Is Open Plan Still Viable?

Taking Stock in the Post-Pandemic Era of Work

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Many critics and industry leaders were quick to declare the death of the open plan office at the height of the pandemic and the corporate world's pivot to working from home. But with the proper adjustments to past oversights, the flexibility of the open plan can enable a variety of strategies to make return-to-office programs successful.

Well before Covid-19 became a ubiquitous term, the open plan office was a hotly debated concept. As companies turned in droves to knocking down walls and configuring open workstations, the results did not universally appeal to employees across industries.

Among the objections that surfaced, noise and distraction, lack of privacy, and presciently, health-related concerns over the spread of germs became part of the public conversation. Researchers studied the dynamics of open plans and produced mixed findings. Perhaps most famously, in 2019, Harvard Business School uncovered data using electronic sensors showing that collaboration and social interaction decreased in the workplaces it studied, countering one of the central claims of the design concept.

Yet open plan persisted. Appealing due to potential cost savings and space efficiencies, it remained a favorite with employers. Other users found merit in its tendency to increase daylight exposure, democratize access to upper management, and in the right line of work, enable teams to collaborate seamlessly.

As we now reflect on a period that saw our homes morph into our workplaces to counteract a virus, it's not inappropriate to ask: is open plan dead? Should we heed the legitimate concerns of some employees and toss out the model? And is it a concept that perpetually threatens to interrupt business operations in future public health emergencies?

[1]Bernstein E., Waber B., "The Truth About Open Offices," November – December 2019, Harvard Business Review.

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Open Plan vs. De-densification

With organizations across the country enacting return-to-office plans, the moment is right for reconsidering workplace strategies and layouts that enable businesses to successfully welcome their employees back. Some past open plan layouts likely underperformed because a company chose to adopt a trend without first deeply examining its own culture or the plan's functionality given the work styles of its employees.

After experiencing the flexibility of home working and as employers face continuing recruitment challenges, employees are exercising their power to influence the circumstances of their daily work environment. Where lingering concerns about open plan exist, it is important to distinguish whether openness or density fuels anxiety. In many cases, it is a robust and thoughtful de-densification strategy that stands to allay the most common worries about open plan workplaces.

Learning from the Past

To proactively take stock of the needs of a workforce, corporations must complete a thorough assessment of their people and culture before deciding on any layout strategy. One example of a successful approach was in our work with Comcast. Before transitioning 1.3 million square feet of space to an open plan, Comcast invested in a meticulous and comprehensive workplace evaluation, relying heavily on user input.

Comcast utilized everything from in-depth interviews with employees to a large space mockup, engaging 3,000 employees to test it out. We helped them establish a robust change management process to manage the transition. Most importantly, Comcast took its time deciding, carefully considering data and responding directly to the evidence. One outcome was choosing to make significant investments in state-of-the-art acoustic technology to aid employees' privacy and concentration.
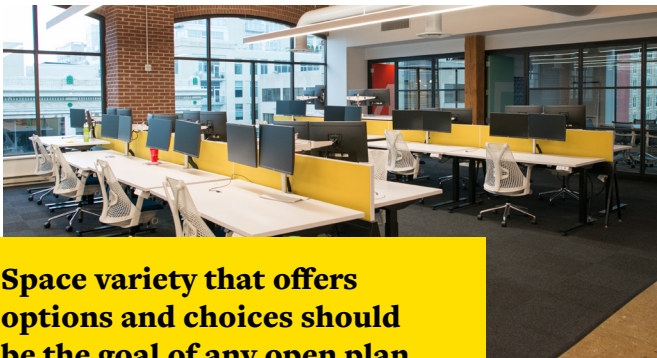

Comcast Technology Center, Philadelphia

While the scope of Comcast's project will not match every company's budget or capabilities, organizations can scale their efforts appropriately. The key is to inform any open plan strategy with good, actionable data that centers the company's workforce.

