HermanMiller
Solution Essay

Bringing Focus Back to the Open Office
Companies love the open office because it saves money, but people struggle to stay focused. Here's how to keep everyone happy.

Key Insights

- Open-plan offices can save money and space, but when they aren't designed well, people struggle with focus, engagement, and productivity.

- By implying space, organizations can reduce distractions and make space more legible for people at the individual, group, and landscape levels.

- One of many Herman Miller products that imply space, Overlay is a system of freestanding, movable walls. It gives organizations a way to accommodate changing needs for space without the cost of prefabricated walls or the burden of traditional construction.

Solution Essay

In 1994, when cubicles were the standard and the open plan was considered radical, the advertising agency Chiat/Day strode boldly into the future, moving to an open plan where desks, laptops, and phones were all unassigned.

The design was not just open but also audacious. It looked like a big living room that had "a giant staircase to nowhere and the piece de resistance, the floor—poured plastic resin. . . [that] was the color of a tangerine." All of it was inspired by "pretty much whatever [the designer] was thinking about that day."[1] One employee described working there as "kind of like sitting inside of a migraine."

Not surprisingly, people found it difficult to get work done. That experiment ended, but open offices caught on, in large part because organizations could fit more people into the same amount of space, saving as much as 50 percent of real estate per employee.[2] Seventy percent of US office workers now work in them,according to IFMA.[3] Headlines like "9 Reasons That Open-Space Offices Are Insanely Stupid" and "The Open Office Plan Is a Disaster" would have you believe that this shift in the way we work is a massive failure.

The data tells a different story. According to Leesman's massive study of 340,000 employees across 2,649 workplaces in 69 countries, nine out of 10 of the highest performing workplaces in the research study are either fully or extensively open plan.[4]

That may be because a thoughtfully done open plan can create the conditions that encourage engagement. People are more likely to be engaged at work if they can move around, have privacy when they need it, and have access to spaces that let them connect with coworkers.[5]

So why all the negative press? Because the exposed and chaotic nature of an open office can be awful. Lack of privacy and difficulty locating colleagues, meeting spaces, and resources can be distracting and lead to unhappiness at work. One survey found that 58 percent of employees say they need more private space for problem solving, and 54 percent say their offices are too distracting.[6] To top this off, studies show that excessive noise can impair a person's ability to remember information and do basic math.[7]

But just because open plans can be awful doesn't mean they all are—especially if they allow people to move around while they're working. Indeed, 85 percent of office professionals believe in flexible workplace design, and 82 percent believe they have their best ideas in these spaces.[8] As the researchers noted in the Leesman's report, "There are great open-plan offices and awful ones. But there are also failing cellular [cubicle] solutions and successful ones."[9] In other words, execution—e.g., how well the space reflects the purpose, character, and activities of the people it's intended to serve—is everything.

---

9 OUT OF **10**

of the highest performing workplaces are fully or extensively open plan

85%

of office professionals believe in flexible workplace design

82%

of office professionals believe they have their best ideas in these spaces

---

Leesman measures employee experience with its global buisness intelligence tool, the Leesman Index, which captures employee feedback on how effectively the workplace supports them and their work.
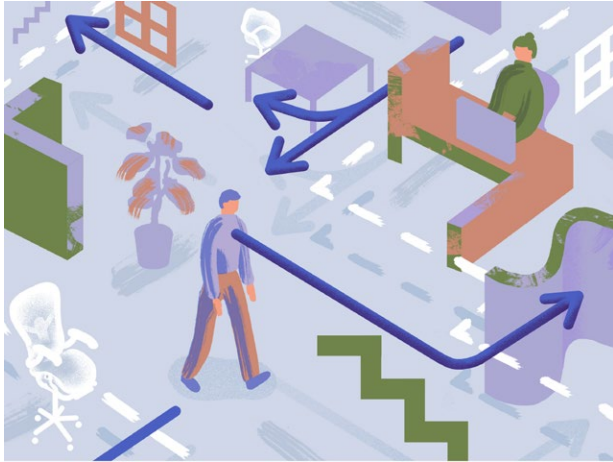
Spaces should be easy to read and intuitive to navigate.

People need privacy to focus within an open office.

