
Teresa Housel: Open plan not always better for workers

Thursday

Posted May 21, 2015 at 2:01 AM

By Teresa Housel

In early 2012, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg hired architect Frank Gehry to design the expansion of Facebook's headquarters in Menlo Park, Calif. With workspace for 3,000 employees, the building may be the world's largest open office plan. Employees will move into the 433,555-square-foot structure this year.

Facebook's expansion is part of the larger open office trend. A German team originally developed the concept in the 1950s to improve communication and collaboration in workplaces.

The open office is now the norm at most workplaces. In her 2012 book, "Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking," Susan Cain states that space per employee shrank from 500-700 square feet in the 1970s to 200 feet in 2010 in the U.S. According to the International Management Facility Association, 70 percent of American employees now have low or no partitions at work.

Cain discusses how employers adopt open plans to maximize a company's space while reducing costs and to create collaboration. The concept is promising in theory, but the reality is different. Cain's book generated public debate in the U.S. about the impact of open offices on employees' health and productivity.

The media coverage of Cain's book occurred after I moved from Holland to Wellington, New Zealand, in 2013. A friend recommended the book to me after I struggled with the open office at my first job in Wellington. Before I moved, I cherished my private office in academic jobs. I soon got a rude awakening.

In my first job here I was a communications adviser for a government

regulatory agency. A communications adviser produces newsletters and media releases, answers journalists' queries and writes government briefings, among other possible tasks.

My manager gave me an office tour on my first day. As we walked around the floor, I noticed employees working at long rows of desks with no privacy dividers. Of course, I didn't expect my own office as a junior staff member, but my stomach sank as she pointed to my desk along a busy corridor. At that moment, I realized that I never considered asking about the workspace during the interview.

The collaborative motivation behind open offices may be positive, but these spaces can be an introvert's nightmare. I am an introvert who needs solitude for thinking and writing. Cain points out how open offices are designed for extroverted personalities, not for introverts who become exhausted from overstimulation.

Recent academic studies on open offices discuss their negative outcomes. In a 2013 Australian study of all office types around the world, employees in open offices said that noise and lack of privacy surpassed the benefits of increased interaction.

Matthew Davis, an organizational psychologist, reviewed more than a hundred studies about office environments in 2011. He found that open offices make workers feel they are part of a larger enterprise. However, they damage job satisfaction, creative thinking, productivity and attention spans.

My experience in an open office mirrors these findings. I was stressed from the constant chatter and surveillance from co-workers. Colds spread across the team within days, resulting in sick days.

Although open offices continue to be popular, hope is in sight. Cain recently helped Steelcase design its Quiet Spaces line. The line is a collection of five spaces that each feature frosted glass walls, sound-blocking technology, and rooms where workers can be alone. An introverted friend of mine works for a company that has Quiet Spaces. He says the space enables him to properly think.

My cozy faculty office is a thing of the past, but thankfully I now have an employer who nurtures different working styles with options to write in a meeting room or from home. Hopefully, public debate about workspaces will

help employers consider more diverse office plans.

— Teresa Heinz Housel is a former Holland resident.