A QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF EMPLOYEES WITHIN THE OPEN OFFICE

ENVIRONMENT

Dissertation in Practice

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The study explores and finds the perceptions of employees that work in an open office cubicle environment. The study also investigates to see if there are suggestions or ideas that can come from employees that work in open office cubicles on how to improve worker productivity and morale. The literature focused on three areas: Physical Environment, Health and Well-Being, and Privacy. There were several themes noted from the data from the participants. The themes evolved around enhanced privacy, working technology, snacks and coffee, sit-stand desks, and collaboration areas. These themes were noted to be important for open office settings from the perceptions of these employee participants. These ideas generated from the study are working to be implemented into the organization.

This dissertation is dedicated to my family; who I had spent many hours away from to pursue my dream, in hopes that one day I can better their world, and the world around them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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DiP   Dissertation in Practice

CHAPTER ONE: PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of open office

environments from employees as it relates to office layout. An open office environment

consists of many cubicles in one large office footprint where numerous workers are in the

near proximity of each other. The study will utilize the lived experience and perceptions

from employees that occupy space in an open office environment. These participants will

assist in the future design and layout of space within the medical organization of Ohio

Medical Care (pseudonym). The information gathered from this study can be used by

their corporate teams to inform office design that may enhance efficiencies and morale

within their organization.

The Problem of Practice

Many large companies use open office layouts for employees to seat their staff.

Open office layouts are focused on team performance and task efficiency. The physicality

of buildings provides companies objective qualities that can be correlated and quantified

with outcomes such as performance and efficiency (Hatch, 2018). Performance and

efficiency are important for maximizing layouts, but consideration should be given to the

needs and perceptions of employees working in these environments. Workplaces need to

support collaboration, organizational changes, and be able to support rapid technology

implementation (Lee & Brand, 2005). Many office environments are also second-

generation spaces where the new company inherits another office layout and design, but

never redesigned the office layout and furniture to fit their new company mission. It is

important to comprehend the impact of layout on the employees sitting within this open

office environment. It is important to understand seating arrangements, privacy, morale, and hierarchies within the office space for the employees that work in the space. I may also be important for senior level managers to understand and design and place employees throughout these open office environments within their workplaces to improve productivity and morale.

Ohio Medical Care did not know the perceptions of its employees within their open office work environment. The company has a high turnover rate for lower-level team members. Low morale, low productivity, and stresses within the office have led to some instances of turnover. I have witnessed employees talking about the likes and dislikes of their cubicles. The physical space in which employees sit within this organization has not been formally discussed with any team members until this study. There were both positive and negative aspects of this workspace that nobody understood. The company will most likely be spending significant money soon to further expand its footprint within their building. The existing office environment and future office space can be improved and designed better with ideas from employees.

Justification of the Problem

By using qualitative methods to study the office environment from the view of employees, we can understand the negative and positive effects of open office layouts. The organization can benefit from the knowledge gained by understanding employees' needs when designing furniture systems and office layouts, as the company previously did not understand the employee needs within the open office space. This study explored characteristics or trends in the open office environment that should be considered that had not been thought of before. The organization's Real Estate Team can design offices to

ensure the employees' needs are met. The Human Resource team can also communicate and implement an appropriate seating policy on principles from data that aid their employees' roles.

Ohio Medical care is rapidly expanding and will continue to expand its corporate office in the immediate future. The information and ideas gathered and generated from this study can assist in the future expansion of this organization's corporate office. As a senior executive within the Real Estate Division of this company, I know there was not enough knowledge on this topic within this organization to be beneficial for future expansions prior to this study.

Deficiencies in the Organizational Knowledge Record

Ohio Medical Care previously did not have any knowledge of the perceptions of their employees within their open office environment. Most of the office space where employees reside are cubicles. Senior managers had no idea what is good, or bad regarding their current office layout from their employee's viewpoint. The company will most likely expand again soon; this study will show how to design the future space.

The timing of this study was also important to understand as the related literature is dated from before a major worldwide pandemic. The pandemic may have changed the way many people now approach and accomplish their work in their workplace. This study was timed perfectly to capture any new perceptions, and possibly introduce or develop new ideas and data that have never been explored during a pandemic.

Audience

The study also examined the open office environment more comprehensively by using qualitative research techniques. By engaging in direct dialogue with key end users,

the study aided in the development of themes and ideas not present in hypothetical research designs. To develop an appropriate space for an office environment, many factors needed to be discussed prior to starting any design of space. Using qualitative research procedures with employees currently working in an office setting will help develop themes and understanding of employee wants and needs prior to designing a space or developing a seating layout. The audience for this study will be key executive decision makers from Ohio Medical Care. This executive audience will include Human Resource, Information Technology, and Marketing Teams that make decisions regarding seating layouts, technology, and visual graphics within Ohio Medical Care's corporate physical office space. C-Suite personnel that make large financial decisions for future large projects will also be included in this audience.

Overview of Theoretical Framework/Methods

The constructivist ontological perspective suggests that the world and nature exist, but different people view the world in a variety of ways. People can only experience the world individually through their own observations; this is different from a positivist ontology, which notes that the world and nature around us is real, and individuals can try to explore existing realities (Walliman, 2011). An interpretive or constructivist perspective from an epistemological standpoint suggests that both the researcher and the participants are co-creators in the knowledge development of the study and highlight the viewpoint of the participants (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Both philosophical paradigms were lenses that guided this study.

Throughout my life I have bounced back and forth between a positivist ontology and constructivist ontological perspective without really knowing it. Researcher's

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positions may change rather than be stationary throughout a study (Berger, 2015). I acknowledge that nature may exist without our exploration of it, like a positivist point of view. Although I can see and feel both positivist and constructivist ontological positions, the one that most resonates with me most is the constructivist ontology. My personal thoughts are that people's feelings and emotions determine the space and surroundings they live in; this constructivist stance is the one I lean more to. This is the ontological perspective that I recognized throughout this research.

From an epistemological standpoint, I see the research world through an interpretive perspective. I believe that the world needs to be explored, discussions need to take place, and emotions need to be understood for a world to truly exist. An interpretive or constructivist epistemology has a co-creative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012).

Since these are the philosophical lenses that the research was viewed through, there are some research implications that can surface because of my paradigms. Reflexivity is the critical self-consideration by the researcher concerning expectations, biases, cultural views, and hypothetical orientations that could impact the study (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). It is important to note that I have created my thoughts and ideas based upon the subject that was studied.

Throughout my career, there was always a top-down approach given from senior management regarding the design and assignment of new employee workstations. The office layouts themselves that I have worked in have been poorly designed, loud, or designed years prior so that the layout no longer meets the immediate needs of the current staff. As a prior worker that worked in a cubicle environment, there have always been office grumblings around the water cooler as to why someone is sitting in a better, or

worse, office seat than others. From my recollection, there was little feedback given to the lower-level employees from senior leadership about how to make their workspaces better. People were just given a seat and told to get to work; because of this, I have a bias that suggests that senior management at most organizations make poor workspace designs that lead to lack of morale and a reduction of workforce efficiency. While the study was looked at through a constructivist approach, much understanding of executive decision making, and positivist ontology can lead to some biases which I needed to remain cognizant of to ensure any persuasion of these ideas did not get conveyed to any participant.

