Collaboration

Do All Open Plan Offices Kill Collaboration?

Headlines following a new Harvard study declare open offices a “collaboration killer.” But, it doesn’t have to be that way.

Read 5 minutes



It used to be that a ping-pong table or Friday happy hour could attract talented people looking for a different kind of vibe at work. Today, the expectations are much higher. Creating a great employee experience requires a deep understanding of what people need and how the workplace can best support them. A new study by Harvard Business School adds to a growing body of research indicating people are seeking workplaces that reflect their changing needs. There is no one size fits all approach to workplace design.

The most recent body of research (published July 2018) found when people moved from cubicles to an open office without any boundaries face-to-face collaboration plummeted. Instead of talking to each other, people used email and instant messaging more frequently. The results of the study have fueled headlines declaring open offices a “collaboration killer” and “the dumbest management fad of all time.” So, what now? Should everyone return to working in private offices?

OPEN PLAN RESEARCH

A closer look at the study reveals researchers tracked people as they moved from assigned cubicles to assigned seats in an open plan. The new environment removed all elements of privacy. Researchers used wearable technology to observe how people interacted. The new space was a monotonous effort to bring people together. But, instead of promoting collaboration, this version of the open plan did the exact opposite. Face-to-face interaction dropped 70 percent.

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In an interview after his study was published, associate professor Ethan Bernstein drew some conclusions from his results. He suggested organizations should consider “hybrid or flexible spaces” within the open plan among other things and, he indicated, successful workplaces should optimize for the kinds of work people are doing.

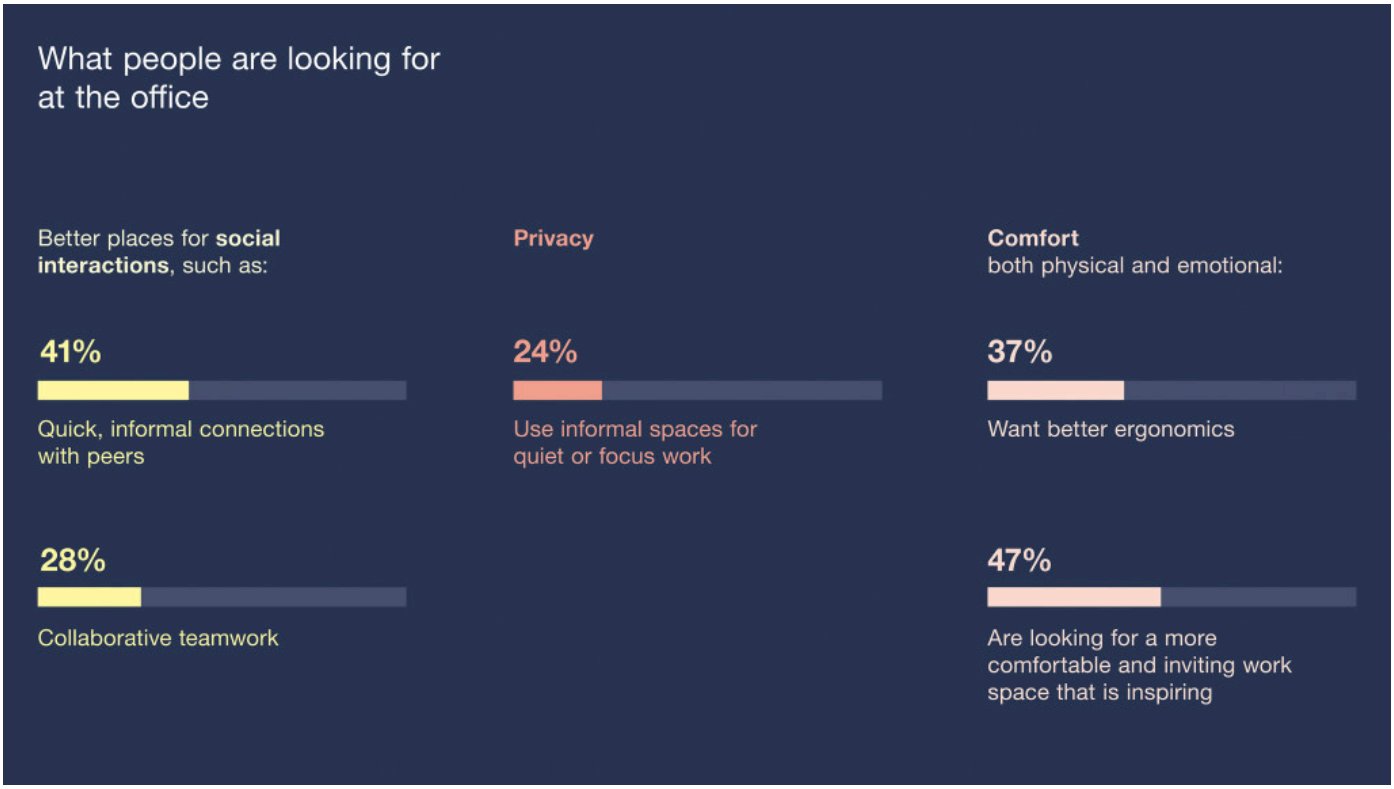
As it reported on the study, Fast Company wrote, “Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, as is traditional in open plan design, work environments should provide various options that support employees working effectively.” The idea that people need a diverse range of spaces to meet their changing needs throughout the work day is one Steelcase researchers and designers have been championing for years. It’s no secret that people often decry their open offices — frustrated by a lack of spaces to choose from and control over where they get their work done. But, it doesn’t have to be that way.

