There's No One-Size-Fits-All Open Plan (Transcript)

Open Office Truth Podcast Series: Episode 2

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This episode features: WorkSpace Futures researchers Donna Flynn, Melanie Redman, Caroline Kelly and Steelcase EMEA workplace consultant Hania Arafat

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INTRODUCTION

Host Katie Pace: I want to start by having you read the very beginning of your research paper.

Caroline Kelly: Sure. Here goes. Is the open office plan dead? Death to the open office floor plan. Google got it wrong. The open office trend is destroying the workplace. And lastly, here's the final nail in the coffin of open plan offices.

Katie: Oh my gosh. Sounds pretty bad. Quite dramatic.

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Katie: Welcome back to What Workers Want, the new 360 realtime, a Steelcase 360 podcast about how the places we work, learn, and heal are changing to help people thrive and ideas flourish at work. I am your host Katie Pace here today with our producer Rebecca Charbauski.

Co-host Rebecca Charbauski: Glad to be back.

Katie: Rebecca's helping me with our most ambitious podcast yet, a five part series on the open office. This is episode two, Open Office Truth. All open office plans are not created equal.

Rebecca: So true. Okay, so if anybody missed the first episode, don't worry, you can start with us right now, but if you want all five episodes, we've put them all in one place in a really easy to use guide at steelcase.com/openofficetruth.

Katie: Today we're going to hear about new research on the open plan and while there are lots of studies about the open plan in general, is it good, is it bad, this study actually looks at how do people focus in the open plan, what sort of furniture and other design elements do they need, and then also how are they creative in the open plan?

Rebecca: Spoiler alert, Katie, you're put to the test.

Katie: I am. I was nervous.

Rebecca: We won't tell everybody how you did. Before we get to that, we do want to take time to understand the neuroscience behind privacy. Open offices weren't created with bad intentions. The goals were good. Collaboration, trust, communication and creativity, all things that organizations want, but what are people craving and what's missing? Should we all go back to our cubicles and shut the doors?

Katie: I don't think that's the answer.

Rebecca: No?

THE PRIVACY CRISIS

Katie: No. But 360 magazine Editor, Chris Congdon sat down with Steelcase Vice President of Workspace Futures, Donna Flynn, and she talked about how our brains work and what it actually is when we say the word privacy.

Chris Congdon: So, Donna, we think about this privacy crisis going on in the workplace, how is that impacting employees?

Donna Flynn: Well, I think when employees can't find the spaces they need, when they need them, to do the kind of work they need to do, and sometimes that needs to be private spaces, that that can increase their stress. They'll feel distracted. Their level of engagement and productivity is going to go down.

A lot of people believe that if someone's working alone, that they're not being collaborative, but we believe that being alone is a critical element of collaboration. And so instead of privacy hurting collaboration, we think privacy can support collaboration. It gives people the time they need to do some deep thinking, it gives people time they need to do some creative work, or just time to focus on producing something they need to produce. It's also important for people to have time to rest and rejuvenate their mind and body as they're moving across a day.

Chris Congdon: So then why don't we just go back to giving everybody private offices?

Donna: We don't think privacy is about having four walls and a door. We think it's really about control. And there's two key dimensions to privacy that we think about. There's information control, controlling information about yourself and how that's shared with the world, and there's stimulation control, which is controlling incoming stimulations.

It's the combination of these two types of control that is really important to give employees. It's not about going back to private offices, it's really about providing those choices for employees to have in front of them.

Katie: I love how Donna talks about privacy being about control, and not just four walls and a door.

FIVE STRATEGIES FOR PRIVACY

Rebecca: Exactly. I love to work in our work cafe. I'm always out there because I love the buzz. I guess it's a little bit private even though it's not really private. We wanted to learn more about privacy. We talked to Melanie Redman, she's a Senior Design Researcher with Workspace Futures and she works with Donna.

Katie: Melanie talked to Chris about how privacy is very dependent on the situation you're in. She shared with us examples of five strategies people use to achieve privacy.

