



100 YEARS YEARS Of Office Trends

A Window into the Future?



TREND

1

Since the development of modern offices, companies have been trying to determine the optimal layout for efficiency, productivity and employee retention. Since there are only so many ways to arrange office furniture, it's no surprise that office trends cycle through the same theories again and again, from open plan to cubicles to flexible spaces and back again.

This report will look at three major office space trends over the last hundred years, and the theories behind them. What they all have in common is the attempt to influence human behaviour and productivity through workplace layout.

Coworking

Co-working spaces function along similar principles, where the focus is efficient individual workstations and productivity, but for individual workers representing many companies.



This practice reemerged in the 1990's under the name Business Process Redesign (BPR), designed to improve customer service and cut operational costs. Taylorist office layouts prefer an open plan office with employees arranged in lines of desks, with managers in offices to oversee production.

This set-up may be ideal for programming teams, business analysts, or data entry teams who are happy to work with headphones on and communicate via Slack, but for a sales team making calls all day, it would result in a miserable cacophony antithetical to productivity.

Open Plan for Maximum Productivity?

Developed in the 1880's, scientific management, or Taylorism (named for Frederick Winslow Taylor), was intended to improve efficiency and productivity. Taylor developed his theories on workplace efficiency as a foreman at the Midvale Steel Company in the 1880's, when he reportedly began timing how long it should take his team members to complete each task in order to determine the optimal output for each worker, based on time and motion studies, or "task-oriented optimization of work".



1880

How the Action Office became the Cubicle Farm

Designed by Robert Propst in the 1960's, the first Action Office introduced a mix of sitting and standing desks, filing systems and lightweight acoustical panels that were intended to provide workers with customizable spaces, but it never really caught on for a couple of reasons. First, the Action Office didn't translate well to large offices that were used to orderly rows of desks, and secondly, companies did not necessarily see the value in purchasing all new 'fad' office furniture. But something had to change, as office layouts had remained basically the same since the turn of the century.



The second iteration, Action Office II, focused more on the acoustic panelling; panels of varying height gave workers a semi-private workspace and cut down on noise without having to provide each worker with their own private office.

As imitation products sprang up, the guiding principle of flexibility and easily reconfigured spaces was lost in favour of mass-produced panels of uniform height, and thus the cubicle farm was born. Unfortunately, Propst's idealized office of open, flexible, collaborative spaces was bound by wall after wall of fixed and uninspiring panelling. But though much derided in popular culture, the cubicle remains a key feature of many offices, and will likely remain as long as companies require semi-private workstations.

TREND

3



When Collaboration is Key

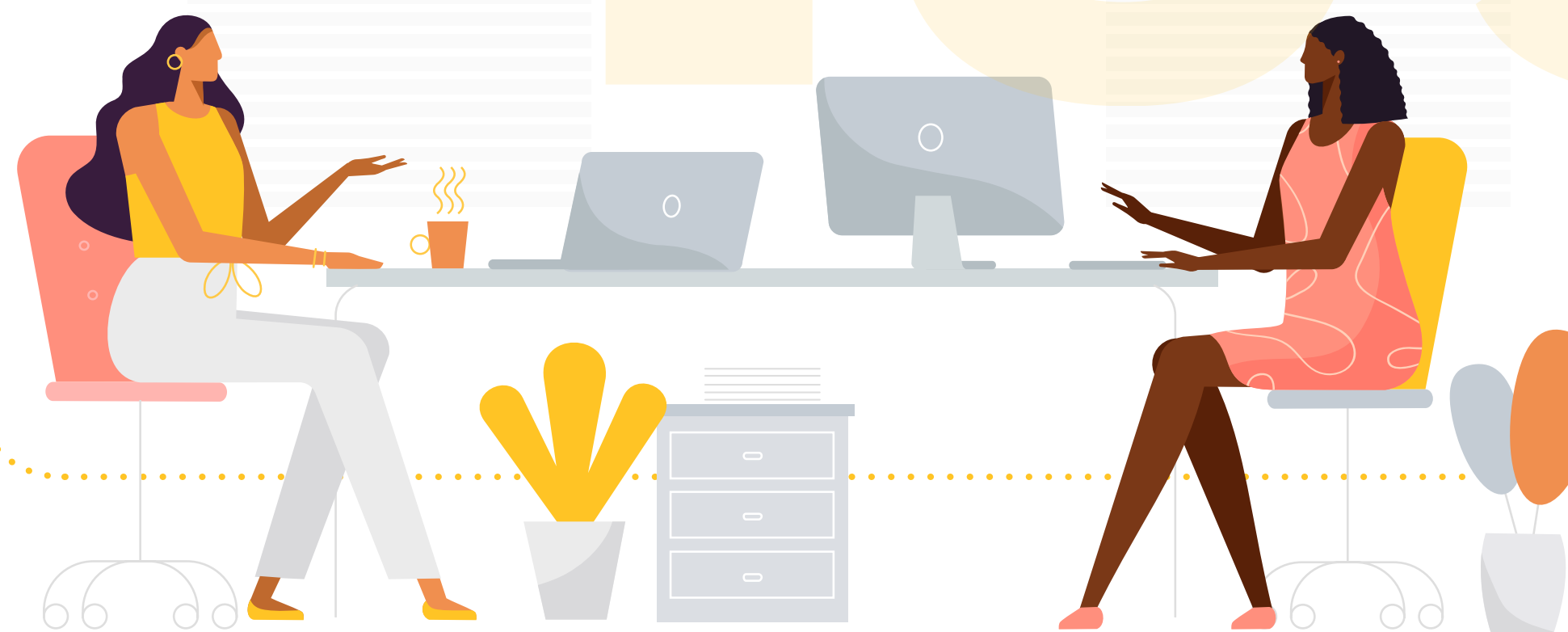
Burolandschaft, an office layout typified by an open plan with irregular layouts and organic circular patterns, emerged in the early 1950's and was developed by Wolfgang and Eberhard Schnelle, two brothers who started a consulting group in 1958.



