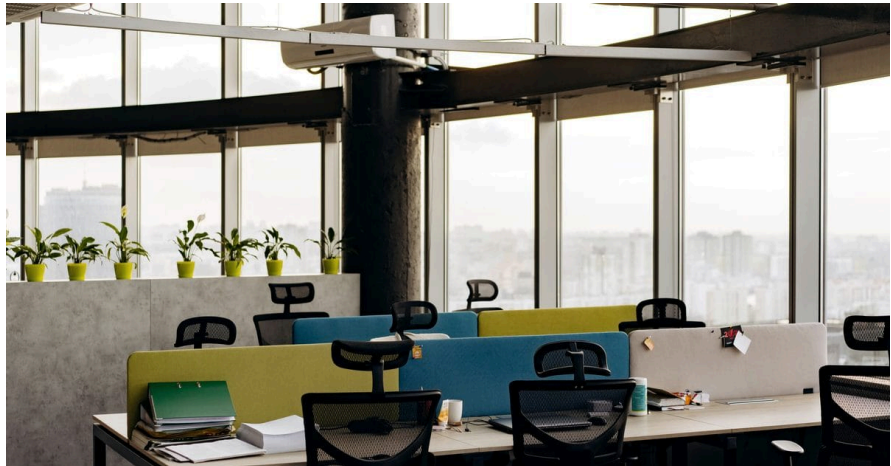


## PUBLIC NOTE

## The Myth of the Open Plan Office

Peter Lewis  
peter@plraresearch.com



Is there anyone who still believes that open plan office layouts *increase* productivity? [Article](#) after [article](#), [study](#) after [study](#) has made it clear that the massive distraction they create outweighs any benefits from “collaboration” or “spontaneous interaction.” It’s almost a running joke at this point in the tech world:

Last week I was talking to some union leaders about tech. “The only thing they care about is open plan offices.” “And they still have them?”

— Pinboard (@Pinboard) [April 27, 2017](#)

And yet some of the smartest companies in the world [keep building them, over the objections](#) of their own employees. What’s going on?

The obvious answer is cost: office space is expensive, so companies are always trying to reduce the space per employee, and the collaboration/creativity/community stuff is just spin. But even that story only takes you so far, because at some point the lower productivity hurts the company as much as (or more than!) the employee. It’s crazy for a big tech company to save \$10k/year on rent by seating a \$300k/year programmer on a trading desk where they need to wear headphones all day.

So on some level, there must be people at the top who still believe the myth. In his recent book *Deep Work*, Cal Newport dissects two of the post-war stories of highly productive collaboration that have driven it: [Building 20](#) at MIT, and [Bell Labs](#) in New Jersey.

Neither building offered anything resembling a modern open office plan. They were instead constructed using the standard layout of private offices connected to shared hallways. Their creative mojo had more to do

with the fact that these offices shared a small number of long connecting spaces — forcing researchers to interact whenever they needed to travel from one location to another.

Originally, open plan offices were about surveillance as much as cost:

The first modern office was the Larkin Administration Building, which opened in 1906 in New York. Designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, it was based on an open-plan factory, with a giant atrium and very few walls.

“He was interested in creating big cathedral spaces for aesthetic reasons,” says Jeremy Myerson, professor of design at the Royal College of Art.

“But actually it was very useful for managers because no walls meant they could supervise workers in this open space and keep an eye on them. It was all about control.”

Every time I’m in a WeWork or similar coworking office, they seem to be getting more and more subdivided: they’re discovering that members will almost always pay a premium for a tiny glass-walled interior closet compared to a seat in an open bullpen. Which shows you that the closer the decision making is to the actual occupants, the higher the premium becomes on privacy. And if you visit even the newest and best-amenitized corporate open plan offices, you’ll find huge waiting lists for the conference rooms, people running in and out to take phone calls, and those giant headphones everywhere. (A friend at one of these told me their colleagues were starting to replace their Bose noise-cancelling headphones with the industrial ones worn by lumberjacks.)

So many of the changes in the typical office over the last few decades are about trading easy-to-measure cost reductions for diffuse, hard-to-measure costs in time and attention; think of the way that software has eliminated so much admin staffing by making everyone into their own assistant, spending hours logging expenses, contacts and meetings on a dozen different websites. Each of these trade-offs individually is so small and hard to measure (sometimes there are real efficiency gains involved) that you can see why they keep happening, even if they’re collectively a mistake. But this one is just too big to be explained that way.

This is especially true at those big tech companies with more cash than they know what to do with. In these cases an open plan office may be a kind of costly signaling device (like a peacock’s tail) or a way to keep employees distracted from the fine print on their stock options. But more likely it’s just another irrational management trend in an industry that prides itself on rationality. Hopefully we’re finally getting close to a tipping point.

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