

## Productivity: Do Open or Closed Office Concepts Hinder or Facilitate Productive Workspaces

Productivity in the broadest sense of the word refers to the efficiency with which a given level of inputs is transformed into discernible outputs. Over the past few years the concept has grown in importance as a result of a confluence of factors namely; increased concern regarding the efficiency with which the world's resources are used and the need for new approaches to spur economic growth following the adverse effects of the global financial crisis. These factors have energized a global debate on the question of how can we do more with less and how can we achieve more with the same i.e. how can we become more productive? This piece will focus on one segment of the debate, productivity within the work environment. This is an apt starting point as the work place is the nerve center of an economy given that the production of a society's goods and services often take place within a work environment setting. Within the St Lucian context recent industrial action by workers highlight the importance of a conducive work environment. Having said this we're going to focus on the debate surrounding the benefits and cost of 'open' versus 'closed' workspaces. This segment of the debate on workplace productivity is a good starting point as literature on the subject is increasingly arguing that the very nature of an office setting has been shown to impact worker satisfaction and subsequently efficiency/productivity.

When one speaks of "open" or "closed" workspace it refers to the degree to which the office staff are physically separated from one another either by walls, furniture or other architectural elements. What makes this debate particularly interesting is that the research suggests that 'open' office spaces inhibit productivity as opposed to enhancing it counter to what most persons would intuitively think. Open office concepts have been around for some time and were seen as

a way of providing relatively flexible and low cost work spaces which by their very design encouraged employee collaboration and subsequently idea generation. In addition the open concept was also seen to allow for easier access for an employee to get help from a co-worker given a lack of physical barriers to colleagues. Several studies however have called into question these benefits. An article in Time Magazine and its sources note that persons in these environments often were dissatisfied with their environments given the constant background noises of other co-workers (phones, conversations etc.) and the subsequent inability to focus as a result of these distractions. .

To assess this in a scientific sense one research paper studied workers who were moving from a traditional closed office setting (walls and closed cubicles) to new premises which were more open (unobstructed seating arrangements). Staff was then given questionnaires prior to the move and four weeks and six months thereafter. The questions asked were geared towards determining how various proxy measures for productivity were impacted. In both the four and six month surveys all productivity metrics received lower scores suggesting that staff were less comfortable and subsequently less able to perform task efficiently. In another test researchers subjected a group of clerical workers to three hours of “low intensity noise” to mimic the humdrum of a typical open office and gave the workers several puzzles to solve (the puzzles had no solution) while a control group were given the same puzzles but in a quiet environment (as a proxy for a closed setting). Those subject to the “noise” were observed to quit attempting to solve the puzzles while the control group persisted in attempting to solve until the end of the review period. These findings were interpreted as providing some level of proof that employee’s in a more quiet and controlled setting were able to maintain their concentration better. These and similar type studies stress that workers perform best in the presence of both psychological and

architectural privacy as they are in more control of their environment and able to get quiet and focus. A closed space allows for minimal distractions and encourages more in depth conversations and concentration given a higher sense of privacy.

Notwithstanding these arguments research concede that in addition to the degree of openness of a work space other factors such as adequate storage and work surface areas also play a role in determining the comfort level of workers and play a role in enhancing the conduciveness of the workspace to maximize productivity. Consequently the totality of a work environment should be studied with a view to making it more efficient. By way or recommendation some pundits argue for a mix of work space which facilitate group discussions (open) and concentration (closed) in order maximize perceived benefits of both settings.

The productivity literature is increasingly focused on how the physical layout of an office affects worker satisfaction and by extension their efficiency. While open plans are flexible and low cost they may inhibit worker efficiency to the extent to which the limit the ability to focus and concentrate while a closed plan which limits these disadvantages may be better. This piece highlighted these areas in the debate to shed some light on the productivity literature and to also get you thinking about how the work place affects you.