



SPACE MATTERS



OPEN VS. CLOSED: IT'S NOT AN OPEN-AND-SHUT CASE

Optimizing office space is a goal for any forward-thinking company; however, there is little consensus on exactly what is the best way to go about it. These days, few topics elicit as much passion as the open office versus private workspace debate. *Fast Company's* article "Offices for all! Why open-office layouts are bad for employees, bosses, and productivity" was among the publication's top ten most-read in 2013. A January 2014 *New Yorker* piece ("The open-office trap") elicited hundreds of strikingly in-depth reader comments. In general, few people appear to take the middle ground in this debate. One is either a staunch supporter of the benefits of open space or a defender of personal space and privacy as fundamental to both quality and quantity of work. And there is little middle ground.

GOOD DESIGN MAKES A DIFFERENCE

What is clearly not in question is the importance of a well-designed space to the success of a business. More and more companies are leveraging their space design as a business tool. According to a 2014 study by Kahler Slater (an interdisciplinary design enterprise), a vast majority of companies that achieve “Best Places to Work” status recognize that a well-designed work environment not only constitutes a competitive advantage but aids in the attraction and retention of employees.

Since their inception, successful companies like Morningstar and Zappos have used space design as an important communication of their brand, culture and values. Other companies, such as Sage Products, use design to intentionally foster interaction between business management and manufacturing. eBay views space design as a way to deepen the connection between its

employees and customers.

So how might one define a “well-designed” workplace? Kahler Slater suggests in its 2013 whitepaper, “What makes a great workplace?,” that a well-designed workplace is simply a place “where an employee’s ability to act is (positively) impacted by the design of the physical environment.” But here’s the catch: given its heavy dependence on a company’s business objectives and its culture, “well-designed” is a largely subjective concept. “Well-designed” for one company might translate into a huge liability for another.

Clearly, the ongoing debate between diehard supporters of private offices and the contemporary visionaries who maintain the importance of open space layouts to creativity and innovation is only fueling the fire.

WHAT MAKES
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THE DEBATE



WHAT WORKS
FINE FOR
ONE COMPANY

Some who have weighed in have suggested that the line of demarcation between those who prefer a private office and those who are comfortable in an open-office space is based on age – that is, if you're over 40, you want your own private space. Whereas, if you're a multitasking millennial, you may be quite happy sitting eye-to-eye with your colleagues. Others maintain that the difference in office space preference is a direct reflection of one's degree of introversion or extroversion. Truth is, one's preference is more likely a reflection of one's work style and job requirements as they relate to a specific company's mission and culture.



MAY BE A
SOURCE OF
WHINES IN
ANOTHER

IN SUPPORT OF THE OPEN OFFICE

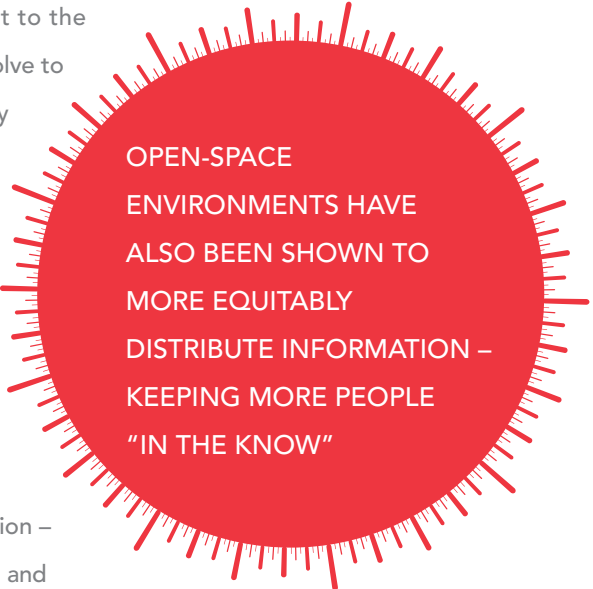


As the business world has evolved from an assembly line-dominated environment to the time-sensitive age of the knowledge worker, the space in which we work must also evolve to better support the real-time production, nurturing and sharing of ideas. Creativity and innovation, the lifeblood of modern business, require a higher degree of quality interaction than individual offices and designated meeting times might provide.

Open-space work environments remove much of the perceived hierarchy and barriers that keep good ideas within the domain of only the senior-most employees. Absent the trappings of rank, open-space work environments hold potential to instill a deeper sense of community among workers, and as Anjali Mullany, an editor for *Fast Company*, observes,



allow for fluid, running dialogue among collaborators that for her is far less disruptive than email and instant messaging. Open-space environments have also been shown to more equitably distribute information – keeping more people “in the know” and therefore facilitating the speed of decision-making and the avoidance of unnecessary duplication of effort.



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IN SUPPORT OF CLOSED OFFICES



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A myriad of studies conducted over the past few decades suggest a relatively high correlation between employee satisfaction and feelings of control over their work environment. Supporters of individual offices maintain that the privacy afforded someone with a personal, albeit small, workspace contributes to an employee's sense of comfort and control. Closed spaces or personal offices have been observed to enhance concentration and possibly productivity by minimizing the distractions (noise, movement) that may naturally occur in open-space environments.



OPEN

While there can be significant savings in the successful implementation of a well-designed open-space work environment, unless the space is specifically designed to fit your company's business, mission and culture, the savings can be offset by declines in employee satisfaction, increased absenteeism and even diminished overall productivity. On the flipside, your business may thrive on dynamic interdepartmental collaboration.

If that is not the case, maintaining individual offices could seriously inhibit your ability to competitively get the best ideas to market.

CLOSED?

WHAT'S THE RIGHT ANSWER? IT DEPENDS



SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN DESIGNING YOUR WORK ENVIRONMENT

The key to optimizing your work environment is to ensure it is a fit with your company – your business, vision, mission and even employees.



Balance Individual and Team Productivity

Plan for a balance of open, private and flexible space. Although the benefits of collaboration are unquestionable, people also need the time and space to concentrate. They also need a degree of privacy that can be easily accommodated in a thoughtful and sensitive workplace design.



Build Flexibility into Your Plan

When creating workspace options, carefully consider the work styles and desired output for the various employee groups within your company. Including enclosed, semi-open and open spaces to

support different functions and activities empowers your employees to select the environment best suited to deliver their highest quality performance.



Address Your Processes Alongside Your Space

Even a workspace “well-designed” to specifically fit your business needs can fail to deliver the desired results if your culture doesn’t include a few rules of the road as they relate to workflow, deadlines, meetings and personal versus communal space.

IF YOU ARE WISE ENOUGH TO USE OFFICE DESIGN AS A BUSINESS TOOL, THEN CONSIDER RENTAL AS A WAY TO OPTIMIZE THAT TOOL.

WHAT'S THE RIGHT ANSWER? IT DEPENDS (CONT.)



Hire for "Fit" as Well as Experience and Expertise

If you and your team believe that the energy that comes from collaboration is at the heart of your success, then be sure to recruit for people who share your passion for the sense of community that can come from an open-space environment. If you're a collection of rather independent partners, make sure you bring on people who don't feel isolated or abandoned in a closed office space. Studies suggest "fit" is as important as the space itself.



Consider Your Options Before You Commit

While the ultimate objective might be cost savings, reinventing your work space can require an investment in time, resources and money. In order to better manage that investment as well as minimize any risk of "getting it wrong" or changes that might occur in the future (e.g., temporary contraction in your workforce), consider renting rather than buying your furniture. If you are wise enough to use office design as a business tool, then consider rental as a way to optimize that tool.

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