

Is it time to rethink an open-space office?



You've probably heard the argument that if you want to improve communication and foster collaboration, tear down the walls and create an open-plan environment.

Open-plan offices have grown in popularity for not only communication benefits, but economic factors. In short, you can squeeze in more employees. The idea is that open spaces promote community spirit and give workers a sense of team.

But a new study based on a survey of over 42,000 office workers in 303 office buildings finds no evidence to support this claim.

The study, by Jungsoo Kim and Richard de Dear, titled *Workspace satisfaction: The privacy-communication trade-off in open-plan offices*, found that workers in private offices are more satisfied and, thus, more productive. Moreover, workers in private offices tend to be more satisfied with ease of interaction than open-plan workers, the study found.

In an open-space environment, the lack of privacy coupled with typical office bustle and noise has shown to actually discourage communication.

The researchers found that, oddly, open-plan offices with workspace partitions irked employees more than open areas with no partitions. Kim and de Dear theorize that this is probably because cubicle walls make ambient noise harder to predict and feel less controllable.

What satisfies workers most? The amount of space they have.

"Our results categorically contradict the industry-accepted wisdom that open-plan layout enhances communication between colleagues and improves occupants' overall work environmental satisfaction," the researchers said.

When it comes to those office caverns, "very few people think that they are productive spaces," said de Dear. "You need places to concentrate."