Intelligence

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DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

Open-plan offices are bad for productivity. **Discuss.**

Championed as a response to the shift in workplace habits and a way for cash-strapped companies to increase head count without taking more space, are open-plan offices all they're cracked up to be?

KAREN HALLER, COLOUR PSYCHOLOGY AND DESIGN CONSULTANT

I'M IN FAVOUR OF OPEN-PLAN OFFICES BECAUSE IT IS IMPORTANT FOR PEOPLE TO interact and communicate with colleagues quickly and easily. As soon as you create physical barriers between them they start to become insular. Having worked in all types of offices, including those with partitions between each workstation, I found you could be in the next cubicle to someone and they would email you, which I found daft. When that's happened I've stood up and said: "Hello, I'm here — talk to me."

Productivity can suffer in partitioned offices because time is wasted walking to someone's office to discover they're not there, or waiting for calls or emails to be returned. In an open-plan environment you can see instantly who is busy talking to someone. You get a lot from someone's expressions or mannerisms to judge when is a good time to approach them.

Open plan works particularly well for start-up companies when rapid decisions have to be made. Information needs to be shared quickly, with whoever's managing the finances as much as those driving the business. In the construction world, regulations are being updated all the time and an open-plan office allows that information to be passed instantly between team members.

However, the downside to ease of collaboration and discussion is that not everyone is able to block out noise and distractions in order to concentrate. We all have different sensory strengths. Those who respond best to visual stimuli find blocking out noise easier than auditory people who are more sensitive to sound. It's important for open-plan offices to include pods or meeting rooms that are always accessible to those who need them.

Open plan or closed off? What's your view? Join the discussion on LinkedIn at rics.org/ linkedin, or tweet using #RICSmodus

SIMON RAWLINSON MRICS, HEAD OF STRATEGIC RESEARCH, EC HARRIS

OPEN-PLAN OFFICES CAN BE BAD FOR PRODUCTIVITY IF THEY ARE not carefully designed to meet the needs of the occupants and the business. For people to be able to work effectively in an open-plan set-up, several criteria need to be considered, such as good acoustics to control background noise. If volume levels are too high, people will find it difficult to concentrate. Conversely, when colleagues need to work together in groups that might involve noisy collaboration, their meetings will be less effective if they're hampered by concern over disturbing their neighbours. An understanding of good design is important. Ceilings, for example, can be adapted to dampen noise levels but retain a "buzz".

Another contributor to reduced productivity in open-plan set-ups is a lack of space per workstation. One of the most pressing challenges concerning office space is that suppliers are trying to reduce the number of square metres allocated per person. If the occupants don't feel comfortable with the quality of their workspace, then lower productivity is the result.

The reality is that open plan is only part of a range of work settings needed by modern businesses. It's absolutely essential to provide flexible spaces if we want to maximise effectiveness. We need facilities for group working, and quiet spaces for focused work, such as small "hive" units. Within an open-plan setting, breakout spaces can also be highly effective for informal meetings, breaks from intensive work, or social interaction. And the denser the occupation, the greater the requirement for high-quality space and design.