



HEAD OFFICE
APARNA PIRAMAL RAJE

THE OPEN-OFFICE MAVERICK

Why Procter and Gamble's Shantanu Khosla believes that the whole office is his cabin and how it helps him foster a more collaborative spirit in his workplace

The private office of Shantanu Khosla is notable for its absence: It doesn't exist. The managing director of Procter and Gamble's (P&G's) Indian operations has no chamber, or even a corner wall, to himself. He sits at a 6x6ft workstation, surrounded by co-workers and a product showcase that currently displays diapers, in an entirely open-plan layout.

If he wants a change of scenery, he can choose the closest available armchair from those lining the office's full-length glass windows. If he wishes to conduct a meeting, he can book himself into one of the facility's many "huddle rooms"—none are especially reserved for him. If a colleague would like to speak with him, she can simply saunter up to his desk for a quick conversation. At lunchtime, he dines in the company cafeteria, where he is free to make himself a machine-brewed cup of coffee.

Egalitarian, informal and exposed, Khosla's workspace is undoubtedly the boldest attempt at flattening workplace hierarchies in an organization in India that I have personally experienced. Given P&G's respectable girth in India—350 people in its Mumbai headquarters, and revenue of just over \$800 million (₹3,648 crore) for the year ended June—it provokes further scrutiny.

A new work culture

Khosla attributes the radical design to a decade-old P&G's global policy, which initiated a company-wide migration to open offices. "What we did then is what you see a lot of people who talk about open offices now actually doing—which means that senior executives are not really in cabins but in open offices," he says. Over time, even senior managers at P&G were plucked out from their cabins. Khosla states that "now we're pretty much like this everywhere, including Cincinnati", the American Midwestern location of the mother ship.

"This" means a complete embargo on individual private offices, an increased square foot allocation towards public spaces, meeting rooms and employee amenities, a significant investment in supporting infrastructure and a transformed work culture, which eliminates any level-linked perks, such as reserved parking slots, separate dining spaces or different-sized workstations or seating.

Khosla emphasizes the need to connect a new workplace to a new work culture, explaining "you have to adjust behaviours to get the most out of it. You can't just say I'm going



to tear down the walls and it's going to be open. It all has to come together". Improved telecommunication systems, such as wireless networks, laptops and networked printers, are essential to unshackle employees from their cubicles. "Cultural interventions" are equally vital, he says, as "people have to want to work in teams, people have to feel comfortable; that's the way to get stuff done".

There appears to be little dispute on the benefits. Greater visibility demystifies senior management and results in faster decision making. "If you were to walk around our office, you couldn't tell who was vice-president, or who was a secretary," notes Khosla, as he pauses by a colleague's workstation for a brief exchange. Greater proximity between team members results in more collaboration, particularly between cross-functional teams. Khosla points to the organic, non-linear layout of the workstations, which explicitly encourages employees to manoeuvre and circulate among their team-based clusters, as they walk to and from their desks.

The open-plan office is one element in a progressive workplace policy, the other being a clearly articulated work-from-home policy, initiated in India in keeping with global diktat. Four years ago, the company allowed employees to work from home, up to two days a week, equipping them with a broadband connection and ergonomic furniture in their

residences. Almost one third of its workforce follows this practice regularly, Khosla tells me.

