How to Improve the Open Office Layout with Activity-Based Working

Originally designed to break down social walls, the open office plan came to be resented as companies crammed in more employees without rethinking their space. Discover how activity-based work alleviates common open office complaints along with what types of spaces to consider for your own office with real-world examples.

Robin

What's inside

Introduction

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People are quicker to write a review about restaurants they hate over ones they love. The same rings true for the open office layout, at least according to Google's search results. Outspoken critics are quick to list the many reasons why they're sick and tired of the open office. But what about all of the silent supporters?

Originally designed to break down social walls dividing people, companies started by breaking down the physical walls in the workplace. The open office came to be resented as companies began cramming in more employees without rethinking the space.

But despite the hue and cry about open offices, they're not going anywhere. In fact, 70 percent of new offices are one.

A modified version of the traditional open office layout supported by activity-based working (ABW) is emerging as a winning solution. According to Gensler's 2019 U.S. Workplace Survey, "mostly open" environments tend to perform highest on both effectiveness and
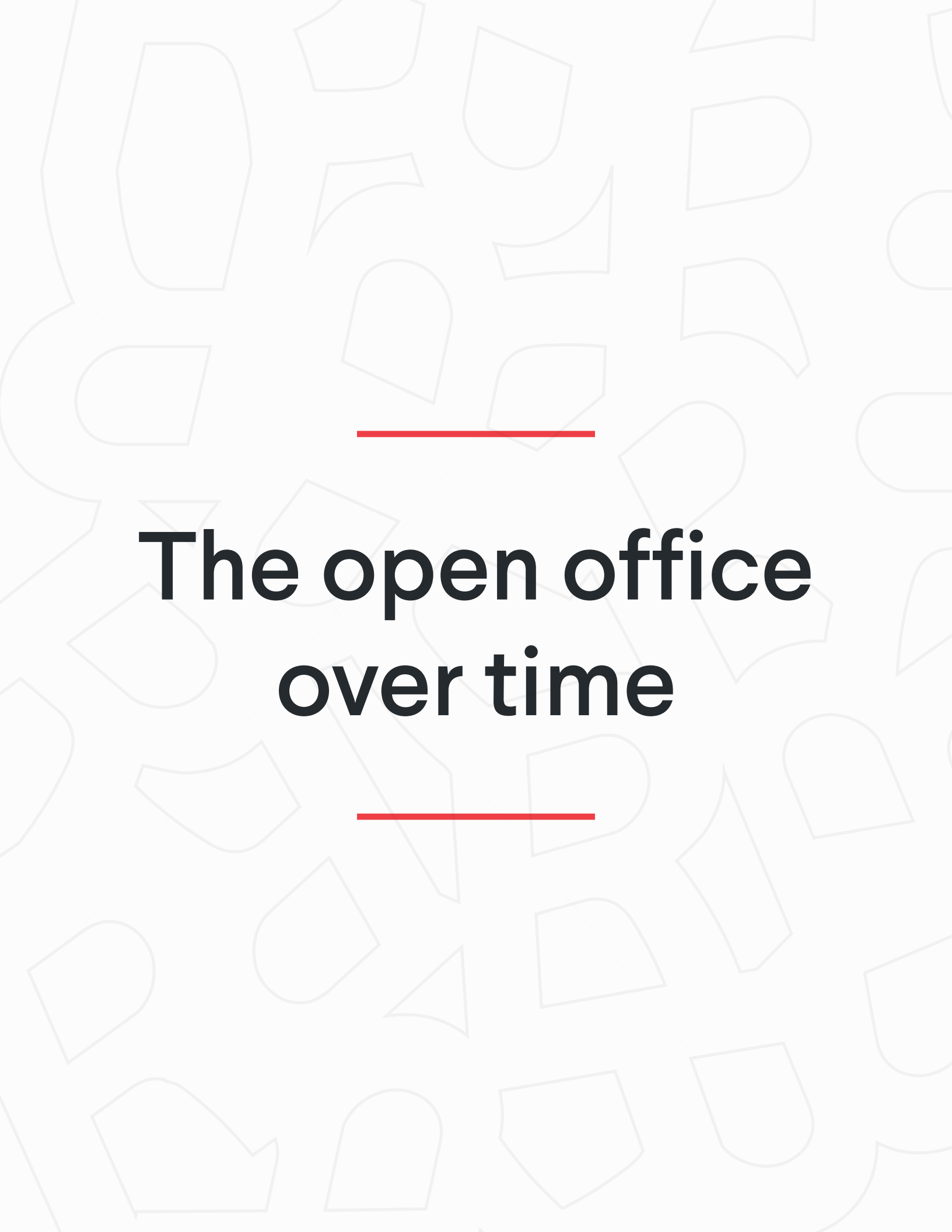
workplace experience. Unlike completely open environments where an employee's only option to get work done is either a meeting room or desk, "mostly open" environments provide ample on-demand areas of enclosure that support privacy and individual work, even while most or all employees sit in "open" individual spaces.

