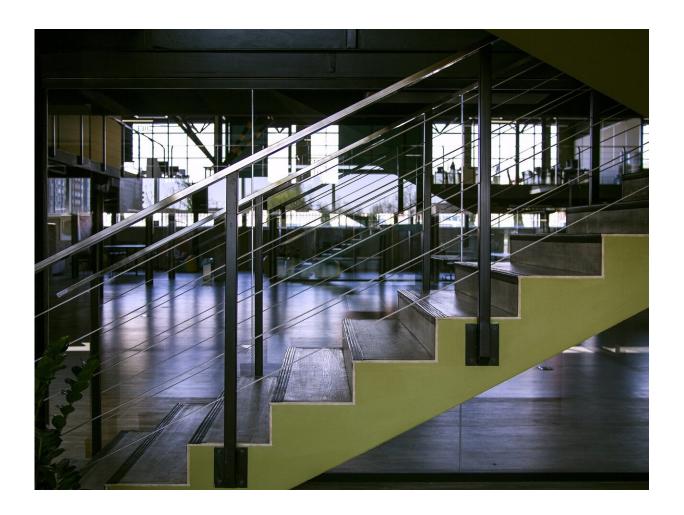# Are the doors closing on the open office?

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As workers return to their offices after the initial phase of lockdowns implemented to stop the spread of coronavirus, there is a new reckoning in the workplace: Will the open office survive?

The open office concept, an innovative model that emerged in the 1960s, is an open-plan work environment devoid of enclosed office rooms or walled cubicles for employees that share large spaces and work in close proximity. It was heralded by a new philosophy of work—a shift from worker "productivity" (which emphasized efficiency) to a renewed focus on "creativity and collaboration."

But now tensions inside offices are rising. As Sarah Needleman of the Wall Street Journal points out, workers are clashing over masks, cubicle barriers and disinfectants. Needleman describes how workers complain that some colleagues aren't taking the virus seriously enough, while others express an overreaction by their co-workers. Some don't hesitate to confront colleagues whose approach they deem unacceptable, while others steer clear of arguments.

One can infer from these recent developments that these tensions could persist to a higher degree in the open office, where perceptions of territoriality and infection control have become dire.

The typical office typology was not always open. It emerged through an evolution of organizational culture in the UK and U.S. a century prior to becoming a viable office type. British architect Francis Duffy describes the earliest offices as expressing a palace-like grandeur and home-like setting. In the middle of the century, the Seagram Building in New York (1954) became the epitome of corporate culture with the consolidation of office spaces brought about in response to high-rise, high-density models and the advent of air-conditioning technology. Later, more flexible management styles gave rise to early models of the open office concept that reduced dividing walls between co-workers and introduced office landscaping.

During this time, the open office concept also received a boost from Robert Propst, the head of research at Herman Miller, who introduced a

new type of office furniture. Known as the "action office system," this model replaced dividing walls by the introduction of innovative fabric and metal barriers that could be used to thread electrical wiring inside it. These barriers then morphed into the now-famous cubicle that provided workers with individual territorial markers.

The open office concept made a comeback in the dotcom revolution of the 90s with the demands of the creative class for collaborative spaces giving rise to business incubators, start-up accelerators and co-working spaces.

One model of the open office that gained tremendous media attention in the '90s was the revolutionary concept introduced by Jay Chiat, the former boss of TBWA Chiat/Day advertising agency. In the hopes of transforming the work culture of a creative profession such as advertising, Jay took away employees' cubicles and desks, equipped them with portable phones and PowerBooks, and turned them into wandering advertising nomads who could perform their tasks wherever they liked. It was similar to the recent concept of "hot-desking" in which workers are not provided assigned or permanent spaces. Aided by Italian architect Gaetano Pesce's design, Jay wanted to inspire and creatively challenge his employees by introducing colorful spaces with experimental furniture, large windows, a coffee bar and lockers. However, after a few years of its operation, the employees revolted against disruption of ownership and routine, and the company dismantled the experiment.

Research conducted by Ethan Bernstein and Ben Waber of the Harvard Business School, who studied office workers transitioning from cubicles to open offices, found there was an increase in digital communication among workers and a dramatic drop in face-to-face interaction by as much as 70 percent. Ethan theorized that moving to an open public affected the dominant social norms, prompting employees to avoid

spontaneous conversations and switch to modes of communication that keep the workplace silent.

A recent study on the open office in the UK, conducted by Alison Hirst and Christina Schwabenland, revealed how increased visibility and surveillance of the open office concept created gendered spatial power differences. Some women spoke of the anxiety they felt and the restrictions they placed on themselves to avoid being judged by the "male gaze" with the newfound visibility being uncomfortable or oppressive.

The managers of the open office saw it differently. According to them, the design would explicitly remove hierarchical and departmental boundaries and promote fluid, informal networking. Instead of an oppressive surveillance, they saw an opportunity to grow into a fulfilling new identity as both an individual and a member of the collective.

The emergence of COVID-19 brings a new reckoning for the open office's viability, especially with emerging health and safety concerns. The cubicle could make a comeback, and according to experts, workers may see knee-operated sinks to wash hands before entering a building, touch-free thermometers, hand sanitizers and even UV lights installed in the air ducts. Industry observers also predict increased use of plexiglass barriers that act as "sneeze guards" or "cough screens" and rising cubicle heights to stop the virus from spreading easily.

Other changes discussed include hand sanitizers built into desks that are positioned at 90-degree angles, air filters that push air down and not up, outdoor gathering space to allow collaboration, windows that actually open for freer airflow, quarantine rooms, antimicrobial paint on the walls and rounded corners in toilet cubicles.

In summary, the doors seem to be rapidly closing on the open office

concept, at least temporarily. The psychological concerns of ownership and privacy, the health concerns of the pandemic, the technological advances for remote collaboration, all seem to be creating a critical mass that is stacking against it and expediting its demise.

However, if history were a guide, there is a reason to believe that it could make another resurgence in the longer term, once people get over the psychological barrier of feeling safe once again in a social setting.

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