

'The hectic, open-plan office is the most expensive office space there is'

Japke-d vraagt door [Japke-d. asks probing questions]

Busy, open-plan office spaces with a lot of stimuli and distractions would seem to be a cheap option for employers but in reality they're not, a neuropsychologist informs *Japke-d. Bouma*.



Illustration Tomas Schats

I think that by now, everyone knows that the hectic, open-plan office with too many people sharing the same space is super-unhealthy. I recently talked to a neuropsychologist who says that such offices are bad for your brain, to a building researcher who says you shouldn't lump too many people together and to a noise expert who says that a noisy work environment makes you sick. But then again, for employers these kinds of open-plan offices are nice and cheap, so it's 'logical' to have them, I always thought ...

Until last week. That's when I read - in my own newspaper - an interview with neuropsychologist Mark Tigchelaar about his book *Focus AAN/UIT* [Focus ON/OFF] in which he says that the hectic, open-plan office "would seem to be nice and cheap", but you lose the savings you make on office space "many times over because employees are unable to perform well". I nearly fell out of my chair. If the 'cheap' argument is no longer valid either, why on earth would you persist with open-plan offices?! I put in a phone call to Tigchelaar.

Quite the contrary, the hectic open-plan office is expensive!

"Stronger still, I would call it the most expensive office space there is. A number of studies have shown that, for example, the number of people calling in sick is dramatically higher than in offices where people are not crammed as closely together. In a Danish study I saw this can run as high as 62%." Hm. Those kinds of studies are often not representative of all offices.

"That is true, but increasingly there is also other evidence showing that people in these types of offices are less productive *and* - and that is my particular subject - are incapable of maintaining their focus."

An individual workspace for everybody is too expensive.

"There are nuances to that. Accommodation and furniture are relatively cheap compared to personnel costs. When the latter increase it's costing you a lot more money."

So at least don't cram quite as many people in together.

"Yes. Absolutely. In an earlier version of my book I called these types of offices 'mega stables with good coffee' but later on I scrapped that phrase."

Why? They are mega stables, sometimes even with bad coffee.

"Haha, yes, I agree, but my editors thought I was being too severe. I sometimes notice the same thing when I advise companies on how to reduce stress and burnout. They'll say: 'we just changed over to an *open office* concept, so we would prefer you not to mention that.'"

And so Tigchelaar makes recommendations with the open-plan office as a given, he says. And his recommendations are clear: give every employee a pair of noise-cancelling headphones, provide 'quiet areas', and come to agreements about talking and being silent.

But employees themselves can also do a lot to maintain their focus, says Tigchelaar. For example, make lists of things that still need to get done - that way they stop distracting you. Make your tasks more challenging and don't change between projects quite as often in one day. Maintaining your focus is hard work, but it's the only way you can perform, is his message.

Tigchelaar compares it to deep-sea diving. If you know the boat has to leave relatively soon, you don't go down quite as deep. It's the same in the office: for the truly complex jobs you need to dive deep into your concentration. "But if you know you may be interrupted at any moment you'll stay on the surface, you'll only start on the superficial jobs and only deliver superficial work."

My advice: when something really needs to get done, work from home.

"I totally agree! I really wanted to make 'real work gets done at home' my motto, but you had already taken that title for your book! I'm now using '*welcome to the jungle*'. That covers the load as well."

People need to relax more, as well.

"That too, but it has to be real relaxation! So don't take a meeting during your break, don't read a book, don't meditate or work out, and definitely stay off your phone."

Huh? Aren't meditating, reading and working out good for you?

"Yes, they are good for your body and spirit, but they don't relax your brain because you are still focusing on something. *Real* relaxation is unfocused attention - wool-gathering, daydreaming, doing nothing."

Real relaxation is taking a walk.

"Absolutely."

I recommend an hour a day! But a lot of people find that boring.

"That's the exact intention! Occasionally your brain *needs* some silent and boring time, otherwise it's unable to recharge. I can come up with a lot of complicated scientific reasons, but essentially it's that simple."