

Open Office Truth: Love It or Leave It (Transcript)

Open Office Truth Podcast Series: Episode 1

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This episode features: Journalist Rob Kirkbride, retired industry consultant Dave Lathrop and O+A design studio co-founder Verda Alexander.

INTRODUCTION

Rob Kirkbride: The number of people who are just dissatisfied with their office. I mean there's a certain percentage that even if you gave them a gold plated throne, they're not going to be happy in their office. I mean, it's called work for a reason, right? We're not here to give you a La-Z-Boy.

Dave Lathrop: Perfect.

Host Katie Pace: Welcome to What Workers Want. The new 360 real time, a Steelcase 360 podcast about how the places we work, learn, and heal are changing to help people thrive and ideas flourish at work. I'm your host Katie Pace. I'm here today with Rebecca Charbauski.

Co-host Rebecca Charbauski: Thank you.

Katie: She is our 360 realtime producer and this is the first episode in our five part series, the Open Office Truth.

Rebecca: That sounds kind of ominous, but I'm really excited we're doing this because we started to talk about the open office and how it's such a conversation out there. And we really thought we needed more than just one episode to talk about the open office. So this is the beginning, and if people want to get all five episodes, they can go to steelcase.com/openofficetruth. We wanted to put everything in one place. So the question is is Rob right? Rob Kirkbride, who you heard at the top of the show, which is pretty funny. Are we after a Holy Grail here? I mean, is it impossible to make everybody happy in the workplace?

Katie: What we know is that 70% of people work in some form of an open plan. And when we asked on Instagram on our channels, 74% of people say they do. So we know that organizations want to attract and keep the best people and that the workplace is a major factor in doing it. But there are such strong opinions about the open plan.

Rebecca: So to get to the truth of it all, we embarked on this five part series and we're going to talk about the open plan history today. We're going to hear about the privacy science. So the neuroscience behind what people need for privacy, including new research nobody's heard before about the open plan and what actually can help. And then designing social spaces. A lot of these informal spaces, shared spaces sit empty and people are spending a lot of money to create these places for people to work, but they're not working. So what's going on there? And then collaboration, which is a big driver in creating the open plan. So how do you make that work? And we want to remind everybody right now to subscribe so you don't miss any of it. And tell your friends if they work in an open office or if they have an opinion about the open office, they're going to want to hear this series.

Katie: That's right. So we're going to expose the good, the bad, the ugly, all in these next five episodes. And privacy is really important. It's a super emotional topic, how we work and how we find time to focus at work. But collaboration is important and serendipity is important. So we're going to explore how we get the balance right. But before we dig in, let's just hear from some workers, some regular people on what they think about their open office plans.

Anonymous Office Worker: So I would describe my environment as a glorified call center, where in the past I've had walls all the way to the ceiling. I've had partitions. Now I have no walls whatsoever. It's a carved out cubby in my mind. I come in actually early every morning, so I have some quiet time. I can be working and as people are coming in, as I'm working on something, I may have two or three people in the area starting to talk loud about what they did over the weekend while I'm trying to focus in on a project, I'm listening to what's happened over the weekend. So it's very hard for me.

Anonymous Office Worker: Yeah, I think the best part about an open plan is just the freedom to sit anywhere you want. So it gives you that freedom to not be restricted to one spot on that whole day. I do like the idea of an open plan. It's cool because it gives you that freedom, it sparks creativity, allows you to work well with other people.

Katie: So a little good, a little bad.

Rebecca: Yeah.

Katie: And we heard the same when we asked on Instagram. By the way, if you don't follow us on Instagram, you should follow us on Instagram.

Rebecca: Totally.

Katie: We asked our followers, how do you focus in the open plan? And some of the answers we got were, "I wear headphones, I minimize my visual distractions. I get up and leave to get water."

Rebecca: I like that one.

Katie: "I just get up and leave."

Rebecca: "I just go."

Katie: Actually a lot of people said they thrive on the open plan or that because it was so open, people were actually quieter because they were more sensitive to the people around them. So it was a real mix and it wasn't super negative or overwhelming. And this is kind of surprising given some of the headlines that we've seen.

