

The Hybrid Office

Mostly open workspaces can be distracting and productivity killers, although the problem isn't always the open office **layout**. The problem is companies approaching open office layouts the correct way.

The next-generation office **combines private offices, cubicle banks and truly open floor plans (in which even cubicle dividers are dismantled) as well as communal areas and [sound-proof rooms](#)** (click link for example) **where employees can go to concentrate on solo work**. The last part appears to be of increasing importance—a study by the architecture and design firm Gensler found that workers in 2013 spent 54% of their time on work requiring individual focus, up from 48% in 2008.

The result is a **hybrid office**, which incorporates a range of spaces and gives the employees the autonomy to move between them throughout the day.

History Behind Open Workspaces

Eliminating the cubicle saved companies money. “The cost saving aspect was a big driver—if you take down the walls, you can get a greater density of people in one space,” says organizational psychologist Matthew Davis, who studies office design. Today, most companies use 6-by-6-foot cubicles. When dividers are eliminated and benchlike setups are used, however, space per employee drops to 2 feet by 4 feet.

Thanks to financial motivations and changes in the way people work, the cubicle grew less popular as the percentage of companies with open, benchlike setups in the U.S. climbed, a trend that took off in 2009, according to Mabel Casey, a brand strategist at corporate furniture manufacturer Haworth. Today, Casey estimates **15-20%** of offices are using completely open-plan spaces without dividers.

Thanks to the corresponding backlash, we may be at the beginning of the next wave in office design. Suddenly, there's a demand for flexible design outside the talent-strapped tech industry, says Casey. Whereas 20 years ago, Haworth's corporate clients reserved approximately 10% of space for communal use, today the company says it's closer to 40%.

These economic factors blend neatly with a shift in how employee performance is measured. Portable devices and communication tools such as Slack make it easier than ever for managers to measure performance by output, as opposed to where, when, or even how work is completed.

Example of productivity in different areas of space: Men and women lounge with laptops in the common room. Rows of earbud-wearing workers sit at communal tables. Other workers engage in “focus time” in the sound-dampened pods scattered throughout the floor.

Open Office Layout Solutions

- **Diverse Spaces Are Key:**

Almost every open office proponent I spoke to pointed to the importance of diverse spaces in the workplace. Noise, interruptions, and lack of privacy are a problem in open workspaces. 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.**

- **More Private Offices Can Increase Unnecessary Electronic Communication:**

Fielding emails and instant messages from your own team members cuts down on productivity. There are many instances when employees would prefer a quick chat as opposed to wading through a chain of emails. If it's done correctly, disposing 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 approximately 25% because workers were able to meet informally instead of volleying emails from offices and cubes,” [according to the Wall Street Journal](#).

- **Introverts Might Not Knock on Your Office Door:**

Some people find it far more frightening to knock on an office door than to turn to a nearby colleague. Some employees are somewhat intimidated to get up and go into their managers or boss's office. For example, one employee stated “When they're sitting right there and walking by my desk all the time, it becomes 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.”

- **Variety:**

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, - What **needs to happen is a layered approach, creating different settings or zones, because it's never one-size-fits-all.** There needs to be spaces for those people who really require quiet to focus, whether they find it easier to work or they're more of an introvert. The goal is to provide spaces where everyone in the company, regardless of personality or role, will feel comfortable.

- **Design toward your goals:**

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. It's important that collaborative spaces don't disrupt people sitting at desks nearby. For example, some companies soundproof breakout rooms and phone booths (small private call rooms) 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.

- **The Library Effect:**

Desks that are divided by tall cubicle-like partitions that hide people's faces from one another this sometimes gives people a false sense of acoustic privacy. Some companies have found that when they bring the panels down, it has what they call a "library effect". You are more aware of the people around you and 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 made some offices quieter. When there are smaller or no partitions between the desks, it can be much easier to glance at a colleague across the room and determine whether or not it is a bad time to interrupt them by the "I'm working" expression on their face, or because they are visibly on the telephone, or typing furiously on their keyboard. In an office with huge partitions everywhere, employees can't always tell if they're interrupting someone.

- **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. Some companies have found success by creating spaces that are accompanied by clear, strict rules about how the spaces can be used—and by whom. Some rooms should have strict protocols. For example, one employee noted, "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."

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