I have also worked with many organizations' transitions in construction from traditional offices to open office environments that provide a more flexible layout. There was always perceived tension from someone that once had an office going to a cubicle. This study will assist in developing the tools to design a new office layout and communicate other related ideas on the physical space. My epistemological approach of co-creating qualitative methodology, and my interactions with participants, could have led to implications leading down my preconceived idea if I did not truly try to hide my ideals from participants. I have several preconceived notions about open office workspace that I ensured not bring into my research, data collection, or themes derived for this study.

As a practicing researcher in an active role in the real estate community, I can have access to many participants in the field. The constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemological philosophies were an advantage to the study. Close interactions and co-creation of ideas, and thoughts, assisted in this study that was

intended to explore the inner emotions of employees that can hopefully assist a field with better workforce design principles. The literature research shows that open office concepts have mostly negative impacts on employees (Brennan, 2002). I wanted to see what can be found and changed about an open office layout to help improve the workplace.

Research Questions

The primary question for this study was:

- What are employee perceptions of an open office layout?

There are two important sub-questions that this study also addressed:

- What are important design elements of an open office layout that will keep employee productivity high?

- What characteristics of the office the layout, or items and conveniences within the space, are important to promoting morale and constructive open office workspaces?

Limitations

The study is a small snapshot of open office layouts that use cubicles for employees. The association between office design layouts and organizational constructs has not been broadly studied (Rashid & Zimring, 2003). Not every layout from each office is the same, and researchers do not define layouts well in useful terms (Rashid & Zimring, 2003). The open office layout in this research will vary slightly from other open offices layouts from other organizations from different studies.

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Review of Related Literature

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Frameworks Informing the Study

Structural contingency theory states that environments determine which organizational form will be successful (Hatch, 2018). A stable environment works best because of the efficiencies it can generate by using standard procedures. Under stable conditions, organizations can optimize activities, reduce costs, and increase profits (Hatch, 2018). The physical structure of built space in organizations is a core idea that is relatable to the real estate field (Hatch, 2018). Part of an organization is the physical entity of having a material form that can be seen in layout, design, artifacts, and location (Hatch, 2018). Workplaces need to support collaboration, organizational changes, and rapid technology implementation (Lee & Brand, 2005). Understanding perceptions of employees that work within an open office environment is important for organizations to understand.

The theory of organizational aesthetics states that senses and perceptions play a major role in organizations; there are emotional characteristics in space design (Hatch, 2018). Artifacts within physical space can include logos, art, décor, finishes, and basic appearance within the space. An employee will have different perceptions about sitting in an open office without windows with secondhand cubicles versus an employee sitting in a well thought out open office layout that includes appropriate colors, lighting, artwork, and new cubicles. Contemporary organizations are largely strewn with artifacts (Clegg & Hardy, 1999). A sense of place from employees occurs when office aesthetics associate employees with meaning and make a symbolic significance (Hatch, 2018).

A theory that physical structures normalize power suggests that architectural interests may show a continuity of power and domination by embodying it in the built-in space (Hatch, 2018). There are many cases when the built form is constructed

deliberately so that it will produce intentional effects of power (Dale & Burrell, 2009).

Companies that want to improve perceptions of support may do so more successfully by

creating fair procedures (Wayne, 2002). Understanding perceptions of employees about

their opinions of the physical structures they reside in is important.

Related research

The research uncovered for this study will be shown through three separate ideas. The

key areas where research was considered was for physical environment, health and well-

being, and privacy.

Physical Environment

The use of cubicle furniture within an open office environment can offer basic

seclusion, and maintain an interactive environment for employees in an office setting

(Cangelosi, 1988). However, the placement of employees within the physical structure of

the layout is still important to understand. Some occupants may enjoy a well-designed

open office layout, but this may not hold true for all open office environments. A study

conducted over 12 months found that employees' perception of health, work setting, and

performance all decreased following a transfer from an individual private office to an

open office cubicle layout (Bergström, et al., 2015).

This organization has people that went from private offices to cubicles, and a

study from Brennan (2002) also discusses employees relocating from traditional offices

to cubicles. It may be one thing for an employee to move from one cubicle to the next but

relocating from a private office into a cubicle has shown to have a negative effect on

employee satisfaction. Research in open office design has shown that it is adversely

linked to workers' satisfaction with their physical workspace and perceived efficiency.

The study was performed within large companies to examine the effects of moving workers from traditional offices to cubicles in open office environments. Negative effects within the open office environment can include physical stress, poor coworker relations, poor job performance, and the use of inadequate open office procedures (Brennan, et al., 2002).

An analysis by Brookes and Kaplan (1972) has shown that a change in office space from semi-private and private office to an open office environment has perceived increases in noise levels, as well as a loss of privacy. Furthermore, an increase in visual distractions were main causes of complaints. However, it was noted that positive changes in sociability are achieved through open office environments (Brookes & Kaplan, 1972).

Nag (2019) wrote that the rise of new office technology and the wave of portable work devices that employers have access to pose an imaginable muddling of boundaries of the work and private space; thereby forcing the employees' work to migrate into home, transportation, and relaxation. The business world is slowly retreating from the uniformity of common place areas, like multiple rows of private offices, and shifting ever more towards a more creative work office configuration that encourages flexible working styles (Nag, 2019). With the heightened number of wireless communications, employees are now regularly interrupted by audio or visual notices from cell phones, email, and other forms of instant messaging notices (Danniinger, et al., 2005). This is because each employees' electronic devices are designed to separately compete for the attention of the employee for which each message delivered, irrespective of the user's current engagement with the other devices or people in the employees' immediate vicinity (Danninger, et al., 2005).

In open office environments, background talking is a known cause of significant distraction in the working environments. The results of a study by Haapakangas et al. (2014) implied that reducing the speaking noise level of employees in this setting is beneficial for worker performance and audio satisfaction within this space. The presence of background noise and speech had negative effects on employee perceptions of noise and on worker performance. These negative impacts were particularly true regarding recalling short-term memory tasks and other memory skills (Haapakangas, et al., 2014).

Cohen (2007) discussed research that has been generated in the field of design and behavior relations as it relates to the physical structures of worker's environment and the behavior outcomes of the employees that work within the space. There is a great deal of research overlap as it relates to comparing articles on corporate office environments that have been published over the past twenty years from top design and behavior journals. The findings are not mutually exclusive of each other. Some findings have shown similarity, while there are disparities in many areas (Cohen, 2007). Further research is needed to assist in developing theories about behaviors in work environments as technology and the working environment is ever changing.

A large-scale review of literature by De Croon et al. (2005) conducted over seven major databases shows that there are strong findings that demonstrate that open office workplaces reduce job satisfaction and privacy. There is little evidence that shows that some open office environments improve communication. The study also notes that special attention is necessary in regard to acoustics of the office and visual protections of employees within open office spaces (De Croon, et al., 2005).

Organizational culture is promoted at all levels for Ohio Medical care, researching this theme found some important ideas. A study by Zerella et al. (2017) revealed that office layout elements were substantially and positively associated with assessments of a company's organizational culture. Culture classifications were shown to facilitate a connection between the office design layout elements and positive employee job satisfaction. The findings from the study suggested that views of an office design layout can affect worker's perceptions of the organizational culture and essential attitudes of employees (Zerella, et al., 2017). Discussions between employees and senior leadership to gauge an understanding of the desire for organizational culture can be qualified further.

