IS IT TIME TO KILL THE OPEN OFFICE, FOR GOOD?

CROWN
WORKSPACE

1 Introduction and methodology

Do we need to kill the open office for good? Over the last three decades, countless businesses have leapt onto the open office bandwagon, convinced it would spark collaboration, community, and transparency.

Yet, real-world experience and research tell a very different story. Studies and analysis from various organisations including the Harvard Business Review and the Journal of Environmental Psychology indicate that open offices can actually decrease face-to-face interaction by as much as 70 percent. Far from enhancing teamwork, they often lead people to hide behind headphones or stay glued to instant messaging just to cope with noise and distractions.

In December of 2024, we set out to ask some key, post-COVID questions about how both office workers and those with responsibility for office management were dealing with hybridity, back-to-work orders, disparities between the home office, workplace, and much more:

• We conducted 1,000 interviews with office workers.

• We conducted 250 interviews with those responsible for management of the office/facility.

Office space decision making
*Only asked to Facilities managers

Decision making	% of responsible
Solely responsible	44%
Part of team that makes the decision	46%
Influences decisions	10%
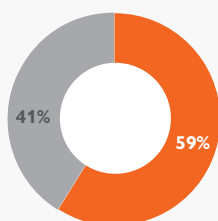
Full-time vs. hybrid

41%   59%

■ Full-time in the office

■ Hybrid work

Company size

No. of employees	% of responsible
25 to 50	11%
51 to 499	36%
500 to 999	24%
1,000 to 4,999	16%
5,000+	13%

Department

1	Finance	20%
2	Facilities / Office Manangement / Operations	20%
3	Executive Leadership	16%
4	Administrative	15%
5	HR	9%

Country

250	250	200
250	150	100

Our data highlights these challenges. We found that 59 percent of office workers are currently in the office full-time, but only 41 percent actually prefer that setup. Meanwhile, 47 percent say they would rather work a hybrid schedule, if given the choice. These figures suggest that original promise of the open office, creating a bustling environment that somehow drives innovation, does not align with how many employees want or need to work. The more we looked into our own research, and third-party research, the more we realized it didn't just align with these findings but had been aligning for the past 30 years (ever since the open office emerged as a paradigm!)

Instead, people want dedicated workspaces, quieter zones, and flexible options for remote work. Workplace expectations have shifted since Covid. Standards that were once tolerable, even if not ideal, are seen as increasingly difficult. For example, many open offices lack quiet spaces that employees have become used to when working from home, we explore this issue further later on.

This report will outline why the model has survived, seemingly despite its fundamental failings, and give some guidance as to how businesses can differentiate themselves by being brave enough to take step back and reflect on office structure.

"

Even in more traditional office cultures like Singapore's, we're seeing the government encourage policies like flexible working hours.

Luis Contreras, Managing Director,
Crown Workspace, Singapore

"

2 Executive summary

Our research shows that while 45 percent of respondents do feel more productive in the office, this is only under the right conditions; conditions that ironically contradict the core philosophy of the open office: They want comfort, privacy, and proper equipment, including quiet zones. These are not small tweaks but core requirements that highlight the gap between what open offices were supposed to achieve and what they actually deliver.

Meanwhile, 75 percent of facilities managers say they are satisfied with their current approach to health and wellbeing, yet only 67 percent of workers agree. The mismatch suggests that the people responsible for organizing the workspace may be overestimating its effectiveness. This is supported by third-party research, which we'll touch on later, suggesting employees' health and wellbeing actively suffers as a result of open office plans. 91 percent of workers say they would spend more time in the office if these issues were addressed, which implies a direct link between a better workspace and higher attendance and morale.

All of this points to an office model that survives more out of inertia than proven outcomes. The open office has not lived up to its promises, and it is time to accept that fundamental changes are needed to make workplaces fit what employees value and need.

3 The state of today's workplace, and why the open office is under fire

As previously mentioned, our findings show that 59 percent of office workers are now coming in five days a week, but only 41 percent say that is their first choice. This gap between attendance and actual preference suggests many are simply showing up because they feel they have no alternative, or because they have been mandated to.

