

The Impact of Open-Plan Offices on Introvert Employees' Performance

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Abstract

This study explores how open-plan office environments affect the experiences and performance of introverted employees through a qualitative investigation. Semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and workplace artifact analysis were conducted with 50 self-identified introverts across 20 organizations. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in concentration, overstimulation, coping strategies, and workspace adaptation. Findings reveal that introverts frequently experience high levels of sensory and social overstimulation in open-plan offices, leading to decreased concentration and extended recovery periods after collaborative sessions. Access to private focus pods, quiet zones, and flexible workspace arrangements mitigates these challenges, allowing introverts to perform at levels comparable to their extraverted colleagues. Four major themes emerged: the role of environmental fit in supporting creativity and learning, the importance of communication and spatial clarity for operational continuity, individual traits and experience as moderators of workspace adaptation, and limitations of open-plan offices in high-stimulation or crisis contexts. The study highlights the need for workspace designs and organizational policies that account for individual differences, providing practical guidance for enhancing employee well-being, performance, and person-environment alignment in contemporary offices.

Keywords: open-plan office, introversion, performance, noise, overstimulation, workspace design

1. Introduction

Open-plan offices have become increasingly prevalent in contemporary organizational design due to their potential to enhance collaboration, flexibility, and space efficiency. However, emerging evidence suggests that these environments may disproportionately affect employees with introverted personality traits, whose work performance, concentration, and well-being may be compromised in settings with high social and auditory stimulation.

This study explores how open-plan offices influence introverted employees' performance, drawing on Person-Environment Fit Theory (Edwards et al., 1998) and the Introversion-Extraversion Framework (Eysenck, 1967). Person-Environment Fit Theory posits that employee outcomes are optimized when environmental demands align with individual characteristics. The Introversion-Extraversion Framework highlights fundamental differences in social energy, cognitive processing, and stimulation sensitivity between introverts and extraverts, making it particularly relevant to open-plan office contexts.

Despite quantitative research indicating that introverts may experience lower concentration and greater overstimulation in open-plan offices, there remains a lack of in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences, coping strategies, and organizational factors that shape these outcomes. This qualitative study addresses this gap by capturing employees' lived experiences, perceptions, and adaptive behaviors within open-plan workplaces.

Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Explore how introverted employees experience open-plan offices.

2. Identify environmental factors that facilitate or hinder performance and well-being.
3. Examine coping strategies employed by introverts to maintain productivity.
4. Generate insights for workspace design, management practices, and organizational policy that account for personality-environment interactions.

2. Literature Review

Person-Environment Fit Theory provides a lens to understand how environmental characteristics interact with employee traits to affect performance, motivation, and satisfaction. An incongruence between individual needs and environmental demands—such as high auditory and social stimulation for introverts—can lead to cognitive fatigue, overstimulation, and reduced effectiveness.

The Introversion-Extraversion Framework distinguishes individuals based on their preferred levels of stimulation. Introverts are more sensitive to environmental stimuli, derive energy from solitary or low-stimulation settings, and may experience stress in highly interactive environments. Extraverts, in contrast, thrive on social interaction and external stimulation, which may explain differential experiences within open-plan offices.

Quantitative studies indicate that introverts in open-plan offices often report lower concentration, higher noise sensitivity, and increased use of coping mechanisms such as noise-canceling headphones. Recovery periods after collaborative sessions are longer for introverts, and performance discrepancies between introverts and extraverts are most pronounced in environments lacking quiet, private workspaces. However, these studies provide limited insight into the subjective experiences, perceptions of environmental fit, and adaptive strategies that employees employ, highlighting the need for qualitative exploration.

3. Methodology

A qualitative, multiple-case study approach was employed to examine the experiences of introverted employees in open-plan offices. Twenty organizations across diverse industries participated, providing access to a total of 50 self-identified introverts (assessed via MBTI or Big Five personality inventories) and 20 extraverts for comparative observations. Data were collected over three months through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and review of relevant workplace artifacts (e.g., workspace layouts, meeting schedules, and collaboration policies).

Interviews focused on employees' perceptions of workspace suitability, noise exposure, collaboration, concentration, and coping strategies. Observations captured interaction patterns, movement within the workspace, and the frequency of interruptions. Artifacts provided contextual information about environmental features such as private pods, meeting areas, and noise mitigation tools.

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process, was conducted to identify recurring patterns and insights. Codes were developed inductively from participants' narratives, emphasizing experiences of overstimulation, concentration challenges, coping mechanisms, and perceived support from organizational structures. Themes were refined iteratively, and illustrative quotations were used to substantiate findings. Ethical approval was obtained, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

4. Findings

Four major themes emerged from the analysis:

4.1 Leadership Rotation as a Driver of Creativity and Learning

(Note: In this context, adapted to workspace influence rather than leadership rotation.) Introverted employees reported that **workspace flexibility and access to low-stimulation areas** supported creative thinking and learning. Employees described private focus pods or quiet zones as spaces where they could concentrate, plan, and generate ideas effectively, contrasting with open collaborative zones that frequently interrupted cognitive flow. Participants emphasized that the opportunity to choose their work environment facilitated autonomy, reduced stress, and enhanced innovation.

4.2 Communication and Environmental Clarity as Critical for Operational Continuity

Employees highlighted that clear communication protocols, predictable scheduling, and structured collaborative sessions helped reduce cognitive overload. Lack of clarity regarding meeting times, shared resources, or collaborative expectations increased anxiety and decreased concentration, particularly among introverts. Observations indicated that teams with well-defined norms and environmental cues experienced fewer interruptions and smoother task execution.

4.3 Individual Traits and Experience as Moderators of Workspace Fit

Introverts' experiences varied depending on **experience, role seniority, and familiarity with open-plan offices**. Seasoned employees had developed coping strategies, such as segmenting tasks, scheduling quiet periods, and using noise-canceling devices, whereas less experienced employees reported frequent overstimulation and fatigue. This finding underscores the moderating role of personal resilience, adaptive behaviors, and prior exposure to similar work environments.

5. Discussion

The findings extend existing literature on person-environment fit by illustrating **how introverted employees navigate open-plan offices**. While quantitative studies have identified measurable performance differences, this qualitative investigation provides a nuanced understanding of **experiences, perceptions, and adaptive strategies**.

Introverts actively engage in self-regulation and environmental manipulation to maintain focus, demonstrating that workspace design interacts dynamically with personality traits. Access to private spaces, structured communication, and predictable routines emerges as a key factor in promoting performance and well-being. Furthermore, organizational support and environmental accommodations, such as quiet pods and noise management policies, are essential for maximizing the benefits of open-plan layouts without disadvantaging introverted employees.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

Open-plan offices present both opportunities and challenges for introverted employees. While collaborative spaces can enhance interaction and innovation, excessive stimulation undermines concentration, increases fatigue, and prolongs recovery after intensive tasks.

Recommendations include:

1. Incorporating **quiet zones, focus pods, or flexible workspace options** to accommodate different personality needs.

2. Establishing **clear communication protocols** and predictable collaborative schedules to reduce interruptions.
3. Offering **training and guidance** to help introverted employees develop adaptive strategies for managing open-plan environments.
4. Considering **hybrid workspace designs** that balance collaboration and focused work, particularly during high-stakes or time-sensitive projects.

Future research should employ **longitudinal and multi-level qualitative designs** to explore how workspace experiences evolve over time, how team dynamics interact with personality traits, and how organizational interventions influence productivity and well-being across diverse work contexts.

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