Two Things to Get Right: Privacy and Spatial Legibility

One of the most important things to get right in an open office is visual and acoustic privacy. In fact, the loss of visual privacy is the second most frequent complaint from employees in an open plan because it's easier to get derailed by distractions. Once a person is distracted, it takes an average of 25 minutes to get back to the original task.[10]

Less obvious than the issue of privacy is the issue of spatial legibility, or how easy it is to read the space. In a more traditional floorplan, it's easy to make sense of the environment. There are conference rooms for meetings, offices (whether private or created with a panel system), and a break room for socializing. Because people can't fall back on these conventions in an open office, open plans need to provide clear cues about the purpose of each space within them. For example, the informality associated with couches and coffee bars helps people infer that they are for socializing, casual meetings, or light reading. A meeting table bordered on three sides with marker boards with work-in-progress or photos and other artifacts, for example, strongly suggests that space belongs to the team in the adjoining space.

Spatial legibility includes wayfinding—clues that help people orient themselves within the space and navigate to their destination. Signage, lighting, and sightlines all make it possible for a person to form a mental map and get to where they need to be, whether it's the bathroom or a colleague's workstation.

Organizations can improve spatial legibility by implying space, i.e., giving the illusion of space without physically demarcating it. Using precise combinations of design elements, organizations can create boundary, provide shelter, signal intended use, and allow people to personalize their spaces. These design elements can exist physically, or be implied through sensory perception. Lighting, materiality, and easy-to-move objects and furnishings can help define a specific area or context—improving spatial legibility, privacy, or both.

Implying space is not new. Artists, architects, and designers use contextual clues—lines, patterns, forms—and arrange them according to certain design principles—proportion, rhythm, contrast—to encourage a viewer to infer meaning. Why does this technique work? Our senses are constantly flooding our brains with information. We can consciously perceive only small fragments of this information, so our brains arrange those fragments into complete pictures; we're hardwired to fill in the gaps. By understanding which sensory fragments send the right signals, we can give the brain a head start toward completing the picture.

Solution Essay

Solutions that Help Imply Space at Different Levels

On a workplace level, implying space can improve space legibility, which is critical to the success of any open plan. Solving that, as well as the issues of audio and visual privacy, can be the difference between an open environment that people despise and one that makes for the highest performing companies—like those found in the Leesman's study. In the office, it's possible to imply space at the individual, group, and workplace level, and Herman Miller has solutions that can help.

On the individual level, movable desktop organizers, like Ubi Work Tools and mobile Tu Storage units can be used to imply "refuge" and personal space, but can be moved when people want more connection. Canvas Vista, a desking system with a lean footprint, allows people to move inserts into open-frame screens to signal to their colleagues that they need privacy or are ready to collaborate. These screens and T-shaped lights imply boundaries while allowing open perspectives across the office.

At the group setting level, there are ad hoc ways to imply space by quickly creating boundaries through mobile furnishings and work tools like large format LCD displays, Exclave mobile carts, and Pari freestanding screens.

Herman Miller also has a variety of solutions that offer different levels of acoustic privacy and permanence as they imply space across the landscape. Partitions like Maars Living Walls comprise the solution that's the most permanent in nature and that provides the highest level of acoustical privacy. Framery is another option in the form of a freestanding, fully enclosed pod that offers acoustical privacy for individuals or groups up to four people.

And then there is Overlay, a new system of sub-architectural, movable walls that create freestanding rooms, give shape to large open spaces, or simply divide one area from another.

Ubi Work Tools includes movable desktop organizers that can imply space and hold personal belongings.

Canvas Vista features open-frame screens with movable inserts and T-shaped lights to imply boundaries.

Framery pods offer acoustical privacy for individuals or groups up to four people.

Solution Essay

How Overlay Can Transform an Open Floorplan

There are three main ways that Overlay helps organizations create and—as organizational needs change over time—recreate open floorplans where people can work effectively.

First, it makes the landscape coherent by implying space to shape the environment. A sea of workspaces without clear divisions can look and feel chaotic. Overlay changes that by bringing clarity and order to open-plan offices, sending the brain signals that help us infer meaning and complete the picture without thinking very hard. Designers Ayse Birsel and Bibi Seck found inspiration in urban planning concepts and designed Overlay to help a person understand where their best work will happen.

Overlay helps people intuitively navigate the workplace by creating a pattern of integrated but distinctive settings, some of which provide the visual privacy missing in the open plan. It makes spaces legible by defining areas, so people know which space will best support collaboration, catching up, or working alone.

Second, because it has only a select number of parts, Overlay simplifies space definition. A single boundary can function as a room divider or a backdrop. A three-sided workspace can become a designated area for impromptu meetings or collaborative work. Four Overlay walls can create an enclosed meeting space— complete with a door—that can offer a higher level of visual and acoustical privacy.

A porous material, such as perforated metal, allows people to see in and out of the space with just enough visual privacy to concentrate on the task at hand.