Employee preference when it comes to working in the office vs. remotely:
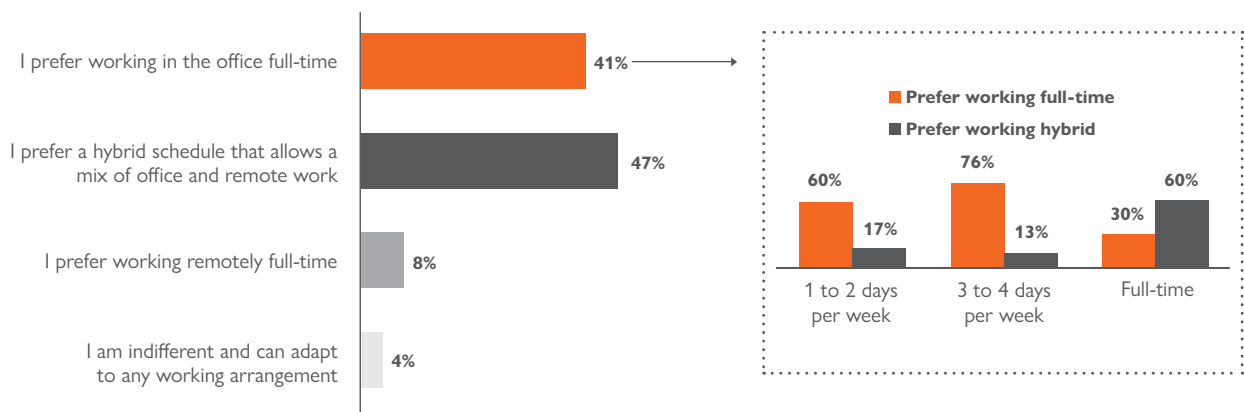
Geographical differences also emerged in the research. Hong Kong has the highest proportion of full-time office attendance, with 75 percent of workers going in every day which, given its reputation for being more traditional, is unsurprising. The United Kingdom, on the other hand, shows a stronger inclination toward hybridity.

Third-party insights reinforce the story of a workplace in transition. Analysis from the Harvard Business Review highlight the increasing popularity of hybrid work models even back in 2019, indicating that remote technology has reached a point where many roles do not require constant in-person supervision. Meanwhile, Gensler's Workplace Surveys have shown that well-balanced offices, combining collaborative areas with private or quiet

zones, tend to outperform purely open-floor environments. Employees who have such "best of both worlds" setups consistently report higher satisfaction and productivity levels.

> " People need that quiet space where they can get their heads down, increasingly we're finding organizations don't have enough of these, so they're resorting to using meeting areas as their quiet areas. "
>
> *Phil Oram, Regional Director,*
> *Crown Workspace U.K. & Ireland*

For employers and facilities managers, the message is that employees expect more than a single type of workspace. Flexibility is the key, and old assumptions about "one-size-fits-all" offices are less valid with each passing year.

The open office concept was originally touted as an engine for collaboration and spontaneity, but our data and external research call that claim into question. A survey from as far back as 1970[1] highlighted exactly the same issues our respondents faced in 2025, highlighting the absurdity of the open office philosophy.

> "
> The question of privacy is one of the most controversial between managers and staff. Few, however, like a completely open plan with little privacy offered.
>
> *Survey on open plan offices, 1970*
> "

A 2018 article by Harvard Business Review found that open offices reduce face-to-face interaction by up to 70 percent[2], as people retreat to digital communication to avoid distractions. Our findings align with this. While 77 percent of respondents agree that the office environment is important for

creativity and productivity, only 23 percent say their current setup truly excels in supporting these needs.

Noise and privacy top the list of complaints. Our survey shows that 67 percent of workers view quiet zones as very important or essential, yet these areas are often in short supply. Many open offices also lack sufficient "escape" pods for phone calls, leaving employees to struggle with constant background chatter. Even something as basic as placing a second monitor in a noisy environment can become pointless if workers cannot concentrate. It's also important to note that many employees need to engage in confidential conversations (think insurance salespeople for example). Open offices make this acutely hard for such employees. This is especially contentious post-COVID since workers are now more accustomed to quiet working environments, and **the old background noise of the office simply isn't tolerable anymore.**

