

Desk Space Planning

These are the 10 most commonly asked questions about desk space planning for commercial office environments, with straightforward answers to help you make a confident, well-informed purchase decision.

Top 10 Questions — Desk Space Planning

1

How much space does each employee workstation need?

Space allocation depends on the workstation type: ultra-dense benching uses 50–65 sq ft per person (technically achievable but consistently degrades satisfaction), standard open-plan benching uses 100–125 sq ft, traditional cubicles use 150–200 sq ft, and private offices use 200–300 sq ft. The practical sweet spot for open-plan knowledge workers is 80–100 sq ft per person. When planning, always account for the workstation itself plus clearances — 42–48 inches behind the seated user, 36–44 inches for primary circulation aisles, and 24–36 inches for secondary passage. The net usable floor area per person is what determines both density and occupant satisfaction.

2

What clearances do I need around a desk for ADA compliance?

ADA accessible workstations require a work surface height of 28–34 inches, knee clearance of at least 27 inches high, 30 inches wide, and 19 inches deep under the desk, and a 30" × 48" clear floor space at the workstation for a forward approach. For passage aisles serving accessible workstations, maintain 36 inches of clear width minimum (44 inches preferred). A 60-inch turning radius must be available within the accessible work area. Height-adjustable desks with a range of 22–34 inches automatically satisfy the surface height requirement. Fixed-height desks at the standard 30-inch height may not accommodate wheelchair users comfortably — verify actual knee clearance before placement.

3**How do I plan the layout of a multi-person office?**

Start with the room's total usable square footage and subtract the fixed elements (columns, mechanical rooms, restrooms, permanent walls). Divide the remaining area by the target square footage per person to get the maximum headcount the space can support. Lay out primary circulation aisles first (44-inch minimum width) to establish the skeleton of the plan, then place workstation clusters or desk rows within the resulting zones. Confirm door clearances (36–42 inches of swing clearance), window access, natural light distribution, and egress paths to exits. Use a scale floor plan rather than estimating by eye — furniture that appears to fit in a visual assessment frequently fails to provide adequate clearance when measured.

4**How much clearance do I need behind a desk for chair pushback?**

The minimum clearance behind a seated user (from the back of the chair to the nearest wall or obstruction) is 36 inches for a standard straight desk or L-shaped desk, with 42–48 inches recommended for comfortable daily use. Bow-front desks require 48 inches minimum because the curved front naturally positions the user slightly further from the desk edge. If a visitor chair is placed in front of the desk in a private office, add 36–42 inches from the visitor chair's back to the front of the desk. U-shaped workstations require separate clearance on both the front opening and the sides for the user to move freely between surfaces.

5**What is the correct desk height and what if it does not fit the user?**

Standard desk height is 28.5–30 inches, established for the widest range of seated adult users. The 30-inch standard was set for typewriter use and is slightly tall for modern keyboard work — 28.5–29 inches suits most users between 5'4" and 6'0". Users shorter than 5'4" may find even 28.5 inches too high, creating elevated shoulder posture and wrist strain; a footrest and keyboard tray can compensate. Users taller than 6'1" often benefit from adjustable-height desks with ranges extending to 32–34 inches. The cleanest solution for a diverse-height workforce is height-adjustable desks with a range of 22–48 inches, which accommodate virtually all users and satisfy ADA requirements automatically.

6**How wide should aisles be in an open-plan office?**

Primary circulation aisles — the main paths people use to move through the office — require 44 inches minimum width under ADA standards, with 60–72 inches recommended for comfortable two-way foot traffic. Secondary aisles between workstation rows need 36 inches minimum for egress safety and 48–54 inches for daily comfort. Back-to-back zones where two rows of users sit facing away from each other need 60 inches of combined clearance. All aisles leading to emergency exits must remain clear of obstructions and meet local fire code clearance requirements. Document and verify all aisle widths on a scaled floor plan before furniture is ordered.

7**How do I fit more workstations into a limited space without sacrificing function?**

The most effective strategies for increasing density without destroying function are: switch from individual-leg desks to benching (benching achieves 50–130 sq ft per person vs. 150+ for standard desks); use sit-stand desks that eliminate the need for a separate break room or lounge by encouraging movement at the workstation; deploy monitor arms to reclaim 6–10 inches of desk depth on every station; and add overhead storage to remove items from desk surfaces rather than increasing surface area. Keep aisle widths at minimum viable dimensions (44 inches primary, 36 inches secondary) rather than generous widths. Do not exceed 80 sq ft per person minimum if you want occupant satisfaction scores to remain acceptable.

8**How should I position desks relative to windows and lighting?**

Position desks so computer monitors are perpendicular to windows (at a 90-degree angle), not facing toward or directly away from them. A monitor facing a window creates extreme glare. A monitor with its back to a window casts the user's shadow on the screen. Perpendicular placement allows natural light to illuminate the work surface without direct glare on the screen. If perpendicular placement is not possible, specify window shades or blinds to control glare during peak sun hours. Supplement natural light with 500–750 lux of task lighting at the desk surface — ambient overhead lighting alone is rarely sufficient for all-day screen work.

9**What is the minimum private office size for a standard desk?**

A private office for a 60-inch straight desk requires approximately 8' × 8' as an absolute minimum — this provides 42 inches behind the chair, 24 inches of side clearance, and enough space for a visitor chair at the front of the desk with the door opening without hitting any furniture. The recommended minimum for a private office with a 60-inch desk plus two guest chairs is 10' × 10'. For an L-shaped desk suite (main wing plus return), plan 10' × 10' as the working minimum with 12' × 12' recommended for comfortable guest seating and free movement. Always draw the furniture to scale on a floor plan before committing to office assignments.

10**How do I plan storage as part of desk space planning?**

Storage planning should happen in parallel with workstation layout, not as an afterthought. The rule of thumb is: every workstation needs at least one file drawer plus one supply drawer in immediate reach, and one vertical storage unit (bookcase or storage cabinet) for overflow within 20 feet. For open-plan and benching environments without built-in pedestals, a dedicated locker per employee plus shared file cabinets in team zones are the substitute. Eliminate the assumption that employees will manage their own storage — insufficient storage migrates to desk surfaces, aisles, and windowsills. Plan linear feet of filing and shelving needed per employee, then allocate storage accordingly in the floor plan.

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