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Open concept offices disrupt brainwaves: Study

But communication around process, soundproofing help workers adapt, say experts

By Sarah Dobson

There have been several studies debating the merits of open-space offices, touching on issues such as privacy, productivity and job satisfaction. A more recent look in the United Kingdom took a somewhat scientific approach to confirm these suspicions. In the TV program *The Secret Life of Buildings*, TV presenter and architectural historian Tom Dyckhoff wore a special cap that measured brainwaves. When he worked in a busy, open concept layout with everyday distractions, the computer measured intense bursts of interruption.

“Open-plan offices were designed with the idea that people can move around and interact freely to promote creative thinking and better problem-solving. But it doesn’t work like that,” said Jack Lewis, a neuroscientist who carried out the test. “If you are just getting into some work and a phone goes off in the background, it ruins what you are concentrating on.”

In the end, Dyckhoff said he could never work in an open-plan office again. So are employers on the wrong path when it comes to incorporating an open design?

Corus goes open concept

Corus Entertainment doesn’t think so. The media and entertainment company’s new headquarters at Toronto’s waterfront— called Corus Quay — are completely open concept, with no offices for anyone, including the CEO.

“It’s been a very positive experience for us,” said Kathleen McNair, executive vice-president of HR and corporate communications at Corus Entertainment. “It’s improved efficiency, it’s improved collaboration and it’s gotten employees talking to one another.”

The move to open concept was reflective of the company’s values of teamwork and collaboration, she said. However, there was an adjustment period.

“At the beginning, it was a bit distracting and, as part of the protocol training, we told people, ‘It is going to be a bit of a distraction if you’re used to working with your head down and your door closed’ — which really doesn’t fit with our style.”

And the acoustics are designed for an open concept office, said McNair. Someone sitting at one of the work stations would probably find it quieter than the acoustics in some offices and there are also numerous meeting rooms, she said.

“The noise levels are not an issue — it’s quiet here.”

In an open, collaborative environment or open culture, there should be elements to provide privacy, said Steve Cascone, vice-president of consulting services at Mayhew, provider of workspace design and solutions in Thornhill, Ont. That means, for example, sound masking that is like air circulation, so people can’t decipher exact conversations, and primary and secondary circulation paths so employees don’t disrupt others unnecessarily.

To help employees adjust, employers might try pink noise to neutralize sound or put soundproofing tiles in the ceilings, floors or walls, said Barbara Smyth, principal and senior interior designer at Vancouver Office Design.

“The idea is to have a shell that will receive all the vibration instead of projecting it,” she said. “(Employers) will also encourage the people to be aware of their partner next to them when they talk on the phone or if they talk to other people, to respect their concentration over the work.”

Encourage employee feedback to help with transition

But in the first month or two of a new design, issues do arise and Cascone recommends clients have a white board where employees can write down their concerns. Eventually, these issues are erased as people adapt, he said.

“When you’re in a more open environment, you’re aware of someone sitting next to you, so you don’t speak as loudly, you adjust the tone of voice and level — it’s just human behaviour, you sort of adapt to your environment.”

The adjustment period is part of the change management process, said Cascone. People want to know what’s going on, to feel like part of a team, so they should be involved from the beginning.

“It’s not always that 100 per cent of their input is going to be incorporated into the final design but it’s the fact that they’ve been heard and they then understand why changes are being made. And it’s communicating to them along the line of the entire process, whether through town hall meetings or through issuing newsletters as part of the renovation process.”

Corus was active in communicating and engaging with employees, said McNair. HR met with each department and discussed potential challenges — such as noise or aromatic lunch food — and presented solutions. Pseudo-work stations were also set up so people could see what the work environment would look like. Each department also developed protocols to deal with issues, she said.

And when they finally moved, some of the most vocal opponents said, “I was so wrong, this is so great,” said McNair.

There is definitely a time of adjustment, said Smyth.

“There is a big education around that that needs to be done, probably in the first few weeks, in order to make people comfortable and know what’s the limit and how far they can go in terms of expressing themselves,” she said.

There can also be challenges around privacy, storage and organization and for some people it’s an easier change than others, she said. “But there is no choice because it’s a question of cost.”

The old systems that use up more real estate are just not affordable in cities such as Vancouver, she said.

“(The traditional setup) also brings barriers between people, it really slows down the communication, it’s less open, less casual. Separation really affects the way people work,” said Smyth.

