

Background

Office strife

A few of us telecommute and have an office in a spare room, but most people's working day is spent in a purpose built office building. An office block can house different office layout environments. This can range from the individual to the shared office through to a completely open-plan environment. The most recent fashion is for hot-desking where employees turn up and find an available work station. This is suitable for staff like salespeople who only need office-space for a short period of time, as the rest of the time they are on the road. It is also used in places where office rents are prohibitively high. The downside, of course, is that people feel rootless, even anonymous, and that they belong nowhere.

Even though the individual office is rare, most top bosses have one. It can come as a shock to find yourself in one. Kingsley Goldman feels uncomfortable being on his own since being promoted to Area Manager. 'I had always wanted to be the man in the corner office, but the peace and quiet can make it a lonely experience. The wall is glass and it's like being in a goldfish bowl. I feel that people are staring at me and talking behind my back. That's why I keep the blinds closed most of the time.

At the other end of the spectrum is the open-plan office. Some people love the interaction with colleagues and the buzz of ideas – it is also great for office gossip! Designer Brigitta Childs says she couldn't bear being stuck in a room on her own all day. The biggest problem with large open-plan offices is that they are often located in the centre of the working space without access to natural light or being able to open a window to the outside world. Fluorescent lighting and centrally controlled air-conditioning lead to feelings of frustration at not being able to control one's working environment.

I recently visited an insurance company in Milton Keynes. From above, its cubical set up looks like a maze or a rat-run in a scientific experiment. This arrangement, justifiably, has been satirized, most notably in the Dilbert Cartoons. Accounts clerk Fawzia Ali tells me, 'You are robbed of the companionship that can come with a truly open-plan set up, but have none of the privacy of a proper office. At any moment someone can appear like a meerkat over the chest-high partition.' There are often problems with co-workers speaking too loudly, or eating smelly food at their workstations, or constantly ringing phones. Eavesdropping co-workers' conversations causes friction as well. Fawzia reports frequent arguments and even fights between co-workers

Cubicle or open plan, most of us like to decorate our space with plants or photographs. A 'clear desk policy' usually means that all paperwork must be tidied away at the end of each working day. Legal secretary Marianne Spencer's firm took this a step further and insisted that this applied to personal objects too. They wanted to create a clean, clinical look for clients. For Marianne this was the last straw and she left to work somewhere where she is allowed to personalize her space and is not treated 'like a robot'.

Surprisingly, the most difficult relationship is when you have to share an office with just one other person. The smallest thing can irritate you. The way the other person speaks on the phone, or even breathes, can drive their partner crazy. 'When you marry someone at least you have made the choice to be with them,' says Hesther P. 'I spend more time in a room with my office-mate than my husband. The person I share with is large and messy and just drives me crazy.' Since speaking, they have 'divorced' and transferred to other offices where they are with people who are more compatible.

Exercises

1 Work with a partner. Discuss these questions.

- 1 How much of your working day is spent in an office?
- 2 Who, if anyone, do you share your working space with?
- 3 How is your working space laid out?
- 4 How does your working environment affect your mood and your relationship with co-workers?

2 The title of the text is 'Office Strife'. Strife is another word for conflict. Discuss what you think the article will be about.

3 Read the text quickly and see if your predictions were correct.

4 Read the text again and discuss with a partner the advantages and disadvantages of the different office systems. Which one does the writer seem to like the least?

individual office shared office (two people) open-plan office
cubicle lay out hot desking

5 What are your personal experiences of these different systems?

6 Match 1–8 to a–h to create collocations from the text.

- | | |
|------------|-----------|
| 1 spare | a bowl |
| 2 office | b light |
| 3 goldfish | c block |
| 4 natural | d station |
| 5 outside | e objects |
| 6 personal | f room |
| 7 work | g built |
| 8 purpose | h world |

7 Complete the sentences by solving the anagrams.

- 1 I have been getting letters from _____ government officials. NANYOSMOU
- 2 Watch out for Brian, he's always _____ people's private calls. AEVESDORPGPIN
- 3 I don't like to _____, but have you heard the latest about Nadia? OSPGSI
- 4 This new building is like a _____. I'm forever getting lost. MZEA
- 5 This layout is much cheaper, but the _____ is that we are going to lose staff. ONWDSIED

8 Look back at the text and choose three words that you could use in your day-to-day work.

9 RGT is a small advertising agency in London. They have rented 2,000m² of office space. Read the description of what they need and decide how they should divide up the space for their sixty staff. They need the following:

a conference room for presentations
two small meeting rooms for clients
an office for the head of marketing
an office for the head of design
five small offices for key executives
a large space for the team of in-house designers
a spacious reception area and lounge
a coffee lounge / snack bar
a space for ten telesales staff
a space for the six administrative staff
a space for the sales team
a room for the supplies