[1] The Office Environment People Prefer, American Institute of Architects Journal, 1970.
[2] The Truth About Open Offices, Harvard Business Review, 2019.
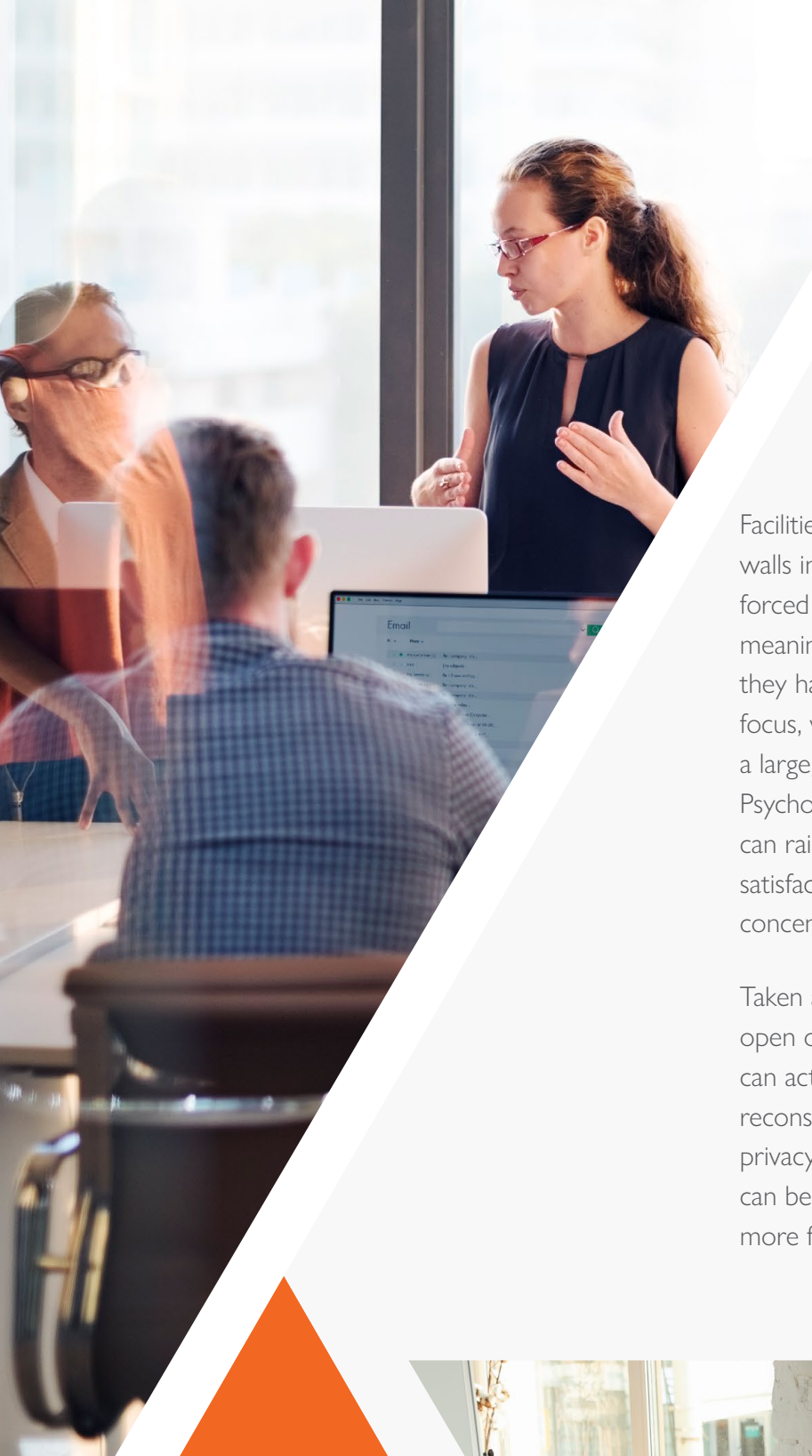
Facilities managers might assume that removing walls increases collaboration, but the reality is that forced proximity does not always translate to meaningful teamwork. In fact, people often feel they have to step away to find a calm spot for deep focus, which undermines the supposed benefits of a large, open space. The Journal of Environmental Psychology has noted that frequent interruptions can raise stress levels and reduce overall job satisfaction, particularly in roles that demand concentration or complex problem solving.

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that the open office model, far from fostering collaboration, can actually drive people apart. As many businesses reconsider the balance between collaboration and privacy, the question remains whether open offices can be adapted or if they should be phased out for more flexible, human-centered designs.

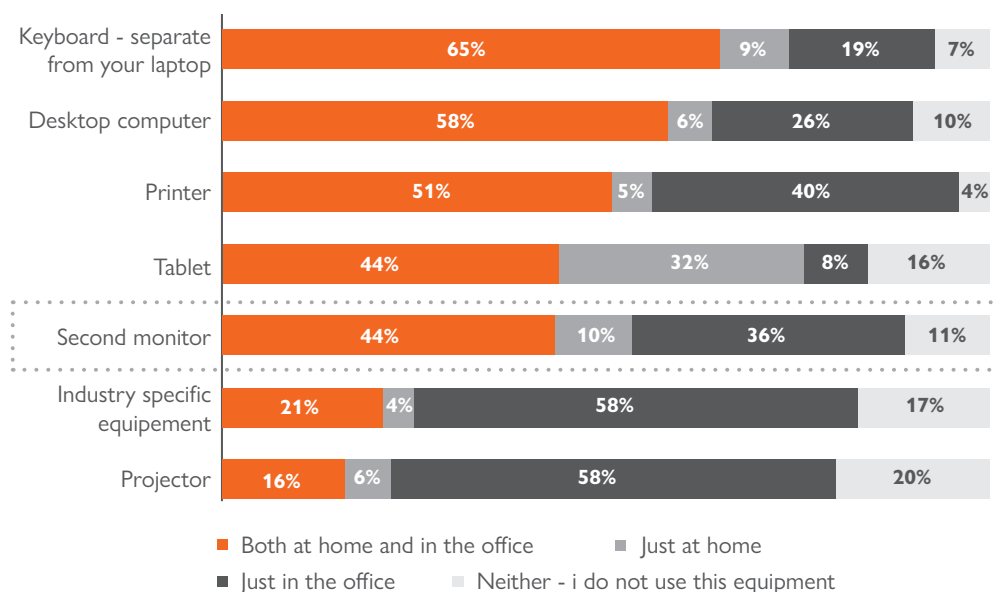# 4 What does the research say about open offices?

