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These are the worst things about working in an open office

Readers share their stories of peeping colleagues, mistress chats, never-ending illness and worse.

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If you're reading this at work, chances are your colleague can peer over your shoulder and read it as well. Such is life in the open office.

Last week, our story about **why open offices are bad for us** drew a large response from readers — it seems, when it comes to the open-plan workspace, everyone has an opinion. We followed up on

Facebook, asking **readers to share the worst parts of working in an open office.**

We received a lot of interesting and insightful replies about working life in close quarters — here are some of our favourites.

The case of TMI

In an open office, many of us have no choice but to deal with noise and other people's discussions. For some, it's unwanted insight into colleagues' personal lives or confidential company information.

"Just putting a bunch of desks in an open space is not an open space design," writes one reader (Credit: Getty Images)

Rory O'Brien wrote, "my boss sits right across from me and I feel several things she has said on the phone recently were not intended for my ears."

Things got more personal for John, another respondent: "My boss used to sit directly opposite me in an open office and used to shout down the phone to his wife in German (this is pre mobile) assuming that I could not understand (wrong)… In the case of his mistress he would whisper

down the phone in English."

Sometimes it's information about your colleagues' pay packets that can get awkward: "[I] worked in an open office directly across from one of our HR reps. Got to hear more than I wanted of co-worker issues and salary and compensation information of new hires," Carter A Thompson wrote.

Loss of identity

Amit Tulsian's bosses converted his "work sanctuary" into an open-plan office. Under the old system, he and his team of five sat in a "moderately enclosed area". The new layout, however, had "50 people, within three feet of each other, without walls," he wrote, adding there was constant distraction, phone calls, discussion, arguments and small talk: "Most of us hated it, [it] felt like working in a call centre."

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> *The new layout had 50 people, within three feet of each other, without walls*

Mac Senour worked in a San Francisco office, where "we originally had alleys, where like people were grouped together. Some chatter, but we were all working on the same things."

Then they moved to an open office and were told they were not allowed to personalise their spaces.

"[The firm] printed pictures of a local company that had made the move to open office and put them on the walls. Everyone in those pictures had headphones on and were shrunk down behind their monitors. When several of us point[ed] this out, we were told: 'Don't like it? There are other places to work.'"

For some, it's unwanted insight into colleagues' personal lives or confidential company information (Credit: Getty Images)

Then, there are germs

The distractions and loss of independence were bad enough, some say, but added to that was the inevitable spread of airborne germs. It's a "walking, coughing petri dish", according to Stephen Venneman. "I literally get congested and start sniffling within a minute of walking in here."

And sometimes it's other bodily functions that get annoying. "I worked alongside a very social and gregarious guy but every day he would arrive at his seat and then proceed to open his shirt and apply underarm deodorant before he did anything else. Really annoying," respondent Peter Fonseca wrote.

The distractions and loss of independence are bad enough, some say, but added to that is the inevitable spread of airborne germs (Credit: Getty Images)

Finding balance

Open offices are popular for collaboration, "but quiet and privacy [are] still needed", wrote Caleb Anthony Parker, who has worked in both open and personal offices.

The solution? Spending some days in an open office setting for team collaboration and meetings, then working from home for quiet and productivity.

> *An open office is not one big room and everyone stuffed in there to reduce costs*

It's a win-win, he says, saving companies and workers money, "not to mention [making] happier employees who are more productive and probably won't miss a stressful commute."

A matter of design

Ultimately, whether an open office succeeds may boil down to its design. "What is needed is a properly designed open office," wrote Mat Solms. "[An] open office is not one big room and everyone stuffed in there to reduce costs."

Solms suggests that a properly designed open office should be a mix of shared spaces, private spaces, quiet spaces and talking spaces, and should have correct lighting, temperature, air and moisture.

Joan Zerkovich agrees. "Just putting a bunch of desks in an open space is not an open space design," she wrote. "There are a lot of really bad layouts put in place by uninformed managers with no background in space design and often coupled with a difficult culture. Open space cannot be evaluated without also evaluating the design and culture."