ECRONICON OPEN ACCESS

EC PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY
Mini Review

The Mistake of the Open Plan Office

Tony Buon*

Buon Consultancy, United Kingdom

***Corresponding Author**: Tony Buon, Buon Consultancy, United Kingdom.

Received: September 27, 2018; **Published:** November 08, 2018

Abstract

This brief review article explores the use of the Open Plan Office (OPO) and the impact that this design choice can have on inter-personal communication, employee satisfaction, engagement and privacy. It is suggested that the consensus of the present research suggests that the OPO, while reducing costs, also affects human communication in organisations in a negative way. There may also be age and other cultural variables that confound the research on this important area. It is further suggested that more research is required on this area of psychological communication.

Keywords: *Open Plan Office (OPO); Communication; Privacy*

The Open Plan Office (OPO) conceived in the 1950's in Germany [1]. The suggestion was that by moving away from the traditional office design, inter-staff communication would be improved, and ideas would flow freely. Today, over 70% of office space is open-plan, with low or no partitions. However, evidence suggests that the OPO may create barriers to communication and impede the flow of information between people and teams [2].

The use of the OPO has been synonymous with the twenty-first century organisations such as Google (Alphabet) and Facebook approach to people management. They have come to represent a modern, free and empowered workforce. The concept is very simple, break down the walls, and you break down communication barriers and eliminate 'silos.'

Older research suggested that these designs increase employee communication and satisfaction with working conditions [3,4] while decreasing operating costs [5] and allowing for flexible use of space. Certainly, the reduction in cost, as the OPO requires significantly less square meterage, made this new idea popular with Finance Managers and CEOs.

There is significant evidence that our physical environment and particularly our work-space can impact performance, motivation, and engagement. The work of Parish., *et al.* [6] suggests that physical environments that are perceived as pleasant (colourful, natural light) can positively affect employee job satisfaction and organisational commitment.

However, more current research has seriously questioned the efficacy of the OPO approach. In one longitudinal study conducted in Canada [7] the effects of relocating employees from traditional offices to open offices found decreased employee satisfaction with all the dependent measures following the relocation. Brenann [7] reported that the employees' dissatisfaction did not decrease, even after a reasonable adjustment period.

In one review of the literature, Davis., *et al.* [8] in a review of the literature found that "open offices often fostered a symbolic sense of organizational mission, making employees feel like part of a more laid-back, innovative enterprise". However the authors also found that OPOs also damaged workers' attention spans, productivity, creative thinking, and satisfaction. Further it was reported that employees experienced higher levels of stress and lower levels of concentration [8].

Possible Advantages of OPO	Possible Disadvantages of OPO
Promotes a casual and free working environment	Interrupts concentration and attention span
Improve communication for some cultural groups (Millennials?)	For most cultural groups - has a negative impact on communication
Saves on the cost of office space	Decreased employee satisfaction
Could promote team-work	Issues with proxemics for some cultural groups
Allows for creative group processes	Lack of privacy
Encourages networking	May have a negative impact on mental health
Flexible	Decreased productivity

Table 1: *The Advantages and Disadvantages of OPO (Author).*

Psychologically, the repercussions of establishing an OPO can even have a possible impact on work-performance. Physical barriers are closely linked to psychological privacy, and a sense of privacy has been suggested to improve job performance [9]. In our modern world of smartphones, social media and increased employee surveillance, a sense of privacy has even more import. Privacy that is diminished by the OPO.

Kaarlela-Tuomaala., *et al.* [10] state that OPO arrangements have been found to not only increase distraction and reduce privacy but also to increase employees' use of coping strategies such as withdrawal. If we have no physical privacy or a 'safe-space' to work, perhaps employees attempt to create their own distance by withdrawing psychologically and this can result in communication barriers.

Some alternatives to the OPO include the use of other office space designs. This includes the use of hot-desking, hub and spoke spaces, privacy cubicles and other design concepts. However, there is very little evidence as to the efficacy of these models.

Many workers in OPO settings complain about interruptions by colleagues and the noise causing problems with concentration. One UK organisation found that after redesigning a new office to the OPO model, staff feedback was overwhelmingly negative. Staff were concerned about the impact on their work productivity and stress (due to excessive noise).

The solution, allowing staff to wear headsets and ear-buds, created other issues. These included safety concerns (e.g. could the employee hear a fire alarm), concerns about privacy and confidentiality, and ironically the reduction in effective staff communication.

Confounding all the available research on OPO, is the possibility that employee age may have a significant impact on the found results. That is, it is possible that younger workers (millennials) more accustomed to collective work-spaces may have a different (positive) response to OPO environments. Though, there is no clear research available on this hypothesis. Though this is an area that warrants further research.

Conclusion

The role of space and OPO design in affecting human communication in organisations is still not well understood. The review of the literature reveals that the connection between office layout, work performance and the breaking down of 'silos' is not clearly established. However, the consensus at present would seem to be that the OPO will certainly save money, but it may also cause serious issues in relation to inter-personal communication, employee satisfaction and privacy.

There is also little acknowledgement by designers, consultants and Human Resource Professionals about the problems with open plan office design. While being able to fit more people into less space may be attractive from a financial point of view it is disingenuous to claim that it is done to improve "communication" or "teamwork". The evidence of impaired communication, satisfaction, engagement and the loss of privacy needs to be acknowledged to those impacted by this design trend.

Bibliography

1. Konnikova M. "The Open-Office Trap". The New Yorker (2014).
2. Buon T. "Communication Genius: 40 Insights from the Science of Communication". John Murry: London (2016).
3. Boyce BR. "Users: Assessments of a landscaped office". *Journal of Architectural Research* 3.3 (1974): 44-62.

4. Canty D. "Evaluation of an open office landscape: Weyerhaeuser Co". *A.I.A. Journal* 66.8 (1977): 34-39.

5. Hedge A. "The open-plan office. A systematic investigation of employee reactions to their work environment". *Environment and Behavior* 14.5 (1982): 519-542.

6. Parish JT, *et al*. "The effect of the service scape on service workers". *Journal of Service Research* 10.3 (2008): 220-238.

7. Brennan A., *et al*. "Traditional versus Open Office Design: A Longitudinal Field Study". *Environment and Behaviour* 34.3 (2002): 279-299.

8. Davis MC., *et al*. "The Physical Environment of the Office: Contemporary and Emerging Issues". In International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology. Volume 26 (eds GP Hodgkinson and JK Ford), John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, UK. Chapter 6 (2011).

9. Sundstrom E., *et al*. "Privacy at work: Architectural correlates of job satisfaction and job performance". *Academy of Management Journal* 23.1 (1980): 101-117.

10. Kaarlela-Tuomaala A., *et al*. "Effects of acoustic environment on work in private office rooms and open-plan offices a Longitudinal study during relocation". *Ergonomics* 52.11 (2009): 1423-1444.

Volume 7 Issue 12 December 2018