

MEDIA COVERAGE

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■ Open and shut case: open plan v confidentiality

On the face of it, the case for working in open plan offices is pretty clear cut. Not only is it more conducive to communication and less bound by ideas of status, but also the economic case is seemingly open and shut, according to Ann Clarke.

Open plan work stations not only take up around half the space of cellular offices, but the costs of fitting out a cellular office are around 25% higher than an equivalent open plan space.

Despite these facts there has always been a tug back towards the cellular office ever since the principles of the modern office were developed in the early part of the 20th century. The attraction of four walls and a door may predominantly be bound up with the matter of status, but there are other reasons why people may want to lock themselves away that are nothing to do with their place in the hierarchy.

Productivity

The first is to do with productivity. A recent survey by office equipment manufacturer Brother found that employees lose up to two hours a day because of distractions caused by colleagues, phones, e-mail and the general white noise of office life. By contrast people working in total isolation at home, were as much as 56% more productive.

As far as offices are concerned, hell is definitely "other people"...

A more scientific study of 13,000 employees carried out in the US by John Olson of DOSTI Associates found that the single most important factor in determining productivity was "the ability to do distraction-free solo work". As far as offices are concerned, hell is definitely "other people": generating acoustic, visual and even olfactory distractions.

Mobile phone ring tones regularly top surveys of the most annoying things in offices, followed by smelly food, body odour, irrelevant conversation and equipment noise.

Research in this area shows that the most stress, annoyance and distraction is caused by things that are either trivial or over which people have no control. For example, in a 1966 study, the Scandinavian researchers Anders Kjellberg and Bertil Nordstrom found that sudden noise was far more distracting than constant background noise. They also found that the noise of printers and shredders is only really annoying for the people not using the equipment. The same researchers also recount research that shows that colleagues' conversation is more of a problem when it is unintelligible or irrelevant.

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Such distractions can prove very costly. According to the Brother survey, two-thirds of workers complained they suffered up to 20 interruptions a day and just 1% of office workers ever managed to get through a day without being interrupted, compared with around 10% of homeworkers.

Spatial requirements

Within the office itself spatial requirements have changed, thanks to the introduction of the flat screen visual display unit which has reduced individual work station footprints by up to 20%, allowing firms to fit more people into the same space. This is one reason why one of the most common sights in the modern workplace is the bench work station: a long row of work surfaces serviced by a central service spine into which people can plug their laptops and phones. As a result of such developments, the typical space

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allocated to an individual in a building has shrunk dramatically in the last few years, while the provision of public and meeting space has increased.

It should be noted that, under the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992, no office or workroom should be so overcrowded as to pose a health risk to the persons employed or working in such rooms. The accompanying Approved Code of Practice recommends that each employee should have a minimum 3.7m (43ft) of floor space and 11m (400ft) of air space.

But, just because getting more people into a building is achievable, is it the right thing to do?

The "father" of proxemics (the study of personal space), Edward T Hall, claimed that people typically have up to four zones of comfort. These are dependent on the level of intimacy with the other person, and are classified as "intimate", "personal", "social" and "public". Get these wrong and you add to the stress people feel about being around their fellow humans.

The problems of open plan offices can become exacerbated when the need for confidentiality is considered.

The problems of open plan offices can become exacerbated when the need for confidentiality is considered. This varies between sectors of industry, but is especially true of law firms. They are a special case in some ways but they highlight the core points about this particular debate.

On the one hand, changes in their own industry and in particular in the ways law firms generate fee income, coupled with a greater awareness of the business arguments in favour of open plan, have led many lawyers to emerge from their oak-panelled corridors and embrace new ways of working, sometimes with stunning results. The modern law

firm's office is typical of many in the service industry: light, airy, open and even vibrant.

More flexible workspace

On the other hand, the work that many practices undertake frequently demands both privacy and confidentiality. The cellular office is still therefore a universal feature for law firms, as are project rooms, knowledge centres and breakout spaces — anywhere that people can get away from the hubbub of the open plan and be able to deal with sensitive information confidentially and without distraction. It is this model of the workplace based around function-related zones that provides us with the ideal blueprint of the modern office generally.

The idea is not new and dates back to the time of the combi-office, a mixture of cellular and open plan that was a common feature of European offices long before laptops came along. The key difference nowadays is that while the combi-office was frequently specified as part of a hierarchical vision of work — with cellular offices going with status as part of a relatively rigid layout — modern organisations prefer their displays of status to be a bit less obvious. They certainly need their offices to be far more flexible. So the provision of zones for private and interactive work is, typically, far more dependent on function and need than on status. Because of this close link with functionality, this relatively complex model of the workplace is invariably reliant on a thorough understanding of the organisation's needs, as well as those of the people who work for it.

This understanding starts from the basic premise that, while there may be a good economic argument for the open plan office, and an admission that some privacy must be sacrificed in the interests of communications, there is a tug back in the other direction that has its own logic and its own business case. The challenge is to get the balance right.

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