

DIALED

OFFICES FOR ALL! WHY OPEN-OFFICE LAYOUTS ARE BAD FOR EMPLOYEES, BOSSES, AND PRODUCTIVITY

IN PART ONE OF OUR TWO-PART SERIES, FAST COMPANY SENIOR EDITOR JASON FEIFER MAKES A CASE FOR GIVING ALL WORKERS A LITTLE ALONE TIME--BEHIND AN OFFICE DOOR.

BY JASON FEIFER

I had an office. Now I don't.

I'm not looking for your pity; I want your own righteous indignation. Because you, too, deserve an office. We deserve better. We all deserve offices. But it gets worse: We've been told that our small squat in the vast openness of our open-office layouts, with all its crosstalk and lack of privacy, is actually good for us. It boosts productivity. It leads to a happy utopia of shared ideas and mutual goals.

These are the words of imperceptive employers and misguided researchers. The open-office movement is like some gigantic experiment in willful delusion. It's like something dreamed up in Congress. Maybe we can spend less on space, the logic seems to go, and convince employees that it's helping them. And for a while, the business press (including, let's be honest, some of the writing



A cubicle of one's own.

in this very publication) took it seriously. "Less space per worker may be inevitable for cost-effectiveness, but it can enhance the working environment, not degrade it," said a particularly infuriating New York Times piece, who quoted only one critic, a person who claimed all this bustle was troubling for introverts.

"Take those long tables, the ones currently lined with laptops at startups, and give them to an elementary school so children can eat lunch on them."

No. This is a trap. This is saying, "Open-office layouts are great, and if you don't like them, you must have some problem." Oh, I have a problem: It's with open-office layouts. And I have a solution, too: Every workspace should contain nothing but offices. Offices for everyone. Offices for the junior

associate and the assistant editor, and offices for the vice president and the editor-in-chief. Take those long tables, the ones currently lined with laptops at startups, and give them to an elementary school so children can eat lunch on them. We'll have to do away with all those adorable communal spaces, but they were always a little demeaning, a little not-quite-Starbucks. We won't need them now that we all have our own meeting place.

Peace and quiet and privacy and decency and respect for all. We people who spend more waking hours at work than we do at home, we people who worked hard to be where we are, we deserve a few square feet and a door. Call me old fashioned, call me Andy Rooney if you must, but Andy Rooney had an office.

Part Two:
[How To Create An Open Office That Is More Awesome For Both Introverts And Extroverts](#)

Let us pause to count our grievances.

1. WE WORK SLOWER, AND OUR WORK IS WORSE

About that office I used to have: My most recent one was here, at Fast Company, before a recent full-floor reorganization. There are few private offices here; most everyone (including me now) works at desks with measly half-walls, barriers of privacy only equipped to shield us from the prying eyes of small dogs. In the past, when I needed to focus, I shut my door. The silence was beautiful. It was calming. It made deadlines easier to meet.

Out here? I've been interrupted at least a dozen times trying to write this, and I'm only a few paragraphs in. That's not just my perception: Employees in cubicles receive 29% more interruptions than those in private offices, [finds research from the University of California, Irvine](#). And employees who are interrupted frequently report 9% higher rates of exhaustion.



Feifer in his happy place.

That's just speaking of the intentional interruptions, of course. I'm now always surrounded by chatter, which means that, like every other office worker in the country, I have to wear earphones. I'm currently listening to Django Reinhardt on [Pandora](#). His talent is timeless. But while it's easier to think with Django in my ears, it isn't nearly as easy as silence was. The music just adds to the clutter in my head. Back when I had an office, I left work with my mind still happy and fresh; I emailed myself ideas while walking home, as some newsy podcast told me even more useful info. Now, at the end of a day of nonstop jazz, I leave work feeling fried. I miss my podcasts, which my brain just doesn't have room for. I walk to the subway in silence, repairing.

Are you unmoved by this argument? I don't take offense. This piece would be so much better had I written it in private. Between the words "That's just speaking..." and now, I've been interrupted two more times.

2. OUR TIME IS NOT EVERYONE'S TIME

Proponents of open offices would say all these interruptions are good: We're in an office to work together, after all. "It eliminated gatekeepers. You didn't have to make an appointment to see someone," a former deputy mayor of New York City [said about](#) the open-plan Michael Bloomberg imposed. Which sounds nice and all, but hey, what about that "someone" you can now access so

easily? Do you think that person might be busy? Might be trying to focus on something, might be on deadline, might have an idea they really need to explore before it vanishes from their minds?

“That’s what work is: It is a vacillation between collaboration and solitary exploration.”

This is the problem with open-office layouts: It assumes that everyone’s time belongs to everyone else. It doesn’t. We are here to work together, sure, but most of the time, we actually work

alone. That’s what work is: It is a vacillation between collaboration and solitary exploration. One isn’t useful without the other. When we are working in a group--literally when we sit around a table brainstorming, or when we are having a conversation--we don’t pretend we’re alone. That would just be weird and awkward. So when we’re alone, let’s not pretend we’re in a group.