Rebecca: They are rough, these headlines. So here's a few. Here's one from Vice. "Open offices should be banned immediately." "Open office plans are as bad as you thought." That's from the Washington Post. And this is my personal favorite. "Open offices were designed by Satan in the deepest caverns of hell." That's the Guardian. I mean they make it seem like fire and brimstone and just one or the other, right? Like it's yes or no.

Katie: So dramatic.

Rebecca: So dramatic.

Katie: Designed by Satan. Yikes. Sheesh.

Rebecca: Right.

Katie: But it's not as simple as a headline. And there are studies that show that the open plan increases collaboration, reduces loneliness, decreases the amount people sit. And these environments allow people to be more flexible.

Rebecca: So I was recently in Boston visiting PTC, which is a high tech company that just moved to this beautiful tower overlooking the sea port and they moved into an open plan. And I was there talking to John Civello who was their vice president of real estate at the time. And here's what he had to say about their move, which is very different than what you read about the open plans' bad reputation.

John Civello: When we first talked to people about that, the sky was falling. And really the open plan and no office is really a ... it's got a bad reputation as you know. And we're fighting against the fact that some people haven't done it I don't think in the most thoughtful way. But having a hundred open seats in two [inaudible 00:05:52] rooms, that doesn't work, right? So we really tried to be purposely conservative and put a bunch of interior spaces that people could use when they needed them. And I don't get any complaints about people having problems finding a private space to have a conversation when they need to. So that really validates the strategy.

I know from my own experience, I can always find a room to go into and have a conversation if I need to in private. But I also love the fact that I'm out in the open and I'm engaging my employees and my colleagues all throughout the day.

So I think people that have done it the wrong way have really hurt all of us because if it's done correctly, like I think we did it, really you get the best of both worlds I think.

Rebecca: John says people have done it wrong, but that you can do it right. So that's what we're here to figure out. So how do we do that? How do we do it correctly?

THE HISTORY OF THE OPEN OFFICE

Katie: Right. So let's start with a conversation I had with two people who have combined close to 60 years of knowledge about the workplace. Today we're going to get started by trying to understand how we got here. So we invited Rob Kirkbride, editor in chief of Bellow Press.

Rob: How are you doing, Katie?

Katie: Thanks for joining us. And he's been writing about the office furniture industry for more than two decades. And Dave Lathrup who retired last year from Steelcase after more than 35 years with a career in research strategy and consulting and lots of other things.

Dave: Hi Katie.

Katie: Hi. I just want to dive right in to this conversation and ask you guys starting with the basics. How did it get so crazy where we see these really provocative, crazy headlines?

Dave: Yeah, I think as an industry we tend to kind of whipsaw from one extreme to the other. We're trying to follow the trends. We're trying to do the best jobs as possible and sometimes we get too overzealous in the application of some of the ideas that we have.

Rob: You know, it's a classic in human psychology that unmet needs result in anger. And when you see those kinds of headlines, those are people expressing an unmet need and we need to listen.

Katie: So I'm wondering if we can back up a little bit. One of the pictures I have in my mind and we can post to the website for our listeners is that image of Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson Wax headquarters. I guess that's an image from 1939 and there are no partitions, right? It was divided with white columns, filing cabinets designed by one of the most famous architects in the world and the metal office furniture company, which of course later became Steelcase. We were one of the few companies that could produce this futuristic design. And so I'm wondering what was going on then that created this futuristic design?

Dave: Well, I think one thing that Rob said is really right. I mean the idea of openness as Wright expressed that at the Johnson Wax headquarters was very much the way office work was always thought of at that time. The boss needed to keep an eye on what was going on. Usually from above in the case of the Johnson Wax building. And the changes though that were starting to happen and the Wright building for Johnson Wax and a number of other iconic buildings in that era were starting to think ... the work itself was evolving and it was no longer purely clerical work to be done essentially by lowly paid employees. Increasingly the work was becoming more complicated and more demanding, more like engineering and less like clerical work. And this was very much the open phase of the World War II economy for example.

