

# For the right office space

While some say an open-office helps staff communicate with each other easily, others consider it a distraction, resulting in reduced productivity. By **SHRINIVAS RAO**

■ ■ DESIGN ■ ■

Open offices have been synonymous with flexibility, communication and collaboration. However, they are slowly losing their purpose and possibly the very thing they intended to accomplish, especially due to ever increasing complaints from employees about noise and clutter. As the saying goes "One size doesn't fit all," it just maybe true in the case of open offices too. Companies are now beginning to redesign and create silent areas/zones by rearranging within the existing office floor plan, for employees who seek privacy while working on confidential projects and escape other distractions.

An open office floorplan is distinguished by neither fully closed areas nor separate rooms...i.e. workstations are divided merely by under-sized screens/panels on a single floor. These come in two set-ups - benching and desking. The former refers to employees working wherever they find space, and the latter refers to a personalised space for each employee in a large room.

### Pros and cons

While collaboration and ease of flow of information and interaction are the obvious benefits, open offices cost 50% lesser due to smaller footprint and decreased build-out costs. Also, open offices can seat a larger number of people than a traditional layout. Open offices also emphasize on growth and resilience, and tend to remove age barriers. Around 70% of U.S. personnel work in an open office.

While some might like the idea of being able to collaborate and communicate with each other easily, others consider it a distraction, resulting in reduced productivity. A high rate of absenteeism due to ill health, environmental stress and lack of focus has been directly attributed to the design of the work space. There are reports that suggest that 25 to 30% employees are not able to work under imperceptible but constant surveillance, besides dealing with other sounds and distractions. Some feel that open offices tend to reduce morale and lower levels of concentration. While open offices increase transparency, many employees prefer to work in isolation as they feel that open offices lead to unhealthy competition and distractions, which further impacts motivation.

To mitigate the concerns associated with open offices, the following approaches can be considered:

### Hybrid approach

The new generation office or 'hybrid office' uses a layered approach that refers to a combination of cubicles, open spaces, communal areas, sound-proof cabins and private offices, to ad-



dress different needs. Such spaces are also known as 'collaborative spaces' and can be categorised as small rooms and quiet corners (especially for meetings so other employees are not disturbed).

### Employee approach

Many employees have begun to reach for their headphones to ward off auditory distractions. Some employees have also started using desks which include a green and red light. While the red is on, it implies that the employee is not to be disturbed.

It is also important to increase visibility by lowering dividers; if one cannot view the person one is conversing with, the conversations tend to get louder, disrupting others' work flow. Also, if people are crowding around a desk for discussions, it should be protocol or a 'work together agreement' to move away from that desk to another area to avoid disturbance.

### Design approach

From a design perspective, one can build walls or tear them down to enhance output.

Installing NRC (Noise Reduction Coefficient) ceiling tiles dealing with a rate of .85 and higher, aid in keeping sound off hard surfaces.

A 'pink noise' system assists in transforming words into muffled sounds, and masks both mechanical sounds and human voice.

Some companies have installed 'alcove' sofas which have high, padded sides that give a feeling of privacy: there is no visual distraction and

people outside cannot hear anything, thus creating a completely collaborative area without the need of private offices (currently used by organizations such as BMW, Sony, HSBC, Pfizer, GlaxoSmithKline).

'Workbays' are also being used with variations on a cubicle that minimise distraction due to its curved, wrap around sides that reach the eye level.

### Digital approach

Distractions due to an open office plan may cost about 40-60% of an employees' productive time or reduce productivity by about 15%. Therefore, companies are investing in digital collaboration tools like 'Slack' which eliminates the need for emails, while engaging in short spurts of communication. Other tools such as 'Asana' and 'Trello' provide the tasks and completion dates, keeping everyone informed, thus reducing meeting times.

There certainly is a disconnect on whether open offices are beneficial or detrimental. Every organisation cannot mirror a Google or a Facebook: such spaces work in these organisations because their work culture demands and accepts it, catering to the diverse needs of its employees. Nevertheless, as collaboration is the key driving force in output, if an open office floor plan is bringing too many distractions, it's time to take cognisance of the fact, evaluate and follow what works best for employees, teams and the organisation as a whole.