Open vs Private Office Environments

Kerry Mothersill, Ph. D.

Brief Literature Review

A number of studies have evaluated the factors associated with the effects of open office work space on employee performance and satisfaction. Open offices were designed in the 1950s and reached their popularity in the 1970s. The primary impetus for the development of the design was cost reduction. Many claims were made regarding improvements in communication and productivity when workers were in an open office environment. It is notable that the belief was based on the social facilitation hypothesis which predicted that performance of routine tasks would improve in nonprivate work areas as employees who found their jobs to be boring would benefit from increased social stimulation. However, research findings have been mixed with some early studies suggesting positive effects while others indicating negative consequences including decreased performance, lower judgments of functional efficiency, decreased psychological privacy, environmental dissatisfaction, fewer friendship opportunities, and increased noise, disturbances and distractions (Brennan, Chugh & Kline, 2002).

In general, empirical findings indicate that employees prefer privacy in traditional offices over increased opportunities for social contact due to the negative effects of noise and distraction (Sundstrom, Burt & Kamp, 1980). Research has indicated that open office environments decrease employee satisfaction, increase stress, negatively affect coworker relations and decrease perceived performance (Brennan et al., 2002). The negative effects continue even after a period of accommodation.

Additional research has documented the negative effects of speech and office noise on concentration (Banbury & Berry, 1998), particularly in open office plans (Mital, McGlothalin, James & Hamid, 1992) as well as on work motivation (Evans & Johnson, 2000). Individuals in no-noise environments perform best on cognitively complex tasks and feel less disturbance and stress as compared with individuals working in noisy environments or space where office noise is masked (Loewen & Suedfeld, 1992). Irrelevant speech in open plan offices contributes to mental workload, poor performance, stress and fatigue (Smith-Jackson & Klein, 2009). Arrivals and departures, keyboard sounds, and conversational sound are particularly annoying and stressful (Mital, et al, 1992). Both speech and office noise disrupts cognitive performance and the effect is independent of the meaning of speech sounds (Banbury & Dianne, 1998). Lower levels of office noise buffer the negative impact of psychosocial job stress on job satisfaction, well-being and organizational commitment (Leather, Beale & Sullivan, 2003). When working on complex tasks, greater satisfaction is experienced when working in private office space as compared with more open work environments (Block & Stokes, 1998).

Long-term exposure to low-intensity office noise has potential health consequences (Evans & Johnson, 2000). In a study on employee burnout, results indicated that the amount of job demands and job control were related to health impairment and active

learning (Demerouti, Bakker, de Jonge, Janssen & Schaufeli, 2001). Control over one's work environment is an important factor.

The relationship among physical work environments, types of work and attitudes are interactive. Perceptions of the physical environment are moderated by job level and the type of work performed (Carlopio & Gardiner, 1992). Office accommodation can have a significant impact on organizational performance and productivity (van Ree, 2002). Achieving greater efficiency by reducing occupancy costs (space per employee) needs to be balanced with improving the productivity of employees by providing a comfortable and satisfying work environment. The design of work environments needs to provide professional staff with the space that is required to perform basic job functions that are considered most important (Kupritz, 1998). Private office environments are associated with lower levels of distraction and cognitive stress and employees who conduct high concentration work report more distraction in all work environments with the exception of private offices Seddigh, Berntson, Danielson & Westerlund, 2014).

The literature review suggests that open office space is not appropriate for professional therapists with multiple and complex work roles. The work performed by mental health professionals is not routine and few, if any, would describe it as boring. The frustration of not having one's tools (books, forms, testing equipment, etc) at hand and having insufficient space for organizing multitasking activities (therapy, supervision, education, committee work, etc) would be significant for therapy staff and detrimental for patient care and student education. It is noted that contrary to cost reductions that may be achieved with office support workers, changing to an open office design for mental health therapists actually increases space needs and costs.

Psychological Services and Workspace Costs

Not all the work of health professionals can be done in a cubicle, they need to have closed door rooms to book in order to do therapy, assessment, supervise students, conduct confidential telephone interactions, etc.

- A cubicle is typically 8ft by 8ft (64 sqft).
- A person in a cubicle for a 7.75 hour work day will occupy a total of 492.8 sq ft (7.75 times 64) during the course of a day.
- If the cubicle dweller also needs to book a closed door interview room (typical 10 ft by 12 ft room, or 120 sqft) to see patients, supervise students, etc (where privacy/quiet is required) for 3.6 hours a day, then that person will occupy an additional 432 sqft (3.6 times 120 sqft) during the course of the day.
- In total, the cubicle dweller will occupy 492.8 + 432 sqft = 924.8 in a day (the cubicle space remains vacant while the interview room is being used) in order to do his/her work.
- Alternatively, if the therapist is given a closed door 10 by 12 ft office to see patients, supervise, etc then over the course of the day (additional interview rooms are not required as the person can do all their work in one space), they occupy 120 times 7.75 hrs = 930 sqft.

- So, as long as the professional's job requires her/him to have a closed door space for at least 3.6 hours a day, then it is no longer cost effective to use cubicles.

Recommendations for Workspace

It is recommended that two factors be taken into account when assigning work space for psychologists (and other professionals) to conduct their assigned program work duties.

1) **Range and Complexity of Tasks**: Psychologists with multiple and complex work roles including therapy, psychological assessment, supervision (staff, practicum students, residents, provisional psychologists) education, and committee work are more productive and efficient when provided with dedicated office space that contains required books, forms, testing equipment, etc, and provides sufficient organizational space to maintain sustained concentration for the completion of multitasking activities in a timely manner.

2) **Frequency of Need for Confidential Space**. As long as the professional's job requires them to have a closed door space (for treatment or assessment of patients, supervision) for at least 3.6 hours a day, it is less expensive to provide dedicated office space. Occupancy costs are increased by leaving a cubicle empty in order to use a bookable space.

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