The antidote to the open office ills isn't more walls. It's creating an environment that supports the varied types of work that take place in a particular setting.

25%

The amount that productivity can increase on cognitive tasks when employees have flexible "empowered offices."

The open office
over time

The open office over time

The history of the modern office has been defined by a push and pull between openness and privacy, between tearing down walls and putting up partitions.

There was *Bürolandschaft* (literally "office landscape") in Europe, a free-flowing and human-centered—and flexible and cheap—office design aimed at increasing efficiency in the office.

In the U.S., Herman Miller designer Robert Propst built the "Action Office" in the 1960s, whose modular desks and dividers were hailed as an energetic revelation.

The dot-com boom of the 90s brought with it the emergence of mobile workplace technology. This freed workers from the assigned seating and old-school, cubicle-farm offices altogether. No one needed to physically close themselves off to work efficiently.

Initially, the open office—whose most notable feature was a lack of private offices and, in many cases, walls altogether—was hailed as a revelation. It was egalitarian, flattening traditional hierarchical structures by putting high-level executives on the same plane, quite literally, as the rest of the company. It meant freedom, encouraging collaboration and the kind of spontaneous, inter-team interactions thought to spark "innovation."

In time, however, office workers have found that the open-plan layout introduced more problems than it solved. The most obvious problem: auditory and visual distractions. No walls means no soundproofing. It also means more "visual noise," the result of people coming and going around the edges of your field of vision.

LACK OF PRIVACY

Then there's the lack of privacy. One study found that a loss of visual privacy was employees' second-biggest complaint about the open office, and that almost half of open-office workers are dissatisfied with their sound privacy, compared to only 16% of people in private offices. ROOM, which makes soundproof phone booths, found that among office workers in the 10 most populous U.S. cities, 31% had gone to a closet or hallway to take a phone call, and the same percentage had held back their true thoughts and opinions while on office calls to avoid judgment from colleagues. The Harvard Business Review reported in 2011

that "because open spaces reduce privacy, they don't foster informal exchanges and may actually inhibit them. Some studies show that employees in open-plan spaces, knowing that they may be overheard or interrupted, have shorter and more-superficial discussions than they otherwise would."

BAD FOR EMPLOYEE'S HEALTH AND PRODUCTIVITY

Beyond being bad for your productivity (and sanity), the open office is bad for your health. A [study](#) of more than 2,400 employees in Denmark revealed that employees in open offices took an average of 62% more sick days than those in single offices. [Another study](#) found that 90% of workers in open offices showed "high levels of stress, conflict, high blood press pressure, and a high staff turnover."

And the main selling point of the open office, that it fosters innovation and collaboration via spontaneous in-person interactions? It might be bunk. A highly-cited [Harvard study](#) found that after two Fortune 500 companies transformed their global headquarters into open offices, face-to-face interactions dropped by 73 percent, while email and instant-messaging use rose by roughly the same amount. "Adopting open offices, therefore, appears to have the perverse outcome of reducing rather than increasing productive interaction," the researchers explain.

NO ONE SEEMS TO LIKE IT

If you missed all those studies, the media has got you covered, with seemingly every publication in existence reporting that the open office isn't the workplace panacea its proponents had once promised it was.

In 2013, BuzzFeed published a humorous listicle titled "24 Reasons Your Open-Plan Office Sucks." In 2014, Quartz began publishing a series of mostly critical articles about the open office, and one of The New Yorker's most-read online articles that year was "The Open-Office Trap."