Solution Essay

Finally, Overlay is flexible and affordable, giving organizations the agility to evolve on the fly. Adaptability in workplace design has been important for quite some time, but the emergence of workplace data and analytics further underscores its value—both in improving the workplace experience for employees and in real estate asset allocation. For example Herman Miller's Live OS—a cloud-connected system of workplace sensors and a dashboard—provides real time information about space utilization and employee well-being. With these insights, organizations know when to expand, consolidate, or reallocate space, as well as if people are getting the most from their ergonomic furniture.

As organizations race to attract talent, rapidly scale, or quickly change course—many times based on what they learn from data and analytics—they don't always have the time, or money, to reconfigure their offices. With just two people and in about two hours, smaller applications of Overlay can be relocated with minimal disruption to the office and people working in it. It comes without the cost of prefabricated walls or burden of traditional construction, minimizing downtime and cleanup.

Overlay is flexible in another way, as well. It has a quiet aesthetic that can be turned up or dialed down to reflect the character of any organization. Overlay can be outfitted in a variety of ways with colors, textiles, laminates, glass, or custom material. It can also accommodate marker boards and tack boards. As drywall partitions come down and horizontal work surface shrink, vertical surfaces have become an even more integral part of collaboration and work in general. Overlay makes it easier to share and discuss work-in-progress, schedules, and other analog artifacts that contribute to rapid iteration and general productivity.

The interior and exterior sides of an Overlay wall can share the same look, or, feature a clean façade and a creative back so that the structure can reflect the design of the office on the outside and also reveal the messy vibrancy of the work happening on the inside.

Solution Essay

The résumé of partners "in life and in work," Ayse Birsel and Bibi Seck, boasts the likes of Amazon, GE, Herman Miller, Staples, and Toyota, and includes social design work to bring the economic value of design to Senegal and other parts of Africa.

Reconciling Dichotomies

While developing Overlay, Birsel + Seck thought a lot about dichotomies. Their design research showed that people do their best work in environments that offer both "social buzz" and a sense of boundary, e.g., trains, planes, and cafes. They realized that people want to see and be seen as part of a community, even if they're working alone. They also found that people are most productive with some ambient noise, but not when they can hear the specifics of a conversation.

Overlay reconciles seemingly opposite needs and wants—open yet closed; alone yet together; clean yet messy. As Birsel says, "if you can make any two opposites co-exist, you can have your cake and eat it, too."

The reason the open plan first caught on in spite of its rocky start is that organizations saw it could save them money—lots of it. But unless those open plans are well designed, organizations are leaving money on the table in the form of reduced productivity and lower employee satisfaction.[11] Overlay gives organizations a way to support how people work today, providing them with some audio and visual privacy. With very little effort, Overlay makes it possible to change a space as needs change, without investing in pricey permanent structures. It allows an organization not just to eat its cake, but to share it in the form of an improved work experience for employees.

1. "NPR Choice Page." npr.Org. https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=480625378. June 2016.

2. "Reconsidering Open-Plan—New Thinking On Productive Space | Regus." Work New Zealand. https://www.regus.co.nz/work-newzealand/reconsidering-open-plan-new-thinking-productive-space/. 2018.

3. "IFMA's New Space and Project Management Benchmarks." Hok.Com. http://www.hok.com/ifmas-new-space-and-project-management-benchmarks/. 2018.

4. Leesman, "The Next 250K." June 2017.

5. Gallup. "State Of The American Workplace." Washington D.C. 2017.

6. Belk, William. "Survey Title." 2017.

7. Perham, Nick. "Disliked Music Can Be Better for Performance Than Liked Music." Applied Cognitive Psychology. Volume 26, Issue 4, July/August 2012. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/acp.2826

8. Capital One. "Survey Reveals That 82% of Office Professionals Believe Companies Can't Encourage Innovation without an Innovative Workplace Design and Environment." http://press.capitalone.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=251626&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=2297152. 2017.

9. Leesman, "The Next 250K." , p. 14, June 2017.

10. The Wall Street Journal. "Why You Can't Concentrate At Work," https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-you-cant-concentrate-at-work-1494342840.2018; Sullivan, Bob, and Hugh Thompson. "Opinion | Brain, Interrupted." nytimes.com. https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/opinion/sunday/a-focus-on-distraction.html. May 2013.

11. "Reconsidering Open-Plan—New Thinking On Productive Space | Regus." Work New Zealand. https://www.regus.co.nz/work-newzealand/reconsidering-open-plan-new-thinking-productive-space/. 2018; Neese, Brian. "The Open Office Layout Trend and Employee Productivity." Rivier University | Online. https://online.rivier.edu/open-office-layout-and-employee-productivity/. 2015.