



Turn Your Open Office into a Productive Office

By implying space, you can minimize distraction, encourage personalization, create boundaries, and improve wayfinding.



Five Ways to Create a Better Open Office Work Experience

1. **Create precise combinations of furnishings, lighting, and color—a technique called implying space.**
2. **Minimize distractions by providing desks and other individual work areas with design elements people can adjust to their desired level of privacy.**
3. **Encourage personalization to signal use and communicate ownership.**
4. **Define boundaries and work areas with flooring, lighting, color, and other design elements.**
5. **Improve wayfinding by varying materials on the ground, on vertical surfaces, and overhead.**

What started as a trend in German workplaces in the 1960s,¹ the open office has now become standard for corporations of all sizes and representing a wide range of industries. Following the lead of tech giants, companies everywhere are ditching private offices and cubicles in favor of wide-open spaces and shared benching. It's a move many organizations are making to improve the efficiency of their real estate portfolios, attract new talent, and foster a creative, collaborative culture.²

Open office environments can be vibrant, light-filled, and highly social places where people easily converse, learn from each other, and collaborate more efficiently and creatively. They can also be noisy, distracting, and chaotic environments where people find it difficult to get their work done.³



Recent surveys of people in open workspaces find that noise, distractions, and lack of privacy and personal space consistently top the list of dissatisfactions, and that people feel they are less productive as a result.⁴ In an anonymous poll of 700 “high-performance employees” across a range of industries, 54 percent of the respondents said their office environment was “too distracting,” and 58 percent said they needed more “private spaces for problem solving.”⁵

Given these challenges, it’s not surprising that “employees who work in open-plan offices that lack spatial diversity reported lower levels of job satisfaction, well-being, and ease of interaction with coworkers than employees who work in cellular or shared-room offices.”⁶ What about those tech companies that started the open office trend? They are “rethinking their open plans altogether.”⁷

For most organizations, the cost of creating more nuanced open offices with accommodations for both privacy and collaboration is prohibitive. People end up cobbling together their own solutions (taping paper to glass partitions for privacy, wearing noise-canceling headphones). While these coping mechanisms solve people’s problems in the moment, they accumulate to form a disconnected and often chaotic work experience.

The good news is that there is a better—and more cost-effective way—to help people make sense of and find comfort in an open office. By implying space, you can transform an open-office environment into an intuitive, productive workplace without making a costly investment in inflexible, permanent walls.

Achieve a Better Work Experience by Implying Space

Using precise combinations of design elements including furnishings, lighting, and color, you can imply space to help bring order to an open office environment. How does it work? Contextual clues—lines, patterns, forms—arranged according to design principles like proportion, rhythm, and contrast encourage a person to infer meaning. Why does this happen? 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.

In visually chaotic, busy, and constantly changing environments like many open offices, the brain expends a lot of energy trying to find the right fragments to fill in those gaps and depletes the amount of energy that might otherwise be devoted to higher-level cognitive activities like analysis and problem solving. But it doesn’t have to be this way. The following examples demonstrate how, by implying space, you can send signals to the brain that help minimize distractions, define space, communicate ownership of a setting, and improve wayfinding—ultimately improving the experience of work.



1. Minimize Distractions

Make sure that workstations, shared benches, and other individual work areas have design elements people can adjust to their desired level of privacy. Implied space tactics like providing a lightweight screen or a booth-like surround can offer a sense of security in otherwise open spaces, as can a desktop lamp that focuses illumination on the task at hand.

Movable desktop organizers, mobile storage units, and even open partitions (think of an empty picture frame) can imply refuge and personal space, but people can adjust them if they desire more connection to colleagues. Greenery and aquariums can serve a similar yet dual purpose. Strategically placed, they can block movement perceived by the periphery of vision and speed the recovery of energy depleted by interruptions or distractions.⁸



2. Define Space and Communicate Ownership

In a Herman Miller study of high-performing teams, researchers noted that a “variety of elements can demarcate zones: flooring materials, lighting, and paths defined by furniture or other artifacts.”⁹ Different color schemes can help to distinguish activity zones, as can variations in light intensity. Research findings suggest that while bright light energizes and improves alertness,¹⁰ dimmer illumination can improve creative performance.¹¹

Once you’ve defined a space, the next trick is signaling whether it’s owned by a specific team or open to anyone for use. To communicate team ownerships, encourage people to outfit the space with personal and team objects. Studies show that teams are more effective and perform at a higher level when they can signal the things they think are important about themselves by personalizing their group space.

If a setting is a place anyone can use, let people know by including lightweight, flexible furnishings that people can easily adjust to suit their needs. And since Herman Miller researchers have found that group settings that encourage “movement and spontaneous regrouping” are great for creativity, be sure to include movable screens, seating that promotes a variety of postures, and mobile tables and carts that allow people to quickly configure and reconfigure the space.¹²



3. Improve Wayfinding

To define pathways, vary materials on three planes: ground, vertical, and overhead. At the ground and overhead levels, changes in flooring and ceiling materials can subtly imply edges that distinguish the inside from the outside of a space. On the vertical plane, variances in the height and density of boundary markers like glass partitions, sub-architectural walls, and furniture can define boundaries, as can the orientation and design of access paths and entrances to different settings.

When it comes to directing traffic patterns, color makes a difference. Research shows that color-based wayfinding systems work best when they comprise fewer than five easily distinguishable colors. People are more attracted by warm colors but find spaces that feature cooler colors to be more easily navigable.¹³ Yellows and oranges are best for landmarks and intersections where people can gather, while blues and greens can help create clear and calming pathways between destinations.

Implying Space and the Future of Data-Based Design

If you've already invested in an open office to take a leaner approach to your real estate, it's likely that you're exploring the use of workplace analytics to measure how well this investment is paying off—both for your organization and your people. With a more flexible, agile workplace planned by implying space, you can easily adapt when data indicates changes in utilization patterns. It's how you can efficiently create workplaces that fulfill people's needs, optimize your real estate, and prime your workplace for continuous growth.

If you'd like to learn more about this efficient approach to workplace design and discover the furnishings and business solutions Herman Miller offers to help make it a reality for your organization, please contact your local representative.

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