Trying to find positive impacts from prior studies was important to possibly model. A study by Morrison and Smollan (2020) discussed that the open office environment has a negative impact on workers within the space, but not many that show the positive impacts. Positive outcomes within the workspace can be accomplished if the workspace is properly designed and uses proper ergonomics within the workspace. Peer learning, listening to conversations about similar topics of worker engagement, and being able to assist others are all positive arguments for having an open office workspace. An important factor emerged that showed that a difference of thought between genders emerged as a theme. Women had a sense of "feeling observed" within the workspace more than men. The feeling of being observed and a sense of privacy may affect females more, and consideration into the office design should reflect this by not having high traffic areas be behind women employees (Morrison & Smollan, 2020).

Health and Well-Being

Understanding any health impacts of employees that work roughly eight hours a day in their cubicle was vital to research, especially as this research was done during a worldwide pandemic. A study by Seddigh, et al. (2015) shows that the physical structure of the work office environment has an association between both health and performance. Performance of office employees can be affected by the working conditions of office environments. Small open offices, medium open offices, and large open offices have been studied in this regard compared to a quiet working environment. There is a drop in performance as the working open office size gets larger. Cognitive demanding tasks are performed better in smaller open office environments than in larger open office settings (Seddigh, et al., 2015).

Office environments have been linked to workplace related stresses and illnesses. Research by Lindberg et al. (2018) has been done on these two items within open office workspaces. Their study of a federal office building showed that open bench seating provides the most active workspace environment compared to cubicles or private offices. Open bench seating experienced the lowest perceived stress levels as compared to private offices and cubicles. Higher physical activity in the job place resulted in the lowest amount of physiological stress (Lindberg, et al., 2018). Understanding what seating is best appropriate for each job function is an item that has just started to be explored and needs to be looked at further as it is related to different worker job functions.

Many workspaces are changing constantly due to businesses evolving and personnel changes. A study by Spreckelmeyer (1993) discussed as office conditions become more subject to constant change, policies must be created to manage the following effects of heightened amounts of stress and disruption on the part of

employees. Specifically, design policies should be discovered that tend to reduce the impacts of environmental shifts that may increase the type of effort itself (Spreckelmeyer, 1993). A post occupancy evaluation can gauge the effects of environmental change within an office that can be used to understand best behavioral and management practices to increase worker happiness during any form of office relocation. Findings from any post occupancy evaluation can be used to understand any contributions to positive feelings of employee morale and satisfaction in the workplace (Spreckelmeyer, 1993).

There are significant studies that address the health effects of shared and open-plan cubicle layouts contrasted to individual private offices. An organized review by Richardson et al. (2017) found that shared or open-cubicle office environments are not beneficial to employees' health, with consistent findings of deleterious effects on staff health, well-being, and productivity. These findings have public health implications for any workforce in an open office environment. Choices about workplace design should include evaluating the short-term financial benefits of open office layout versus any significant harms, including heightened sickness absence, lower job satisfaction, and lower productivity (Richardson, et al., 2017). In a world dealing with a current pandemic, further research needs to be explored in the open office environment as it relates to health and psychological anxieties of working in open office environments.

A study by Pejtersen et al. (2011) noted that understanding the amount of sick leave associated with a private office versus an open office cubicle environment is important. In an open office environment where there are many employees sitting near each other, illness is imperative to comprehend. Sickness related absence was meaningfully related to having a greater number of occupants in the open office

environment than compared to employees residing in private offices (Pejtersen, et al., 2011).

Other health related factors are discussed in a study by Evans et la. (2000) that examines unperceived levels of stress from sound on office employees. Low level noise stresses can produce physiological tinges of stress, the study shows a potentially significant and new health risk for subtle sound exposure (Evans, et al., 2000). Clerical workers performing normal office tasks under normal, open-office noise conditions, are less likely by 50% to fix any ergonomic issues at their workstations while working. The results of the study noted that chronic noise exposure can lead to possible musculoskeletal health impacts; the results of this study also show other probable health effects from chronic low-level sound exposure. Chronic sound exposure can lead to elevated epinephrine level, even if the sound is unperceived as stressful. This rise in epinephrine level due to increased sound is a risk factor for heart disease (Evans, et al., 2000).

Privacy

Privacy within an open office environment has been studied by many researchers, and there are not many private spaces in the current organization's office layout. Researching this theme was of significance to explore. A study done by Kim et al, (2013) showed that enclosed private offices easily outperformed open office cubicle layouts in most aspects of employee satisfaction, particularly in audibility and privacy. The benefits of 'ease of interaction' were slighter than the drawbacks of increased sound level and reduced privacy resulting from open office cubicle layouts (Kim, et al., 2013).

A study done by McElroy and Morrow (2010) showed that offices that are redesigned with the goal of decreasing workspace while increasing perceptions of work-related attitudes and organization have interesting results in the opinions from employees. Results show that workers assigned to a redesigned office layout report less workspace and more interruptions than those who stayed in a cubicle environment. The employees that are relocated to newly designed layout do show favorable perceptions of work cultures at a cost to more interruptions. Should there be a need to implement organizational change, a new office design will support this (McElroy, & Morrow, 2010). Open office environments have shown that they can provide better visibility, improved face-to-face exchanges, and improved perceived privacy if auditory privacy can be assured (Rashid, et al., 2009).

A study by Bernstein and Turban (2018) discusses the interactions between employees in open office structures. Organizations have been pursuing a physical workspace where increased workplace collaboration has led designers to transform traditional office spaces with private walls into open office cubicle environments. They did this through architecture and making workspaces with fewer walls and doors. There is negligible amount of observed research on how human collaboration patterns changed as an outcome of these architectural changes. In short, rather than prompting progressively improved face-to-face collaboration, the new open office architecture performed to trigger an environmental response to socially withdraw from other employees sitting in this environment. These employees instead chose to interact over email and other instant messaging technologies (Bernstein & Turban, 2018).

Oldham and Brass (1979) noted employee satisfaction and internal motivation decline considerably after a change from a private office to an open office environment. Studies also suggest that changes in job descriptions that accompanied a shift in where an employee sits are reasons for decline in motivation and satisfaction within the workplace (Oldham & Brass, 1979). It is also noted that contentment with privacy declined among former occupants of private walled offices. The decrease in privacy from private offices to an open office floor plan reflected a decrease in confidentiality of conversation due to lower than previously accustomed acoustical measurements (Sundstrom, et al., 1982).

Office redesign has a relationship between employee productivity and the impact on privacy and productivity. A study by Yunus and Ernawati (2018) show that these relationships are different across different generations within the workforce. Not all employees of varying ages have similar opinions. In a mixed method study using a census method, three emerging themes developed from perceived ideas of employees within a workspace: friendship, collaboration, and privacy. Both collaboration and privacy exert a positive relationship. For Generation Y, the relationship between privacy and work productivity is stronger than for Baby Boomers and Generation X. This younger generation prefers freedom, mobility, and flexibility of work environments. For this reason, these younger generations are more inclined to an open office working environment (Yunus & Ernawati, 2018). Additionally, male employees and those from younger age groups were also found to believe that the office environment will have more of an adverse impact on their perceived workplace efficiency than that related to females and older employees (Haynes, et al., 2017).