Melanie Redman: An example would be why somebody would go to a cafe. They do this because they want the energy, the vibe, of the people around them, but they also want to be somewhat invisible. We call this strategic anonymity, because they're choosing to go somewhere where they're not known and so they can control the social stimulations, or interruptions, as we would call them.

Chris Congdon: Are there times where people need to experience privacy when they need to be with another person?

Melanie: That's a great question. There are. Anytime somebody wants to engage with another person to share information that they expect to be held confidential, they're seeking a trusted confidence. You could also think of this as social privacy. That's why people need to find a private room when they're having a performance review with their manager, or if they're having an intimate chat with a friend at work about something that happened at home, they don't want everybody else overhearing that.

Chris: That's a good point. One of the ways we hear people talk about privacy today has to do with privacy of their information, what people know about them. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Melanie: Yes. We refer to that as selective exposure, because it's about the choices we make. We think of information in a very broad sense in this case. Information is obviously personal data, but it's also behaviors. We reveal a lot about ourselves by how act, how we speak, what we wear, what we eat. And one of the complaints about open plan has been that people feel they're too exposed. What that means is, they've lost control over the ability to make that choice about what is shared.

Chris: Sometimes I feel like I want to shield myself from other people when I'm trying to get that control. That's a strategy that you saw as well.

Melanie: Definitely is. It's about safety. Safety of your information, safety of your belongings, safety of your thoughts. This plays into the dangers of group think when it comes to collaboration. You want to be able to have your own opinions without being interfered with by other people.

Chris: Did you see people needing to just have time to be alone?

Melanie: Absolutely. We call this purposeful solitude. We differentiate between solitude and isolation. Isolation is a state of mind. Solitude is a choice where you're not looking to disconnect from the group, but you're looking to separate yourself physically from the group. It can be for rejuvenation, it could be for focused work, it can be for any number of reasons.

GLOBAL PRIVACY

Katie: So Rebecca, as the title of this episode suggests, not all open office plans are created equal. We wanted to understand how privacy might be considered around the globe, and how it might be different in each country.

Rebecca: Exactly. I reached out to Hania Arafat, she spent six years as a Steelcase Design and Workplace Consultant in Europe and the Middle East. She's based in London, and I asked her what she seen when it comes to how privacy varies by culture.

Hania Arafat: Well, I've seen a lot of cultural implications of a country or region manifested into their designs and layouts of the office. But if you take a country where hierarchy's important, such as Russia, China, or even Saudi Arabia, the higher you are up in the corporate ladder, the more privacy you're receiving as an individual.

Therefore, you have less need for alternative areas to seek privacy in the workplace, which is why they might have a little bit less of them.

But on the other hand, if you have a more network oriented culture, such as the UK or the US, leaders are encouraged to share their spaces and evidently compared to others, they have less privacy, but they have more options to work from.

Rebecca: Hania, do you have any real world comparisons you can share with us?

Hania: Well, last year we were working on a project with an IT company from Saudi Arabia. They visited our Learning and Innovation center in Munich, and we're absolutely amazed by how an IT team could be part of this shared network.

They asked for a similar experience for their own space and before beginning to design their future work environment, we wanted to better understand how they currently work, how they currently seek privacy, where they seek it, and how they would prefer to seek it in the future.

We designed a series of settings for them to cater to their direct needs. When it came time to install, the Head of Security for this IT company was a little bit concerned, because Saudi Arabia has a culture of monitoring the work environment, so it's very common to have cameras within the common areas, but also within the entire office. This meant that he had to place more cameras distributed around the floor plan in order to see inside of all these smaller private enclaves that we had offered.

When you compare this to a country such as Germany, where it's actually not socially accepted to have securities in the work environment, he was quite surprised to hear that, because they're based on a culture of trust that they don't include cameras within their space.

