

Is higher ed ready for corporate-style open office designs?

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While cubicles have long been a staple of private sector offices, many colleges and universities are slowly starting to follow suit, reducing or eliminating private offices for their employees in favor of semi-private and open workstations.

There are three primary benefits for colleges and universities that shift to an open office floor plan:

- First, open office floor plans improve space utilization by reducing total space per employee. The number of administrative positions in higher education increased 28% nationally between 2000 and 2012, and many institutions have accommodated that growth by moving to open floor plans. However, this shift is not solely about efficiency.
- Cubicles and open offices enhance collaboration by removing physical barriers between employees and providing more public and private meeting spaces.
- Third, open offices lead to better communication within and among units, which increases operating efficiency and productivity.

How did one university make open office a reality? By starting with the facilities unit.

Leading by example at the University of Toronto

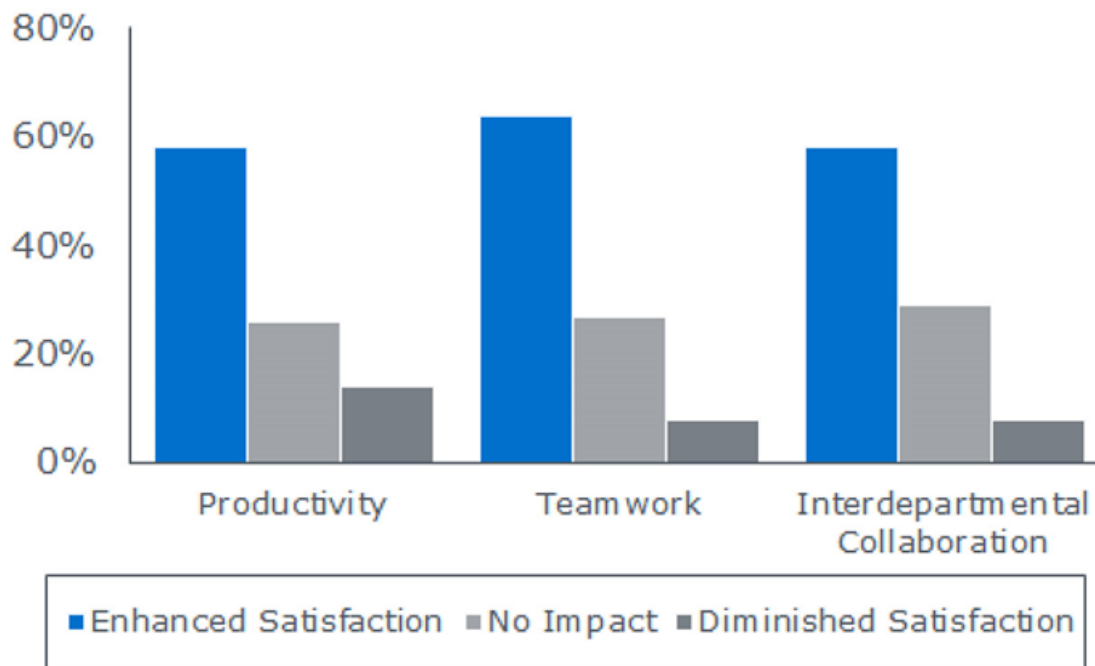
The University of Toronto has started the migration to a more space-efficient layout. Toronto's facilities unit voluntarily moved out of private offices and into low-walled cubicles positioned around the perimeter of the floor to maximize the natural light on staff desks. Toronto also created a variety of formal, reservable rooms and non-reservable collaborative spaces for informal meetings and ad hoc discussions. Since staff spend less time in these rooms than at their desks, these spaces are positioned near the center of the floor away from windows.

[Download the research brief for more information on open office plans](#)

This move has been an all-around success for Toronto. The facilities unit reduced the total number of private offices by 30% and decreased workstation size by 25%. In total, the unit reduced gross square footage by 10%.

Moreover, contrary to conventional wisdom that staff will resist elimination of private offices, a survey of the facilities department found high satisfaction with the new space. Staff reported higher productivity, increased teamwork, and more collaboration across the facilities teams. Toronto reports that the Facilities department space change has gone so well that other administrative departments at the university are now following suit.

Staff Satisfaction with New Space



Bench-style layouts: A step too far?

While schools such as the University of Toronto have shown the potential benefits of moving to an open office floor plan, examples in the corporate world reveal the potential pitfalls of embracing it without pause. Some companies have shifted to bench-style seating, with no assigned desks and no partitions separating staff. While this layout is appropriate for staff who travel frequently or do not require regular access to a desk, early data suggests that the costs of this office layout outweigh the benefits.

Specifically, research across various industries has found that staff who work in unassigned seating arrangements:

- Take 62% more sick days than their counterparts in private offices
- Lose an average of 23 minutes per day to distractions
- Report a significant decrease in satisfaction with visual and sound privacy

To date, very few colleges or universities have shifted to unassigned bench-style seating. This is potentially an instance where lagging behind other sectors has benefited higher education; facilities leaders can wait for private companies to adjust and perfect this model before adopting it on campus.

Want more on office design?

To learn more about the possibilities and considerations for moving to an open office design at a college or university, check out our latest publication, *Corporate-Inspired Office Space*.

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