Research from Jensen and Arens (2005) has been shown that employees in private offices are considerably more satisfied with the sound quality than employees whose main working environment is in cubicles. Aiming at the group of employees that are most dissatisfied with their working environment, the most prevalent problems were: people talking loudly on the phone, people overhearing private or personal conversations and people talking loudly from surrounding offices and cubicles. Over fifty percent of employees that reside in cubicles think that acoustics and other noises interfere with their ability to complete their daily job tasks (Jensen, & Arens, 2005).

A study by Lee (2010) noted that employee job satisfaction can be measured depending on their office working space. Workers in cubicles showed substantially lower enjoyment and job performance relative to visual privacy and collaboration with co-workers than that of both enclosed single occupied private offices, and those with an enclosed shared office space. Employees also showed considerably lower satisfaction rate with noise intensity and sound confidentiality. These employees located in cubicles also had lower job performance perceived by acoustic quality than those of enclosed private offices, and enclosed shared offices. Tall cubicle partitions don't provide employees adequate environments where people can have private conversations (Lee, 2010).

There are levels of hierarchy within many different types of organizations. This combined with different job skill sets within organizations can impact how employees perceive their workspace. A study by Sundstrom et al. (1982) used participants of office workers from several different work groups including secretaries, managers, and administrators to provide feedback on their workspaces. They also had their dimensions measured and had other features about their work environment documented. The highest

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predictor of ranked privacy of workstations for all job parties was the number of partitions around the workers environment. Occupiers of private offices rated their working environments as the most private. The different job groups recognized privacy in their own way, depending on the different kinds of work they did, and their influence over interaction and communication with other employees (Sundstrom, et al., 1982).

Action Research Design and Methods

The approach used for this action research study was based on the grounded theory method. The reason for this approach is that there was a presumption of an outcome, but not a well-defined starting point. This grounded theory approach starts from exploring the data and finishes with a theory that is created from the data (Hesse-Biber, 2017). The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of open office environments from employees as it relates to office layout and furniture system dimensions. The study gathered information from the actual employees that occupy the open office environment by using participatory action research; the purpose of participatory action research is to improve the quality of people's organizations (Creswell, 2019).

I chose this type of participatory action research because participatory action research addresses internal organizational issues. Participatory action research has a social emphasis on research that benefits change in organizations (Creswell, 2019). This study needed a process approach with sampling from a population that revolves around the core category of perception of employees, the grounded theory approach was selected for use with this study (Creswell, 2019). By gaining this information from research, corporate teams will be able to modify or design a workspace in a manner that may aid

efficiencies or morale. This research used a constructivist approach. This study also aimed to gather knowledge to assist in a development of open office design ideas to assist Ohio Medical Care with their future workspace that can be implemented throughout their physical space. These office design ideas and themes were developed from the researcher's view, from the knowledge that was gained from the interviews.

Site and Participant Selection

Ohio Medical Care is a healthcare company dedicated to treating adults that have mental behavioral health issues. There are currently 125 open locations, and the organization is rapidly expanding across several states. The company has over 5,000 employees, of which roughly 150 employees work in the corporate office. The mission of the organization is to provide one-on-one personalized therapy for people and families affected by behavioral, communication, and emotional challenges.

At the corporate headquarters, the company uses mostly cubicle furniture that existed within the space prior to Ohio Medical Care's occupancy. There are 13 private, enclosed offices with the remainder of the seating being 150 cubicles. The corporate staff is dedicated to serving the front-line employees. The company has hired many middle managers within the prior two years to assist with the expansion of clinics. The corporate office has expanded to two floors and uses several different layouts of cubicle furniture and style across both floors. There was no intention of these floor layouts being different, other than simply the furniture was cheap and affordable to install on both floors; the furniture across the floors is from different manufacturers. The company does not have any additional cubicles available for employees, as all are currently occupied. The company most likely will be expanding onto an additional floor and will be purchasing

70 more cubicles to assist in the forecast of rapid growth within the next year or two. The company is expanding so rapidly because of the growing need for behavioral health services throughout the country.

The participants in the study were mid and low-level team members. All these team members reside in an open office cubicle environment. This study employed convenience sampling, as these employees have unique understanding of the setting, and are available to serve as a participant (Hesse-Biber, 2017). The participants were from a mid-level position that sit in cubicles in the office. These participants need to hold private conversations with other low-level staff team members frequently, sometimes for disciplinary actions. The low-level employees sometimes deal with private and sensitive information about other people. There are only a few limited places where the mid and low-level employees can hold private conversations. They were selected for participation due to their willingness to have an interview for the study. The participants in the study came from support staff functions of various teams within the organization to capture a variety of diverse ideas within the organization. The names and other material information of participants are shown below in Figure 1, as well as in the appendix.

Figure 1

Participant Data

Participant	Role	Years With Company	Gender	Age
Eri	Middle Manager	3	Female	30
Ben	Middle Manager	5	Male	45
Emi	Low Level Employee	1	Female	27
Carrie	Senior Manager	2	Female	42
Macy	Low Level Employee	1	Female	30
Tony	Senior Manager	4	Male	52
Michelle	Low Level Employee	2	Female	33
Kendall	Low Level Employee	1	Female	35

Researcher role and positionality

My experience in the real estate office design field is paramount with 15 years of experience in office creation and design; because of this I do have some biases from prior experiences that need to be noted so that it does not interfere with the ideas and deliverables of this study. Reflexivity is a major strategy for quality control in qualitative research; it is important to know how the study may be impacted (Berger, 2015). I used journaling to write down my thoughts and experiences, to understand my biases and keep my own personal assumptions out of the study. My role within the study is the researcher, but I am a senior leader within the organization of the participants. I had to ensure that I did not interfere with any answers that the participants wished to state during their interviews, good or bad. I have some biases and assumed that many of the answers that I received would be negative. I wanted to ensure that I heard these negative remarks of the workspace and worked to disarm any hesitancy from the participants. The current office is set up so that thoughts and emotions can be spoken at any time; I was encouraged that I heard both positive and negative remarks in honesty from the participants, which the data revealed.

Ethical & political considerations

There is an ethical concern for the study, as there are lots of moving parts in my organization. The last thing I want to happen from the study is get everyone excited about a possible change in the workspace for employees and then never do anything with the results. The results do dictate a position which requires significant funds to fix, and the company currently does not have anything set aside currently to work on the action plan from this study. The goal of the DiP is to make the workspace better for employees, but if

there are significant financial barriers the results of the study may go unchanged for quite some time until the next major office remodel, which is most likely within two years from now. Nonetheless the intent of the study is to achieve a working environment that improves morale and proficiency within the office space, having the participants know that the results of their study can possibly make the space better is at the forefront of this research.

There is a political concern for the study as well. The company is backed by many investors and ensuring privacy of employees as well as the company name is significant. The company absolutely does not want to have any negative light shine on it from a study that may perceive the office working environment as poor. The main objective of the company is providing medical care. While the company is excited to understand how to improve the workspace, if the findings are shown in a negative manner this may impact the care that some patients may receive, this confidentiality must be ensured at all cost.