So when we think about privacy around the world, I think it's important to consider not only the culture and the country's culture that you are incorporating the elements of privacy into your designs, but also the corporate culture of that organization, then an individual's preference.

Since you could never solve for all, I think the key is really to design a diverse workplace that is catering to multiple needs.

NEW RESEARCH ON ELEMENTS TO HELP PEOPLE FOCUS

Rebecca: There's all these different kinds of privacy and that's a really good baseline, Katie, as we jump into your conversation with Caroline and that test we've been waiting for.

Katie: Caroline works with Melanie and Donna. She leads a team here at Steelcase and in Workspace Futures Department, and she's publishing brand new research with the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin on how design elements can impact focus and collaboration in the open plan. Caroline, welcome to What Workers Want.

Caroline Kelly: Well, thank you. I'm very glad to be here.

Katie: I want to start by having you read the very beginning of your research paper.

Caroline:	Sure. Here it goes. Is the open office plan dead? Death to the open office floor plan. Google got it wrong. The open office trend is destroying the workplace. And lastly, here's the final nail in the coffin of open plan offices.

Katie:	Oh my gosh. It sounds pretty bad. Quite dramatic.

Caroline:	It starts with a question, then there's a call to action, and a proclamation at the end that, open plan is dead, should be dead, we should put it six feet under. In my opinion, I don't think that the case is closed.

We've done some research around this because we thought it was such an important topic. 60 to 70% of offices in North America have open plan as part of their design strategy.

Katie:	It's the thing.

Caroline:	It's the thing.

Katie:	Well you go on to share more studies done on the open office and as we've been talking about on this podcast, some people say it helps, some people say it stresses them out, some people say it's like being trapped in a coffin. It's very dramatic. But very few of these studies actually shed light on what kinds of things are helping people in the open plan. Tell us what it is that you set out to study.

Caroline:	Sure. Yeah. When we look at the literature, there are lots of claims as to its benefits and like you said, helping collaboration, or there's evidence that it can help with cultural transformation and removing hierarchy, let's say, in an organization.

But as we read through all these studies, some of which were very negative as well, saying it increased sick days and there was a high level of distraction, and people just generally hate it, it doesn't say anything really about the way these spaces are designed. It's dealing with the open plan and as this abstract monolithic idea of-

Katie:	Everything is open.

Caroline:	Yeah. A big giant room with a bunch of desks in a row, and we just know that that's not the case. So we said, well, let's pick this apart a little bit and let's think about the different design strategies people use in the open plan and the different types of furniture settings that are typical there and see if there's any difference in terms of the types of work activities people do in each of these settings, and if one helps more than another.

We were interested in particular in a setting, it's actually a product called Brody, and we think of it as an individual work environment where it's a seat that's in a semi reclined lounge position. It's got an integrated work surface, power, and it's most importantly, I think, has a shield around it. So you have privacy on maybe two thirds of the space around you. And the nice thing about this is it's small. It's a piece of furniture. It can be easily moved. It's not making the commitment to having walls being built or dividing up the space, which is the point of the open plan, to have that flexibility.

So we said, hey, how do people work at the bench? How do people work in these individual work environments? And are there particular tasks that we do as part of our everyday work that are better at one than the other?

Katie: How'd you do that? Did you go to everybody's work spaces or did you set up a model workstation? How did you do this?

Caroline: This was not an observational study. This was an experiment. We randomized and controlled how we dealt with the variables. Imagine we took a large work area here at Steelcase that was not being occupied by other office workers, we did need a laboratory environment, and we outfitted it with a few Brodys, a bench application, some other individual desks, and then we recruited participants to come in and do experimental tasks that are used in neuroscience and psychology to measure different types of cognitive function.

I didn't just make this up myself, unfortunately. I had partnership with the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin, and was advised by Dr. Elena Patsenko on the study design.

As we talked about what we know from our more of our qualitative research that people really, we know, are craving focus and they want lack of distractions around them, she suggested a particular study task that's called the SART. That's it's abbreviation. It's the Sustained Attention Response Task. It's an exercise that people do that help us determine whether or not they're paying attention.

