

# Open plan offices attract highest levels of worker dissatisfaction, study finds

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Open-plan layouts showed considerably higher dissatisfaction rates than enclosed office layouts, the data showed. Credit: John Blower

Open plan offices attract the highest levels of worker dissatisfaction, with cramped quarters, lack of privacy and noise topping the list of gripes, a large study has found.

An open plan workplace, in which enclosed rooms are eschewed in

favour of partitioned or non-partitioned desks arranged around a large room, are supposed to promote interaction between workers and boost teamwork.

However, a study of over 40,000 survey responses collected over a decade has found that the benefits for workers are quickly outweighed by the disadvantages.

The study, conducted by the University of Sydney and published in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, involved analysis of 42,764 survey samples collected in 303 [office buildings](#) in the US, Finland, Australia and Canada by the Center for the Built Environment at the University of California, Berkeley since 2000.

The surveys asked respondents to list their level of satisfaction or [dissatisfaction](#) felt for various aspects of office design such as temperature, visual privacy and noise.

According to the University of Sydney's analysis of the data, around two-thirds of respondents work in open plan offices.

"In general, open-plan layouts showed considerably higher dissatisfaction rates than enclosed office layouts," the researchers wrote in their paper.

More than half of the occupants in open-plan cubicles (59% for high partitioned cubicle and 58% for low partitioned cubicle) and 49% in open-plan with no or limited partitions expressed dissatisfaction with the condition of sound privacy, the analysis found.

"What the data tells us is that, in terms of occupant satisfaction, the disadvantages brought by noise disruption were bigger than the predicted benefits of increased interaction," said lead author Jungsoo Kim, a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney's Faculty of Architecture, Design

and Planning.

"Between 20% and 40% of open plan office occupants expressed high levels of dissatisfaction for visual privacy and over 20% of all office occupants, regardless of office layout, registered dissatisfaction with the thermal conditions."

Mr Kim said his analysis did not look at whether open plan offices are more productive but that he suspected that workers found overhearing snippets of colleagues' conversations distracting.

"It's not part of my research but based on the literature on noise distraction, previous researchers have said that intelligible speech interrupts cognitive processes. Steady, constant noise, like ventilation noise, doesn't interrupt people's thinking too much but intelligible speech does."

Professor Richard de Dear, Head of Architectural Design Science at the University of Sydney and a co-author of the paper, said worker satisfaction was important because it was linked to productivity.

"The productivity benefits of teams working together have been used to sell the open plan office for decades. Yet, if you do these evaluations and actually talk to occupants of open plan offices, very few people think that they are productive spaces. You need places to concentrate."

**More information:** [www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ...  
ii/S0272494413000340](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0272494413000340)

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