Data Collection

Interviews

Since this study's approach was based on the grounded theory method, semi-structured interviews were an important part of the research. Many grounded theorists use interviews to best capture experiences of the participants in a study (Creswell, 2019). This grounded approach was selected because there was an assumption of a possible conclusion, but there was not a good starting point. This grounded theory approach starts from gathering and studying data and finishes with an idea or theory that is generated from the data (Hesse-Biber, 2017). The data from the participants was gathered qualitatively through the semi-structured interviews. The participants were provided with

the questions prior to the actual interview. There was time for the participants to ask any questions they might have about participation and address any concerns about their participation. All the participants will remain anonymous for the study and will be identified with pseudonyms throughout the findings. There was sincere concern of participants not to be known by senior members as there were a significant number of negative views delivered. These participants were selected by convenience sampling as their willingness to fill the role was easiest (Hesse-Biber, 2017). These participants were also selected as they best represented a larger staff of employees.

The eight interviews were semi-structured in nature, to ensure that key questions will be answered. The interviews were held via in-person meetings on request from the participants. The interviews were recorded to ensure accuracy and validation of the data. Due to timing constraints for these participants, each personal interview were roughly 15 minutes in length. The interviews were recorded via a phone and were transcribed via a third-party transcription service. Each participant was interviewed only once.

Data Analysis

Since the data was qualitative in nature, the data from interviews was transcribed from the recordings taken from the interviews. Interviews are the most used data collection method from a grounded theory approach (Thomson, 2010). The transcript texts used third-party transcription services to assist in getting the research from audio to text. The researcher verified the validity of the transcription services to ensure the accuracy of third-party services. After the data was prepared, the data was thoroughly re-read and listened to further to get a better sense of the qualitative research that was gathered. Reading the transcripts several times was a time-consuming effort. Spending

effort and time reviewing the data is necessary to make the connections from the voices of participants and the original research questions (Mertler, 2020).   Codes from the research were developed using an Excel file which will assist in storing the data. After placing codes for all the research collected, the researcher assigned the most common codes and themes throughout the data into a research matrix (see appendix in Chapter 2).

Trustworthiness

Member checking is an important role in the research. Since the research was qualitative in nature, the participants reviewed a copy of the text transcript version of the audio recording to verify completeness and accuracy. The text was reviewed for accuracy by a third-party transcription service, the researcher, and the participant to verify the correctness of the conversion from audio format to text. This was done to show to the reader that the findings of the study are worth taking account of (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

Dependability

Reflexivity played an important role in this study, as there were some implicit biases by me. As noted in the transcripts from the study, the questions were designed to let the participants fully explore their own thoughts without any researcher biases. I have been redesigning office layouts for many organizations throughout my career. I have always used a top-down structure when discussing planning and office deisgn with other organizations. Most designs are approved and designed by upper management. I have many opinions in this field, and I needed to ensure I did not steer participants down a path I desired, and make sure their ideas were heard.

Confirmability

The study also brought in triangulation, which can be shown to associate the data collected between the individual interview participants within the research study. Since the interviews were the major strategy for collecting data, individual viewpoints and experiences from these distinct interviews were corroborated against each of the other participants to come to themes and conclusions. The themes were developed from the participant's own dialogue and were cross-referenced during the coding analysis.

Credibility

The distinct challenge with this study was that I only had the opportunity to interview a limited number of participants. While there will be some themes that emerged from the grounded theory study, more participants might be necessary to fully ensure there were not any additional themes missed.

Transferability

This study was based on knowledge from a back-office support staff that utilizes large open office work areas. This study will be able to assist Ohio Medical Care if the suggestions are relatively cheap. Should Ohio Medical Care continue to expand, and new space need to be designed, the findings from this study will be used for the future office design for the expansion of the company across multiple floors.

CHAPTER TWO: RESULTS OF RESEARCH

Reporting Qualitative Results

There were several themes from the interviews that resonated with the participants. I will focus on the three dominant themes across the participants for this study. The study aimed to understand the perception of employees within their office space and to understand if there were themes related to worker productivity and morale. The main themes of physical space, health and well-being, and privacy will be discussed below, as well as morale and productivity.

Physical Space

The result regarding physical space will be discussed in three separate categories. The interviews showed that layout, working technology, private rooms, collaboration areas, and conference rooms were important for the participants.

Layout

The physical environment was important to understand from the employee perspective to know if changes are needed to the physical space as well as possible seating assignments. The participants had their own ideas about layout of the space and some preferences if they had the option to revise seating assignments and layout. Ben noted that "from a seating standpoint, again, I'm not that picky. I can pretty much sit wherever. I don't have any complaints about that." He continued that "it's such a personal preference thing" in regard to the layout of the space. Who has access to certain seats may be important to Ben as he said, "I also know that with our space, some people have views, some people don't, from their seat. That may be the only thing that's ever been a

concern or a point of emphasis." Similarly, Tony noted that "I do like that there's some natural light; however, I'm kind of in the middle. So, I wouldn't say I have a window necessarily, but there is a little bit of natural light, which I do like."

Michelle had thoughts on the layout of the space: "I also sit next to the restrooms and I don't like that people walk and can hear all the conversations that I am having." She continued "that would be really nice to be in a segregated area away from the common space. So, something, maybe in a corner would be better for me."

Regarding layout of the space Eri noted that she doesn't "know that you changing the arrangement is as big of a factor." While Michelle noted that "I think it's nice that my teammate sits by me. It makes it just convenient for working." Macy said that she sits "on what you could call a hallway, like on a path where people are passing me often. Which I kind of like personally, because then I'm more likely to talk to more people." She also noted that "I definitely think seating arrangements. We're coupled by a team which is specific to how we operate in the market. So, I think keeping it that way is highly important, and it helps with our productivity." Kendall also stated that "I would select seats by putting teams together, so they can collaborate, communicate with one another."

Carrie's thoughts on the layout were that she "sits in the middle of a cube farm in the center of a floor. There's not a lot of visibility to natural sunlight, which can wear on you at times after a long day in front of the computer." She also said that "I think if you were working with a team, it might be better and a more collaborative environment if you had kind of a bullpen type arrangement instead of trying to make us all separate." She thought that it "defeats the purpose." Her other suggestion on the layout of the space was that "there is the opportunity for collaboration, but I think in order for it to be effective,

you need to be surrounded by people that you do actually work with." She also noted that "having teams together makes a lot of sense, but I don't necessarily need to be in an open environment next to other departments."

Working Technology

The study was looking to explore the physical space, but a theme kept emerging about physical items in the space, specifically around working technology. Ben said that "from a technology standpoint, since we've gotten rid of the phones, the headsets that were given I didn't think were the best." He also took note that technology was non-standard throughout the employee workforce in the office he said "I'm one of the few people that have four monitors. So that's great from that standpoint."

Eri said that "having really good headsets is something that might be able to improve some of the productivity and just experience." Emi stated that she would like "a faster computer that doesn't have to be restarted." Tony also said that "I'm always asking for a better computer, just so I can do my job faster." His thought on technology continued in that he would prefer "better technology being available and upgraded technology so that things move a little bit quicker. I'd say better technology available to everybody, not just the higher ups." He further expanded that "and then additionally, a faster computer, not even faster, but just something that works as good as the one I have at home, for example." Tony additionally stated that "outdated computers can really, it's kind of disheartening to come in knowing you could be moving faster and having to wait around for those sort things."

