

Why open plan offices are like a nudist beach

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On Leadership

By Jena McGregor

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In the #MeToo era, an open-office environment might seem like the perfect solution for fixing the sexual harassment that can take place behind closed office doors. If there are glass walls everywhere, and no one has doors or even plastic partitions to reserve any sense of privacy, groping and sexual advances might be harder to get away with. (Remember the famous allegations about NBC host Matt Lauer remotely locking his office door from a button under his desk?)

But that hardly means it's an office arrangement women love. Research has already shown that women tend to be more sensitive than men to the noise generated in open-plan offices, and take more long sick leaves when they work in them. Now a recently published study of a British government office showed that open-plan offices may be tougher for women in different ways -- leaving them feeling more scrutinized for their appearance, subject to staring by male peers and more self-conscious about their status in the organization.

That's the exact opposite sensation such designs are typically meant to inspire, said Christina Schwabenland, one of the co-authors of the paper, which was published in the journal "Gender, Work and Organizations."

"A lot of the thinking behind open plan offices is they're more egalitarian, so your rank and position matters less," she said.

In fact, women were more likely to report the opposite feeling, driven to show their status in the organization by dressing up for work. And without any privacy at their desks, they tended to sense they were being scrutinized for their appearances by male peers.

"Women felt under surveillance" more than men, Schwabenland said. "They felt pressure in terms of the clothes they were wearing, and uncomfortable if they wanted privacy."

She and her co-author, Alison Hirst, interviewed about three dozen men and women over a three-year period who worked at a British government office that was transitioning out of a traditional office space and into an open plan environment. It was set up as a qualitative study that gauged the thoughts of workers in long, structured interviews rather than one with a statistically valid sample.

Schwabenland acknowledges that their study approach means they could have had a skewed group respond, but says that it also provides a credible snapshot. For one, the researchers did not set out to do a gender-based study -- the discomfort that female employees said they felt in the new office first emerged organically, rather than out of prompts from questioners. (After hearing women repeatedly bring it up, Hirst later added gender-oriented questions to the study.)

In addition, the response to the study has clearly resonated with women, she said. After Fast Company published an article last week about the study, "responses poured in from readers," the publication said, particularly women, about the effect open-plan offices had on their work.

"Oh my god, yes," wrote one woman on Twitter after Tracy Chou, a software engineer and high-profile diversity advocate in Silicon Valley, shared the story. "A couple jobs ago, I was basically a zoo animal. Incessant staring and comments on my clothes, makeup, jewelry, conversations, personal habits, food, facial expressions, everything. One guy would even stare between the monitors all day and comment while I worked."

Others wrote in with their own experiences. "Reading this article was both upsetting and validating," wrote one anonymous reader, calling it "ambient sexism." Another reader, named only Veronica G., wrote Fast Company to say "my own office was a glass box and my desk did not have a facade – which meant, because I always wear skirts or dresses instead of pants, I had to sit with my knees together all the time to look ‘proper’ because I was visible from all angles."

Stefanie Johnson, a professor who studies diversity and gender issues at the University of Colorado, Boulder, said the study, though based on qualitative interviews, rang true to the experiences women often have in the workplace. She recalls speaking with an executive at a company who described himself as being an advocate of hiring and advancing women -- yet say he was pro-diversity because "who doesn't want to look at women all day?" she said. "He laughed, but it's not very funny. There's a lot of literature on sexual objectification that shows the damaging effects it has."

She said that while open office environments may work well in more gender-balanced workplaces, where the split between men and women is more even, particularly male-heavy workplaces or those with toxic cultures could make the sense of being on display distracting. Other research has looked at the drain of what researchers call "covering," in which people hide parts of their true selves at work in order to mesh with the dominant culture.

In their paper, Schwabenland and Hirst note that the new building's architecture team was all male, who, when asked about their findings, made an analogy to a nudist beach. "You know, first you're a little bit worried that everyone's looking at you, but then you think, hang on, everybody else is naked, no one's looking at each other," he said, suggesting "that's what'll happen, they'll get on with it." That was an "interesting metaphor," Schwabenland said.

She would not offer a solution for what office designers should include as a result of their interviews, but said it was a reminder that a transparent space wasn't a catch-all solution.

"You can't ever assume that having a nice policy or having a wonderfully designed building or having a dress-down Friday will change things," Schwabenland said, and that the only way to address the issue is through the right messaging from leadership and vigilant attention to the organization's culture. "It's these little ways of being and behaving that carry messages -- that really make the difference to whether people feel happy at work or not."