

Neither open nor equitable

The high cost of open offices

Steven Bell's October 2023 *C&RL News* article, "We're All About Openness: Except When it Comes to Our Workspaces," is propaganda for open offices masquerading as "an objective look at the open office environment."¹ Bell minimizes the costs that open offices pose to employee well-being and to the functioning of the organization, and falsely equates the move to open offices with greater openness and equity. While I don't disagree that there are ways to use design to mitigate some of the harm to employees and their ability to work productively in open offices, research suggests there will still be significant harm and it will not be felt equally. As a fellow open office dweller, I felt it was important to offer another perspective, supported by scholarship on the topic.

Bell suggests in his article that the verdict on open offices is mixed and that it's just as easy to find evidence supporting open offices as critiquing them. In looking at systematic reviews on the topic, including several that have been published over the past three years, I found this to be far from the case. In fact, the scholarly consensus on open offices is uniformly negative and the move to open offices comes with many detrimental impacts on employee well-being, organizational health, and work output.

The real impact of open offices

It is probably not surprising to hear that open or shared office spaces lead to decreases in productivity, but people may be unaware of the unanimity and statistical strength of those conclusions.² One recent experimental study provides insight into the mechanics of this productivity dip.³ Researchers gave subjects a task to do that required cognitive flexibility. One group worked in silence, but the other was subjected to the sort of ambient noise that is common in open offices. The researchers found that noise reduced analytical and affective processing, making it difficult to do deep thinking and to trust one's gut feelings. They also found increased physiological arousal in the group exposed to noise, which also negatively impacts task performance.

A consequence of open offices that is rarely considered is the negative impact on worker health. One systematic review concluded that "compared with individual offices, the introduction of shared or open-plan office space is remarkably consistent in its consequences, with every study reporting deleterious effects on employees' health."⁴ Another found that studies of sick leave use for employees in open offices saw increases of between 18 and 62 percent versus those in private offices.⁵ We just emerged from a pandemic and are learning

Meredith Farkas is a faculty librarian at Portland Community College, email: meredith.farkas@pcc.edu.

to live with an endemic virus that continues to cause death and disability. It is irresponsible to design spaces that put employees at far greater risk of contracting and spreading disease.

It is a common misconception that moving to open offices will lead to increased communication and collaboration, based on the assumption that if people are in closer proximity, peers and organizational leaders will be more accessible. Not only has that not been borne out by research, but the exact opposite has been found. One study that followed users at two separate companies with wearable sensors both before and after a move from private offices to an open office scheme found that face-to-face interactions decreased between 67 and 72 percent and that email interactions increased by up to 56 percent.⁶ This makes a lot of sense when you consider the lack of privacy for open discussion and the fact that any conversations in an open office space will disturb others. Many studies also found that open offices actually had negative impacts on employee relationships.⁷ Not having easy access to private spaces makes it difficult to have urgent sensitive conversations when they come up in the course of our workday. While Bell being in an open office as an associate university librarian seems laudable—since managers at most institutions still have private offices—it is likely to make him less accessible to the people he manages.

Finally, open offices are strongly associated with significantly lower job satisfaction and psychological well-being. Some of the reasons for this include increased noise and visual stimuli, the lack of privacy, the cognitive load of completing tasks in a distracting environment, the lack of individual control over the environmental conditions of the space, and worsening relationships with co-workers.⁸ When considering the research, it's astonishing that administrators would choose to make their employees less competent, less productive, less happy, less present, and less well given the impact it will certainly have on the bottom line: our services to students.

Equal treatment is not equity

Bell also suggests that his library's move to an open office setup is a move to increase equity because it treats every worker equally rather than having private offices as a status symbol for management and those in professional roles. While I support removing trappings of status, treating everyone equally is not equity. As a librarian who suffers from migraines, I had the ability to better control my environment, and thus my illness, when in a private office and working from home. In the open office setup, my migraines became more frequent and severe, and any accommodation that might help me in the space would inconvenience the other five people working there. For those who are neurodivergent, environmental factors in open office spaces are not just distracting, but significant causes of stress and harm. People who are immunocompromised are put at significantly greater risk to their health in a space where illnesses are more easily transmissible. These disabilities are far from the only ones exacerbated by working in an open office setting. Treating people equally ignores the unique needs that people with disabilities have and is not only inequitable but ableist.⁹

Library workers also don't all do the same types of work. While I do not believe that people deserve private offices based on status, I know from my own experience that some tasks are much easier to complete in an open office and others are virtually impossible. At my place of work, our web programmer has a private office because his work requires deep concentration. Many other types of library work draw heavily on our analytical processing abilities, like lesson planning, tutorial development, and chat reference. Again, treating everyone

equally ignores the fact that some will be far better able to do their work in an open office space than others. It's nice that Bell is satisfied with his workspace and that the drawbacks of open offices are merely annoyances for him, but that is not the case for many whether by virtue of the nature of their work, the presence of a disability, or both.

