

advancing office space for employee satisfaction & productivity

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A happy employee is a productive employee. One recent study¹ found that happy employees are up to 20% more productive than unhappy employees. When it comes to salespeople, happiness has an even greater impact, raising sales by 37%. But, how can a company impact an employee's happiness? It is not overly complicated. Since employees spend more of their waking hours at the office than they do at home, a comfortable, healthy, and motivating workspace is critical to happiness.

Trends in workplace design are always changing. New research continues to emerge about the best ways to facilitate productivity and collaboration, improve employee satisfaction, and reduce stress. Everything about your workspace – the colors your office uses, the use of greenery, the openness of the space – can have a direct impact on your workers' satisfaction and productivity. While open offices may continue to dominate many workplace designs, this year's Staples Workplace Survey² finds that this workplace layout is not always the solution to meet all employees' needs. Instead, workplaces need to tap into the full design toolkit to build flexible, inspiring spaces that minimize distractions and enable employee choice when it comes to the environments that energize them.

When thinking about a new office space, engage an architect early in the process to help translate the company and employees' needs into the most effective space. The best design is rarely a full open office approach. Instead, it is typically a hybrid that introduces Activity Based Working (ABW) areas to meet the spectrum of needs. A highly touted Harvard Study supports this concept, "Our studies show that the most successful work environments provide a range of spaces – an ecosystem – that allow people to choose where and how they get their jobs done."³

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open office

In the US, open office design plans are used in about 70 percent of offices, according to the International Facility Management Association (IFMA). Open office layouts can save companies up to 50% per employee on office space costs,⁴ so the financial rationale often drives design in that direction. Let's quickly review the benefits and challenges of an open office design to identify the reasons and the extent to incorporate it.

Open offices offer a variety of benefits including:

- Increased collaboration – open plan environments encourage employees to work together more.
- Creative thinking and innovation – easy input from others without having to schedule a meeting, can lead to better ideas.
- Lower build and fit-out cost – the amount of space needed and the costs of constructing a space with an open office design can be as much as 50 percent lower.
- Energy savings – open plans reduce heating, cooling, and electricity expenses thanks to improved flow of air and light.
- Reduced office equipment expenses – enable easier sharing of printers, copiers and other office supplies.
- Easier layout changes – can accommodate increases in headcount, or rearrangements of groups due to changes in company structure.

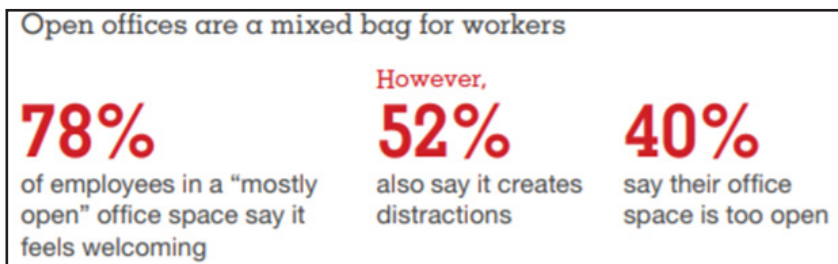
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Along with the benefits come some challenges:

- Noise and distractions – make focus more difficult and can lead to decrease in productivity, especially for work that requires concentration or privacy.
- Lack of privacy – computer screens are easily visible and sensitive telephone conversations can be overheard. Depending on worker background, they may respond negatively to an open environment perceiving they are being watched.
- Implied lower status – when all employees don't have the same workspace scenario, any difference can be interpreted as a ranking in perceived value to the company.
- Addressing noise in the open plan is a key area to address to ensure success, regardless of how open, or closed the overall office design may be. When noise distractions are reduced, 75% of employees are more productive, 57% have increased motivation and 49% are happier at work overall.⁵ An acoustically balanced environment is as easy as A-B-C: Absorb, Block, Cover.⁶



Results from the 2019 Staples Workplace Survey



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1) **Absorb.** Minimize noise by absorbing sound. High ceilings create reverberant acoustics that blur voices in the distance to allow clear face to face conversations. However, conversations more than a few feet away can be problematic. An acoustical ceiling can absorb up to 50% of sound, so explore using hanging baffles (shown on next page), suspended ceiling tiles, or sprayed acoustic foam. Consider soft carpets to dampen noise, especially foot-fall sounds. Wrapping walls with acoustical panels, incorporating curved walls and reducing the number of parallel walls will reduce reverberation of sound. Explore furnishings such as free-standing interior elements, surfaces and fabric and draperies to attenuate sound without compromising design.

2) **Block.** Blocking helps manage noise via sound avoidance. While many initially think of blocking as a physical solution, it is often more effective to establish office protocols. These protocols encourage etiquette and a positive culture, which maintains comfortable sound levels. Initial, proper workspace planning and strategy is also valuable. For example, avoid noise disturbances by placing front-facing teams that spend large time periods on the phone away from those with focused work. Also, it is beneficial to divide staff into smaller groups of employees. Instead of putting all 100 employees in the same open space, consider 2 to 3 smaller groups separated by meeting rooms. Another critical factor to address in office layout is loud and constant noise generators. Isolating copiers, shredders, and other disruptive noise generators will help minimize noise disruptions.

3) **Cover.** Cover is how you mask noise with sound-generation equipment. Background sounds prevent small noises from producing out-of-proportion disturbances. Pink noise, which is smoother and more calming across all frequencies is preferred over white noise. Also, investment in high quality headsets with directional microphones are well worth the cost for individual workstations.

Noise mitigation design should include the following key considerations:

- Functional and activity-based space planning
- Workstation layout as sound barriers
- Interior materials selections and application
- Sound absorbing materials for ceilings, floors and walls
- Electronic sound masking – Privacy index
- Isolation of noise generating equipment, devices and systems
- HVAC system design (duct routing, silencers, materials, geometry, vibration isolation)



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Activity Based Working (ABW)

While open office design has become a standard, many companies are now reaping the benefits of incorporating Activity Based Working (ABW) areas. Office design trends in some regions and industries (especially in the tech industry) are moving in a new direction: Activity-Based Working (ABW) environments, which provide a combination of open office design spaces with other task-oriented, private spaces. When an ABW office design is combined with a non-assigned seating model (also known as “agile” or “flexible” working), many of the problems associated with open plan spaces are eliminated.

For example, someone who needs to make confidential phone calls can choose a private “phone booth.” Likewise, an employee from a branch office location (or a guest) can use a “hotel” workspace. Team brainstorming sessions can take place in a comfortable lounge or whiteboard room that encourages creative thinking. Meanwhile someone auditing financials or reviewing legal documents can choose a small quiet space for thinking and concentration.

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Designing the Right Environment

So how does a company go about designing the right environment for their workers and their bottom line? The planning process starts with a thorough inventory to help you understand how your current space is being utilized. The planning team will gather data about each building, floor, conference room and desk, and track who is using what.

Workplace Management Technology systems like Serraview⁷ have recently become available and help by implementing space utilization tracking technology, such as sensors and network tracking, to determine exactly when and how often spaces are used. That data can help determine exactly when and how often spaces are used. That data can help determine the right mix of spaces and ratio of people to desks.

The only right answer when evaluating open space, doored or activity based working plans is the one that is the best suited to your company and employees' needs. Investing in a relationship with an experienced architect can ensure success, regardless of which type of office design you choose; it will be money well spent that keeps your employees happy and productive.

“Without too many physical barriers, I’m much more likely to reach out to people within my department, but also outside of my department. I tend to be more introverted when I work, so the open office balances things out pretty well.”

– Employee at Cincinnati
Art Museum Administrative
Offices

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