

Change Management: Readiness for Open Plan

Making the shift to open plan? Quell concerns with these suggestions.



You've clarified your vision for change, engaged users and created a robust plan to get people on board with the shifts you're making to your space. But what is your organization's readiness for open plan? You may still be experiencing some pushback. This is natural and it's especially true when you're emphasizing more openness in the environment than what people have been used to.

A common challenge that can emerge when you're managing change is employees who make assumptions about what is meant by the term "open plan" or "open office" and who seek research as a way to discredit the concept. Sometimes these studies make the rounds— passed among groups as a way to nurture resistance. How should you respond to this particular type of challenge?

Employee concerns are often based on a misconception about what's in store. The sooner you clear the air, the less opportunity there will be for resistance to gain traction and get in the way of successful change.

WHY PEOPLE ARE WARY

Employees can be wary of workplace change because they fear loss— loss of territory, privacy, status or relationships. All of these seem to be in jeopardy in an open environment. Often, however, these fears stem from fuzzy terminology and a lack of understanding. What, exactly, is meant by an open office?

Negative articles about the open plan almost invariably reference wide-open benching configurations that place people in rows with no private offices, enclaves or areas for small group interaction in sight. Although these floorplans do exist, we generally recommend a more holistic strategy: a range of spaces that supports both collaboration and privacy, giving employees the freedom to choose where and how they work. Clarifying this point often goes a long way toward soothing employee concerns.

CLARIFY WHAT YOUR NEW WORKPLACE WILL INCLUDE

When assisting clients with workplace change, Steelcase advocates for variety and choice— a diverse range of work settings that supports the various types of work employees do throughout the day.

For a workplace to promote engagement, creativity and wellbeing, it must provide an ecosystem of spaces that supports all modes of work—places to focus, learn, collaborate, socialize and rejuvenate. Moreover, employees must be assured they have the cultural freedom to work wherever they can work best— or in other words, that it's okay to work away from their desks.

Steelcase's own body of research corroborates the benefits of variety and choice in office design.

- The Steelcase Global Study found a link between choice and engagement. Most highly engaged employees (nearly 90 percent) feel they have flexibility to make choices about where and how they work. They can move around the office easily, change postures, and choose where they want to work based on the tasks they need to accomplish.
- The study also confirmed the importance of spaces that support multiple kinds of wellbeing. The most effective workplaces support physical wellbeing by encouraging movement and postural change, emotional wellbeing by promoting social interactions, and cognitive wellbeing by making it easy to focus or find respite throughout the day.
- Steelcase research also makes the case for finding the right balance between privacy and openness. Due to today's fast-paced iterative nature of team work, the ability to switch freely between collaboration and privacy as needed is a critical attribute of modern office design.

Learn more about Change Management and our Applied Research and Consulting team.



CONSIDER CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Of course, when employees start passing around negative articles about workplace change, the specific points raised probably aren't their primary concern. The bigger issues have to do with acceptance of change more broadly—and the use of the studies to debunk the office are a symptom of their resistance generally.

Their real worry is change itself. Change can be scary, and human nature dictates that many people resist it as their first reaction. Employees need reassurance they will be heard, supported and kept in the loop throughout the change process.

To that end, Steelcase recommends a comprehensive change management program that engages employees from the start, solidifies leadership support, and shares information with full transparency. In our experience, an intentional, proactive change management program can make the difference between gaining employee buy-in for your plans or churning up their resentment. Think of it as insurance for what is likely to be a significant investment.

POINT OUT HOW THE RESEARCH ISN'T A MATCH TO WHAT YOU'RE DOING

In addition to a bigger picture effort focused on change management, you may still want to respond to the particular article(s) employees are sharing. In fact, a lot of the research on the open office isn't suited as a comparison to what you'll be doing with your office design, and you can point this out to employees.

Let's take a closer look at one of the more prominent articles that circulates during times of workplace change. The gist of the article [Open Plan Offices Are As Bad As You Thought](#), (Washington Post, July 18, 2018) is that open offices tend to hinder collaboration—the opposite of what is intended. The problem is, the article reports on research that is limited for a number of reasons:

- The research only looks at two companies, perhaps too few for firm conclusions.
- The research methodology monitors workplace interactions by requiring employees to wear electronic badges and microphones, an approach that is potentially perceived as invasive and which could influence employee behavior.
- Most important, the two workplaces studied are wide-open spaces that give employees few alternative work settings from which to choose. As mentioned earlier, this is hardly ideal.

We've given thought to the open office—for many years—and published podcasts on the topic as well as this article about whether they negatively impact collaboration: [Opinion: Do All Open Plan Offices Kill Collaboration?](#) Each of these provide additional perspective and alternative viewpoints.

The bottom line: many studies that circulate are not applicable to the changes you'll be making in your own space. So, be discerning about the study employees may be circulating and help point out its limits.

ADDRESSING ISSUES

Overall, effective change management addresses employee concerns directly and with appropriate transparency. Candid communication can dissipate rumors before they metastasize into serious blowback. Depending on how much resistance you're encountering, you may want to address it in a face-to-face opportunity such as a town hall or with some written communication. Either way, here are some key points to make (assuming they are in alignment with your plans and the approaches you'll take):

- **Thank** employees for their commitment to making the place the best it can be.
- **Remind** employees that you welcome insights and research as you take steps toward refreshing your workplace.
- **Assure** employees you're committed to developing an office design that supports the way they work and contributes to your business goals. Let employees know you'll encourage their engagement and participation in the process.
- **Acknowledge** your awareness of published studies that find fault with open offices and let

employees know that the thrust of these studies seems to be when a space is too open it can actually hinder collaboration and productivity. Let employees know you agree, as do the experts from whom you're gaining input.

- **Reassure** employees you're not considering a totally open space. Although you're still working through details, you're anticipating a space with variety, choice, and a mix of spaces to support plenty of different kinds of work from focusing and collaborating to learning, socializing and rejuvenating.
- **Let** employees know about the change process that will be forthcoming/continuing and insert appropriate detail here.
- **Close** by reassuring employees you'll look forward to their involvement in the process and expect to continuously improve the space over time, inviting their questions or additional discussion on an ongoing basis. Remind employees how enthusiastic you are about the new space and the ways you know it will contribute to a great experience and positive business outcomes.

Overall, resistance to change can occur because people are concerned about being heard and they are committed to staying productive through the change they're anticipating. They want to be sure nothing about the new office design will get in their way.

You can increase readiness by providing clear information, addressing issues with transparency, and taking a direct approach to quelling specific concerns. These actions will go a long way toward your success with your workplace change.

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