



Ways of working

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Reconsidering open-plan design – new thinking on productive space

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Open-plan offices have become the norm for many companies wishing to optimize their space, encourage collaboration between staff and breaking down traditional hierarchies.

However, recent research challenges the idea that open-plan working is a surefire route to productivity. Far from an antidote to the inefficiency of closed-off offices, open-plan working can mean staff are beleaguered with distractions and stifled by lack of personal space.

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Gensler's *2016 Workplace Survey* found that 67 per cent of the UK workforce feel drained at the end of each working day due to their office environment. In addition, badly designed offices are suppressing innovation in businesses: although over eight million UK employees work in open-plan environments, many of these do not offer variety or choice, nor are they tailored to specific tasks and practices.

"Enclosed office space is not the enemy," says Philip Tidd at Gensler. "Moving to a simplistic open-plan may not be the most effective option in today's hyper-connected workplace."

Distraction and dissatisfaction

Dr. Nicola J. Millard, who combines psychology and futurology to make insights into ways of working at BT, also believes traditional open-plan offices to be inefficient. In her white paper *Workshift: The Death of Dolly, Dilbert and Doctor No*, Millard argues that we are disturbed constantly in the office – every three minutes to be precise – and much of that is due to office design.

"Open-plan offices are a one-size-fits-all model which actually fits nobody," Millard explained at a recent New Scientist Live conference. "We're interrupted every three minutes. It takes us between eight and 20 minutes to get back into that thought process. Email. We get too much. Meetings, colleagues. It's all distracting."

A 2013 study from University of Sydney researchers, *Workspace satisfaction: The privacy-communication trade-off in open-plan offices*, published in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, states that uncontrollable noise and loss of privacy are the main sources of workplace dissatisfaction in open-plan offices.

"Open-plan office layouts have been touted as a way to boost workplace satisfaction and team effectiveness in recent years," said author Jungsoo Kim. "We found people in open-plan offices were less satisfied with their workplace environment than those in private offices. The benefits of being close to co-workers in open-plan offices were offset by factors such as increased noise and less privacy."

Traditional offices don't work anymore...



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Productivity down, absenteeism up

Furthermore, a BBC report from January 2017 found that employees in open-plan offices were 15 per cent less productive than those working in cubicles and twice as likely to get sick, since diseases are more easily transmitted by workers in an open-plan office. This can lead to higher rates of absenteeism.

Speaking with the BBC, Sally Augustin, an environmental and design psychologist at Design with Science in Illinois, said although we can work in busy spaces, our best work is done when we have total focus: "It's a shame to waste people by not giving them a place that supports what they actually do."

The benefits

That's not to say open-plan working is without its benefits. Such offices can deliver cost savings – as much as 50 per cent less per employee than more traditional office layouts according to the *Wall Street Journal* – and a reduced carbon footprint. And there are more opportunities to socialize, work in teams or get help from colleagues.

Employers can more easily reconfigure an open-plan space, compared with distinct smaller offices, even potentially sub-letting space to another business.

Rather than doing away with the traditional office, evidence shows that employers need to focus on offering flexible working environments, tailored to different tasks, ways of working and employee preferences. Gensler says that effective workplaces must support the needs of individuals and teams, with a balanced environment of spaces for concentration and collaboration. "You need to do what is right

noticeable impact on the productivity, creativity and innovation of employees."

Space to think

Companies such as Microsoft are investing in a mix of open and private areas, with separate quiet spaces or soundproofed focus rooms available for concentration or phone calls when needed. "The world has put all the focus on collaboration with people thrown in a big room together, but you have to be more thoughtful than that," says Martha Clarkson, Microsoft's global workplace strategist. "When you put people in a communal environment, it won't work if you don't provide privacy. They need alternative spaces for thinking time, whether it's focus rooms, lounges, patios or outside walking areas."

Dr. Millard also believes in the need for a balance between "we" and "me" and a greater variety of options for how people can work. She refers to a growing trend of something between the home and the office, nicknamed the "coffice" – spaces offering pleasant working environments as well as company and connectivity, from informal coffee shops and hotel foyers to more formal work hubs with all the amenities of an office. "I think we will start to embrace 'the coffice'," she says. "I need good coffee, connectivity, cake, my Wi-Fi wings to fly me into the cloud. I like company. The 'coffice' could be a coffee shop or a hotel lobby."

In lieu of an alternative to the open-plan concept your business has embraced, you can also find innovative ways to avoid distraction or navigate the open working environment. Aid your concentration levels by avoiding long periods sitting still at your desk: take a brisk walk or do a lunchtime class, or find a more private spot in the office. As a last resort, invest in some strong coffee or even prominent noise-cancelling headphones, if only to send a strong signal to colleagues that you need more than three minutes without interruption to get your work done.