Michelle said that "it would be really nice to have upgraded technology, dual monitors and faster technology in general. My computer is really slow." She also thought

"technology is really important." Carrie said that it's important to have "multiple monitors that you can move around, and headphones." Macy also thought that "headphones are obviously super helpful." Kendall also noted that "the nicer headsets" would be a benefit in the workplace.

The theme that working technology is of importance for these team members was significant. Part of these workers' everyday activities is to work on these technologies daily and technology that did not work was frustrating. Giving these employees proper working technology is of paramount importance.

Private Rooms/Collaboration Areas/Conference Rooms

Collaboration space and private areas were discussed by several participants. Emi stated that "I think it's nice that my teammate sits by me. It makes it just convenient for working." Ben also noted that "I do like having very quick access to other staff. Just a simple question can be asked and answered very, very fast. And back and forth responses. Very quick team huddles." Regarding having the ability to have a private room he said that "people want to be able to at least take that 10-minute break and be able to step away and not necessarily be in the middle of everything."

Eri noted that what "I like about our open office layout are that we can work together, collaborate with other departments." She also thought that having a small private room was important. She said there is importance in "providing small spaces that you can go take a phone call in, that you aren't taking an entire office. Sometimes office spaces are hard to find."

Tony thought that, "Collaborative areas are good as well, if we do have to collaborate and meet about something, we can just duck into one of the conference rooms

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and knock it out together." He additionally noted that "I do think you also need that in person collaboration time, which is important." He said he "did like the collaborating and space and meeting rooms and those sorts of things." Kendall noted that the workers can "meet together in person as a team, it's nice to see people face to face and not be isolated in your space all day. And then we can also be productive by bouncing our ideas back at each other." She also said that "Our meeting rooms always get booked up, so it would be nice if we had more spaces to hold meetings with team members."

Michelle thought there was a need for more private space. She stated "and I feel like if I need to have a private conversation, I'm unable to do so." She did note that "collaboration is really important. Sometimes I feel like I'm just stuck in my cubicle all day. People are walking by, we say hi, we head nod, but there's not really a space for us to get together for a purpose." She continued that thought with "I think that it would be important for us to have more common spaces with a purpose." Macy's thoughts on common space was that "going to the meeting rooms and things like that, we only have one big, that's open, collaborative space, which is just our kitchen and just off of it. So maybe if there were more collaborative spaces" she would prefer.

Carrie said that "I do like being able to have access to some of my coworkers to have quick conversations, have direct conversations instead of having to send an email, because sometimes things can get lost in translation in email." She noted that it would be preferred "to have some huddle rooms" she continued her thought with "or a little touchdown area where you could go and focus if and when you needed to, or if you have to have a serious phone conversation with somebody, I think that would be very useful." Access to conference rooms appears to be a challenge for her as she noted, "I think we

need more conference rooms because they're always booked. And also, our conference room booking system is really a challenge." She additionally thought that, "People don't use it appropriately, and people are always using the wrong conference room, not the ones that are necessarily designated for our department, and so that's a little bit frustrating." Carrie also stated that "I just think if they had more conference rooms and more touchdown rooms, it would be good."

The data collected shows that there is a need for additional rooms in working environment. There needs to be additional dedicated spaces throughout the office environment. These spaces should allow for additional break areas, collaboration rooms, and conference rooms.

Breakroom/Snacks/Coffee

There were continued themes around breakrooms, snacks, and coffee from the participants. These items emerged as important from their perspectives. Eri noted that "creating a break room that is appealing to sit in, eat, coffee makers, some snacks for people to have, or just basic conveniences, are huge for, I think, just overall morale." She further stated that "I'd definitely put some type of little bit more industrial coffee maker so that it has better wear and tear." She continued to say in regard to the breakroom "I would have probably just some free snacks out there once a day, or one Friday every month or something that's feasible. I think it gives people a little bit of something just to look to forward to."

Ben sits on a floor that has a small personal coffee maker and said that "the convenience of the coffee maker, I think we've done a good job on that. I mean, it's helpful." Tony also noted that the "coffee maker is pretty great because I grab a cup of

coffee throughout the day to give me an extra kick to get my work done." Regarding this theme, Carrie said that "I think that just having access to good coffee, maybe some healthy snacks, a bowl of fruit" are important to her.

Michelle's thoughts in this area are that she thinks "it's nice to have extra items in the staff break room. I've heard of some jobs, some employers that provide snacks, they provide coffee, they provide drinks, they provide just small items that are nice to have." She continued that "I think our break room just doesn't have enough items in there for us to want to collaborate in there because it's just kind of simple." Kendall noted that "as far as our break room goes, we do have a coffee maker, but it's a small Keurig, and it would be nice if we had a bigger one." She also noted that "because there's so many of us. It would also be nice if we get another refrigerator because those of us that bring our lunches."

Regarding the breakroom area Emi said she thinks "the pictures and posters that we have up that describe the work we do is really nice to be able to sit and read in the break room, just because what we're doing is so important." She also asserted that "I would think the biggest thing is in the break room, not everyone keeps it clean, the appliances. I think it'd be helpful if we had food areas nearby." The concept of a nice breakroom appealed to Emi as she further expanded that "no one eats in the break room or anything. That would be maybe nice to promote morale, because then you get to chat a little bit."

Health and Well-Being

The results regarding health and well-being are broken down into two separate categories. The data will be discussed separately between working in an open office during a pandemic and use of chairs and sit-stand desks.

Open Office during a Pandemic

Another item that was a recurring theme was workplace safety. Offices need to hold the safety and well-being of the staff in high regard. The pandemic put a spotlight on this as the participants have described. Emi had discussed that "being able to have a clean working environment that you can change is a good idea." She also stated that, "Being able to have the availability to work remote without feeling like it's compromising to your role. If you're waking up not feeling well, I don't want to feel as though I'm expected to be in the office." And importantly noted that she "would've probably gauged everyone's individual comfort level with the pandemic." Regarding individual preferences, Ben similarly noted that, "I also think that there are individual issues that might come into play in terms of you have to meet a certain requirement or minimum requirements to be able to do that."

Carrie thought that individual thoughts on safety in a pandemic were unique to the individual. She stated that, "It's hard to know other people's comfort level with how comfortable they were with talking to people face-to-face, wearing mask, not wearing mask." She also said that, "We had company rules, but a lot of people didn't really follow the rules and people just did what they want." Macy's individual thoughts differed from others; regarding working during a pandemic she said, "So I'm not as terrified. I'm not a germophobe. So the pandemic, I think, has just changed how people work. Not so much that I'm scared of getting sick more than I used to be."

Tony had mentioned that he gets "nervous about people touching or coughing in my space." He continued to note that "having more antibacterial pumps with hand wash available would be great, and free masks and those sorts of things would definitely help out and it would make people a little bit more comfortable." Regarding physical space, he suggested that "with the pandemic stuff, it would be also great to shut the door if you hear somebody coughing or sniffling next to you, so you don't have to worry about all of that."

