

DIALED

HOW TO CREATE AN OPEN OFFICE THAT IS MORE AWESOME FOR BOTH INTROVERTS AND EXTROVERTS

OPEN OFFICE LAYOUTS CAN SUCK--BUT THEY DON'T HAVE TO. IN PART TWO OF OUR OFFICE DESIGN SERIES, SENIOR EDITOR ANJALI MULLANY TALKS WITH WORKPLACE EXPERTS ABOUT HOW TO TURN YOUR COLLABORATIVE SPACE INTO SUPER PRODUCTIVE REAL ESTATE.

BY ANJALI MULLANY

Earlier this week, my colleague Jason Feifer published a funny and rousing anti-open office manifesto, decrying Fast Company's shared workspaces and singing the praises of private offices.

Our mostly open workspace, Jason argued, is distracting and productivity killing, and it doesn't promote collaboration! But I believe that the problem with Fast Company's office isn't that we have a mostly open office layout. The problem with our office is that we haven't approached our open office layout the right way. And while I definitely don't believe that open office plans magically create divine levels of collaboration, I don't agree with Jason's proposition that giving everyone in every company their own private room is a good solution.

Part One:
Offices For All!
Why Open-
Office Layouts
Are Bad For
Employees,
Bosses, And
Productivity

Here are a few reasons why I don't support Jason's all-private-office proposal:

PRIVATE OFFICES CAN ENCOURAGE MORE MADDENING ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION--NOT LESS

My inbox is the bane of my existence--my work day would be so much faster and less stressful if I didn't have to field so many emails and instant messages, Yammer notes and Campfire updates all day long. There are many instances when I would have preferred a quick chat to wading through a chain of emails with my colleagues. If it's done right, getting rid of physical barriers can help cut down on email overload. For example, when GlaxoSmithKline moved its workers from cubicles and offices to open-plan work tables, "email traffic dropped by more than 50%, while decision making accelerated by some 25% because workers were able to meet informally instead of volleying emails from offices and cubes," according to the Wall Street Journal.

INTROVERTS MAY PREFER WORKING INSIDE AN OFFICE, BUT MIGHT NOT KNOCK ON YOUR OFFICE DOOR

I don't know about you, but I find it far more intimidating to knock on an office door than to turn to a nearby colleague. I'm not the only one. Self-proclaimed introvert Grace Emery is a publicist at tech PR firm Highwire, where managers, executives, and principals sit in the company's open plan office alongside the rest of the staff. "I would be so intimidated to get up and go into their office," she told me. "When they're sitting right there and walking by my desk all the time, it becomes much, much less intimidating. I think that's an important part about being an introvert--I'm not as excited to just get up and strut into someone's office and say I need to meet with you, so open plan is kind of a good environment for someone who might be less bold."

OPEN OFFICES CAN FOSTER COLLABORATION--WHEN THEY'RE DONE RIGHT

Over the past year and a half, I found that moving more of my staff into my row got us talking in person far more frequently and productively than before. But when some of my key team members were recently moved to the next row over from me, our in-person communication dropped. For the kind of work I do, an open layout makes sense.

Like many creative people, I'm both extroverted and introverted. I put myself out there at work, talking to colleagues and working with others as a team because I believe that's how I'm going to help my company move toward two of its stated goals: greater collaboration between print and web (Jason works for print, I work for web) and more powerful and innovative news reporting. After

work, however, I require serious alone-time in order to recover from a day's worth of social interaction with so many people. I derive my best energy from myself and my close family--not from other people. At the Fast Company retreat earlier this year, Jason got so into his (awesome) karaoke performance, he tore his ACL. I did not take the mic--there is little chance I would ever feel comfortable performing in front of my colleagues like that.

I bring all this personal information up because some people in my company have told me that they believe open office plans can't be good for introverts, or are only beneficial to extroverts. Here's what I've learned from people who actually like their open office layouts about what it takes to create open offices that are productive and enjoyable, rather than distracting and annoying.

