[Open Office = Great Modern Innovation?](#)

Options for flexible workspace walls balance privacy and collaboration

 Mark Zuckerberg is spending a lot of money designing the largest open office work environment in the world This open office is described by Zuckerberg as "one giant room that fits thousands of people, all close enough to collaborate together". He plans to house 2,800 – 3,400 engineers in the new space. In Canada as around the world, open office spaces are in vogue. Modern spaces set in converted industrial locations (or built to look like it) are also in vogue. You know the type of place, exposed pipes and high ceilings and plenty of whiteboards where everyone can see everyone else, even the boss.

According to a 2010 survey from the International Management Facility Association, 70% of American employees work in open-plan offices. Data released from CoreNet Global in 2012 predicts that within 5 years, the average workspace per worker in North America will drop to 100 square feet or below. According to Richard Kadzis, CoreNet Global's Vice President of Strategic Communications, "The main reason for the decline is the huge increase in collaborative and team-oriented space inside a growing number of companies that are stressing 'smaller but smarter' workplaces against the backdrop of continuing economic uncertainty and cost containment". More companies are creating workspaces where their employees do not have permanently designated private space; portable office spaces where you need an outlet, Wi Fi and the ability to sit somewhere with your laptop. The number of crowdspaced workspaces and co-work spaces (where workers from more than one company share space) is increasing. But is this trend really in the best interest of individual productivity and satisfaction?

What Are The Costs Of An Open Floor Plan?

While there may be practical cost savings for workspaces without walls and private offices, requiring less square footage and fewer resource and furniture, the benefits may not always outweigh the costs. Open workspaces may encourage more collaboration and innovation, but what does the research tell us about the impact of open offices on your employees?

Reduced Motivation, Decreased Job Satisfaction and More Sick Days

According to a research meta-analysis from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, open spaces create reduced motivation, decreased job satisfaction, and lower perceived privacy. Researchers in Scandinavia found that those in open office setups reported 62% more sick days. This was not only a result of spreading more germs but also stress and the lack of privacy. Researchers at the University of Calgary found that when workers were moved from private spaces to open office settings not only did they report more stress and less satisfaction but over time they also experienced more breakdowns in team relationships.

This does not sound like a prescription for ongoing success, yet the trend towards open spaced office space continues to grow.

Finding The Middle Ground

If open office space does lead to innovation, but at the cost of burned out employees, is this a sustainable strategy?

Balance is key. Designing workspaces that combine the benefits of open office spaces with opportunities for having permanent private space is the optimal balance. People usually do better when provided both the opportunity to be part of the crowd, including spontaneously, and an opportunity for concentrated focus, alone, or with a small number of collaborators. Here are a couple of options to consider in finding this balance

1. Design private public spaces. Bring in movable walls or dividers and allow workers to create private spaces where needed. Create shared spaces that have boundaries created by furniture, corners, white boards, and objects.

2. Create open office space for half or three quarters of your workplace but maintain private offices that are assigned for specific hours per day. For example, assign workers to the

3. private spaces 1/3 of the day each day rotationally.

4. Find 'co-work space' with another company whereby you share open and collaborative spaces, but still maintain some private and reserved work spaces.

5. Enable employees to create personal space. Assign lockers or team rooms where employees can have a sense of privacy and a place to put their personal items.

6. You really may not need a desk and a chair for every employee. Community desks and equipment, sofas and comfy stools around open office workspaces can provide useful opportunity for collective conversations. For the sake of your workers, ensure private spaces are available.

Sources

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