Michelle had anxieties about working in the office during a pandemic. She claims that it was "scary having the same touch areas. So, restrooms, using the restroom after someone sanitarily made me nervous. Same thing with doorknobs, we were touching the same doorknobs. And so that open office space, shared areas definitely is just scary." She continued to emphasize that "in an open office cubicle, especially during the pandemic, so like during COVID, it was kind of scary." Kendall stated that "we had to be in the office the whole time during the pandemic." She continued to say that "we didn't have the option to telework, but it would've been nice if we did have that option, especially at the beginning when there were more unknowns and people weren't as comfortable yet being back in person."

Sit-Stand Desks/Chairs

Almost all participants noted the importance of an ability to have proper chairs or other ergonomic comfort in the workplace. Tony noted that "I think it's very important to have nice chairs. People have physical or issues with, I have a bad back." He also stated that "having a comfortable chair that I'm going to sit in for eight hours a day is usually

something that I really like and appreciate." In regard to chairs, Carrie also negatively mentioned that "There's not a lot of ergonomic support. There's nothing you can adjust."

Most of the other participants highlighted that they would like an adjustable height desk. Eri thought that some "changes I would like to see is standing up desks, having that as an option." Ben had noted that having some areas that were adaptable for different people suggesting that "maybe you've got one floor that does have standing desks."

These adjustable height desks might have a health impact on employees, as Eri stated "I think the options of the sit-stand would be really nice because I know that when I sit for a while, my hips get sore, which, I could imagine that probably happens to other people." She further noted that she would like "the ability to have a standing workspace." Carrie additionally noted that she would "like desks that can raise up and down."

There are a small number of individuals in the workspace that have adjustable height desks. There is no clear protocol in the organization on how to get these desks, some of the few staff that have them, have bought them. Macy has a sit stand desk and likes it. She said that, "I have a desk that can change height. So, the fact that what I have is so good means that I don't really have a complaint on it."

Workspace Privacy

Workspace privacy will be discussed into two separate groupings. The data will be discussed separately between interpersonal privacy and privacy from distractions.

Interpersonal Privacy

An ongoing theme throughout all participant responses was the notion of workspace privacy. It was important to have some sort of privacy from other peers that

sit close to each other and to assist with distraction within the workplace. Emi noted that "it is difficult to have phone calls and to feel like you're having a private conversation with somebody, without having everyone else listening to your phone call." She went on to further state that changes she would like to see would be to create "some temporary privacy" between others.

Ben stated that from privacy standpoint there is "a downside standpoint of having a lot of open conversations, not always work related, not always advantageous whenever you might be on the phone, which I'm sure when we do that, that causes other people problems too." His floor has two small offices where a private conversation can be had. He further stated that "I do like that we have those two little mini offices where you can jump in and have a personal conversation if you need to. I think more people should probably take advantage of those than they do."

Emi had a few thoughts on privacy. She noted that "I know that sometimes I worry that other people are going to overhear." In regard to general privacy of her workspace, she further acknowledged that, "I don't think I would enjoy private office because then I would just be by myself."

Tony at one point had a private office, and his dislike for lack of privacy in open office layouts was clear. He noted that "things I don't like are, that I don't really have any privacy." He also stated that he would prefer "any sort of a barrier so that when I'm working on something, people wouldn't bug me, would be great." In discussing what he would desire to be changed in the office he noted that he would like "higher cubes" and "ideally, that everybody have an office would be great." In regard to a cost effective ways to increase privacy, Kendall simply said, "I would like the privacy screens for my

computer screen. Also, with having a nice headset, so people won't hear your other end of your conversation, especially if it's on Zoom meeting" would be beneficial.

Regarding privacy, Michelle said that "I don't like how the space is so open, I don't have any privacy." She did like that her cubicle provided some privacy. "I do like that I'm in a cubicle where there is just a tiny bit of privacy because people can't see my screen unless they're walking behind me," she stated. She also discussed that "I really don't like that people can hear the conversations that I'm having." She had ideas concerning privacy. In the workspace, she said that "telework is always really nice. You have that privacy," and that "higher cubicles would be preferential, maybe with a small door or a four-wall area would help be helpful for increased privacy."

Carrie's thoughts on privacy are that "you have your own space, and really, private offices are super nice. I think that's the preference all around." She continued to say that, "If somebody wants to have a conversation with you, just come walk right in. If the door's closed, don't come in. I like a door open, door closed policy."

Privacy from Distractions

The participants had additional thoughts on privacy and distractions, as well as thoughts to possibly mitigate these disruptions. Eri noted that "it's hard to have calls with people in your department when you're sitting next to each other on Zoom. There's a lot of echoing. You hear everyone else's calls. It gets loud. The environment becomes very just noisy." She further stated that "it's hard to have calls with people in your department when you're sitting next to each other on Zoom. There's a lot of echoing. You hear everyone else's calls. It gets loud. The environment becomes very just noisy."

Ben noted that managers should be in visible range to assist with managing distractions for their team. He suggested "making sure that the people that are managing their teams at least have a good visibility to their people to help when there is potentially an issue of too much open conversation." Emi noted that "we all sit really close. When we're having conversations, that interferes with other people having conversations sometimes." Emi said that "the two people that sit by us, when we're on calls, I can hear them on their calls, which makes it a little bit difficult and distracting."

Michelle said, "It's really hard to focus when I can hear conversations that are happening around me." She also identified that she does "work really well independently in having that quiet space. And so, to keep my productivity high, I would prefer to either work remotely where I don't have distractions or in a segregated space." Kendall stated that "just the noise with it being an open office layout. Noise with just hearing other people's conversations or people's phone rings, people typing" can be distracting.

Carrie had thoughts on privacy from distractions, she stated that "some of the challenges that I have with the open office environment that I work in is it can be loud." Macy suggested that "headphones are obviously super helpful" in managing distractions, and "I guess, if I was to change anything, maybe the option to put up walls" might help.

Concerning distractions, Tony stated "people have a tendency to swing by my desk and talk to me about random stuff or gossip when I'm in the middle of a project or trying to get some work done." He continued that, "I have some passive aggressive indicators to other people like putting on my headphones that signal to people that kind of do not disturb me at the time." He suggested "in terms of structurally and design wise, higher cubicle walls would be good" when talking about privacy and distractions.

Productivity

  Michelle noted that "having high technology and I probably should have said that in the question above to increase productivity, it's important that we have the technology that we need to best do our work." She said that having dual monitors and the latest and greatest computers would help them work effectively, "which then would promote our morale because we're able to complete the tasks as quickly as possible." She also said that "I really struggle using just one monitor. It's hard to be productive when I can only have one screen." In regard to lack of private rooms for personal conversation she noted that "I'd have to go out to my car to have a private conversation and that's in the middle of the work day, stopping my productivity." She additionally stated distractions impact her productivity she said that "I work really well independently in having that quiet space. And so, to keep my productivity high, I would prefer to either work remotely where I don't have distractions or in a segregated space."

  Regarding productivity Carrie discussed that other employees "loud talking on the phone can be very distracting when I'm trying to have another conversation with a client or trying to draft an email, sometimes I feel like it takes me longer than it should to do regular tasks." When discussing productivity, she also stated that, "You have to have good ergonomic and flexible working spaces and the ability to choose multiple different options for spaces: huddle rooms, touchdown areas, offices, conference rooms, that type of thing."

