

# Why open plan offices are like Marmite...

The open plan office continues to strongly divide opinion in the workplace as, like Marmite, people either love it or hate it.



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But one thing is for sure, they are likely to be around for a while as businesses struggle to balance the tension between the need for immediate collaboration and the demand for individual, quiet spaces where people can concentrate.

Richard Andrews, Managing Director of Inspiration Office, an Africa-wide office space and furniture consultancy, said that his company continues to install both open plan offices and private office spaces in equal measure despite the growing global pushback against open plan.

“It’s a horse for courses situation. There is no cut and dried winner in the debate. It really does depend on whether open plan is best for your employees and the way they work rather than a philosophical debate.”

Andrews does acknowledge however that there is a growing body of recent evidence that shows open plan makes it harder to work.

A study published in the Journal of Environmental Psychology that studied 40,000 workers in 300 US office buildings

concluded that enclosed private offices outperformed open-plan layouts in most aspects of Indoor Environmental Quality - namely in acoustics, privacy and proxemics (how uncomfortable people feel when forced into close proximity to other people) issues.

Said Andrews: "Benefits of enhanced 'ease of interaction' were smaller than the penalties of increased noise level and decreased privacy resulting from open-plan office configuration."

Another study by SP Banbury and DC Berry showed that loud noise has become one of the greatest irritants at work. It revealed that 99% of employees reported that their concentration was impaired by various types of office noise, especially telephones left ringing at vacant desks and people talking in the background. A further study showed that 68% of those surveyed become frustrated when sounds levels rise above normal conversation level.

Even employees at Apple, which just spent \$5 billion and six years building a centralised campus around the open-plan office concept, are reportedly dissatisfied. Some are said to have insisted on their own space outside of the new spaceship style building.

"But, just like a taste for Marmite, many businesses have a definite passion for the lack of walls or other physical barriers in open plan offices.

"Open spaces makes it easier for employees to interact with each other on a regular basis. The constant intermingling not only generates a sense of camaraderie, it also enhances the flow of information and teamwork."

Andrews noted than another benefit which may not immediately spring to mind is that of budget.

"Having an open plan office can save the company money, as costs are reduced on construction, utilities and office equipment. It is more efficient to have everyone in one room in terms of utility bills and office supplies. It also provides the best flexibility to accommodate extra capacity for when the company grows as desks can easily be reconfigured.

"It really comes to how your company works best," Andrews concluded.

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