Employees in open offices have made their feelings known. Software company Autodesk moved into an open-plan office and installed a pink-noise system—and when, one day, it turned the system off as a test, employees complained. When the office of tech-advisory firm Chairseven had an open office with concrete floors and custom-built communal tables, employees wore noise-canceling headphones. At Apple's new $5 billion headquarters, some engineers and developers, accustomed to more privacy, hated the shared-table "pods" so much that they threatened to quit.

It's not all doom and gloom in the office-design world, though. There's a business concept that, if implemented correctly, has the power to cure the open-office plague: activity-based working, or ABW.

88%

Percentage of the most highly engaged employees who can choose where and how they work in an office.

What ABW is

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ABW is a transformational business strategy, not just a way of redesigning your office aimed to solve open office unrest. It entails "using the work environment as an instrument for change in an organization," according to Louis Lhoest, a partner at Veldhoen + Company, the Netherlands-based design agency that pioneered ABW in Europe decades ago. At the heart of ABW is one question: "What is the kind of space that any worker at our company needs at any point in the day to do the best job on whatever they're working on?" Basically, ABW involves having a variety of office settings, supported by the right technology, to accommodate every activity that your company's employees perform. Put more simply, ABW means tailoring your physical and virtual workplace to your employees' diverse needs.

Think about being at home. You don't brush your teeth where you eat lunch and you don't sleep where you cook dinner. Your office should be the same way.
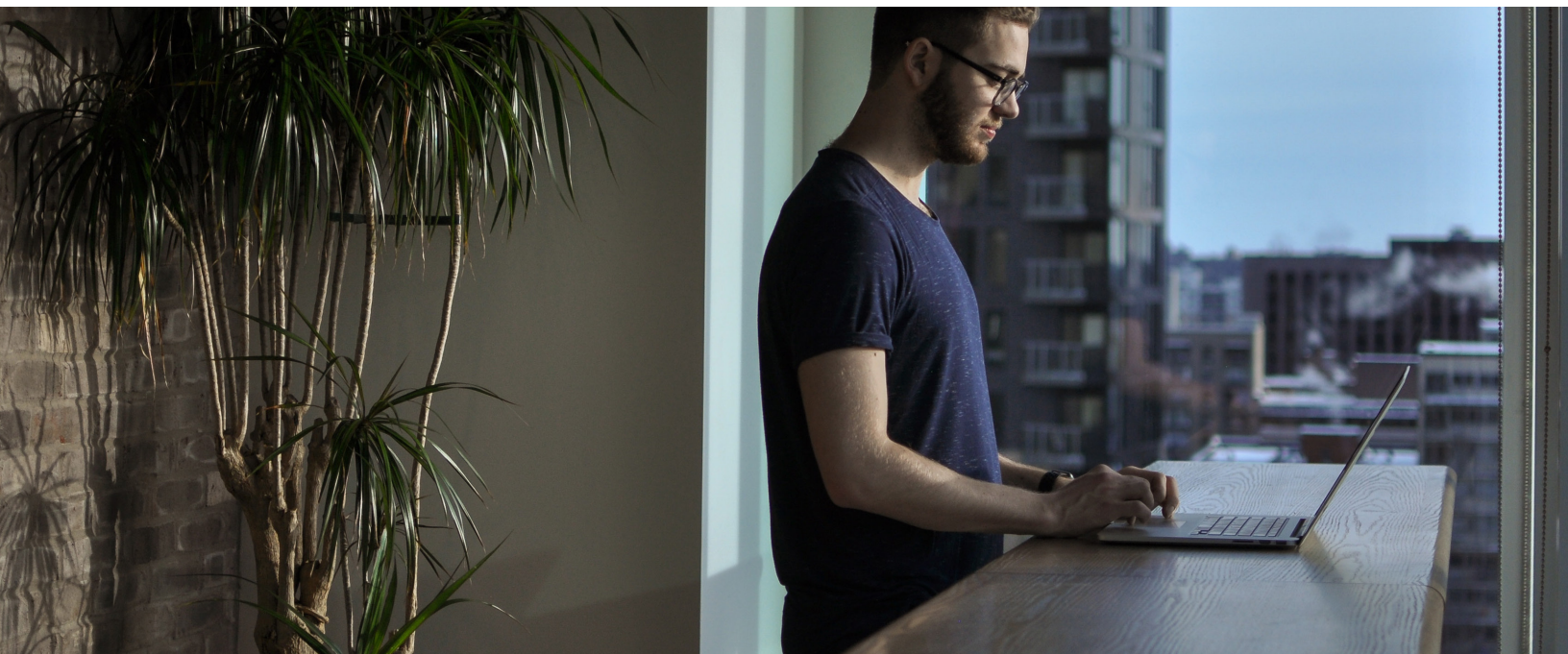
ABW means having, for instance, soundproofed pods for private phone calls and heads-down solo work, A/V-equipped huddle rooms for impromptu follow-ups, and cafés for informal coffee chats. It means having conference rooms that are both physically large enough to accommodate the C-suiters in the office and equipped to accommodate people dialing in remotely and comfortable, airy lounges for relaxing and socializing. To see the most benefits from ABW, your office needs a mix of open and private spaces.