Avoiding the Common Pitfalls of Open Plan

One of the clear advantages of open plan is its inherent flexibility. This essential quality allows companies to accommodate a wide variety of hybrid models for return-to-office. Open plan is also a concept that is ripe for customization to provide meaningful solutions for user comfort and functionality. But in the past, many companies overlooked strategies that would attend to their employees' needs in an open environment. The most common missteps have been:

Over-dependency on Bench Seating
One of the least effective strategies in nearly any office plan is long, endless rows of open workstations crammed together, aisles crowded with chairs and personal belongings. Bench seating is one of the simplest strategies for maximizing employees per square foot, yet the polar opposite of how companies should think about quantifying their space (square feet per employee).

Under-investing in Acoustics
We all know where sound travels in a space without traditional walls. To avoid the potential nuisance of noise, companies should pay special attention to the rich range of options they have for acoustics technology. Sound absorbing panels, furniture, and fixtures can be configured rigorously throughout the floor plan to ensure that no employee has to sacrifice productivity or concentration to sit in their optimal environment.

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Space variety that offers options and choices should be the goal of any open plan. If bench seating is a must, de-densifying these areas by removing a desk in between or simply expanding the size of each workstation is an appropriate strategy for a post-Covid workspace. They can also be allotted for reserved, bookable seating.

But typical employees focus on multiple tasks throughout the day and have varying needs around collaboration and socializing. Providing a range of space types (e.g., huddle rooms, desk pods, heads-down spaces, or larger open collaboration areas) truly harnesses the potential of an open plan. As a wellness bonus, it encourages employees to move around and untether themselves from a fixed seating arrangement for the full day.

Neglecting to Use the Right Technology
A progressive space requires a savvy approach to technology. The right kind of technology will empower employees to get the maximum benefit from an open plan that is well diversified in space type. Tools that give employees comfort and control within their personal space are key, such as high-tech headsets, temperature and lighting controls, and ergonomic features that support stability and range of motion. Equipping meeting rooms with audiovisual technology expands communication capabilities. And crucially, a user-friendly desk-booking system is the secret to optimizing space usage throughout the day.

Considerations for De-densification Strategies

Of all potential open plan improvements, de-densification is now the most timely and urgent need as companies transition from full-time home working.


Effective approaches to de-densifying office space will include the following elements:


Listening First

Tempting as it may be to make hasty and low-cost changes to the floor plan, listening to your employees' needs and concerns first has never been more important. Just as companies may have issued user surveys about working from home and schedule preferences, they should also assess employee expectations for coming back to the office. Any de-densification plan should support the potential for changing health needs with no interruption to productivity or accommodation of work styles.
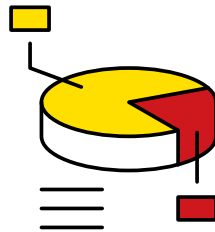
Collecting Data

We are still in a shifting situation as rules change and the pandemic winds down. Hybrid scenarios, for scores of companies, are new territory. Optimizing space utilization is an ongoing endeavor, and initial changes to the floor plan should continue to be tested and reviewed. Employers can use sensor software to monitor space use and adjust as needed.
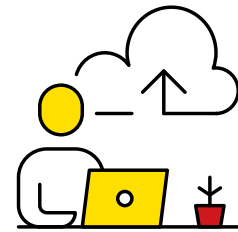
Thinking Beyond the Office

Strategies to de-densify exist beyond the primary workplace. Some employees chose to relocate further from their offices during the pandemic. Companies are now expanding their geographic boundaries for recruitment to remain competitive in the war for talent. Establishing satellite offices or taking advantage of coworking spaces are ways to minimize or perhaps complement changes in the primary office. It also gives employees more options beyond working from home, relieves the pressure of long commutes, and naturally reduces occupancy in the primary workplace.

Open Plan for a New Era

While some might have hoped the pandemic would be the final word in the open plan debate, it would be a mistake to abandon the concept now. By its nature, an open plan is a highly flexible tool for companies to use in building high-performing, supportive workplaces.

As organizations transition to new operating models, it will offer room for trial and error and allow employers to give their teams more choices than ever before. Using the lessons from the past to guide the present, the open plan is a concept that still has a lot of untapped potential.

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