The growth of online learning and online meetings has also made open office spaces more fraught. When I first started working in a cubicle nine years ago, I only had one online committee meeting per month, and our shared office space made even that difficult to focus on. Similarly, my colleagues' occasional online meetings made it difficult for me to work. Now, with the exponential increase in online meetings, synchronous teaching in online classes, and online consultations with students, the need for private spaces has only increased. While work-from-home has certainly become a more mainstream option, it is neither equally accessible nor equally supported, and there are plenty of library workers who, on an average workday, will need to staff a service desk and do work that requires quiet concentration. Offering a smattering of bookable private spaces is unlikely to meet demand.

Our working conditions impact the student experience

I would urge library workers to question false dichotomies like Bell's "user-centric or worker-centric mindset"¹⁰ as the two are not mutually exclusive. As a teaching librarian, my working conditions are my students' learning conditions. My ability to plan a highly interactive and effective learning experience or design a tutorial for an online class hinges on my ability to concentrate and think analytically. If employees face constant distractions, harmful environmental conditions, and feel psychologically less well because of the office setup, they will not be able to provide the best services possible to our students. Libraries are so much more than building space, and managers should do everything in their power to ensure that the talented people they hired to serve students can actually do their best work.

Conclusion

I fully understand that with space at a premium at many colleges and universities, some administrators may choose to decrease the staff workspace footprint, but they should only adopt open offices with a full understanding of the significant costs to employee well-being, job satisfaction, and work output that will result and should be prepared to accommodate workers whose disabilities are exacerbated by an open office setup. Library administrators who believe they can design their way out of these costs are operating with a hubris that stands in direct opposition to decades of research on the subject. Despite what Bell suggests, there is no design that will "make open office environments productive and satisfying for all library workers."¹¹

Notes

1. Steven J. Bell, "We're All About Openness: Except When it Comes to Our Workspaces," *College & Research Libraries News* 84, no. 9 (2023): 311, <https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/26062/33990>.
2. Andrea Gerlitz and Marcel Hülsbeck, "The Productivity Tax of New Office Concepts: A Comparative Review of Open-Plan Offices, Activity-Based Working, and Single-Office Concepts," *Management Review Quarterly* (2023): 1–31.

3. Lewend Mayiwar and Thorvald Hærem, "Open-Office Noise and Information Processing," *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 38, no. 6 (2023): 404–18.
4. Ann Richardson, John Potter, Margaret Paterson, Thomas Harding, Gaye Tyler-Merrick, Ray Kirk, Kate Reid, and Jane McChesney, "Office Design and Health: A Systematic Review," *New Zealand Medical Journal* 130, no. 1467 (2017): 46.
5. D. Mauss, M. N. Jarczok, B. Genser, and R. Herr, "Association of Open-Plan Offices and Sick Leave—A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Industrial Health* 61, no. 3 (2023): 173–83.
6. Ethan S. Bernstein and Stephen Turban, "The Impact of the 'Open' Workspace on Human Collaboration," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 373, no. 1753 (2018): 20170239.
7. Sepideh Masoudinejad and Jennifer A. Veitch, "The Effects of Activity-Based Workplaces on Contributors to Organizational Productivity: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Environmental Psychology* (2022): 6–8.
8. Olivia James, Paul Delfabbro, and Daniel L. King, "A Comparison of Psychological and Work Outcomes in Open-Plan and Cellular Office Designs: A Systematic Review," *Sage Open* 11, no. 1 (2021): 1–13.
9. Koen Van Laer, Eline Jammaers, and Wendy Hoeven, "How Organizational Spaces Contribute to Disabling Employees with Impairments," *Work in Progress* (blog), May 7, 2020, <http://www.wipsociology.org/2020/05/07/how-organizational-spaces-contribute-to-disabling-employees-with-impairments/>.
10. Bell, "We're All About Openness," 311.
11. Bell, "We're All About Openness," 312.