So, what are those benefits, exactly?

INCREASED PRODUCTIVITY

Workers lose an average of 86 minutes a day to distractions associated with the open office, according to a recent workplace experience study. If you've ever tried to read an article or write an important email in an open office—when you're in the vicinity of people eating lunch, making calls, and discussing Ronaldo versus Messi—you know how valuable something like a "quiet car" can be.

Providing employees with a space fit for focus work like a solo pod, another for quick collaborative meetings like a huddle room, and one for socialization and casual collisions like an open staircase, productivity spikes.

INCREASED SENSE OF EMPOWERMENT

When employees have a functional and personal choice over where and

how they work, it makes them feel more in control of their workday. A lack of autonomy, after all, is one of the biggest contributing factors to professional unhappiness.

INCREASED TEAMWORK AND COLLABORATION

Even though the traditional open office is designed for collaboration, its intensely singular focus on working together leads many employees to retreat to the nearest quiet space, even if that means finding solace in the supply closet. ABW, on the other hand, doesn't force one way of working over another. It allows employees to seek out group spaces when they need to, and work in quiet privacy when they don't.

INCREASED TRUST

Not being so closely observed at designated desks makes employees feel that the company trusts them to do good work. "Give people more guidelines and fewer rules," suggests Louis Lhoest, a partner at Veldhoen + Company. "Treat people like adults. That is the key to success."

INCREASED MENTAL, PHYSICAL, AND SOCIAL WELLNESS

A healthy employee is a happy employee. ABW workplaces promote employees' well-being. They accommodate different personalities and moods, letting employees choose the work setting that best suits them at that moment in time. They foster movement, preventing employees from being sedentary for eight hours straight. And their strategic openness encourages interactions both casual and formal, social and professional. A recent study found that employees in an ABW office stopped working to eat lunch with their colleagues more often than

in a traditional office. The study's introduction sums it up: "Although originally designed to enhance collaborative working while reducing office space requirements and operating costs, ABW has the potential to favorably influence a variety of health, behavioral, and work-related outcomes."

DECREASED REAL-ESTATE COSTS

Yes, this is the underlying reason for most open-office plans. (Office accommodation is likely your company's second-biggest expense, after labor costs.) ABW also helps decrease real-estate costs, but not by cramming more desks into the same space.

If your company employs, say, a large team of field sales professionals who are in the office infrequently, perhaps supplying each with a dedicated desk consumes floorspace that could be better used to support another activity, like installing "phone booths" to enable employees to hold private conversations or make personal calls. Desk scheduling software, which would allow people to reserve a desk only on days when they'll be in the office, may be your answer.

12%

Average increase in employee pride in ABW workplaces compared with non-ABW workplaces. *[Leesman research study]*

What ABW isn't

What ABW isn't

Having established what ABW is, it's just as important to note what ABW isn't—how it differs from the trendy office-design ideas with which it's so often confused and associated.

ABW doesn't mean giving each of your employees a MacBook Air and telling them they're free to work remotely. ABW isn't a space- or cost-saving strategy, though it often has both effects.

ABW isn't about funky aesthetics. It doesn't require the kind of Instagram-worthy décor that comes up when you Google "startup office perks." It doesn't mean having beanbag chairs, ping-pong tables, or kombucha on tap. It doesn't mean building nap rooms, game rooms, or secret rooms that you access by yanking a fake book off a real bookshelf. But an ABW office can have all those things.

