

# Open Offices Can Lead to Closed Minds

*Some workplace designs are more about cost-cutting than collaboration*



“LONELINESS is a crowded room,” as Bryan Ferry of the band Roxy Music once warbled, adding that everyone was “all together, all alone”. The open-plan office might have been designed to make his point. That is not the rationale for the layout, of course. The supposed aim of open-plan offices is to ensure that workers will have more contact with their colleagues, and that the resulting collaboration will lead to greater productivity.

Ethan Bernstein and Stephen Turban, two Harvard Business School academics, set out to test this proposition\*. The authors surveyed interactions between colleagues in two unnamed multinational companies which had switched to open-plan offices. They did so by recruiting workers to wear “sociometric” badges. These used infra-red sensors to detect when people were interacting, microphones to determine when they were speaking or listening to each other, another device to monitor their body movement and posture and a Bluetooth sensor to capture their location.

At the first company, the authors found that face-to-face interactions were more than three times higher in the old, cubicle-based office than in an open-plan space where employees have clear lines of sight to each other. In contrast, the number of e-mails people sent to each other increased by 56% when they switched to open-plan. In the second company, face-to-face interactions decreased by two-thirds after the switch to open-plan, whereas e-mail traffic increased by between 22% and 50%.

Why did this shift occur? The authors suggest that employees value their privacy and find new ways to preserve it in an open-plan office. They shut themselves off by wearing large headphones to keep out the distractions caused by nearby colleagues. Indeed, those who champion open-plan offices seem to have forgotten the importance of being able to concentrate on your work.

Employees also find other ways of communicating with their fellow workers. Rather than have a chat in front of a large audience, employees simply send an e-mail; the result (as measured at one of the two companies surveyed) was that productivity declined.

Cubicles do not offer a great work environment either; they are still noisy and cut off employees from natural light. But at least workers have more of a chance to give their work area a personal touch. Allowing plenty of room for pictures of children, office plants, novelty coffee mugs—these are ways of making people feel more relaxed and happy in their jobs.

Such comforts are completely denied when companies shift to “hot-desking”, as 45% of multinationals plan by 2020, according to CBRE, a property firm, up from 30% of such companies now. Workers roam the building in search of a desk, like commuters hunting the last rush-hour seat or tourists looking for a poolside lounge. If you planned to spend a morning quietly reading a research paper or a management tome, tough luck; the last desk was nabbed by Jenkins in accounts.

Hot-desking is a clear message to low-level office workers that they are seen as disposable cogs in a machine. Combine this with the lack of privacy and the office becomes a depressing place to work. Workers could stay at home but that negates the intended benefits of collaboration that open-plan offices bring.

The drive for such offices is reminiscent of the British enthusiasm for residential tower blocks after the second world war. One British wartime survey found that 49% wanted to live in a small house with a garden; only 5% wanted a flat. But flats they got. Architects, who fancied themselves as visionaries like Howard Roark, the “hero” of Ayn Rand’s “The Fountainhead”, competed to create concrete temples for the masses to occupy. As David Kynaston, in his book “Austerity Britain” recounts, the desires of the actual residents were dismissed.

The real reason post-war architects built flats rather than homes is that it was a lot cheaper. And the same reason, not the supposed benefits of mingling with colleagues, is why open-plan offices are all the rage. More workers can be crammed into any given space.

Some people like them, of course, just as some like living in tower blocks. The only option for everyone else is to kick up a stink until executives change their minds and provide some personal space. In other words: workers of the world, unite. So you can separate again.

\* “The impact of the ‘open’ workspace on human collaboration”, Philosophical Transactions, The Royal Society

***Correction (August 8th 2018): This article has been changed to reflect that face-to-face interaction decreased by two-thirds, not one-third, in the second company.***

This article appeared in the Business section of the print edition under the headline "Open office, closed minds"