We had people do this both at Brody and at the bench, because we wanted to see within the same person if there's any difference. What this task does is asks you to be at a computer and a series of single digits will flash upon a screen one at a time for just a few seconds, zero through nine. Every time the number three shows up, you do nothing but every other number, zero, one, two, four, five, et cetera, you press the space bar,

This is a go or no go task. It's seeing if you can withhold a response, which requires a lot of focus, because when you start to not pay attention, you get in this automatic mode and you're just going tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap on the space bar. And so by measuring how many errors they make when they press the space bar for number three, when they shouldn't have, and how long it takes them to actually press the space bar, we can tell whether or not they're paying attention.

Katie: That sounds hard.

Caroline: It is. Well, someone else figured this out. This is a well validated instrument that it gets used in many, many different scenarios where this cognitive function is in question. What's interesting about this is, slower is better.

Katie: Really?

Caroline: Yeah. What we saw was at the bench, people were getting into that automatic mode. They were just going tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, and they had faster response times. Whereas at Brody, people were able to make fewer errors and have a longer response time.

Katie: They were being more thoughtful about it.

Caroline: Being more thoughtful about it, having more focus, and really paying attention.

Katie: What does that teach you? What are your results? What do we take from that?

Caroline: Sure. Well, I think it's a few things. I think we know that when there's a lot of activity around you, you're expending a lot of cognitive resources to manage all of that. If you're trying to focus on your work and there are people walking past you and then maybe there's noise, maybe there's motion, other things, other stimuli, that's going to make your brain tired.

Katie: It's really tiring. [crosstalk 00:18:04].

Caroline: We also know that when you're out in your workplace, there are social norms that we are all trying to live up to at work. You might be self-monitoring saying like, how is my posture? Am I making a weird face while I work? All of these things that are more about your appearance, if you will, as you're performing your work.

We surmise that these different issues are what are taxing people more cognitively and making it harder for them to focus. But it's not all bad news for the bench. What's really interesting is that there are occasions where actually having a little bit less ability to sustain your attention is good. There's research that shows that it's good for more divergent thinking, for more creativity.

So, we did another task, which is a remote associates task and we're actually, I'm going to do a little game with you. It's fun, I think.

Katie: I'm a little scared.

Caroline: I'm also a nerd. Is you're going to be presented with three words and you have to figure out what the fourth word is that completes that triplet. That makes sense. Okay?

Katie: Okay.

Caroline: We'll start with cottage, blue, and Swiss.

Katie: Cheese?

Caroline: Cheese. Yes. Right. Cottage cheese, blue cheese, Swiss cheese. It's examples like that. There's a set of these triplets that have been used in studies before and it helps determine whether people are able to have this creative problem solving. We also did the remote associates task in both settings, again, the same people do the same tasks in both applications. And we found that at the bench actually people did better with the remote associates.

Katie: Really?

Caroline: Yes. They got more correct. There is a time limit. You get 10 seconds per triplet. Either you get it right, or you get it wrong, or you just run out of time and you move on. I think that that's also an interesting-

Katie: What does that tell us?

Caroline: I think it tells us a little bit that being together, having stimuli around us can be inspirational. It can help you-

Katie: I'm connecting these dots.

Caroline: Connecting. Yeah. I could've given you one of the really hard ones [crosstalk 00:20:19] start with the easy [crosstalk 00:20:20].

Katie: Okay, good. Because I got nervous there.

Caroline: There's other research also that shows that having wide open vistas, long views, and high ceilings helps with creativity. When we're in these more open spaces and we're not enclosed by say the screens that are surrounding a Brody for example, that that kind of work might be well suited for that. Sometimes a little less attention might be just what you need.

Katie: Yeah. So, talk a little bit about why you think this research is important and how it can add to the open office conversation and these really startling headlines.

