Open vs. Closed: Achieving the Optimal Library Office Ecosystem

By Steven Bell

In my first academic library job I had what is quite possibly the worst workspace ever. My beat up, grey metal office surplus desk was in use before I was born. Situated in the middle of a workroom, other staff surrounded me, some in offices but most sharing my misery. The constant flow of people walking by, conducting loud phone conversations, eating wildly aromatic foods or just plain being annoying assured I was constantly subject to every type of distraction. What I would have given for a few cubicle walls. Hours spent at the busy reference desk served as a respite from the headache-inducing space I referred to jokingly as "my office". It took two years and a colleague's retirement before I graduated to an actual office. Its low glass partitions gave it a fishbowl effect, and even with the presence of a door, the term "private" would be inaccurate. As I sit in my administrative suite office now, contemplating that first depressing office situation, an important question comes to mind: Did it make a difference?

Contemporary workspace directly impacts staff's work quality, productivity and general level of satisfaction and morale. Office space experts agree that design, layout and furniture make a difference. Where there is consensus lacking is in determining what type of office workspace makes it happen. Do individuals work and collaborate best and do organizations function most productively with an open or closed office space environment?

With limited research, most of what we know about the good and bad of workspace arrangements comes from the field. Depending on whom you ask about either system, be it closed or open, anticipate strong opinions. Advocates for open offices praise the arrangement's contribution to better staff communication, interaction and engagement. Supporters of closed systems, typically private offices for managers and professionals, claim the noise and distraction created by open systems hurts worker productivity and morale.

Designing, furnishing and moving to a new staff workspace is an expensive project, but it is high impact work that influences how well the library and staff will function – or fall into dysfunction. New, "from scratch" academic libraries are rare these days. More commonly, workspace redesign projects accommodate renovations or organizational change.

This *Library Issues* explores the sensitive matter of choosing the optimal workspace for the academic library staff. What factors should deans, directors and academic administrators pay attention to when planning workspace that accommodates present and future workflows and worker preferences?

Library staff will no doubt have much to say about their office arrangements, with the potential for disagreement, but the real question goes beyond whether an open or closed system works best. Focus instead on what is the optimal office ecosystem to facilitate connections between co-workers that leads to collaboration that maintains or enhances the quality of service to community members.

Create Some Collisions

Why all the interest in open workspace arrangements? It is spurred in part by the office cultures

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found in Silicon Valley, start-ups and tech incubators. Open offices are touted as a factor that enables entrepreneurs such as Instagram to be more innovative than corporations like Kodak. Their supporters associate open office arrangements with a culture where workers in barrier-free, close proximity achieve the cross-departmental fertilization in which creativity and ideation bloom. Organizations hope to catch that spark with an open office arrangement.

Ben Waber, writing "Workspaces That Move People" for *Harvard Business Review Blogs*, points to the core of that creative culture: getting employees to collide. "We've begun to unlock the secrets of good office design. Face-to-Face interactions are the most important activity. Creating collisions, chance encounters and unplanned interactions, improves productivity and performance".

General Assembly, an open office tech-incubator space shared by individual start-up companies, is designed with collisions in mind. It is a communal office where entrepreneurs, unable to afford Manhattan rent, share resources such as a receptionist, conference rooms and classrooms. There are no cubicles, just long tables where staff work intensely. Programmers from one start-up can easily mix with marketers from another firm who sit at nearby tables.

Most open offices are hardly as spartan, but the intent is similar. At the Manhattan headquarters of Seamless, an online food delivery service, a cubicle-free space makes extensive use of Steelcase systems furniture to give every worker a home space location at a series of long benches. There are abundant spaces for meetings and private work, along with socialization zones. Even Seamless' top executives are out of offices and on the floor, equally available for collisions.

