

Turns Out Open-Office Plans, Once Hailed as Facilitators of Face Time, Might Actually Stifle Communication

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It seems people don't actually like working totally out in the open.
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It's been clear for a while now that the spread of the open-office plan to almost three-quarters of American offices hasn't worked out so well. They're almost universally detested for their lack of privacy, for their unique ability to amplify both auditory and visual distractions, and for the officewide plagues fostered by their lack of barriers. Still, in every single article or study on the decreased productivity employees suffer from in open offices, there's a single bright spot, the selling point of the entire scheme: Open-floor plans theoretically allow for more face-to-face interactions and are supposed to be catalysts of collaborative creativity. However, a new study from two Harvard researchers suggests that they might not even do that.

Published in Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B, the study tracked the face-to-face interactions of employees from two different multinational Fortune 500 companies as they transitioned away from workspaces with walls. Tricked-out badges containing a microphone, an infrared sensor, a Bluetooth transmitter, and an accelerometer captured whom employees were speaking to, where they were standing in the office, whether they were listening or talking (but not what they said), and if they were moving. Harvard researchers Ethan S. Bernstein and Stephen Turban also analyzed email and instant-messaging data from both of the offices and found that a change from a traditional layout to an open-floor plan fundamentally changed the quality of communication—and not necessarily in the direction executives have been hoping for.

In fact, open offices reduced face-to-face interaction by a shocking 70 percent with electronic communication picking up only some of the slack. (Digital correspondence increased between 20 to 50 percent.) "Many organizations, like our two field sites, transform their office architectures into open spaces with the intention of creating more [face-to-face] interaction and thus a more vibrant work environment," write Bernstein and Turban.

What they often get—as captured by a steady stream of news articles professing the death of the open office—is an open expanse of proximal employees choosing to isolate themselves as best they can (e.g. by wearing large headphones) while appearing to be as busy as possible (since everyone can see them) ... Rather than have a [face-to-face] interaction in front of a large audience of peers, an employee might look around, see that a particular person is at his or her desk, and send an email.

They also found that shifts to open offices could reduce productivity by lowering the overall quality of communication, since email interaction serves as a poor proxy for face-to-face discussion. “Adopting open offices, therefore, appears to have the perverse outcome of reducing rather than increasing productive interaction,” the researchers write. It ultimately makes sense that when your co-workers can see and hear your every move, and you theirs, that you might prefer to send a Slack rather than pitch your half-baked idea out loud. Rather than creating vibrant, collaborative spaces, open offices tend to foster quiet spaces occasionally disrupted by a cough or stifled chuckle followed by a guilty glance. Unfortunately, open offices are likely here to stay—even if they’re not boosting productivity, they’re certainly still boosting rent savings.