

# Now is the ideal time to address the frustrations of 'open plan human spam'

With the almost evangelical rush to convert offices to open plan in the last 20 years, workers in South Africa and around the world are increasingly revolting against the design trend as they demand a shift away from what was once an unquestioningly popular, cost-cutting management trend.



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Linda Trim, director at South African workplace design specialists Giant Leap, said that it has become increasingly clear that many work spaces are prone to constant interruption.

“The phenomenon of ‘open plan human spam’ is now something that is being addressed the world over. And now may be a particularly good time to review this model as many people are set to continue working from home while the coronavirus poses a threat.

“Having access to only open plan without area demarcation, is just too noisy an environment for many people. Open office plans, which are specifically designed for collaboration, can make it tough for people to do any sort of meaningful, deep-thinking work.

“And ironically, there is growing evidence that open plan offices are in fact a collaboration killer.”

A 2018 Harvard study compared how employees reacted when they were moved to open plan offices.



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Said Trim: "Overall, face-to-face time decreased by around 70% across the participating employees with email use increasing by between 22 and 50%.

"Also very interesting, was that in the 15 days before the switch to open plan, participants had an average of around 5.8 hours of face-to-face interaction per person per day. After the switch to the open layout, the same participants dropped to around 1.7 hours of face-to-face interaction per day. That's four hours less of collaboration per day."

There's growing evidence that open architecture triggers a natural human response to socially withdraw from office mates and interact instead over email and messaging.

"We spend so much time working, offices shouldn't just look modernist and aesthetically pleasing to the eye, but they also feel great to work in," said Trim. "Offices around South Africa are slowly acknowledging the need for change and much of our current consulting is helping business address exactly this issue."



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Linda Trim 5 Feb 2019



## What's the solution?

Rethinking how a space is structured could change the ways people do their jobs. An approach that is beginning to gain traction across the US and starting to pop up in South Africa too is the replacing of general open plan spaces with distinct zones, also called 'neighbourhoods'.

"Workers move through five or six distinct zones during the day. Each space has a purpose, from socialising to research, allowing people to alternate between focused work and chances to recharge. The design culminates in individual 'deep-work chambers,' intended for focus," said Trim.

The focal point of the zones is often small rooms free of distractions meant to give workers a chance to do the kind of heads down, all-consuming thinking at times missing from today's offices. "The rooms even include a place for workers to change clothes and can also serve as mediation spots as a way to physically and mentally reset."



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Employers around the world are trying various, and often inventive approaches to give people ways to do such focused work and regain what was lost when the 'walls went down.'

Change management and user education is important to help adapt the office so there are fewer interruptions for workers.

"Whatever the approach, it's clear office workers want change. And offices will have to adapt to make the work experience all people-friendly," Trim concluded.

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