"Hoteling" could be an option for some academic libraries. When staff take vacation, family leave, sick time, attend conferences and more, offices are vacant. Hoteling means employees have no permanent assigned space. There may be only 100 workspaces for 150 people. Each day employees locate a desk where they can tap the network,

New Building, Traditional Workspace: How Did We Get Here?
Julie Garrison, Associate Dean, Research and Instructional Services
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When we embarked on designing a new library at Grand Valley State University, we took the opportunity to reimagine everything. The goal was to design for flexibility, providing opportunities for students to create and own their learning environments. We wanted moveable furniture, a mix of spaces, and as much as possible, to minimize walls and invite students to create their own spaces.

Translating these design strategies to our library staff and faculty work environments proved more challenging. We explored new ideas and options for creating functional, attractive, and flexible workspaces. We imagined collaborative spaces and hoteling for staff in need of temporary accommodations. The changing nature of our work was factored into discussions weighing the relative merits of open and closed work environments.

Sub-par workspace in the old library strongly influenced these conversations. Many of our newer professionals were in shared spaces with systems furniture. Elevated noise levels would often distract others from getting work completed. Moving to another space for conversation was not always plausible or desirable. Those working in these environments looked forward to real offices. Senior librarians were scattered around the building in private offices of varying sizes. These individuals were isolated, often having no contact with colleagues for days unless they initiated it. They wanted co-location with colleagues to increase opportunities for discussion and collaboration.

The university's desire to standardize office sizes and furniture became a decision factor. The goal was to minimize special furniture requests or customized office designs, and increase the general equity in campus workspace. Whichever office and system furniture layout we chose for the new library required approval from all parties. No individual accommodations or special requests were authorized.

Our final design created offices and workspaces in tune with the campus office standard. Professional staff have traditional offices and support staff work in open environments. Unoccupied offices and open workspaces serve as perching stations for those who need temporary accommodations. Private offices are located within departmental suites to encourage collaboration. Despite plans for growth, just one year later we have run out of offices in two of our suites, needing to relocate some individuals.

An open office environment would have offered us more flexibility to accommodate growth. However, private offices are serving the needs of our librarians and professional staff, who require some privacy for a multitude of projects and meetings. We believed professional staff morale would have taken a huge blow had their request to support this need gone ignored.

connect to their files and engage with other staff. CitiWorks is a group of office neighborhoods where Citi employees group according to functions such as technology, human resources and customer service. Open work spaces in any neighborhood allow for cross-employee contact that contributes to the collisions. Citi claims that after some initial resistance staff now enjoy working with different colleagues, and have overcome challenges related to distraction and securing personal items.

Create an Office Ecosystem

Much of what we know about workspace arrangements comes by way of the popular and business press. Two articles from November 2013 gave open office opponents plenty of ammunition with which to make a case for private spaces.

Harvard Business Review's "Research: Cubicles Are the Worst" and *Fast Company's* "You're Not Alone: Most People Hate Open Offices" both cite research from the paper "Workplace Satisfaction: The Privacy-Communication Trade-Off in Open-Plan Offices." This article concludes that the benefits from increased employee interaction were smaller than the penalties of increased noise, stress and decreased privacy. People with private offices are more satisfied than those in open office cubicles. In addition to the greater status associated with a private office there's no denying the joy of having a door to shut.

That brought a response from open office advocates. Most acknowledge that open office arrangements present challenges but insist that design strategies and appropriate furniture can

It's about Work, not Space

By Elliot Felix, Founder, brightspot strategy

Many organizations – libraries included – are contemplating changes to their workspace. It may result from a new organizational vision or structure, new construction or renovation, a consolidation, a response to budget constraints, a new initiative, a change in leadership – or more likely, a mix of all of these.

Library administrators must focus primarily on the changes in how people work and secondarily about changes in the space to facilitate that work. For instance, moving to a more open workplace might improve group problem solving but open space isn't itself a goal. The design and implementation process should acknowledge and weigh the inevitable trade-offs new workspace will bring. Careful orchestration will engage everyone affected by the changes and empower them to learn new ways of working.