ABW isn't hot desking, in which workspaces are unassigned and reservable on a first-come, first-served basis, although hot desking can certainly be a part of your company's ABW strategy. If employees move around throughout the day, spending less than half of their workday at a desk, hot desking makes sense. Similarly, ABW isn't the same as desk hoteling, where employees can reserve a workstation for more than a day at a time, but your strategy can include the practice if it lines up with employee behavior and activity.

ABW spaces

ABW spaces

PODS

Your client or boss urgently reschedules your phone call to right now, prompting you to go on a frantic wild-goose chase for a quiet place to chat. Conference room? Nope, taken. Closet? Too cramped. You end up taking the call in a hallway, holding your phone in one hand while balancing your open laptop on the other.

What's the solution to this open-office scenario that's so common as to almost be a rite of passage?

Pods.

Office pods are small, modular, self-contained spaces designed for one or two people—like sleek, modern phone booths. Most pods are equipped with USB and power outlets, a skylight or lighting fixtures, a ventilation system, a small work surface, and a chair or stool. They're soundproofed for acoustic privacy but also offer visual privacy. In an open office, pods can be essential for solo productivity, or even head-clearing quiet time. They might be your most effective defense against the oft-repeated attack that the open office is little more than a breeding ground for noise and distractions.

They're quick and quiet to set up, some built in under an hour—no noisy renovations required. Best of all, they're budget-friendly. Framery's

futuristic-looking pods can be custom-designed with various accessories, colors, and seating options. Its clients include Fortune 500 companies like Deloitte, Microsoft, Siemens, and Tesla.

HUDDLE ROOMS

Everyone knows what a conference room is, and why a closed-door meeting space is needed in today's open-plan office. But do you know about its technologically advanced, financially viable, and increasingly popular little sibling, the huddle room?

Huddle rooms are strategically small, informal, ad-hoc meeting spaces designed to accommodate up to five people. They can't be reserved, which keeps them free from the occasional logistical hassles of scheduling, and keeps real conference rooms available for important meetings with stakeholders or clients. Huddle rooms are for times when a few colleagues need acoustic privacy but don't necessarily need to book a conference room: casual brainstorming sessions, small team stand-ups, quick face-to-face meetings. Think of football players briefly

huddling up to discuss strategy and motivation before the next snap.

But huddle rooms, it must be said, aren't just scaled-down conference rooms. Huddle rooms should have a durable work surface and some type of seating, but whether that combination means beanbag chairs and a low coffee table or bar stools and a workbench depends on your company's needs. Huddle rooms should also be equipped with audio, video, and display technology and equipment, to accommodate in-office and remote employees.

CAFÉS AND DINING AREAS

If the viral popularity of Sad Desk Lunch is any indication, too many American workers—nearly two-thirds, in fact—eat lunch where they work all day. No wonder, then, that when Gensler studied people's most-desired office amenities, it found that a café came in second place, right behind a restaurant or bar. What do these spaces have in common? They're multipurpose meant for eating, working, and socializing.

SOCIAL AREAS

As more time is spent online, spaces that foster face-to-face connection are increasingly valuable. The office commons—a space with a different vibe from work-

only areas, with features like cozy couches, bar-height stools and tables with built-in charging ports, and low coffee tables—has replaced the break-room water cooler as the new social hub.

As Marlyn Zucosky, partner and director of interior design at the design firm JZA+D, said, "[T]he shared functions of copy room, dining area, pantry, and laydown space can be clustered to create a commons, or the so-called 'downtown' of an office floor."

At the New York City office of Morningstar, an investment research firm, open spaces with couches and chairs around coffee tables are kept intentionally casual to spark direct and informal interactions.

LIBRARY

There's a reason why people love working in libraries: simply being around other people doing quiet, heads-down work can inspire the same kind of intense focus. That's why so many modern offices with soundproof, single-person pods also have library-like spaces that are governed by library rules.

Kickstarter's Brooklyn office, for instance, has a large library that's "designed for focused work," according to Lindsay Howard, the company's manager of creator initiatives. With worn-in leather armchairs, study carrels, and double-height floor-to-ceiling shelves holding hundreds of books, it's perfect for extended productivity sessions. Other offices with dark, moody libraries include Google's Dublin campus and Spotify's Manhattan office.

