how long a person will be at their desk (e.g., do they have other job functions that are done in the field, at clients, etc.)

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