Begin that process by getting at the goals for the change – what do you really want to achieve from the initiative and why? Be as transparent as possible. Calls for workplace change that are just cost saving initiatives wrapped in rhetoric about collaboration will likely fail, be resented, and cost more in damaged morale than savings to the project budget. Make your project an honest attempt to enable more effective work and a higher performing organization. There are always constraints, of which cost might be one.

Next, enter a diagnostic phase using interviews, observations, workshops, surveys, and data mining to examine team structure, roles, policies, space, workflow, and culture. From there, develop a change program to outline the gaps between the current state and the future goals, identifying the space, technology, and organizational changes needed. For instance, "work styles" might describe the different ways individuals and teams work and their needs. From there, establish a design and organizational structure that allows for the measurement of progress.

As you do so, there will likely be some trade-offs where you optimize one aspect (e.g., group awareness, connectedness, and problem solving) somewhat at the expense of another (e.g., interruptions and distractions). Leadership's job is to facilitate a process of weighing these various factors and deciding what is an acceptable trade-off and to develop ways to mitigate these risks (e.g., creating shared quiet work zones whose protocols preclude noise and interruptions). Some organizations can achieve this change without making sacrifices and this is certainly the ideal. More often, a decision must be made as to what the priorities are and how to achieve balance. An honest discussion about the concrete trade-offs and how they relate to the goals is best informed by research data and input from all those involved.

To make the change initiative about work and not simply about space, organizations need to carefully orchestrate the process to maximize input, manage uncertainty, and create as many opportunities for learning and growth as possible. This should include staff needs analysis so people know the plan is for them. Give staff a sense of ownership in the change, and communicate regularly so staff know what is going on and what will happen. Supply the facts to head off fear and rumor. New and different workflows require staff development and training during a transition period so the switch to a new space is as smooth as possible.

The upfront research and analysis should also serve as a baseline against which you can measure your progress as you proceed. Identifying a small, more controlled pilot is often a great way to be able to lower the risks of the change, build momentum, improve your solution, and get others onboard. Seek out the answers to important questions. Does it provide a relative advantage over what I'm doing today? Is it compatible with my values and experiences? How complex is it? Can I easily try it out? Can I easily observe someone else doing it and see the results?

If you truly want to use staff workspace as a tool for improving the effectiveness of your organization, reframe your space initiative to be about work. Then carefully orchestrate the research, engagement, communications, development, and assessment activities so that people can enroll in and take ownership of the change.

Office design specialists believe that privacy and collaboration are not mutually exclusive. Privacy is obtainable with creative strategies beyond personal offices with closed doors. The key is to create different zones that contribute to an overall ecosystem that lets the employee decide the best office location to accomplish their work, whether individually, with a team, when consulting with students or faculty or managing a subordinate. Administrators should look to develop the following types of "systems" in a redesigned office ecosystem:

• **Distributed:** A mix of spaces that are blended together so that it is easy to move between them. The design allows for "stimulation control." That means workers can choose spaces that meet their productivity and distraction requirements. Physical proximity of different work spaces allows for quick switching between optimal work modes.

• **Zone:** Locations are more specifically designed for maximum quiet or noise tolerance. Unlike the distributed model the quiet and noise tolerant areas are physically separate from each other. This ecosystem is preferred for workers with greater noise disruption concerns

• **Shields:** Applies to any type of office ecosystem. Shields are design features that offer more privacy where and when needed. Partial height walls and portable screens can dampen noise and block distractions. They may be combined with book cases, white-noise machines, plant walls and other "non-wall" dividers.

• **Signals:** Practices that workers agree upon that are used to communicate the need for quiet or openness to distraction. Props, signage and even body language may be put to use to communicate the signals.