Rob: And at the same time you've got this emerging consumer economy in the late 1930s where before that you had small towns or even larger towns that were served by companies in that area. In the late thirties you're seeing corporations arise, places like Johnson. And at that time in 1930 the first supermarket opened, and by 1939 there were 5,000 supermarkets. So this idea that consumerism had changed as well as the workplace, which gave rise to these companies, which gave rise to the office.

Dave: In many ways society was simply evolving.

Katie: And more so they were going to an office. And then by 1959 Peter Drucker coined the term the knowledge worker. So now there's this move from efficiency to effectiveness. And I'm wondering if you guys can talk about, sort of moving on in history, fast forwarding a little bit in the fifties and sixties, what was happening in our culture at that point?

Rob: I think at that time work was really evolving. You know, people were starting to think about the idea of a workplace that works for them. And I think that maybe that period was the first time people really thought about that.

Dave: Yeah, well up until that point, remember we had a supervisory culture in most organizations. We hired you to fill a slot in the machine. We expected to see you at your work doing that work. And that resulted in not only a cultural way of thinking about work and space, but it reinforced the idea that work was sort of a thing you did to survive. And what Rob's beginning to hint at is that work was becoming something that was in and of itself much more fulfilling. It became something more than a way to simply provide for a family. It became a way to establish your own worth and to express the value of your ideas far beyond what organizations had thought in the past.

Katie: Yeah. In the 60s we had the first cubicle and then by 1973 you had Steelcase executing the largest cubicle project in the world filling the Sears Tower.

Rob: I think the industry gets a bad rap for the cubicle. I really do.

Dave: Why is that?

Rob: Because it was never designed to do what designers tried to make it do. And I don't want to place all the blame on interior design, but I think they have a share of this too. Because if you look at some of the early cubicle designs, they were never meant to be lined up in rows. They were never meant to be a way to shove a bunch of people into a space. In many ways, if you look at some of the brochures from then, it could be a workspace today.

Dave: Very much so. It became more and more and more of an issue of managing the complexity of a building that was now filled with a disproportionate number of people or the bulk of the workforce, which was very expensive to change. So we had this aging building stock that had had systems furniture thrown into it as we threw technology, originally electrical and later electronic and later wireless and on and on. But we threw all these new things at these buildings and hoped somehow they could cope. And we mixed that with the status and hierarchy orientation to the way space was assigned. And you ended up with something which was fundamentally untenable. So the cube was more a result of that, I think, than it was really the cause of it.

Katie: Yeah. You know, the eighties you have this cubicle land, productivity, productivity, productivity, and then a bunch of things happened, right? So technology, we started to think more about humans, but really it was this rise of wifi and laptops and all of a sudden I could work anywhere and oh, by the way, collaboration needed to happen. So I needed to have these serendipitous interactions. In between the 90s and early 2000s all of a sudden you start taking down all the cubicles and opening everything up.

Dave: Yeah, in some ways that was done I think with the intention of reflecting a new kind of corporate culture that was starting to emerge in the beginnings of it in that same time. So the baby boomers who grew up in the 60s were now running companies and starting to make some of these decisions and they had a distinctly less formal attitude about work and organizational design. And we ended up starting to open things up and make it vaguely more usable for people to find places that were about who they were that was more expressive. So instead of it just being, you pick the kind of rug you want in your office, CEO of past, it was increasingly you can use the places that are provided to you in any way you want because this technology now enables, as you said Katie, people to do what they need to do, where they want to do it. And I think this evolution in the direction of taking down partitions is probably a good idea, but we have to recognize also that it's not the only thing people need when they're working.

Rob: Yeah. I think the move from cubicle to open space was allowed because of technology. If technology wouldn't have changed, the workplace wouldn't have changed. Because we had to have cubicles to deliver power to people to have giant CPUs sitting on their desk. I mean really the whole design of the office was around the technology of the day, which had to be in a certain place. Since the last 10 years or so all that's changed.

