



Despite promoting a democratic working environment, open plan office space is far from ideal for many employees. **Richard Buckley** explains why he is in praise of the cellular office

Space invaders

I was heartened to read last year that General Sir Mike Jackson, Britain's top soldier and a man with a reputation for straight talking, was less than amused when asked to work in an open plan space in the refurbished Ministry of Defence building. The hapless aide who made the suggestion was told to come back with a more 'career enhancing' proposal.

I recently managed the relocation of a government agency whose chairman had decreed all staff, including himself, would work in open plan at the new building. I didn't agree, arguing that because of his role in deciding public policy, he and his senior advisors should have private offices. I was overruled.

It seems to me that the current assumption that everyone should work in an open plan space on vague grounds of democracy or communication are ones we should question. 'Open plan' has become space planning orthodoxy to the point where anyone who questions it is now considered to be reactionary. But space planning decisions should be based on functional and organisational needs and office environments should suit the practical needs of the people who work in them. And sometimes that should mean cellular offices.

Sadly, many organisations find that the process of deciding who should have private offices is so difficult that they avoid it altogether and put everyone in open plan.

When the concept of open plan office space was introduced to the UK in the 1960s, offices were dire places with hard floors, gloomy décor and quasi-domestic furniture. The idea of open plan was to improve internal communications by taking people out of what were seen as communication-stifling offices. Knowledge workers (as we would now call them) were to become more efficient and productive by putting key departments adjacent to each other to minimise paper flow.

The main justifications usually given for open plan nowadays are that it can accommodate more people per square foot and that it fosters open communication. I question both of these assumptions.

The space advantage offered by claimed-for open plan over cellular space is not particularly significant. In fact you can put two people and their storage in a smallish private office, which actually 'chunks' space rather nicely.

Nor does the communication argument stand up in these days of email and informality. Working in an office where you might sometimes shut the door does not preclude the valuable informal communications that come from chance meetings in the office or discussions around the coffee machine.

People such as the chief of the general staff (who got his private office) or the permanent secretary to the treasury (who

didn't) should be in private offices because they are concerned with matters which are confidential and of major importance.

Similarly, managers with significant numbers of people reporting to them should be able to work in a private space. So should HR and finance departments, for example. Confidentiality is key to these functions and sloping off to a conference room for a private talk, which can in itself cause a fuss as these things are often noticed, is not the answer.

The absence of private offices often has the undesirable effect of causing people to modify their behaviour to suit the open plan environment. They cover up desktops or turn off their VDUs when they go to the loo or when someone comes to speak to them; they find themselves speaking in a low voice on the phone when talking about HR staff issues. This cannot be right and is a symptom of bad interior design.

Cellular offices also have the benefit of being able to denote status, which has almost disappeared as a factor in office design. I would be the last person to suggest a return to the stereotype of civil service notions of status with every minor differentiation in grade being given an equally minor differentiation in the type of office or workspace they occupy. But why shouldn't some people be given higher status than others and assigned a private office to reflect their worth or standing in the organisation?

Open plan has some advantages. It costs less to build and less to reconfigure than cellular space. But it's not the only solution. And even when open plan is the right solution, it doesn't have to be organised in geometric blocks of desks. It can and should be designed in such a way as to give employees 'defensible' space and a diversity of office landscape – including private offices.

Richard Buckley is managing director of Buckley Associates

“Space planning decisions should be based on functional and organisational needs and office environments should suit the practical needs of the people who work in them.”