

Making the best of it: An open plan space workers actually like.

Morrison, R. L. and Smollan R

(Management dept., AUT University, Auckland, N.Z)

Issue: There are increasing findings that open plan office environments, though less expensive, incur social costs in terms of a lack of privacy, distractions and social liabilities (Morrison & Macky, 2017). In addition, either through poor design or inappropriate application, many of the supposed advantages (e.g., increased communication and collaboration) of these environments are frequently not evident (Kaarlela-Tuomaala, Helenius, Keskinen, & Hongisto, 2009). Case studies of hot-desk and / or flexible workspaces that have been thoughtfully designed with worker well-being

in mind are lacking. “Best practice” workplaces can provide options regarding both physical workspace options and ways of working.

Approach: Six months after a N.Z. law firm moved to purpose built premises, researchers spent time in the new open-plan office. A brief staff survey was conducted and, in addition, 24 employees (both legal and corporate services staff) were interviewed. In total, data were collected from 99 employees (representing 56% of the 177 staff). The sample was representative of the firm with 37% being corporate services and 63% lawyers (70% of respondents were female). Interview and survey questions focussed on employees’ work experiences in both the “old” and “new” space, as well as the change process.

Key findings: The vast majority of the staff report being very satisfied in the new offices.

High collaboration and consultation in the decision making meant most employees accepted the change, if not enthusiastically, at least willingly. Egalitarian desk allocation, where every staff member (including partners in the firm) received similar spaces, also facilitated acceptance of the move. In addition, the thoughtfully designed space has very high indoor environment quality with abundant natural light, over 1,300 plants, “green walls”, and acoustic quietening throughout. There are numerous “collab” rooms, small, internal rooms with laptop docking facilities, sound proofing and headsets with blue tooth capabilities. In addition, there is an inviting library with strict silence norms to facilitate concentrated work. The lunch room is a particular highlight for many staff. It has a garden café feel and tables which are frequently used by groups of employees (including senior partners) who would otherwise have no reason to interact in the usual course of their day.

Implications: The key implications for best practice relate to both change and the design of the spaces. Well managed change is essential; beginning with getting by-in from senior equity partners and then frequently communicating with all staff. Thoughtful office design, with genuine attention paid to what employees might need in order to do good work, as opposed to (for example) simply knocking down walls and expecting increased collaboration, is crucial.

Conclusion: Open plan offices, though anecdotally disliked by employees, and empirically found to be both less “friendly” and more distracting, do not have to be disadvantageous to workers. Well-designed offices and carefully executed change processes can result in improved productivity, collaboration and, importantly, worker well-being

References:

Kaarlela-Tuomaala, A., Helenius, R., Keskinen, E., & Hongisto, V. (2009). Effects of acoustic environment on work in private office rooms and open-plan offices - Longitudinal study during relocation. *Ergonomics*, 52(11), 1423–1444.