



ILLUSTRATION BY STEVEN MOORE

The Office

Space invaders

Fancy a sniffing, squabbling, unproductive workforce? Have we got an open plan for you! **Evan Williams** shares his beanbag – and his take on desks without borders.

LIKE MANY things in life – DIY renovations, communism, standing desks – the open-plan office sounds great in theory. Break down the physical barriers between employees and you break down the barriers to collaboration and productivity. The reality, of course, is very different. This type of workplace has the highest level of employee dissatisfaction, according to a 2013 study by The University of Sydney. How can that be?

To start with, they make us sick. Workers in open-plan offices are at “significant excess risk” of taking short-term sick leave, a 2013 Stockholm University study suggests. And what about that collaboration? Co-worker friendships are “of the lowest quality in

hot-desking and open-plan arrangements”, says Dr Rachel Morrison, a senior lecturer at Auckland University of Technology’s Business School. But at least you get a boost in productivity, right? Wrong. The University of Sydney research also found that the disadvantages of distraction are greater than the benefits of interaction.

None of this is news to long-suffering employees in open-plan offices. As someone in the creative sector, I’ve never been allowed to have my own office; instead, I’ve been confined to converted warehouse spaces. Managers think I’ll be at my most productive working from a shared beanbag or partaking in a game of ping-pong. Of course, it’s hard

to be productive when the colleague sharing your beanbag regales you with uninvited TED Talks about the dream they had last night.

But, at least for the foreseeable future, we’ll continue to work without borders. So it’s up to employees to make it viable.

Over the years, many have adapted to this openly hostile environment. Like the orange oakleaf butterfly, which camouflages itself as a leaf to confuse predators, we have evolved earphones to ward off chatty colleagues. And for the bigger predators in management, there are noise-cancelling headphones.

A source who wishes to remain anonymous told me that a co-worker set up Christmas lights on his desk. If they were green, you could talk to him; red meant stay away. When an office layout reduces social interaction to lighting cues, it might be worth rethinking it altogether.

Though I’m cynical, I have found one company that does benefit from the open-plan revolution. It has been a boon for Soundmask, an Australian business that specialises in solving noise problems. “Architects do not design with their ears,” Soundmask’s general manager, Megan Short, tells me, noting that on-trend interiors – polished floorboards, lots of glass partitions – are a “nightmare for acoustics”. Installing high-tech sound generators helps employees hear their own thoughts rather than their colleagues’ musings on last night’s *Game of Thrones*.

Audio wizardry aside, there’s one other way to save the open-plan office. It may seem radical but hear me out. Instead of having many workers share one big office, what if employees got their own, separate, small offices? I sound crazy, I know, but just listen.

Archaeologists have uncovered evidence that in the distant past (1964 to 2000), ancient structures called “cubicles” existed. They were invented because workers had no privacy in their open-plan offices. Before cubicles, according to *Scientific American*, “The typical open-plan office of the first half of the 20th century contained long rows of desks occupied by clerks.” Sound familiar?

So there may be a way to redeem the open-plan office after all: wait for history to repeat itself. In the meantime, perhaps buy some of those Christmas lights. ●