Our data shows that 45 percent of respondents feel more productive in the office, yet, this productivity boost is not a given.

Of that group, 91 percent say they would come in more often if they had critical features like quieter areas, comfortable furniture, and upgraded equipment. This highlights a central truth: the open office model typically fails to deliver the variety people need to balance teamwork with focused tasks. The promise of collaboration and innovation through open spaces appears logical in theory, but do these layouts really support the full spectrum of employees' daily activities?

1. Technology

48 percent of respondents say improved technology is their primary motivation for spending more time in the office, while 36 percent note that access to a second monitor significantly boosts their productivity. This indicates that many home-working environments may currently offer better technological setups than office environments. If employees can access better or equal technology at home, why would they choose to commute to an office that offers them fewer practical tools? Offices aiming to increase employee attendance should therefore consider investing in technology upgrades beyond basic connectivity. For example, providing additional monitors, video conferencing capabilities, and fast, reliable internet connections could represent essential steps in attracting workers back to the office. When employees see the office as technologically superior to their home environment, they naturally have a stronger incentive to commute regularly. Without these investments, can businesses truly expect employees to prioritize the office?

Equipment usage in the office and at home:

Equipment	Both at home and in the office	Just at home	Just in the office	Neither - i do not use this equipment
Keyboard - separate from your laptop	65%	9%	19%	7%
Desktop computer	58%	6%	26%	10%
Printer	51%	5%	40%	4%
Tablet	44%	32%	8%	16%
Second monitor	44%	10%	36%	11%
Industry specific equipement	21%	4%	58%	17%
Projector	16%	6%	58%	20%

- ■ Both at home and in the office
- ■ Just at home
- ■ Just in the office
- ■ Neither - i do not use this equipment

2. Individual work areas

An extensive 77 percent of respondents see having their own dedicated workspace as valuable or essential. Yet, only 23 percent of those surveyed feel their current open office environment is "extremely successful" in supporting productivity and creativity. This large gap highlights a critical issue. Many open offices rely heavily on hot-desking, assuming flexibility will naturally lead to collaboration and productivity. However, the data clearly suggests that this assumption might be misguided. Employees strongly desire a space that feels personal, stable, and familiar. Could businesses unintentionally be reducing productivity and employee satisfaction by removing fixed individual desks in favour of transient seating arrangements? With such a significant proportion of the workforce expressing discomfort with hot-desking and shared spaces, should companies reconsider providing designated personal desks or semi-private zones as part of office design? This approach could reduce daily disruptions, improve comfort, and increase an employee's sense of belonging at work, ultimately enhancing productivity and workplace morale.

Important aspects of the office (showing % Valuable / Essential):