I’m not advocating for more gatekeepers. Nobody’s giving me a secretary, which is good, because I don’t know where that person would sit. And I hate that by advocating for a few minutes of time to myself, it makes me sound like I don’t enjoy collaboration--as if one must be the opposite of the other. In truth, I love helping others, and I almost never say no when someone asks if I have time. (While writing this paragraph, one colleague drew me away to brainstorm how to describe spreadable chocolate without using the word “spread” too many times. And you wonder what we do all day!) I’m just advocating for very small barriers that announce: “Can’t wait to talk to you, but I am busy right now.”

Think of it this way: Do you answer your phone every time someone calls? I don’t. Publicists will know (or should!) that I never pick up my phone. I have a business card covering my phone’s screen, so I don’t even see the caller ID. A phone call is someone else deciding when you should be available. It says, Deal with me right now! Email it to me, and I’ll get to it as quickly as I can. I know how to prioritize. I look forward to focusing on the response.

3. WE ALL KNOW “SERENDIPITY” IS FLEETING, AT BEST

“Serendipity” is the counterargument to everything I said above. It’s this catch-all word for a fantasy somebody cooked up (Marissa Mayer, maybe?), in which two coworkers are talking about how to re-brand Old Spice’s body wash, and a third wanders by and overhears them--because there’s no distinction between

eavesdropping and “overhearing” --and says, “Well, you know, I just saw a guy on a horse, and it was hilarious.” Serendipity! People working together in an unplanned way!

Hogwash.

“There’s some evidence that removing physical barriers and bringing people closer to one another does promote casual interactions,” explains a Harvard Business Review piece that nicely summarized the research on this subject. “But there’s a roughly equal amount of evidence that because open spaces reduce privacy, they don’t foster informal exchanges and may actually inhibit them. Some studies show that employees in open-plan spaces, knowing that they may be overheard or interrupted, have shorter and more-superficial discussions than they otherwise would.”

“Serendipity is when we’re both listening to Django at the same time. Though we’ll never know.”

I could swing my headphones around my head right this minute and hit at least four very smart, talented, hard-working Fast Company staffers. I like and respect them a great deal. But we have our

headphones on pretty much all the time--because that’s what our environment demands of us. We like talking to each other, but we have been put into an environment that tries to manufacture that talking, and now we do the opposite. Serendipity is when we’re both listening to Django at the same time. Though we’ll never know.

4. OPEN-OFFICE LAYOUTS DISTANCE US FROM OUR COWORKERS

At the last magazine I worked for, everyone had offices. We’d pop into each other’s offices, at first to ask a question or work out some problem, and soon, because nobody could hear us, we’d transition into long and personal conversations. Many people there became close, treasured friends, and awesome collaborators.

But out in the open? It’s far harder to get to know coworkers--and that personal connection is important. “Serendipity” isn’t a matter of matched-up ideas. It’s a matter of knowing how another person thinks. That’s the kind of stuff you learn by getting personal, and that’s not something I want to do out in the open.

Not that I'm a private person. Contrary to that introverts-are-the-only-people-affected New York Times piece, I am an extrovert. At a Fast Company retreat, no joke, I tore my ACL while doing a very acrobatic karaoke. Stone-cold sober. But I don't wander around forcing everyone to look at my vacation photos, so I'm not going to subject them to 20 minutes of a bunch of overheard personal chitchat either. When I had an office here, colleagues popped in regularly; we had fun. I started a little Whiskey Friday gathering, where everyone was invited to come drink and chat. It was great; we killed off bottles with respectable speed. But we haven't done it since I moved: Not everyone here is on the same schedule, and a Whiskey Friday in the middle of the office is just a gigantic interruption.

It's the final tragedy, really: I love my work, I love working with others, I love jazz, and, let's be clear, I love whiskey. These are things I want for all of us. The open-office layout has diminished the value of it all. And the prescription is so tantalizingly simple, yet kept out of reach because...

Hold on, a colleague just knocked on my chair. I'll finish that thought later.

[Image: Flickr user [Tim Samoff](#)]



JASON FEIFER

Senior editor at Fast Company. Follow me on Twitter @heyfeifer. You probably, maybe won't regret it.

CONTINUE

November 4, 2013 | 6:08 AM

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE



FROM THE WEB

5 Elements That



FROM THE WEB

7 Tips for Effective

Hate
Productivity?
Then Enjoy That
Nightcap!
FAST COMPANY

Watch Photoshop
Turn A Woman
Into A Completely
Different Woman
CO.CREATE

Make a Great
LinkedIn Profile
U.S. BANK CONNECT

First Impressions
DALE CARNEGIE
BLOG

[?]