Guidelines for Working in Open Plan Offices

Many offices and workspaces these days are open spaces. Within these spaces, there will be a variety of arrangements, include teams working in cubicles or ‘pods’ as they are sometimes referred to. And, whilst for the most part, groups of workers have taken this for granted and are able to get along just fine, it’s important to remember that there needs to be certain rules of etiquette and consideration and respect shown towards others in order to make this arrangement function efficiently.

Many individuals enjoy working in open spaces as this provides opportunity for productive exchanges associated with their work program.

Irrespective of your views about the advantages and disadvantages of this working arrangement, here are some guidelines as to the issues you should consider if you want your workspace to be as productive and as harmonious as possible.

Show Consideration

Showing consideration to colleagues in an open plan office will only work if you all adopt a mutual respect for each other.

- Allow yourself to be accessible to others but adopt clearly understood signals for when you’re busy and don’t wish to be disturbed.
- Keep your desk tidy. This is especially important if you are sharing an open plan desk and show courtesy when using any shared spaces.
- Be careful when having conversations. Don’t speak too loudly in shared workspaces as you may be interrupting another fellow worker from getting on with their work and never shout to a colleague who’s at a workstation several feet away to attract their attention.
- Even within open plan workspaces, there will be designated aisles or walking routes to use. Use them and don’t be tempted to take short cuts across other people’s ‘patches’.
- Never use anything which might cause disruption to others, e.g. a speaker phone or radio.
- You should always be wary of speaking openly about any issues of confidentiality. Perhaps, you are a team leader/supervisor who works on the same ‘pod’ as your team. If so, and you’re speaking on the phone about a certain issue that your team should not have any knowledge of, make sure you move to a more private enclosed space to make or take the call.
- If you tend to have to field a lot of calls as part of your job, always switch your answer machine on before leaving your desk. If a colleague has to take a call on your behalf, it just means more work for them.
- Also, if a colleague is on the phone themselves, don’t interrupt them during the call but wait until they’re off the phone.
Smells

Pungent or bad odours are one of the most complained about aspects of working in an open plan office.

- Therefore, make sure you practice good hygiene but don't make the mistake of going overboard on the aftershave or perfume. What you might think is the best cologne or eau de toilette ever produced might make another person retch and overpowering perfumes can have an even more negative effect, first thing in the morning.

- Likewise with food – if eating at your desk, be careful that you choose relatively neutral smelling foods i.e. no curries, onions or garlic.

- Make sure you also dispose of food waste thoughtfully. Food left lying in an open bin overnight or over the weekend can create an unpleasant surprise for your colleagues when they come back to the office!

Tact and Diplomacy

- Should you accidentally overhear a conversation that you know was intended to remain private between the people having the conversation, simply forget about its contents. Don't make the mistake of falling into the trap of telling other people what you overheard later as you'll simply contribute to a perception that you are untrustworthy.

- In general, it's quite easy to get along well in an open plan working environment. What you should always be thinking about is being accessible to people wherever possible but still maintaining boundaries whenever you need to focus on work, showing consideration to others and by being tidy and courteous.

- Remembering that not everybody will share exactly the same values as you is also important but in general, to adopt a policy of treating people how you’d like to be treated yourself is usually a good benchmark to ensuring a harmonious workspace.