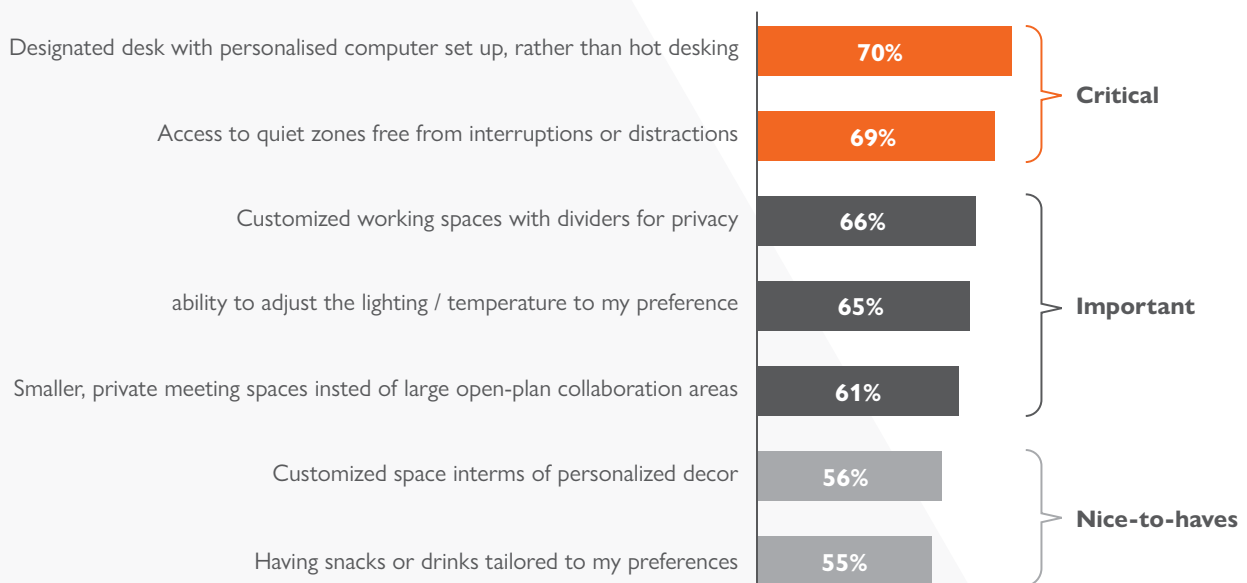| **77%** Individual work areas | **72%** Meeting rooms | **62%** Lunch / Social area | **67%** Quiet zones | **65%** Collaboration spaces |

3. Quiet zones

A significant 67 percent of respondents rate quiet spaces as crucial or essential for uninterrupted, focused work. Open floor plans often introduce frequent distractions, such as background noise, nearby conversations, and phone calls, significantly hindering concentration on detailed tasks or virtual meetings. Employees frequently highlight these disturbances in our survey comments, noting how the persistent lack of quiet negatively impacts their ability to accomplish high-quality, deep-focus work. If the open office was initially designed to stimulate continuous interaction, has this approach overlooked essential requirements for quiet, reflective, or complex tasks? Could businesses improve productivity and employee satisfaction by establishing clearly marked, easily accessible quiet zones or soundproof booths where employees can retreat and concentrate fully? It seems clear that balancing openness with quiet areas is not simply a luxury; rather, it appears essential to meeting the practical needs of a diverse workforce. How much productivity might businesses recover by proactively creating quiet areas that respect different working styles?

The importance of personalising different aspects of the offices (showing % important / Very important):

| Aspect	%	Category
Designated desk with personalised computer set up, rather than hot desking	70%	Critical
Access to quiet zones free from interruptions or distractions	69%	Critical
Customized working spaces with dividers for privacy	66%	Important
ability to adjust the lighting / temperature to my preference	65%	Important
Smaller, private meeting spaces insted of large open-plan collaboration areas	61%	Important
Customized space interms of personalized decor	56%	Nice-to-haves
Having snacks or drinks tailored to my preferences	55%	Nice-to-haves

4. Meeting rooms

Our research found that 72 percent of respondents strongly emphasize the importance of well-equipped meeting spaces. Employees clearly prefer defined boundaries separating collaborative areas from individual work zones. In open offices, however, these boundaries often blur, creating frustration for both groups, employees trying to concentrate and those attempting to collaborate. Without enough dedicated meeting rooms, spontaneous or informal meetings inevitably spill into common areas, increasing disruption and reducing the overall effectiveness of communication and teamwork. Given these findings, should businesses rethink how their office spaces are allocated? Could a stronger investment in dedicated, enclosed meeting rooms equipped with modern tools significantly improve both the quality of teamwork and the overall office atmosphere? It is increasingly apparent that effective collaboration does not necessarily mean constant openness; rather, it involves carefully considered design choices that respect both group interactions and individual tasks.

91% of employees could be encouraged to spend more time in the office through changes to the office environment