Katie: And it was the type of work too. Right? The type of work you needed to do was very desk based. I went to my desk, I did my job, I went to lunch, did more work. I went home.

Dave: Yeah. The machine defined work as it had during the Industrial Age and increasingly it doesn't at all. The machine is simply a tool in the hands of the artists and how we get to that next design of organization, which will be reflected in the next designs of spaces too, is the process we're in right now.

Katie: So then all the walls come down and we'd say we're going to have serendipitous interactions when we walk to the bathroom and we're going to have instant collaboration and there's going to be no private offices anymore because we're all going to be out in the open. What could possibly go wrong?

Dave: Well, I'll just take a quick shot. I think the biggest thing that went wrong is we began to assume that that was the new way and everybody was going to work that way and that is fundamentally wrong as was putting everybody in cubes or putting everybody in office boxes down a long gray hallway. None of these things are right. What's right is what that individual is, needs, does, wants. That's what we need to be thinking about.

Rob: Yeah. And in the two early 2000s, for the first time, you started seeing companies wanting to emulate other companies and how they work, which is really interesting. I mean if you look at Google or Facebook, at that time everybody was saying "we want an office like Google, we want an office." And that doesn't work for everybody. If you're a law firm, you're not going to have a slide in the middle of your office. I mean that doesn't fit culturally. So I think people were starting to try to stick round pegs into square holes that didn't fit.

Dave: That's really right. That's so right Rob. I mean, you really need to engage those people in a fashion that allows the system to be designed, not the cubicle system, but the system of place and technology to be designed where they can have meaningful choice

Rob: And that's a lot harder to do. Then you've really got to come up with a design or products that not only serve people but make them want to come into the office because they have choices. That's really fascinating to me. The choice, the idea of choice in where people work. You don't only have to create a nice place to work like you used to, Steelcase or any other company. You've got to create the best place to work. I mean the absolute best or people will go to Starbucks or home or somewhere else.

Katie: Or they'll leave your company altogether.

Dave: That is right. Exactly right. I couldn't agree more Rob.

Katie: For organizations today that are considering an open office or they've knocked down all their walls, how do you talk to people about the open office today?

Dave: So I think the key is to be less deterministic about what they need, quote unquote, and more open to a dialogue about who they are and what they want to do as they become these high performing humans that we hope they will be. So my answer to "is there a future in the open office" is of course there's a future in the open office. It's part of the scenario. It's part of the landscape. It's not the answer.

Rob: Yeah. I think the easy answer would be to say choice. You give people choice in where they should work. That's the obvious answer. I think we also need to create products that help them to do that, to make good choices in the office. The industry does a good job in addressing some of these things. Not so good in other ways, but obviously the open office is not a bad thing in and of itself. It's just the way that the design is applied, and if it's applied well, people are happy with the place that they work.

Katie: Well Dave and Rob, this has been a really fascinating conversation. Thank you so much for joining me.

Rob: Thank you.

Dave: Thanks Katie.

Rebecca: Those guys are great.

Katie: And you can really understand after listening to them that the workplace was always designed as a way for the type of work that was being done.

THE FUTURE OF THE OPEN OFFICE

Rebecca: And when you think about where the workplace is going next, we wanted to talk to somebody about the future. So we got in touch with Verda Alexander, she's co founder of O Plus A, a design studio based in San Francisco. And you know what else is based in San Francisco? All those really progressive Silicon Valley companies, a lot of which are being copied.

Katie: We called her because not only has her firm designed some of the most iconic offices in Silicon Valley, but she also wrote this article for Fast Company where the headline was, "I've been designing offices for decades. Here's what I got wrong." Let's listen in. Hi Verda, welcome to What Workers Want.

Verda Alexander: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Katie: So you guys were really early on in the open office trend. When did you start seeing those come into vogue? Would you say it was in the early 90s?

Verda: So the nineties there was a growing awareness that the work environment was important and it contributed to a company's bottom line. And I think that that's when people really started to look at the office more through this microscope. If workers were happy and excited to come to work and felt more creative, they could do more and create more and contribute more to the bottom line and the company would profit and retain their employees and things like that.

