

SWAAY

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Cubicle-Busting: How Workplace Reinvention Affects Productivity

It was upon pouring myself my second coffee of the day in our spacious 13th floor WeWork space that it dawned on me; I work somewhere cooler than most, and it's not even that cool.

There's two businessmen across the long counter top from me in deep conversation over greasy burritos. I can hear snippets of their conversation, and if I was nosier I could hear it all. Not being the slightest bit interested in anything other than what's going into their mouths however, I neglect the idioms of their speech for an overall grasp of the situation – that nobody expects me to be of corporate espionage, or mischief. Everybody works seamlessly here, in harmony almost, not bothered by the whirl of other business going on around them in a constant rhythm of phone calls, heavy-heeled steps and buzzers. The day is fluid and so are the movements in and out of the glass enclosures. WeWork is not a fixed abode – it's a new-age office, reflective of a workspace revolution, one that is undoubtedly affecting employee culture and productivity.

Our neighbors here at in this communal office are an amalgamation of industries: fashion, finance, tech and every other clique imaginable. We tussle with each other in the lounge room, share beers on a Friday and mindlessly admire each other's office spaces and attire before questioning the optics or functionality of their business and wondering if everyone will survive the next decade in the business world. Who are we? It doesn't really matter, we're not competitors, we're just sharing this inclusive and modern space one sip of hot coffee at a time.



It was perhaps Google who lead the way, ushering out the cubicled dark ages and ushering in a new era of fun working environments, artfully-designed open spaces and a litany of cost-free perks like nap rooms, workout classes and catered lunches – but it quickly caught on. Gone are the days of traditional and tightly packed cubicle-planned office floors. Gone are the days when office functionality spanned 9-5 in a hot, penned-in space. Modern corporations are now creating spaces people want to work at rather than where they have to work – where you'll be happy to stay longer, lousy with the beauty and relaxed nature of your surroundings. This win-win situation makes us wonder, are these beautiful new-age spaces helping employers in the long-run? Are they actually causing employees to stay longer and work harder?

With so much confetti around a work room, one has to wonder if a professional level of working focus is being compromised. Are people getting more done – or are these upgraded aesthetics a way to make people give more to their business lives? We've asked Alex Cohen -Lead, Commercial Specialist for brokerage CORE, to comment on the changes occurring in workspace lay-out and how this is affecting the average workers' psyche. Cohen, who has years of concentrated analysis and research at his back, does believe that open office spaces are the way forward, and barring any serious complications, will be the eventual model for most offices of the future.

“They create campuses with amenities that are all designed to motivate their people to stay as long as possible in the workplace.”

– Alex Cohen



Technology companies have paved the way for this office model, lead by giants like Google, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Airbnb. Workers have responded particularly well to the change – receptive to the ease with which ideas can be shared across a room, conundrums cracked over a large table and naps taken in designated ‘quiet’ areas. These billion dollar companies are thriving and attracting the world’s brightest minds not least for the status, but for the amenities that come part and parcel with working in these environments. The office formula is no longer desk + computer + chair = ready. Instead it is gym, restaurant, iPad lab, nap room, bean bag area x open spaces = internet. The mobilization of devices means nobody needs a fixed abode anymore – you can work from anywhere – including the treadmill.

“Some people work very productively in an open environment where the stimulation of people and ideas energizes them to be creative and effective,” says Cohen. “For companies in technology in particular, like Facebook or Google, the constant interaction that a very open work space allows appears to foster team work and in essence forces people to share ideas and challenges.

For individuals with ADD, learning or working in a very open environment hurts their productivity – this has been proven in research – as the distractions that an open space create stifle their attention span and focus.”

It’s those companies and industries that have been around since the dark ages — before the internet — that have put up the most resistance to the new office models, with law firms vehement about rejecting the change, barring a few in London, and banks, slow to embrace hashing out fledgling finance ideas over long tables with people you barely know. At its base, this model focuses on an interaction and inclusion with your team the likes of which old-school bankers and lawyers holed up in corner offices have never seen before – the adjustment is strange and almost alien – but it’s coming. Being a team is non-negotiable these days, in these offices.

To up the ante at her business, Virginia girl-boss Sarah Everhart, has revolutionized her office by introducing collaborative boxing and dancing workouts into the work week to adrenalize her colleagues into action. Sarah's attitude behind the shift has invigorated her staff whilst encouraging them into a fitter working week. The exercise involved releases endorphins (making everyone happier), but also boosts team morale and cultivates a sense of company spirit.

"We are pushing ourselves to be the best version of ourselves that we can be, and I believe that has translated naturally into the work environment."

– Sarah Everhart



Everhart's firm has reaped the rewards of team training, as have the likes of Google, Facebook and their techie comrades, who spend millions each year on team outings and sessions – keeping them at the top of those 'Best places to work' lists churned out yearly.

Social psychologists, big corporations and activity leaders have clashed heads and produced a new working system that is pushing the envelope for open and inclusive office spaces, and I can't imagine it's going to stop. Watch this space as the cubicle continues to disappear and inclusion becomes the new norm.