The Slow Death of Open Offices

First, you tear down the walls and dispense with the soulless cubicles. Then you put everyone at long tables, shoulder to shoulder, so that they can talk more easily. Ditch any remaining private offices, which only enforce the idea that some people are better than others, and seat your most senior employees in the mix. People will collaborate. Ideas will spark. Outsiders will look at your office and think, This place has energy. Your staff will be more productive. Your company will create products unlike any the world has ever seen.

That is the myth of the open office, a workplace layout so pervasive that its presence is taken for granted, and its promises–of collaboration and innovation–are sacrosanct. According to a 2010 study by the International Facility Management Association, 68% of people worked in an office with either no walls or low walls–and the number has undoubtedly grown.

There's just one problem. Employees hate open offices. They're distracting. They're loud. There's often little privacy. "The sensory overload that comes with open-office plans gets to a point where I can barely function," says one 47-year-old graphic designer who has spent more than two decades working in open environments. "I even had to quit a job once because of it."

For as long as these floor plans have been in vogue, studies have debunked their benefits. Researchers have shown that people in open offices take nearly two-thirds more sick leave and report greater unhappiness, more stress, and less productivity than those with more privacy. A 2018 study by Harvard Business School found that open offices reduce face-to-face interaction by about 70% and increase email and messaging by roughly 50%, shattering the notion that they make workers collaborative. And yet, the open plan persists–too symbolically powerful (and cheap) for many companies to abandon.

As with so many things today, we have Google, at least in part, to thank. Open floors have existed since the secretarial pools of the 1940s, but when the then seven-year-old Google renovated its headquarters in Mountain View, California, in 2005, the lofty, light-filled result was more than a showcase for the company's growing wealth and influence; it signaled the dawn of a new professional era. Architect Clive Wilkinson eschewed the cubicle-heavy interiors of the company's previous office for something that resembled a neighborhood: There were still some private spaces, but also lots of communal workplaces and small, glassed-in meeting rooms. "The attitude was: We're inventing a new world, why do we need the old world?" Wilkinson says. With Google's rise, his vision for a collaborative workplace took off. "We had [companies] come to us and say, 'We want to be like Google.' They were less sure about their own identity, but they were sure they wanted to be like Google."

Around the same time, a more radical version of the open office was emerging from other startups founded during the dotcom boom of the late '90s. As these companies proliferated, they looked for cheap ways to differentiate themselves from each other and their predecessors. They found inspiration, Wilkinson says, in the more playful offices that had long been common in the advertising industry. Some moved into the unfinished lofts of San Francisco's South of Market district–and left them that way. Walls only make things complicated when you're rapidly adding (and eliminating) staff. "Those places were terrible," says Joel Spolsky, who cofounded Fog Creek Software in 2000 and is currently the cofounder and CEO of Stack Overflow. "They were so loud, because there were no drop ceilings. It was painful for everybody. But [dotcom startups] were doing it because they had literally no choice." Out of necessity, an aesthetic was born.

By the time Facebook opened its Frank Gehry-designed Menlo Park headquarters in 2015, the open office had become not just the face of innovation in Silicon Valley but a powerful metaphor. Facebook now houses roughly 2,800 employees in a 10-acre building that the company claims is the largest open floor plan in the world. "The idea is to make the perfect engineering space: one giant room that fits thousands of people, all close enough to collaborate together," founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg wrote when he announced the design in 2012. Famously, he has a plain white desk in the communal area, just like everyone else. (He also has a private "conference" room, where he is rumored to spend much of his time.)

The whiff of disruption that open offices carried became irresistible to startups and established companies alike. "When you talk to leaders in corporate real estate or CEOs about why they designed their space [in an open plan], most will give some fluffy answer," says Ben Waber, cofounder and CEO of workplace analytics company Humanyze, which uses sensors to track how people use offices and interact with each other. "But when you dig down, it's because this is what the workplaces look like at a couple of highly successful tech companies." Calvin Newport, a computer science professor at Georgetown University who studies how people work, takes an even more skeptical view: Open offices have become a way to indicate a company's value to venture capitalists and talent. The goal is "not to improve productivity and collaboration, but to signal that the company [is] doing something interesting."

Lost amid the symbolism are the employees themselves. According to Humanyze, open plans are great at encouraging interaction between teams, which is useful when a company is trying to create new products. But they are terrible at encouraging interaction within teams, which is necessary for execution-based work, like writing code, when employees need to be in sync. An open office might be suitable for a company coming up with new ideas, but when someone has to implement them, it becomes distracting.

Of course, one of the main reasons that business leaders default to open plans is simply that they're inexpensive. According to commercial real estate association CoreNet Global, the average space allotted to individual employees globally fell from 225 square feet in 2010 to 176 square feet in 2013, and is projected to keep decreasing. This adds up to hundreds of millions of dollars–or more–in savings per year

at the country's largest companies, according to calculations from Erik Rood, an analyst in Google's human resources department who examines corporate financials on his personal blog, Data Interview Qs.

Perhaps no company has exploited these efficiencies more than WeWork, which popularized communal tables and lounge areas in its coworking hubs and now builds out offices for other companies. WeWork distinguishes itself by using its data to compress people into smaller areas–it recently took Expedia's Chicago office from three floors to two–without, it says, sacrificing employee satisfaction. Liz Burow, WeWork's director of workplace strategy, says that this entails bringing people closer so they interact more, while also creating a variety of seating arrangements and, yes, even some private areas. "People have different needs throughout their day and their life," she says. "They might need to focus at a certain point and talk to someone at another point."

Many architects share this vision. Janet Pogue McLaurin, a principal at the architecture firm Gensler, which has designed dozens of prominent corporate offices, says that the most effective open plans include a host of meeting rooms and private areas for deep concentration. "Innovative companies actually use more spaces throughout the office," she says. They don't expect the desk to be the center of an employee's work life.

It's an enticing idea. But, as WeWork has found, the most expensive part of an office is the small meeting room. As a workaround, WeWork offers its enterprise clients phone booths–basically, portable pods that can be dropped right into an existing layout. At 15 square feet, they're rather tight for a private office. But at least there's a door.

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