[3] Fixing the Hated Open Office Design, Scientific American, 2023
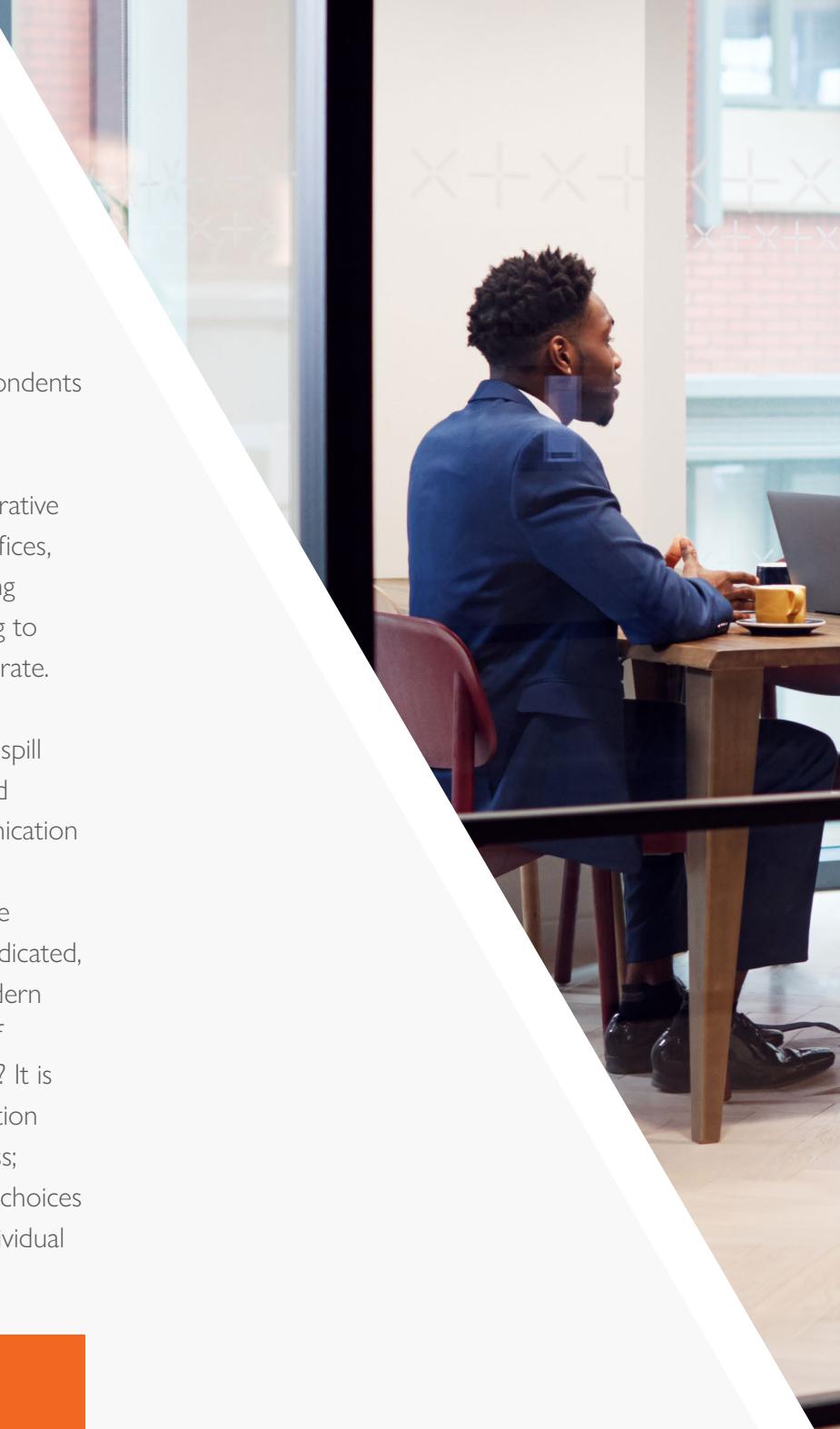
Our research also touches on sustainability. A full 59 percent view sustainability as a high or top priority, with 97 percent of businesses already taking some green steps. Meanwhile, 81 percent of facilities managers say they plan to expand these initiatives in the next three years, and 98 percent are open to using refurbished or upcycled furniture. This interest in circular strategies dovetails with the push to redesign office layouts, since upgrades and replacements can be more eco-friendly when they reuse existing materials.

> **"**
>
> It's now well established that open-plan offices fail to accomplish one of their major stated goals—increasing collaboration
>
> *- Scientific American, 2023[3]*
>
> **"**

Looking at third-party findings confirms these conclusions. The Harvard Business Review has shown that open offices often push employees toward digital rather than in-person interactions, contradicting the stated goal of boosting face-to-face collaboration.

The Journal of Environmental Psychology conducted one of the largest meta-analyses ever performed[4] on office and workplace satisfaction. 40,000 survey respondents across multiple surveys were examined, across 303 office buildings and four different countries.

[4] Workspace satisfaction: The privacy-communication trade-off in open-plan offices, Journal of Environmental Psychology, 2013.

This analysis, conducted over the course of a decade, consistently linked high noise levels and frequent interruptions with increased stress and lower job satisfaction across the board. Meanwhile, Gensler's Workplace Research, mentioned earlier, underlines that organizations offering a blend of private zones, comfortable collaboration areas, and access to technology tend to report better performance and employee morale.

