

# HR Insights

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## Open Offices

A traditional office arrangement typically features rows of cubicles and a wall lined with private offices for management. The open office movement, however, is challenging the traditional setup. Designed to foster collaboration and togetherness, the trendy format is not without its share of controversy. Although companies implement the open office design with the best of intentions, some employees contend that the arrangement actually leads to productivity-killing interruptions and a lack of privacy.

### Open Office Design and Purpose

An open office is designed with a vast open space that allows co-workers to see and hear each other, without cubicles, office walls or doors separating them. Common ways to implement the open workspace concept is the use of benching, which looks like long dining tables with colleagues working alongside and across from each other, or the use of sets of small, panel-less cubes.

The open office concept was created by a team in Hamburg, Germany, in the 1950s, with the intention of improving communication among employees. The main idea behind the open office is that it fosters collaboration and enables easier and more spontaneous communication. The downside to the concept is the lack of privacy and frequent inability to find quiet, uninterrupted workspace.

Many open offices use the concept of hoteling, which means that employees take a work station each day on a first-come, first-serve basis. This arrangement allows co-workers to move around and work next to each other if they are tackling a project together. Wireless internet is essential as employees set up each day in various spots around the office.

Hoteling also means that employees do not have a place that they can consistently call “home” when they come into the office, which may be difficult for some employees.

Recent developments include office designers creating open offices that feature more flexible spaces with moveable partitions and couches. The more flexible open office designs offer areas of privacy within the overall design of the workplace, with nooks and crannies available where employees can escape for more private meetings or quiet work. Ideally, open offices should have seamless transitions between solo and team work; “flow” is a common descriptor for this concept.

### Is an Open Office Right for Your Company?

Although the idea of an open office, with its sense of closeness and collaboration, might sound attractive, whether it is a good fit for your employees depends on the type of work they do. The topic of open offices can lead to volatile discussions, and the concept is polarizing among many workers who either love it or hate it.

Employees in various jobs and departments will react differently to the transition to an open office, often depending on personality types and whether their specific jobs require a larger portion of team collaboration or silent concentration. Here are some pros and cons to consider before tearing down those walls and installing endless lengths of narrow tables.

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## Why Open Offices Work

Open office arrangements can provide many benefits for the right company.

- **Community and camaraderie:** Open offices are implemented to foster teamwork and a sense of togetherness among co-workers. If primary tasks require working closely with colleagues, an open office can be the perfect setup to facilitate efficient work.
- **Creativity:** When everyone is working in close proximity, collaboration can be easier to accomplish, and spontaneous discussions between members of different departments may occur. When there are no walls to separate them, employees can create together and build on each other's ideas.
- **Costs:** After transitioning to an open office format, you can fit more employees into less square footage, cutting down on overhead costs due to the need for less space. Although this should probably not be your primary reason for transitioning to an open office, if the format works for you, overhead cost reduction can be a benefit.

## Why Open Offices Don't Work

Although open offices can facilitate creativity and communication among teams that need to work together closely, there are also disadvantages to switching to this office design.

- **Lack of privacy:** Although open offices are meant to bring everyone together, sharing a workspace can lead to a frustrating lack of privacy and resentment of colleagues for annoying habits, such as pen-clicking or taking personal phone calls. Also, the deep, spontaneous conversations that are supposed to happen in an open office are usually limited to short bouts of small talk due to the number of listening ears.
- **Too much noise:** Some employees, recognizing that others can easily overhear conversations or be disrupted by the noise, may be reluctant to hold conversations with co-workers, preferring to use email instead, even if they are sitting in close

proximity. The closeness of fellow employees also frequently causes headphones to go on in an attempt to shut out noise and disruptions, thwarting the goal of eliminating barriers between employees.

- **No place to keep personal belongings:** Many open offices don't assign desks or workspaces, although a general area may be designated for each department or team. The lack of a consistent, assigned space to stash belongings and feel at home can be counterproductive and stressful for many people. Assigned lockers are sometimes provided so employees can leave items at the office.
- **Distractions:** For employees who don't need constant interaction with colleagues to get their jobs done, an open office can stifle productivity and creativity. Any task that requires concentration is more difficult, and meeting deadlines can be near impossible for employees who are frequently interrupted because they can't close a door.
- **Illness and sick leave:** With employees sharing a large space, the frequency of illness spreading among co-workers increases. Studies show that there is a higher frequency of sick leave among employees in an open office compared to those in private offices.

Ultimately, whether an open office design will work for your company depends on many factors, including costs, workplace culture and, most importantly, whether the primary need in each department is low sound levels or easy collaboration.