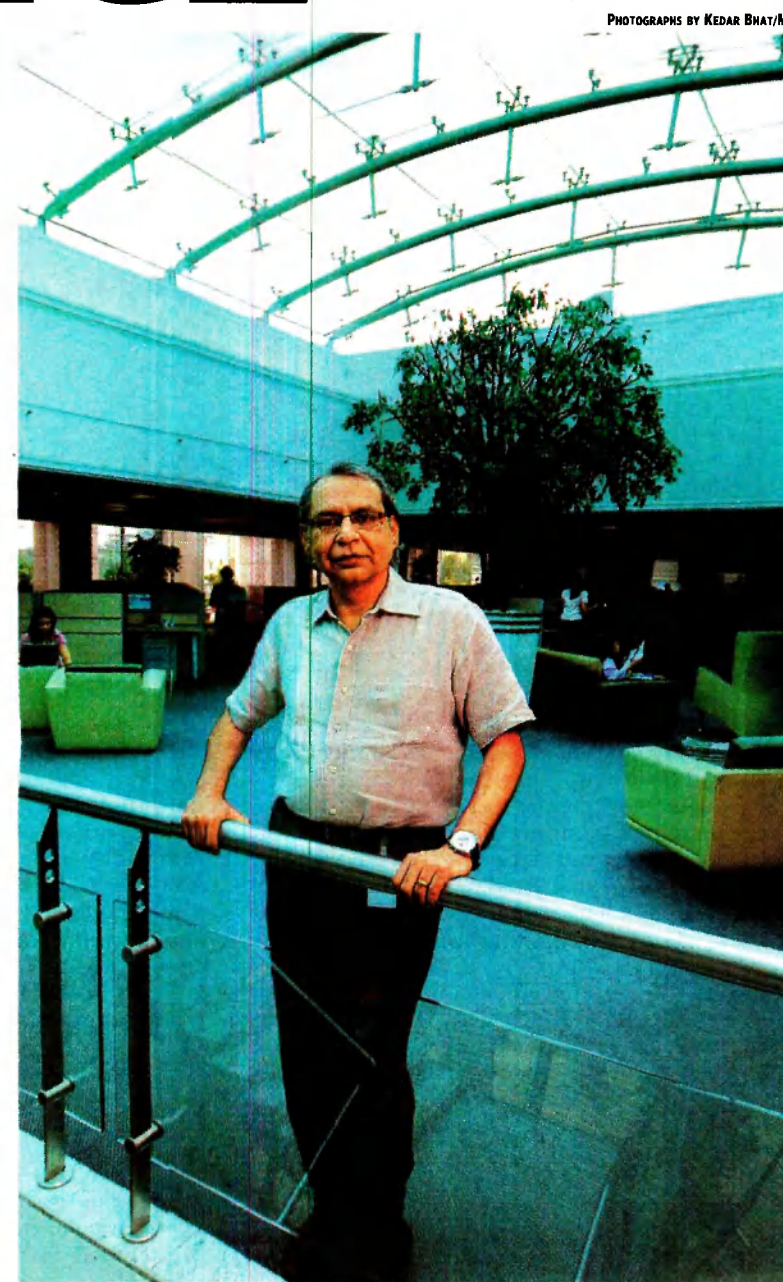
Maverick techie

Khosla's gadget-friendly disposition reinforces open-plan working; he clearly follows the "work is what you do, not where you are" philosophy. While he maintains a nine-to-six schedule in the office, he is "always working, 24x7. It normally takes me 30 seconds to reply to an email. I clear it as it comes". His desk is as uncluttered as his email inbox, with no signs of personal attachment to physical location.

We found him reading off an iPad on an armchair—"a wonderful device"—which he says he's been using for email for six months, and has almost replaced his laptop ("I haven't travelled with a laptop for a long time now"). Magazines and newspapers are read on both iPad and iPhone; his only hard-copy print subscription is a daily newspaper. Regular videoconferencing with overseas colleagues has substituted frequent travel. A P&G veteran, having worked in offices of various dimensions, in Newcastle, Kobe, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, he is adamant that he "doesn't miss his cabin at all".

Workplace innovation

The approach is not easily replicable. Our conversation confirms my belief that the most successful office fit-outs are those where top man-



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Space savers: (clockwise from above) Shantanu Khosla believes that open-plan offices lead to greater proximity between team members and result in more collaboration; not having a designated space allows Khosla to choose whichever corner he likes to catch up on his reading; and Khosla conducts his meeting anywhere on the premise, like this one in the cafeteria.

agement views them as opportunities for organizational behavioural change, and ensures that human resources policies, corporate culture and physical infrastructure are all equally aligned with the company's square-foot growth. Most of the time, though, a new or renovated office space is viewed merely as an operational, real estate project—the necessary outcome of headcount expansion or reduction.

P&G's innovation-led business philosophy, one of the consumer product behemoth's most enduring traits, also makes it a likely candidate for embracing alternative approaches to workplace design. The latest experiment in India is

"hotdesking", a practice where "teams have dedicated spaces, but the individual doesn't have a space", Khosla informs me. Team members will share desks, depending on travel and work-from-home schedules, for greater spatial efficiency. Perhaps, when I next visit, Khosla's dedicated workstation itself might have disappeared.

Aparna Piramal Raje, a director of BP Ergo, meets heads of organizations every month to investigate the connections between their workspaces and working styles.

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