

Principles for office arrangements

Introduction

Over much of probation history single room occupancy was a key feature of office arrangements as probation officers dealt with their cases in splendid isolation though perhaps in more recent years with panic buttons. But as the service changed and newer buildings were purchased those arrangements changed. Open plan offices became more popular partly driven by a belief in their creative potential but also because slashed budgets necessitated more frugal arrangements. A more diversified workforce encouraged working together too as did an increasingly office-based culture. Offices became more security conscious as growing concerns for the safety of staff also influenced design.

This paper explores the principles behind constructing office arrangements which support the primary endeavour of rehabilitation, give due regard to the confidential nature of the service user-staff engagement whilst maintaining public and client safety. It examines the latest demand for 'agile working' defined as bringing *'people, processes, connectivity and technology, time and place together to find the most appropriate and effective way of working to carry out a particular task'* (The Agile Organisation 2010). These principles are driven by putting the needs of the service user first in any changes in office configuration.

Principle No 1:

Planners need to ensure that open plan arrangements are appropriate for the target population.

Open plan offices were first muted by German designer, Quickboner in the 1950s. The assumption has always been that it creates worker cooperation, the spread of innovative ideas and a collective work environment. The incidental benefit being cost effectiveness. Recent research now questions this orthodoxy suggesting actually that there are clear physical and mental distractions in the open plan environment and that the loss of privacy, dissatisfaction amongst workers and thinking space are the greatest losses. In social service organisations the loss of privacy also escalates to a serious concern which has to be addressed in any design, given the confidential nature of the interaction with service users. These service users can be vulnerable, have mental health issues, share confidential interactions and thus raise data protection concerns and any design must put their needs at the top.

Principle No 2:

Open plan should not be driven by cost considerations alone or as a backdoor way to encourage home and community working.

Where open plan working has put strain on worker engagement the end result has been the increased use of home working usually at the cost of the worker. It can also lead to unsafe practices in seeing service users out in the community. It is therefore a false economy to assume cost savings through open plan arrangements. The stress of this for workers leads to isolation, mental incapacity and thus impacts on the efficiency of the business model. Probation workers need to be able to find spaces they can discuss their work and receive support. Also whilst community working is an aspiration the PI would support it should be promoted in its own right not as a consequence of a failure of office environments.

Principle No. 3:

In any office environment there must be private space for confidential and difficult conversations.

At the heart of engagement between probation and service users is the gaining of mutual respect to encourage the rehabilitative endeavour. This is not possible where arrangements are inadequate to deliver a secure and private space for such conversations. A current trend towards the use of pods with half height screens between them is inappropriate and cannot be condoned. Whilst the worker needs arrangements where they can be safe this has always been possible in conventional interview rooms and this should be the norm. Sufficient space must be available so that all such interviews can be conducted in the right therapeutic and safe environment. Workers are asking service users to be open and honest in their interactions this is simply not possible if their conversations can be overheard.

Principle No: 4:

Open plan arrangements must facilitate workers to develop good working practices with service users

Evidence suggests that open plan can cause stress and lower productivity, particularly for work that requires contemplation and thought. Noise, such as phones ringing or colleagues chatting, is a problem for concentration and distracts workers from tasks requiring concentration, complex processing and creative thinking. Few can work without interruption and many staff find it a major source of stress which is exacerbated when workload demands are high. Blueprints for change which may look convincing on paper are not worth the anticipated savings if not conducted with worker satisfaction in mind. Workers and service users should be consulted and their views taken on board when open plan arrangements are being introduced.

Principle No 5:

Open plan arrangements must ensure that there are no costs to the physical well being of their staff

Although introducing open-plan offices may appear cheaper in the short-term, providers must acknowledge the indirect costs to the wellbeing, performance and retention of staff. One piece of research reported that *'people who work in open-plan offices are less healthy. They typically experience more headaches, fatigue and stress-related illness, and are at increased risk of infectious diseases'* (Kinman and Garfield, 2015) Probation's productivity comes from its staff and such a finding should give rise for concern about introducing practices which would increase stress and dissatisfaction already experienced by the dislocation caused by the new spilt arrangements.

Principle No 6:

In planning office environments planners need to take note of the research evidence and act accordingly.

Despite the apparent support for open plan arrangements *'In 2011, a review of more than one hundred studies about office environments found that, although open offices fostered a symbolic sense of organizational mission, and made employees feel like they were part of a more laid-back, innovative organization, they were damaging to the workers' attention spans, productivity, creative thinking, and satisfaction'* (Taylor, 2015) one study citing a 62 % rise in staff sickness. Younger staff appear to cope better in open environments. Research findings distinguishes between planning the work and doing the work. The former is best achieved in open environments where interchange and ideas creation is at its height. However when undertaking the work this reverses and privacy and quiet space is needed. Respect for service users demands an appropriate level of privacy.

According to a survey of more than 10,000 workers across 14 countries, published in September 2014, a lack of privacy is the number one complaint from workers. (Taylor, 2015) Office workers said they were losing as much as 86 minutes a day due to distractions. The persistence of open plan design in the face of clear evidence against is simply explained.

"From a financial perspective you can get more bums on seats in the open-plan layout," she says. "It is easier and cheaper to heat and cool and cheaper to fit out than having the same number of people in enclosed offices." (Taylor, 2015) It is also a design which has greater surveillance capacity on staff. The known benefits of open plan linked to innovation and collegiality are only present when the right balance essential for productive work is achieved; including breakout and quiet spaces, private zones for phone calls, interview rooms for private service user-staff conversations. Open offices can work if this balance is achieved but, research is clear *'if you 'rack 'em and stack 'em' with no place for people to chill out, then you're going to have unhappy, stressed and distracted workers'*(Taylor, 2015)

Conclusion

The PI is in favour of making the most of more modern arrangements for office accommodation but urges serious attention to the evidence base which challenges the conventional wisdom that open plan is the best and only solution. Staff understand the arrangements which enable them to work effectively and their views are crucial to the construction of workable arrangements. Service users can be unpredictable and care must be exercised to introduce arrangements which protect the security and well-being of staff, accessibility and inclusivity, adaptability, openness and interaction across workspaces as well as ecological sustainability.

Bibliography

- Kinman G and Garfield I (2015) *The open-plan university – noisy nightmare or buzzing ideas hub?* Friday 16 October 2015
- Lynch S (2015) *What do the studies say?* results.com
- Taylor C (2015) *Does open-plan get the worst out of workers?* 1st May 2015