ABW in practice

ABW in practice

ANZ BANK

ANZ boosted revenue at its Melbourne headquarters by nearly $50 million by embracing a style of ABW it called the "Playbox" project, in which different departments have different furniture and technology options. The 14 workspace designs are based on the 14 ways ANZ employees were found to work. Workplace change manager, Tessa Roulston, said that this was effectively like turning the idea of ABW on its head. "In activity-based working you have environments that people move to, whereas with Playbox, the environment itself changes," she said at the 2015 Worktech conference in London. Decision-making speed went from four days to four hours, and a new banking app was completed six months ahead of schedule.

COSTA COFFEE

Design firm Morgan Lovell helped Costa Coffee design an office that would accommodate the company's two historically separated business sides: its office employees and its roasting-plant workers. Breakout spaces were "intentionally placed between the two different working areas—the

office and roasting plant—to encourage different teams to interact more," Morgan Lovell writes in its [brief](#) for the project. "This shift from 'my desk' to 'our space' is set to improve productivity, while allowing staff to connect in different ways and move away from a culture of presenteeism." Costa Coffee employees have reported "an increased sense of belonging and connectedness in their new office."

GERSON LEHRMAN GROUP

For most of GLG's 21-year existence, its global headquarters, in Midtown Manhattan, looked like that of any other big-city consulting firm. Employees had designated desks in what was essentially a cubicle farm; higher-ups had their own closed-door offices. In 2014, not only did the company move its Big Apple employees to a new space—65,000 square feet spread over two floors near Grand Central Terminal—but it also completely changed how those 300 employees worked. As CEO Alexander Saint-Amand writes in a first-person piece for *Fast Company*, the office was designed "around a new paradigm, neither open nor full of private offices": ABW.

GLG was the first large company in the U.S. to embrace ABW. The office is organized into "neighborhoods" where people working on similar projects can gather. Each contains a variety of workspaces, from multi-person team tables, conference rooms, and enclosed glass meeting pods to single-person phone booths, quiet concentration areas, and adjustable standing desks. "Yes, we give up our personal desks," Saint-Armand writes, "but we gain the whole office."

Still, there was, at first, pushback. Employees were hesitant to give up their personal space for photos and plants. Clive Wilkinson, the architect behind the office, Wilkinson thought that if employees had a variety of cheerful, comfortable workspaces to choose from, he or she wouldn't have an urge for aesthetic customization.

Indeed, ABW soon caught on. One GLG employee, a systems analyst, told Business Insider, "I definitely find that moving around helps me get work done." GLG surveyed its employees six months after the move, and the data was validating. Two-thirds of employees were already using multiple workspaces, 91 percent felt excited about ABW's flexibility, and 92 percent found ABW to be fun.

PUBLICIS

At the global advertising agency's North American headquarters, not one of the 1,200 employees has their own private office. And despite being spread across eight floors of a staid Midtown skyscraper, employees feel connected to one another in a way that's fluid, organic, and well-established at the same time.

Clive Wilkinson Architects designed the office around ABW, which Wilkinson, in an [interview with Architizer](#), called a "highly supportive version of mobile working" that leverages technology "to be super mobile and to be able to use an office in a very different way." He acknowledged that open offices have been criticized—fairly—for being unfriendly to introverts. But in an office like Publicis', one designed with ABW in mind, introverts "can really go wherever they like because there are no designated desks," he said. "They can curl up in corners. They can slip away from noise and the crowd. It's self-selective, and as a result it's actually probably the best possible environment for introverts."