However, there is a proviso. One of the key failings highlighted in both our own study as well as that of third-party researchers was that disparity between goal and outcome in office design. Many "non-territorial" offices with hot desking, breakout rooms and private spaces aim to provide spaces for all requirements, but the reality is different. Further corroborating our own survey results, one study from Sweden found that offices that do not provide enough private spaces or breakout rooms are among the most hated.[5]

We also know that open office plans are linked to low health outcomes. In one survey[6], those employees assigned open-plan seats in an office with both open-plan and private seats had the worst job satisfaction and health issues, including the highest stress levels.

> "
> **Between 20% and 40% of open plan office occupants expressed high levels of dissatisfaction for visual privacy.**
>
> *- Jungsoo Kim, University of Sydney*
> "

In short, both our own research data and external studies tell the same story: the open office concept usually delivers far less in practice than it promises on paper. Rather than flattening an entire floor plan, forward-thinking businesses are starting to layer in different zones that respect individuals' need for quiet, while still providing collaborative spaces. By considering technology, acoustics, ergonomics, and environmental impact, companies can create work environments that are more productive, more comfortable, and more in line with what employees actually want.

> "
> **Hybrid working is here to stay, but we're finding Indian organizations are now focusing more on design, fit out and improving ambience to encourage a return to office.**
>
> *Kavitha Suresh, Assistant General Manager, Crown Workspace India*
> "

[5] Office Employees' Perception of Workspace Contribution: A Gender and Office Design Perspective, Danielsson and Theoren, 2019.
[6] Office Design's Influence on Employees' Stress Levels, Danielsson, 2010.

5 Making sense of it all: Is there a middle ground?

Balancing collaboration and privacy are not simply about whether walls are up or down. Many offices now opt for blended solutions that provide activity-based zones, acoustic pods, or semi-private work areas. The core realization is that workers need different environments depending on the tasks at hand, the more realistic realization is that not enough is being invested to provide enough of these spaces. Capacity is simply seen as an afterthought.

> **75% of those responsible for office management are satisfied how their office environment addresses health and wellbeing, compared to only 67% of office workers**
>
> *- Crown Workspace survey*

A flexible layout encourages genuine collaboration in brainstorming areas or lounges, while also providing quiet rooms for deeper concentration. Our data shows 91 percent of respondents would spend more time in the office if these fundamentals were met.

Creating a workspace that accommodates varied tasks, respects environmental impact, and supports well-being is more likely to foster productivity and reduce stress. As more companies step away from a purely open model, they recognize that design should reflect the diversity of tasks, technology needs, and employee preferences across the organization.

"

Employees have a love hate relationship with the office. There's a place for open, collaborative environments. But often the need for quiet, secluded areas to 'lock in' and get work done is overlooked. "

Jeslyne Lam,
Project Director, I.Dezign, Singapore
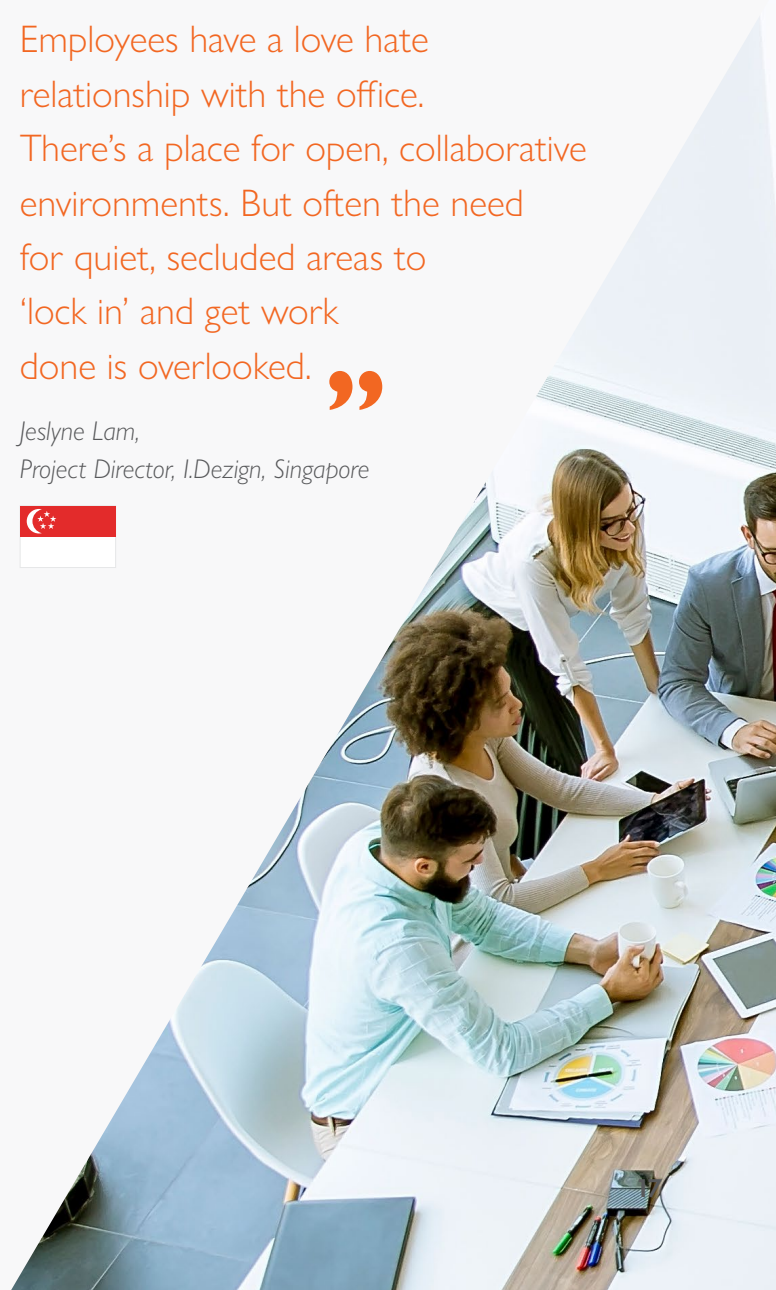
Below are five ways to get there

