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Open Offices and Working from Home

Inequities in Residency Wealth

Workplace trends such as the open office concept continue to be hot topics of discussion in the literature, such as Steven Bell's October 2023 *C&RL News* article "We're all about openness: Except when it comes to our workspaces."¹ In this essay, I seek to address comments made by Bell in his article. The goal of this response is not to question the efficiency of open office spaces. More comprehensive, direct responses to that issue can be found in a blog post² and December 2023 *C&RL News* article by Meredith Farkas.³ Rather, I will focus here on issues of equity related to working from home as part of the open office model presented at Temple University.

In the article, Bell wrote "In addition to *costs saved by eliminating private offices*, where staff work offsite two or more days a week, the need for private offices diminishes"⁴ [emphasis added].

Temple University was able to save costs by transferring space costs to its employees who work from home for at least part of the week. Although not addressed by Bell directly, employees are largely responsible for their own infrastructure costs when working from home. This cost share assumes that each employee has adequate residency wealth, which refers to available resources in, for, or near a residence regardless of ownership. This includes such costs as internet access, office space, and income to cover increases in utilities and home modifications.

Digital equity is still not a reality, and Philadelphia, where Temple University is located, has a city-wide Digital Equity Plan to address known gaps.⁵ The plan acknowledges that although there has been a recent increase in households with wired high-speed broadband, 33 percent of Philadelphians are estimated to be subscription vulnerable. The Benton Institute for Broadband and Society analyzed Philadelphia's response to digital equity needs during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that the wealthier neighborhoods have higher broadband adoption rates and faster internet service than their lower-income counterparts.⁶

Philadelphia is not alone in its struggle for equity. The National Digital Inclusion Alliance keeps an active list of the worst connected cities in the United States. In the northeast, Newark, New Jersey; Rochester, New York; Toledo, Ohio; and Baltimore, Maryland, rank in the top-20 cities for the number of households without cable, fiber optic, or digital subscriber line (DSL) internet connectivity.⁷ Residency wealth and digital equity concerns extend geographically, and despite the recent rise in rural adoption, rural residents report they are less likely than those living in suburban areas to have home broadband.⁸

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General access to space to work from home could be affected by intersectionalities, including multigenerational homes. In the United States, the instance of multigenerational homes has quadrupled since 1971. It is a younger band of worker, aged 25–29 years, that is most likely to live in multigenerational housing (31 percent), according to a recent Pew Report.⁹ While most respondents saw financial benefits to their situation, there are differences across income tiers regarding views of having adequate space. “Nine-in-ten of those with upper incomes say there is plenty of space to live comfortably, compared with 79% of those with middle incomes and 62% of those with lower incomes.”¹⁰

In addition to navigating space in a home that must serve the needs of multiple generations or multiple users, we must address space needs in terms of special populations such as children and older adults requiring care. In 2019, 1,365,000 children who were home-schooled in grades K-12 had one or more guardians in the labor force.¹¹ To be more inclusive of early childhood years, the percentage of households with stay-at-home parents has risen 60% between 2019 and 2021.¹² The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in 2022, 6.3 million Americans provided eldercare solely for someone with whom they live.¹³ A home might already be needed as functional space for children, stay-at-home parents, and those requiring eldercare. A decision to work from home is not always as simple as occupying the home office, den, or spare bedroom that comes with residency wealth. In fact, Milena Sina Wütschert found that home-based teleworkers have increased health risks due to poor ergonomics of home offices, including workers using dual-space living rooms or bedrooms to avoid inconveniencing their family members.¹⁴

In his conclusion, Bell called upon our “essential core values” to justify his position. I will do the same, focusing on the recently adopted ninth principle of the ALA Professional Code of Ethics.

We affirm the inherent dignity and rights of every person. *We work to recognize and dismantle systemic and individual biases; to confront inequity and oppression; to enhance diversity and inclusion; and to advance racial and social justice in our libraries, communities, profession, and associations through awareness, advocacy, education, collaboration, services, and allocation of resources and spaces.*¹⁵ [Emphasis added]

We work to advance social justice in our profession through allocation of resources and spaces. This is a serious charge and one that stands as a foundation for my response. For those with high residency wealth who want to work from home, this transition is as easy as Bell makes it sound in his article, but that is not the case for many. The trade-offs and sacrifices an employee makes to work from home should be considered costs when measuring the success of a staffing model. ²²

Notes

1. Steven J. Bell, “We’re All about Openness: Except When it Comes to Our Workspaces,” *C&RL News* 84, no. 9 (2023): 311–17, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.84.9.311>.
2. Meredith Farkas, “Open Offices are Neither More Open nor More Equitable,” *Information Wants to Be Free* (blog) October 16, 2023, <https://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/2023/10/16/open-offices-are-neither-more-open-nor-more-equitable/>.

3. Meredith Farkas, "Neither Open Nor Equitable: The High Cost of Open Offices," *C&RL News* 84, no. 11 (2023): 407–10, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.84.11.407>.
4. Bell, "We're all about openness."
5. Milena Sina Wütschert, Diana Romano-Pereira, Livia Suter, Hartmut Schulze, and Achim Elfering, "A Systematic Review of Working Conditions and Occupational Health in Home Office," *Work* 72, no. 3 (2022): 839–52, <https://doi.org/10.3233/WOR-205239>.
6. Office of Innovation and Technology, City of Philadelphia, "A Digital Equity Plan for the City of Philadelphia," January 2022, <https://www.phila.gov/media/20220215130307/Digital-Equity-Plan.pdf>.
7. Pawel Popiel and Victor Pickard, "Against Digital Redlining: Lessons from Philadelphia's Digital Connectivity Efforts during the Pandemic," Benton Institute for Broadband and Society, August 24, 2022, <https://www.benton.org/blog/against-digital-redlining-lessons-philadelphia-digital-connectivity-efforts-during-pandemic>.
8. "Worst Connected Cities 2019," National Digital Inclusion Alliance, <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/worst-connected-cities-2019/>.
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11. Digest of Education Statistics, "Table 206.10. Number and Percentage of Home-schooled Students Ages 5 through 17 with a Grade Equivalent of Kindergarten through 12th Grade, by Selected Child, Parent, and Household Characteristics: Selected Years, 1999 through 2019," National Center for Education Statistics, 2021, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_206.10.asp.
12. Devin Delfino, "Places With the Most Stay-At-Home Parents," Magnify Money, March 22, 2021, <https://www.magnifymoney.com/news/stay-at-home-parents-study/>.
13. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Unpaid Eldercare In The United States—2021–2022 Data From The American Time Use Survey," US Department of Labor, September 21, 2023, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/elcare.pdf>.
14. Wütschert et al., "A Systematic Review of Working Conditions and Occupational Health in Home Office."
15. "Professional Ethics," American Library Association, June 29, 2021, <https://www.ala.org/tools/ethics>.