DIVERSE SPACES ARE KEY

Almost every open office proponent I spoke to pointed to the importance of diverse spaces in a workplace. Noise, interruptions, and lack of privacy are definitely a problem in open workspaces, and not everyone in an office works the same way or does the same work--which is why giving workers many options in a space is key to open office success. The workplace experts at Steelcase refer to this as creating a "palette of place."

“An open office is not just a pit with long rows of desks”

"What the cube farms of the '80s and '90s and what many of the open plan offices of today lack is variety and functional simplicity," says One

Workplace design consultant John Ferrigan, who has worked with Silicon Valley companies large and small (including Google) to reshape work environments.

"In my experience, what needs to happen is a layered approach, creating different settings or zones, because it's never one-size-fits-all," says Ferrigan. "There need to be spaces for those people who really need quiet to focus, whether they just find it easier to work or they're more of an introvert. We need to provide spaces where everyone in the company, regardless of personality or role, will feel comfortable."

Joe Ziemer, communications manager at investment startup Betterment, agrees. "An open office is not just a pit with long rows of desks and everyone packed in as tight as you can make them-- that's not the ideal," he says. Betterment recently moved into its third open layout space and its new offices feature a variety of work environments. Sometimes employees want to work at their desks, so they can easily turn to one another to ask questions or share ideas--and sometimes employees need a quiet space where they can focus. One breakout room dubbed "The Library," outfitted with couches, is designated not for conversation, but as a quiet space for quiet work. Other breakout rooms are designated for meetings. More couches and breakfast nooks in the Betterment space are designated for small group conversations and co-working sessions. Small, private "call rooms" are outfitted with a desk, banker's lamp, and whiteboard for quiet work and phone calls. There are high tables in the kitchen for people who like to eat away from their desk (probably pretty handy on those days you bring smelly food to work).

DESIGN TOWARD YOUR GOALS

"Oftentimes I'll hear clients say, "We want to be more like Google"- -but then I tend to challenge them and say, "Is that really what you want? Do you want to be more like Google or do you want to find out how your brand, how your company identity is expressed through physical space?" says Ferrigan.

Your company needs to ask itself: What are our goals? Would an open office really help us achieve them? "More collaboration" is a noble goal, but "More collaboration between the product team and the sales team" is a goal that you can more precisely design your office around. Identifying these types of specific goals can help you more thoughtfully organize your open office.

ADJACENCY IS CRITICAL

Not only is diversity of workspaces important--it's equally important where those diverse workspaces are situated in your office. Ferrigan's team creates "enclaves" in open offices for collaborative working, but stresses that it's important that collaborative spaces don't disrupt people sitting at desks nearby. For example, his team soundproofs breakout rooms and phone booths to help minimize disruption.

If you're going to provide private phone rooms and private work pods, don't place them so far away from your employees' desks that the trek across the office isn't worth it. "What we do is create adjacencies--yes, you'll have to get up from your desk, but you're not going to have to walk more than 10 feet to a phone booth or an enclave," Ferrigan says.

THE LIBRARY EFFECT

At Fast Company, our desks are divided by tall cubicle-like partitions that hide our faces from one another. This "gives people a false sense of acoustic privacy" says Ferrigan. "What we've found is that when a company does bring the panels down, it has what we call a "library effect" where you are more aware of the people around you, you're not going to be as boisterous on the phone, because you can see that there is someone just a couple feet away from you that could be disrupted. Bringing the panels down has actually made some offices quieter."

At my old job, there were no partitions between the desks, which meant it was much easier to glance at a colleague across the room and determine whether or not it was a bad time to interrupt them by the "I'm working" expression on their face, or because I could see they were leaned in close to their screen, on the telephone, or typing furiously on their keyboard. But in an office with huge partitions everywhere, I can't always tell if I'm interrupting someone or not until I'm really close to their desk.