Learn From Others

Academic administrators considering non-traditional workspace designs for their library need to be well versed on the advantages and disadvantages of the full spectrum of possibilities. Nikil Saval, author of *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplaces* wrote "The idea is that these [open] offices encourage collabo-

alleviate noise, distraction and privacy issues. Weighing in on the workspace debate, the *Harvard Business Review's* October 2014 issue was "Spotlight on the 21st-Century Workspace." The lead article "Balancing We and Me" establishes that with 70 percent of American workers in open offices, it is the dominant workspace design. Though

sometimes problematic, if properly executed, it can lead to better productivity. Based on Steelcase workplace research, this study confirms the strong connection between worker satisfaction and office space. Workers want to (1) concentrate easily; (2) engage in teams without disruption; and (3) choose a workspace that meets the task at hand.

ration and serendipitous encounters. But there's not a lot of evidence behind these claims. Whereas there is a lot of evidence that people don't like open plans." Saval ignores numerous reports from open office designers and dwellers that speak to its success.

In "An Open Office Experiment That Actually Worked" Paul Rosenberg and Kelly Campbell describe their open-plan office as a success stating that "The open layout has increased productivity, energy and connectedness. But the journey from a traditional office to this new space where everyone shares work benches, tables, lounge areas and private rooms took careful thought and planning. "

Most higher education workers are well acquainted with traditional office arrangements but have little experience with or exposure to non-traditional approaches. Today's open-plan settings, when outfitted with state-of-the-art furniture, abundant privacy options and noise-suppressing technology, are a far cry from Dilbert's cubicle farm. Perhaps the best strategy comes from Reagan Arthur, a publisher for Little, Brown who was quoted in a *New York Times* article on Hachette Publishing's move to an open-plan office. Arthur said she "was dead set against the idea" until she toured the open-plan space of an architecture firm and discovered the experience "was a bit like the college library during finals."

Therein lies a more practical option for decision makers. Visit different office layouts. Speak to the designers. Speak to the staff. Find out how well these different layouts are working. Finding good library examples could be a challenge.

An open layout is found at the North Carolina State University's relatively new Hunt Library. While some managers have private offices the majority of staff work in an open arrangement with individual cubicles. That is supplemented by an adjacent work/socialize zone with different types of spaces and furniture that allow for both collaboration and privacy.

At Purdue's Parrish Library of Management and Economics, a renovated library features an open office for the small group of business librarians, and they now prefer their more collaborative, shared space.

Finding good non-library examples may be a better option. Those with a serious interest in field exploration may find good open office examples in their own city. Sales representatives from office furniture vendors may be a useful source of information. Seeing and experiencing what others have done with their workspace is a better method for gaining an understanding of how well or poorly any office system setup may work for your academic library.

More For Tomorrow Than Today

Conversations between administrators and staff members about workspace arrangements may be difficult at best and combative at worst. Constructive action depends on everyone being well informed about long-term goals, cost constraints and experiences from the field. Everyone needs to come to the table with more than just personal experience and preferences. The question is what is the best workspace arrangement for the library organization, not the individual worker, in terms of workflows, collaboration and worker satisfaction. The answers

must satisfy not only today's staff, but also all those future generations of workers who will inhabit the space as well. To make these critical decisions, administrators must look beyond past or current practices and imagine instead how staff may work and interact 10, 20 or more years into the future.

The debate about the benefits and pitfalls of different office space arrangements is likely to continue, with too much anecdotal evidence and too little research supporting every view.

Martin Pedersen, writing at Metropolis, perhaps sums it up best when he says, "The truth is, architecture can't keep up with the changes in the workplace. The whole idea of The Office is under assault—by tools that allow us to work anywhere, smart machines that threaten to make us 'redundant,' and, lurking in the shadows, a perpetually squeezed economy. It's no surprise that a lot of design responses, like the open-plan office itself, are best guesses."

Every office arrangement will have its strengths and weaknesses, and academic administrators know well they won't please everyone. If they approach the design of library workspace as an ecosystem where staff can make choices to determine the optimal spaces for when and where to get their work done, while everyone may sometimes be displeased, the majority is empowered to control their work environment – and that should make a powerful difference for every library worker.

For more references visit Steven Bell's Diigo page for office systems at https://www.diigo.com/search?adSScope=my&what=open%20office&snapshot=no. —*bells@temple.edu*