WHAT WORKERS WANT



So, what do people want from the places they work? A recent Steelcase study of global office workers found that although 77 percent of people have their own assigned workstation, the vast majority—87 percent—spend two to four hours every day working someplace else. Digging deeper, the study showed 53 percent of people say they can't find the spaces they need. While over half (51 percent) say they need an escape from working in the same place during their day, whether they were alone or with others.

The results are revealing. In addition to privacy and places to work together, people are seeking informal, inspiring spaces to work. They're looking to build deeper relationships with colleagues and 43 percent believe informal spaces can help build more trust. Good informal spaces provide views of nature, support informal interactions and offer access to visual and acoustic privacy. (Read: What Workers Want)



It’s clear, people need an ecosystem of spaces to support the various types of work they do throughout the day – places to collaborate, focus, learn, socialize and rejuvenate. By paying attention to all these needs, the open plan can accommodate all the types of work people do. What’s called for is a holistic approach that integrates the needs of people, place and technology.

A HOLISTIC APPROACH



With the intensity of work today, leaders are expecting more and more from their **people**. To produce and create at a consistently high level, consider people's sustained wellbeing which requires:

- Ergonomic support and comfort
- Elimination of distractions so people can focus and collaborate uninterrupted
- Inspiration and rejuvenation — make sure people feel better when they leave than when they arrived at work



When it comes to **place**, people need an ecosystem of spaces to support all modes of work: focus, collaboration, learning, socialization and rejuvenation. In addition, they need:

- Support for a diverse range of postures and privacy options
- Spaces that give remote colleagues a great experience so they can feel and act as if they are present in the room
- Spaces that help co-located team members remain present and focused



When people have a bad day with technology, they have a bad day at work. They need a range of devices and spaces to share information. They also want easy to use **technology** that's smart and connected so their ideas can travel seamlessly with them. Considerations include:

- Gathering data so organizations can understand the spaces that best support their people and refine their workplace accordingly
- Giving people access to data so they can find colleagues and rooms quickly
- Providing spaces designed so the place helps the technology be used more effectively and the technology enhances the place

By creating a workplace that brings together people, place and technology, organizations can give people choice and control over where and how they work — something that correlates directly with high workplace engagement and satisfaction. By putting people at the core of everything, the open plan doesn't have to be a source of frustration. It can be a tool to help people and teams thrive.

Sources:
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