Caroline: Yeah. In a lot of the research there just isn't really even a description of the settings that they studied, much less a photograph. In our study we have everything well described and we have images of how we set up the room, to really be mindful about the fact that all open plans are not created equal.

A lot of it, we know that having a range of applications is important, but in order to make those useful, you also have to give employees choice and control. If you assign someone to a bench and that's all they have, even though maybe you have… That's all they have operationally, even though there might be other types of spaces around. If they feel like they can't get up and move when they need to do that focus work, you're going to get disgruntled employees.

We have other research that shows that choice and control correlates with engagement. You start thinking about enabling that choice and control to both support particular work modes and to increase engagement, and you're really starting to get at the root issues of organizations that they really are trying to solve for. I think it's promising.

Katie: What's your advice to organizations that either have an open office plan, are going to an open office plan? How do you look at that? What's your advice in terms of how you should do this successfully?

Caroline: I think engaging with the employees is critical. While we did this experimental study to determine the difference between these applications, really you need to consider the work processes, the organizational culture. Maybe some people really are doing more focused work all day long and so a higher level of shielding might be appropriate. For teams that are maybe more mobile or doing more collaborative creative tasks all day that you might need to swing more to the other side.

But I think it's a combination of understanding what is supportive of what types of work and then what do your people really need is always going to give you the best opportunity, I think, to have a successful workplace.

Katie:	Caroline, this is really interesting.
Caroline:	Thanks.
Katie:	Thank you so much for sharing this with us.

CONCLUSION

Rebecca: Caroline's work is really interesting, and really good job with that test, Katie.

Katie: Thank you. I'm so glad I didn't fail. I was really nervous.

Rebecca: When they were doing these controlled experiments. They actually looped ambient noise in. So it really sounded like the open office. She controlled for all of these variables to help us understand what is it that helps us get our work done.

Katie: When you think about it, when you're really trying to focus on something, for me, I can't sit in a cafe or a buzzy environment, I really need to block everything out and focus on whatever it is I'm writing, or doing, or trying to achieve. Because that's a lot of mental energy.

At the same time though, there's things that we have to do that are really creative or when we're trying to think of a new idea or come up with a new concept and you want the buzzy environment, you want to be around more people and ideas, and see things in the corner of your eye.

Rebecca: Yeah. Sometimes I'll just get up and walk around, because honestly getting a different perspective gives me a different idea. If I sit there and I'm stuck on a problem, I just need a different vision or view, and sometimes bouncing it off people really helps me get past that block.

Katie: Yeah. But then you need people. You need to be in an open environment. It's great. Where I sit in Chicago too, in the bench, people come from all over the world to visit our Chicago space and I'll see people from all over the country, or all over the world, that I haven't seen in a long time. They'll come up and they'll say, "Hey, how you doing? How's it going?" Or "I heard your podcast." I love that, but I can't be in a time or on a task where I really have to focus.

Rebecca: Yeah, exactly. We want to thank everyone who helped us with this episode, including Chris Congdon, Donna Flynn, Melanie Redmond, Caroline Kelly and Hania Arafat.

Katie: And Rebecca, thanks to you as well.

Rebecca: Of course.

Katie: As a reminder, please subscribe to What Workers Want to get the entire open office series. And for more information on anything we talked about today, or to listen to upcoming episodes, make sure you visit steelcase.com/openofficetruth.

Rebecca: Plus, in our next episode, we're going to talk about one of the hottest trends in office design right now, the pod.

Katie: I love my pod. There's so much to love about pods, but it's actually not as simple as just adding a chair or a table. There are different options on the front end, on the back end. You have to know what you're getting and you should really make sure you know what kind of work you should be doing in a pod and the culture to create around it.

Rebecca: We're going to explore those questions along with an interview with Orangebox Creative Director, Jerry Taylor. They're designing their fourth generation of pods, and he's going to talk to us about how they think about design away from the traditional desk. For now, that's it for this episode, so thanks everyone for joining us.