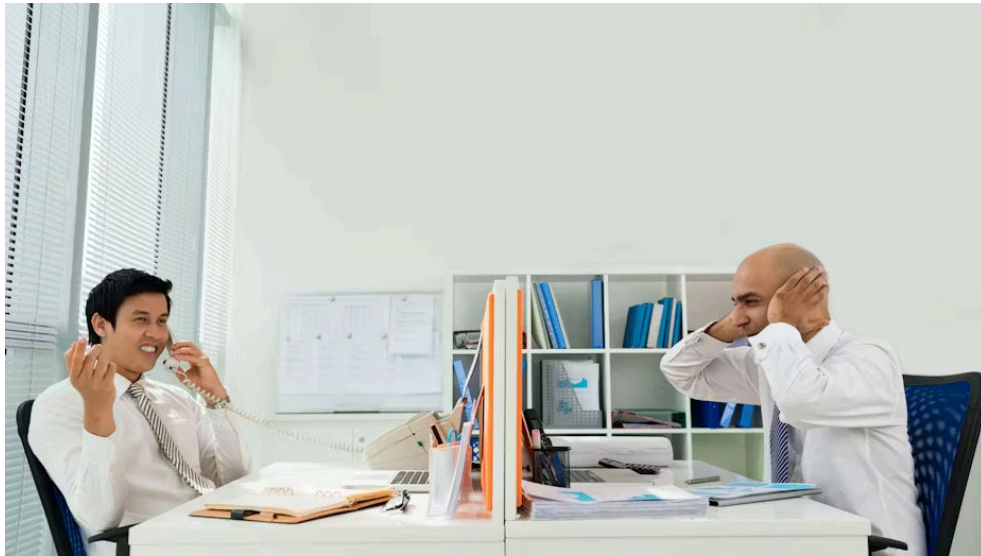


Get out of my face! We're more antisocial in a shared office space

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Shared work spaces can be counterproductive for the employees who work in them.
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If we all work side by side in an open-plan office or “hot desk”, moving from place to place, it’s sure to increase collaboration! It turns out that may be wrong. If you don’t have your own space, perhaps you are better off working remotely with your cat for company.

Our research found that in shared working spaces there were increases in “employee social liabilities”; distractions, uncooperativeness, distrust and negative relationships. More surprisingly, both co-worker friendships and perceptions of supervisor support actually worsened.

Although prior researchers have claimed shared work spaces can improve social support, communication and cooperation, our results indicated that co-worker friendships are of the lowest quality in hot-desking and open-plan arrangements, when compared to those with their own offices or who share offices with just one or two others.

They are significantly worse when compared to those who mainly work at home or on the road. It is possible that these shared offices may increase employees’ use of coping strategies such as withdrawal and create a less friendly environment in a team.

As part of our research we surveyed 1,000 working Australians. We asked them whether they shared their office space with others, what sort of co-worker friendships and supervisor support they had, in addition to any negative relationships (such as lack of cooperation or distrust).

Shared environments did not improve co-worker friendships and, in addition, were associated with perceptions of less supportive supervision. The finding may be because employees who receive either too much monitoring or only informal supervision, perceive their supervision to be of lower quality than those who have dedicated supervision meetings.

It could also be that, as employees become more irritated, suspicious and withdrawn in a shared workplace, their relationships with their supervisors and colleagues deteriorate.

Other research also supports the idea that the benefits associated with shared spaces are aren't all they are cracked up to be. Instead, it showed that cooperation became less pleasant and information flow did not change in a shared office space.

This is not great news for employees in an age where shared space and hot-desking is increasing alongside the use of mobile technology like laptops, smartphones and tablets. This, together with the high cost of office space, has brought about a desire to use physical office space more flexibly.

So, if this trend towards shared space is not likely to be reversed, how do employees survive?

Surviving a shared office space

If you can have your own office, share with just one or two others, or work from home, these are the best situations for workers we studied. However, we're not all that lucky.

One way to combat visual distractions from nearby co-workers can be to use panels, book shelves, or "green walls" of plants. Noise from the office can be cancelled out with headphones.

However, these interventions will depend on whether they are suited to your job, workplace or your fellow employees. One option can be to create a mix.

Researchers Pitt and Bennett describe a large office redesigned to include not only hot-desking, but also "touchdown areas" (free desks to allow quick access to information), "bookable offices" (rooms that can be booked in advance), "collaborative workspaces" (for group work, possibly with teleconferencing capabilities) and finally "break-out workspaces" (relaxed couches and low tables for spontaneous, informal collaborative work).

We are not suggesting workers should be afforded unlimited privacy and solitude. Some spontaneous interaction is needed for many types of activity-based work to succeed. Too much and the distractions will outweigh any potential collaborative benefits. Too little and the benefits are not evident.