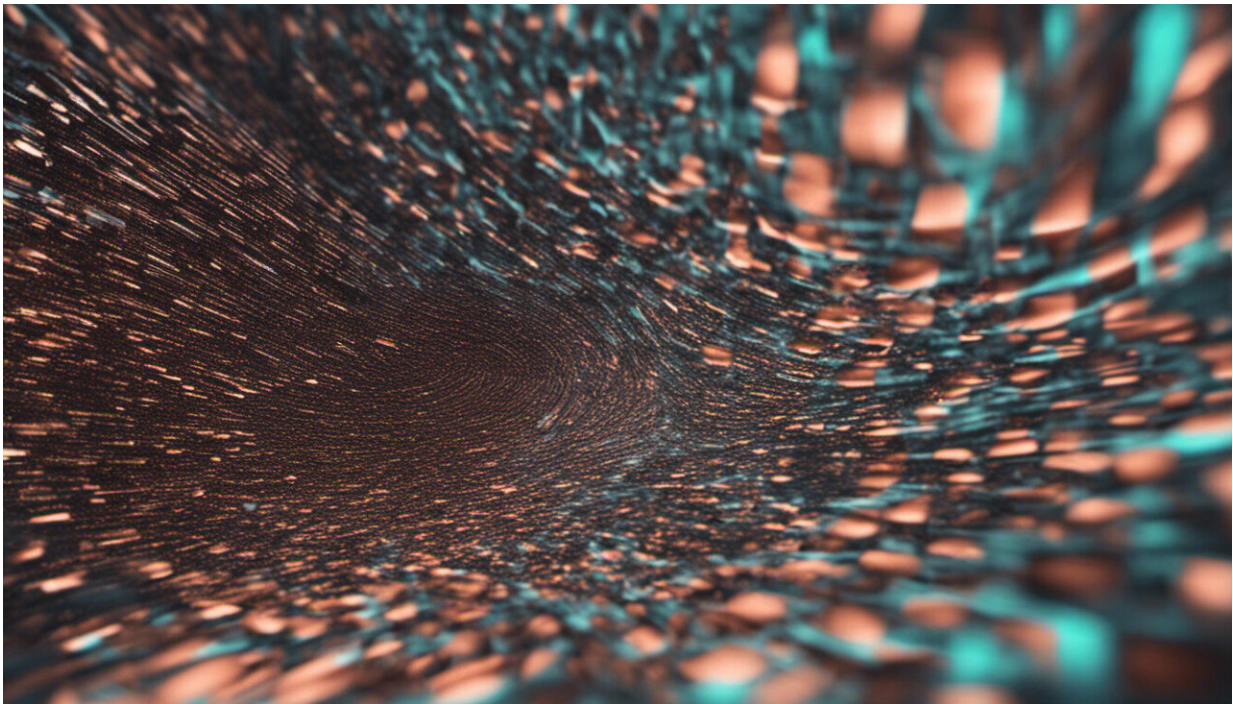


# Why open offices hurt collaboration and what can be done about it

November 13 2019, by Colleen Walsh

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Last year, Ethan Bernstein's research hit a deep cultural nerve.

"I never would have imagined I'd be a person to get hate mail," said the Harvard Business School associate professor in organizational behavior, whose offending paper, authored with Harvard graduate Stephen Turban

threw a bucket of cold water on the hot trend of open office layouts. The study, "The impact of the 'open' [workspace](#) on human [collaboration](#)," concluded that the new configurations actually reduced interaction, contrary to the intended result. It became one of the most-mentioned [scholarly articles](#) of 2018.

"It was respectful, but it was still hate mail," said Bernstein.

The strong response, which also included a significant amount of fan mail, reflects how important work environment is to job satisfaction. It also mirrors an ongoing societal debate about the value of open-office environments—wide, exposed rooms with long tables instead of desks, or clusters of cubes or workspaces with few or no barriers in between. Once hailed as the office of the future—with the added benefit of potential cost savings for employers who could fit more workers into less space—the open concept has met with mixed reviews in recent years: driving collaboration for some but driving others crazy.

In light of all that, Bernstein decided he needed to take a second look. His new piece, "The Truth About Open Offices," explores why open offices seem to discourage interaction and how companies can create designs that best fit the needs of their employees. The article was written with Ben Waber, CEO and co-founder of Humanyze, an analytics software provider, and it appears in the new issue of the *Harvard Business Review*.

"The first paper did methodology well, and it did rigor well, and it helped answer a longstanding debate between sociologists who argue that removing spatial boundaries will increase collaboration and social psychologists have argued the opposite is true," said Bernstein. "What we didn't do was tell people the reason their employees stop collaborating face-to-face."

In the new piece, the authors turn to a French philosopher from the 18th century for answers. Denis Diderot was the first to write about the fourth wall—the idea in theater that there is a kind of invisible, imaginary barrier that lets an audience observe the action in the fictional world onstage with the actors seeming unaware they are being watched. "The larger the audience, the more important the fourth wall" to the actors who must remain in character, the article notes.

Bernstein and Waber suggest that office workers in open settings need to have the discipline of performers in a musical or play in order to drown out distractions and get their work done, and that they get creative with how they go about it.

"It can be my really big headphones, or I don't look at you when you pass by, or I have a red light on my desk that signals I am unavailable, or I shush my colleagues," said Bernstein. "And because those norms are happening in open spaces—because everyone can see and hear them—they spread faster than they do in more modular spaces.

"I think that's the fourth wall, only playing out in a different way."

Open offices also ramp up digital engagement. Instead of talking directly, workers tend to send colleagues electronic messages if they appear busy or engaged in a conversation with someone else, said Bernstein, even though they may be just a few feet away.

When it comes to solutions, Bernstein and Waber encourage experimentation and collaboration. Letting employees simply choose their preference isn't optimal, they note, because some will opt for closed offices, others open spaces, and still others will work from home—meaning staffers will be even less likely to collide and collaborate than before. Instead, they urge managers to consider getting together with employees to test—rigorously, using the scientific method

or A/B testing—different office configurations.

As an example, they cite the efforts of the pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline (a Humanyze client), which is currently overhauling its London headquarters. The company has developed a pilot space and rotated through teams of employees, tracking everything from their steps, heart rate, and blood pressure to their well-being, collaboration, and performance. Using the results, the company is fine-tuning "all aspects of the space—lighting, temperature, aroma, air quality, acoustic masking, ergonomics, and design—to help its people do (and interact) more by making the space respond to the employees' needs, whether professional or physiological," notes the piece.

And while large studies and pilot programs designed for office overhauls are effective, even small tweaks in an open office can make a big difference. One company, the article notes, added whiteboards after finding that open meeting areas with movable whiteboards generated 50 percent more interactions than open meeting areas without them.

"We can actually build buildings that respond to people rather than the other way around," said Bernstein. "Let the experiments proliferate, and let the people who are working in the spaces feel ownership over them, because without that collective and rapid experimentation—more design thinking and less design—we are not going to get better workspaces."

The ultimate goal, the article states, "should be to get the right people interacting with the right richness at the right times."

**More information:** The Truth About Open Offices. *Harvard Business Review*. [hbr.org/2019/11/the-truth-about-open-offices](https://hbr.org/2019/11/the-truth-about-open-offices)

Ethan S. Bernstein et al. The impact of the 'open' workspace on human collaboration, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*:

*Biological Sciences* (2018). [DOI: 10.1098/rstb.2017.0239](https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2017.0239)

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