Photo - The Herman Miller Action Office system - Courtesy of: <https://www.buildings.com/news/industry-news/articleid/22110/title/open-office-design-collaboration>

Intended to be more egalitarian than Taylorist offices, desks were organized by work paths and roles, and offered a more flexible design. Informal spaces were included for breaks and leisure time.

This is very similar to modern flex offices with a mix of open plan seating, semi-private cubicles, offices, and collaboration spaces where space is organized by the nature of work performed.



1958

EMERGING TREND

4

2020

The Biggest Work from Home Experiment in History

The term 'telecommuting' was coined in 1972 by NASA physicist Jack Nilles, who was working off-site on a new communications system.¹ In 1979, Frank Schiff wrote an article for the Washington Post promoting working from home as a way to save gasoline. Today they seem oddly prescient now that we are in the midst of the global Coronavirus outbreak and global climate change is getting harder and harder to ignore or deny. More and more countries have asked workers who are able to work from home to "flatten the curve" and delay the spread of COVID-19 to avoid putting our healthcare system under extreme pressure. With no vaccine expected for months, delaying the spread of the disease is the best chance to ensure that healthcare facilities have the space to accept all the patients who require intensive care to recover. If the majority of office workers are able to avoid their daily commute and large gatherings, the disease will have fewer opportunities to spread.

Delaying the outbreak is seen as key to managing the damage, as countries like Italy found their healthcare system overwhelmed with patients. Unfortunately, telecommuting is not an option for most retail workers and vital service providers, but those who can work from home are being strongly encouraged by governments around the world to do so. For businesses, this is a massive, unplanned test of their ability to support telecommuting.



Though telecommuting has technically been an option for office workers since the 1990's when the internet first became publicly available, not all companies have encouraged or supported its widespread adoption, even where it could reduce their office space requirements. Anxiety that employees would abuse the freedom of not being observed; people are less productive with all the distractions of home around them; and that company culture and collaboration would suffer as a result.² There are enough results from 30 years of telecommuting to provide easy rebuttals to each concern, however, and the fact is, with the COVID-19 outbreak expected to continue for the foreseeable future, companies are going to have to make it work if there is going to be any work done at all.

¹ <https://www.alliedtelecom.net/the-history-of-telecommuting/>

² <https://money.cnn.com/2016/06/21/pf/telecommuting-work-from-home/index.html>



CONCLUSION

No single solution works for every type of office work or business. Not all tasks can be done from home, yet, although some enterprising tech company is undoubtedly working on an app for that. Collaboration space isn't always necessary in a call centre, but sound-mitigation is. Conversely, a marketing and design team needs space to verbalize and sketch out their ideas without driving the programming team to distraction.

Proper office layout and design can go a long way in employee attraction and retention. Employees notice and appreciate when they have thoughtfully planned space appropriate to their tasks, and creating task specific zones can foster team cohesion. Other considerations when looking for your next space are how quickly your business is growing, and will you need to scale up the number of employees on short notice? How many teams require collaboration space vs privacy? How many confidential meetings are held in a week, and how many people attend those on average?

The best solution is a bespoke solution tailored to your specific business.

Let's chat about how I can help you with this.



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