The new Publicis space allows for supreme flexibility. "I don't know how we'll be shaped in five years," said Andrew Bruce, CEO of Publicis North America, "but I do know we've built an office that will accommodate it."
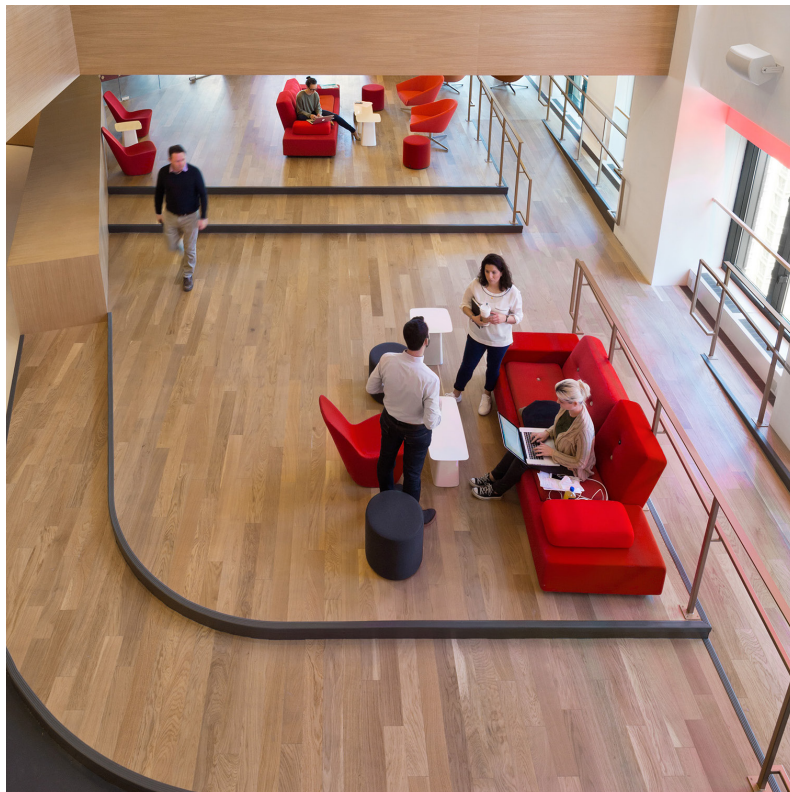
Tips for implementing ABW

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For decades, workers' sense of ownership in the office has been tied to having a desk they could call their own. Decoupling that relationship can be difficult for employees to understand, much less embrace. Here are some tips transitioning to ABW.

ASK YOUR EMPLOYEES QUESTIONS. LOTS OF THEM.

Learning how all of your employees currently work, and how they'd ideally work, is crucial to implementing an ABW office that fits everyone's needs. Do your research. Conduct a formal poll. How often do your employees work alone versus in groups, and how large are those groups? What do they need to be surrounded by to be laser-focused? Outside the office, do they prefer to work at a café or at home or somewhere else, and why? What's their biggest distraction? Are there any technological tools they wished they had? And so on.

ENSURE THE C-SUITE IS ALL IN.

Executives must become early adopters, and outwardly vocal advocates, of ABW to nip employees' inevitable arguments in the bud: "But if our CXO feels wishy-washy about this new way of working, how am I supposed to get behind it?"

CONSIDER PEOPLE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SPACE EQUALLY.

These are ABW's three core components, and each one must be in place for ABW to work.

UNDERSTAND THAT NO TWO ABW MODELS ARE EXACTLY ALIKE.

Just as no two companies—from their business strategies and bottom-line goals to their employees' tasks and personalities—are exactly alike.

FOCUS ON SOUND, AIR, AND LIGHT.

"If you don't invest in these prime factors," says Louis Lhoest, a partner at Veldhoen + Company, "don't invest at all. Acoustics are key." Remember that although sweeps of glass and polished floors may look nice, they're bad at absorbing sound. A 2016 Gensler survey of 4,000 office workers across 11 industries found that at the most effective open offices, shared desks had barriers high enough that employees couldn't see one another without standing up.

MAKE SURE YOUR TECHNOLOGY IS MOBILE.

Employees must be outfitted with a fast, modern laptop, and necessary files should be in the cloud, accessible to employees no matter whether.

LEVERAGE IoT TO DETERMINE WHAT'S WORKING.

Gather information about who's doing and using what, and where, at your office. Using space utilization technology can arm facilities with the right data to help fine-tune the office design until employees have access to the ideal number of open to private spaces, employees to desks, and so on.

ABOUT US

Robin modernizes the open office with workplace experience software. We help employees secure the ideal space and resources for whatever project they're working on at any given time while equipping facilities leaders with the insights they need to continually optimize the workplace. The solution to the open office isn't more walls.
It's activity-based work.

Robin