And then there was other things too. I think there was this idea of democratization of the office and that's also a concept that's been around for a long time. Huge in the Silicon Valley, this idea of flatter everybody contributing and this meant bringing down sight lines, being down the cubicle wall so that employees at every level in a company could look around and see each other. And tech firms just really embraced this way of working. Everybody being accessible and every single employee being important. And I think it's no coincidence that people like Mark Zuckerberg embrace this and want to sit out in the open.

And then I think the third thing is technology and not being tethered to your desk. There's an allure and a freedom to this idea and how could we not want to be able to work not just at our desk but anywhere.

Katie: So in your article, you use the words "when it all went crazy" or "the moment it got crazy." And I think it's really interesting because if you look at some of the headlines or some of the images of the office spaces that are being designed today, you might think that's a little nuts. What was it that's wrong and that got so crazy?

Verda: So we're talking decades now. Going into the 2000s and then this decade that we're in where things just started to get more outlandish and it felt like it was starting to become a contest of who had the coolest amenity, who had the slide or the wildest thing that might give them an edge up actually on recruitment. This is when I think needs and wants started to blur. What an employee really needed to get their work done versus what they wanted or what maybe someone assumed they might want. In this last decade, I think we've seen a lot of critique of tech firms not doing the right thing, of turning their back on communities, of being ostentatious and things like that and just not tuned into reality. And so this is when I really started to question what we were doing and how that contributed and why. And just not feeling that same satisfaction that I thought when I was starting out and breaking down those cubicle walls. So was it really the right thing for us to provide for every possible need or want in the office.

Katie: At the same time, we know that the workplaces of the past are not the way to bring people back together. Right? I mean, I'm sure you're not proposing to put up the cubicle walls and put everybody back in a private office again. So talk a little bit about what that does look like. Is this still an open office or what does it look like?

Verda: Yeah, I feel like there's been a lot of critique on open office for good reason and I think that designers taking a step back and really understanding what the implication is of their designs is a great thing. I think what I'm proposing at this stage is more of maybe philosophically, it's this idea of reducing what's unnecessary and getting back to a focus on work. So I see a refinement of different types of spaces to work in that can accommodate all different types of people. And that's I think where the open office has gotten its biggest critique is it just doesn't accommodate the introverts or people that need extra privacy. And so I think the office will be landing somewhere in between. We'll be going back a little, but we'll of course not lose the progress that we've made in so many areas. Definitely open office is not going away.

Katie: Thank you so much for joining us Verda.

Verda: Thank you.

CONCLUSION

Rebecca: So we got to hear from Dave and Rob about how the workplaces over the decades have changed based on the kinds of work people need to get done. But then it feels like with Verda that things kind of tipped to where organizations were almost trying to give people everything under the sun that they could possibly want so maybe they'd never leave work.

Katie: Yeah, I mean think about some of the images you see online or pictures in magazines or articles, workplaces featured. Like there's ball pits and there's beer on tap and there's ping pong tables and there's a slide.

Rebecca: I can get behind the beer on tap.

Katie: Yeah maybe. But think about it. If we slide down a slide, are we going to make a better podcast?

Rebecca: Probably not. Probably not.

Katie: I know. Probably not.

Rebecca: And I think what we're seeing now is this desire for purpose in people at work and what makes them feel purposeful is to be able to meaningfully contribute to work. And so you're seeing this shift to giving people what they need. And our next two episodes of the Open Office Truth are going to be about privacy, which is something people need. And there's actual neuroscience behind the privacy that people need. And we're going to get to hear new research that hasn't been out there before, tests done on people in the open office and what kinds of things can actually help them have a better day at work.

Katie: Well we're looking forward to that. And so I want to thank everyone who joined us for this episode. Dave Lathrup, Rob Kirkbride, Verda Alexander, and thanks to you Rebecca.

Rebecca: Happy to do it.

Katie: And remember to subscribe to What Workers Want and share the series with a friend. If you're interested in more about the Open Office Truth, including the next episode and more resources, visit steelcase.com/openofficetruth. Thanks for listening.