ESTABLISH RULES

It's all well and good to provide a diverse range of spaces in your office--but unless you are clear with your employees about which spaces are meant for which uses, chaos is bound to ensue. For some clients, Ferrigan's team creates spaces that are accompanied by clear, strict rules about how the space can be used--and by whom. Some of his clients have created "'coding caves,' where they have set protocols," Ferrigan says. "If you're going to go in there and work, you can't take a call on your phone, you can't talk to anyone, or have music playing. You go in there, it's focus and head-down to get work done."

"It sounds very corporate and Big Brother to some people, but when you're in this open plan, it is really important to have some sense of protocols--it gives a sense of how things are supposed to

be," he says.

SEND A SIGNAL

Sometimes, at your desk, you can't be disturbed. Jason's piece surprised me in part because I'm far more distracted by electronic interruptions through the day than in-person visits to my desk. On gChat, I post status messages like "Please don't IM me right now unless it's urgent!" to keep at bay friends, office gossips, and questions that could be answered later. Why not start doing that in real life, too? Would a little sign at our desks that read BUSY or AVAILABLE help alleviate interruptions?

If you don't want to go that far, headphones send a signal too. You don't have to actually be listening to anything. "There are certainly times when you want to recede into your own world to get things done. We issue every new employee a pair of really good headphones, complete with a little hang tag that says "corner office." If the distractions get to be too much, just slip them on and tune the rest of the office out," says Dave Schiff, chief creative officer at Made Movement.

Also: I wonder how many people who secretly gripe about noisy colleagues have ever told their neighbor they're too noisy or interrupt them too much? A little honest communication seems like a less drastic solution to the office interruption problem than moving into a private office and shutting the door.

GET MANAGEMENT OUT OF THEIR OFFICES, TOO

At my last job, my boss spent half the day sitting at a desk in our open office, working with us side-by-side, and half the day in his private office a few feet away, drilling down on other work. It was a great system because it allowed him to understand, first hand, what his employees' days were like--and made us employees believe he understood our workflow problems, too. Similarly, sitting with my staff as they work on their assignments has helped me understand the challenges they face each day.

"Time and again, we'll hear from executives who led by example, who came out of their office--some of them want to, some of them don't--but even the ones that don't want to, once they've

come out of the office, they'll say, 'Wow. I've learned more about my own company in the last three weeks than I did in the past three years in my private office,'" Ferrigan says.

"I think if a company is going to make the move to an open layout, it's important to commit to the idea top to bottom," agrees Alex Bogusky, creative advisor at Made Movement. "All the Made partners sit at a big open table in the center of an open layout."

If the idea of sitting with the plebians makes you nervous, bosses, consider dipping your toe in the water by swapping desks with one of your employees, first.

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED

Betterment moved into its third office three months ago. All of its offices have been open offices--and each move has taught the company how to make its next office better. "In the first office, we had literally no private space. When we wanted to take a call, we had to go out to the stairwell," Ziemer says, which led to the company building a call room in the next office. Betterment learned over the course of its moves that employees really enjoyed and made use of having a diverse range of workspaces in the office, which is why the new Betterment office features so many.

Betterment also learned about desk assignments through its many moves. Betterment's employees sit at butcher block tables and the company discovered over time that at those tables, "two people together works; if you get more than two people in a row, it starts to feel a little like you're in an office farm." It's through this ongoing trial-and-error process that Betterment has learned how to make its open office environment more productive and more pleasant for workers.

One reason why I'm not ready to give up my dream of an open office that is truly productive and collaborative is that, at Fast Company, we just haven't experimented with our setup enough yet (though we're working on it). But there's another reason I'm not going to stop trying to find a way to make our open office work just yet: I go to work because I want to work with other people. And the people I work with at Fast Company are pretty great.

What makes your open office productive and enjoyable? Please share your advice with me in the comments section below!

[Image: Flickr user [Robert S. Donovan](#)]



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