Redesign for focus and collaboration:

• Incorporate sound-absorbing partitions, private booths, and "quiet floors" for focused work.

• Reserve open spaces or "huddle zones" for quick discussions.

• Look into Gensler's Workplace Research and MIT Sloan Management Review articles on adapting physical spaces for hybrid collaboration.

Invest in better tech:

• Provide robust internet connections, second monitors, and easy-to-use video call booths.

• Since 48 percent of workers cite improved technology as a main draw, consider new solutions like noise-cancelling headsets or smart meeting room scheduling tools.

• For device management strategies, check Forbes Tech Council for insights on scalable office tech upgrades.

Implement clear guidelines:

• Outline how and when to use different zones, so people respect quiet areas.

• Encourage teams to hold collaborative work in dedicated spaces, while quieter tasks move to designated "focus zones."

• Guidance on employee well-being and engagement can be found through CIPD, which offers best practices for balancing collaboration and privacy in workplace policies.

Involve employees in the process:

• Poll people about what makes them most comfortable and productive.

• Use surveys from platforms like SurveyMonkey or quick, in-house feedback forms to gauge success.

• Gradually implement changes, adjusting based on direct feedback.

Emphasize sustainability and well-being:

• Check BREEAM for Europe-focused sustainability standards, or the International WELL Building Institute for global occupant-wellness guidelines.

• Consider reusing and refurbishing furniture, as 98 percent of facilities managers say they would look at upcycled options.

• Review the World Green Building Council for international perspectives on eco-friendly and employee-centered design.

6 Conclusion: Time to deliver the coup de grace to the open office?

The results are unambiguous. Open offices do not deliver on their promise of enhancing collaboration and creativity. Study after study, survey after survey, the failings have not been highlighted by one piece of research, but dozens of mutually reinforcing pieces over the course of many decades. These figures underline one stark truth: the open office is a failure as a concept that makes workers less productive, more anxious and unhealthier. It is also a disincentive for workers post-COVID to return to the office.

So, do we kill the open office? The answer is a resounding yes. Holding onto an environment that repeatedly proves itself detrimental to productivity, morale, and overall well-being makes little sense. While some offices may benefit from partial openness or zoned layouts, the traditional, wall-to-wall open plan must go. We cannot keep subjecting employees to constant distractions in the name of an outdated idea that never bore fruit.

Looking forward, **any real commitment to employee satisfaction and effective work means abandoning the old open office model.** Design a smarter, more flexible space by blending private focus areas with shared meeting rooms, guided by international standards. Companies that continue clinging to a layout known to erode concentration and undermine teamwork do so at the expense of their people and their bottom line. The verdict is clear: Distinguish your organization by listening to your employees and end the open office once and for all.

Crown Workspace is dedicated to consistently supporting clients workplace needs as they change and grow. We have been moving people and businesses for over 50 years and understand that no two projects are the same. Our objective is to provide clients with hassle free and sustainable workplace change projects.

We tailor our services to each unique project, be it corporate or specialist, with sustainability at the core of everything we do. Our services and expertise span across commercial and specialist relocations, moves and changes, IT services, furniture, interiors and storage.

Built on the legacy of the Crown Worldwide Group, Crown Workspace is complemented by a number of other divisions offering business services all over the world. These include international logistics, relocation and mobility services, records management and fine art services.

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