  Regarding productivity Tony noted that "I'm always asking for a better computer, just so I can do my job faster." Convenience and access to other team members was important to Emi she said "I think it's nice that my teammate sits by me. It makes it just

convenient for working." Eri had some ideas on productivity she stated that "I think the collaborative work environment is great." Further noting how "it is difficult to have phone calls and to feel like you're having a private conversation with somebody, without having everyone else listening to your phone call." She continued to say that privacy "does play a big factor in what type of role you are within that company and how many phone calls you do take in a day." She also said that "people are on phone calls often, so it has no impact on them. But someone in a very big project role will have a lot of phone calls every day. That can impact how productive those calls are." She also noted that "having really good headsets is something that might be able to improve some of the productivity and just experience."

Kendall had suggestions on productivity as well. She said, "Just things I already said with the sit-stand desk, especially because sometimes if I've been sitting for a while, and I need to get up to stretch my legs, I have to leave my workspace to just go take a quick walk." She countered with the idea that if she "would have the sit-stand desk, I could stay at my workspace and continue what I'm working on while still standing up and getting movement in my body."

Eri had some thoughts on productivity and stated that distractions can restrict productivity. In regard to distractions on phone calls that "someone in a very big project role will have a lot of phone calls every day. That can impact how productive those calls are." Also, in regard to productivity she noted that "I think the collaborative work environment is great." She also said that "having really good headsets is something that might be able to improve some of the productivity and just experience."

Morale

Thoughts on morale form Eri are that "creating a break room that is appealing to sit in, eat, coffee makers, some snacks for people to have, or just basic conveniences, are huge for, I think, just overall morale." She also stated that "I think some of those conveniences like a good break room, convenience coffee, snacks, town halls, can really promote a constructive open office that makes everyone feel like they're on the same team." Concerning increasing morale Ben thought "I guess, maybe some spaces that are a little bit more, not necessarily work related." He also thought "little wins create more of a team environment. So that way other departments have a better understanding of what other teams are doing."

Emi thought regarding morale that "I think the pictures and posters that we have up that describe the work we do is really nice to be able to sit and read in the break room, just because what we're doing is so important." She further thought that "adding in more artwork, and maybe more things about the company that showcase what we do as a whole." She also noted that "no one eats in the break room or anything. That would be maybe nice to promote morale, because then you get to chat a little bit." Tony also thought regarding morale "I guess some pictures and paintings and those sorts of things would be cool as well."

Michelle had several ideas to increase office morale she thought that "I think boosting morale for employee recognition would be really nice." She also thought that "I think just feeling appreciated. So maybe once a month, doing some sort of celebration for birthdays could be something that would be employee morale boosting."

Carrie noted that "some cheerful artwork I don't think would hurt, seeing some cheerful images instead of just mustard" color would increase morale. She also thought

concerning morale that "I think maybe to do a connect to purpose or something to make people, I don't know, to remind you why you work so hard." She additionally noted that I "think light, bright interiors with positive messaging maybe outlining some of the company's achievements, maybe employees' achievements, and highlighting some of the good work that the company does in order to keep top of mind the mission" are important regarding morale.

Macy had noted regarding morale that pictures "help send messages that resonate with me. Whether it be our group, our team, around our local city, just help ground you and remind you why you're working. I like it." She also thought that "I think the fact that it is open helps all of us just get along, or not get along, but socialize, which I think is morale boosting for me at least." She continued to say that "just increasing amenities just, because I think it makes employees feel like they're being taken care of" and that "artwork is really a nice way to resonate a message" are important for promoting morale.

Kendall had several thoughts on how to increase morale; she noted that "a nicer space in general, or a larger break room, so you're not in your same little cubicle all day, just some other places to go" could increase morale. She also suggested that "I think inviting artwork or pictures or motivational quotes is nicer to look at than just stark plain walls." She continued that if there were "pictures of the kids that we service and real-life photographs and the therapists, and they're all working together, and you see behind the scenes because we're just behind the scenes of our company and what we do." Lastly regarding morale, she said "having nicer coffee machine or more of them because there's one Keurig for a hundred something people" would be nice.

Present Qualitative Findings

The study explores the perceptions of employees that work in an open office cubicle environment. The study also aimed to see if there were suggestions or ideas that can come from employees that work in open office cubicles on how to improve worker productivity and morale. The themes gathered from the data from the participants developed around: enhanced privacy, working technology, snack or coffee bars, sit-stand desks, and collaboration areas. These themes were established through data collection and coding that will be implemented from the action plan. See appendix for coding matrix.

Physical Space

Productivity was an important theme that was part of the DiP in regards to working technology. The organization is intrigued to see what improvements can be made to increase productivity within the space. Another main finding was that these office workers perceived that their technology did not work effectively at all times which was a cause of tension across multiple members. Poor technology within the office space can cause worker frustration, create poor workplace relationships, produce loss of worker performance, and impact users' moods (Lazar, et al., 2003). Even keen and skilled computer users encounter irritating delays and frustrations (Ceaparu, 2014). Coordinating with the information technology team to stress that employee team members were frustrated with their technology is a significant part of the action plan.

The organization also appears to be lacking conference and collaboration rooms from the perceptions of employees. Employees working within open office areas desire sufficient collaboration and meeting spaces (Zamani, 2019). As the company expands, there needs to be proper space planning programmed into future expansions to allow for

additional conference and collaboration rooms. While the existing layout does not have room to currently add these, as the organization expands onto additional floors, this idea needs to be at the forefront of the Real Estate Team's design thoughts. Office redesign can be an effective tool for implementing positive organizational change (McElroy, & Morrow, 2010). This organization can work to modify the existing layout to also bring around positive change for their employees.

Breakroom/Snacks/Coffee

A theme that emerged was that employees wanted some sort of healthy food and snack offering in the breakroom, as the existing breakroom only offers a microwave and a refrigerator for a significant number of staff per floor. While this was noted in the data to suggest this might increase morale, the organization needs to be careful on what snacks are implemented. Previous studies have shown that in an effort to increase morale, many organizations employee snack options; if choosing snack options they should be healthy (Baskin, et al., 2016). Another study suggests that if you provide snacks to employees they should provide low-fat dairy options, fruits, and vegetables to assist with health of employees (Viana, et al., 2018). As part of the action plan the real estate team will look into sourcing healthy third-party food catering services, such as Canteen or similar.

To increase morale and productivity, a simple suggestion of coffee was noted along with snacks in this breakroom theme. Many users of coffee in the workplace note that it helps them to stay awake for work and manage workplace performance, but some also note that it helps take a break, destress, and get renewed ideas (Rodrigez, et al., 2021). This simple addition to the workplace to add coffee to the workplace is not too expensive to budget for. This is one of the cheaper solutions that can increase morale.

Health and Well-Being

Due to the variations of thoughts of personal health and safety, a good theme was not generated. Data from the questions asked in the semi-structured interview questions showed that each answer was unique to each employee's individual preferences. Each person knows their own personal health and safety, as well as their concerns. Individual assessment and ability to be fluid in the office should remain flexible should there be further pandemics or other health related issues in the workplace. Working with the Human Resource team will be critical to address workplace health issues individually with each employee. Poor open office procedures can lead to physical stress and poor performance (Brennan, et al., 2002). Due to the fact there was a wide array of thoughts and individual preferences for personal health and safety there was a lack of a theme; this lack of a theme could mean that there is an individualist ideal that is always necessary to consider. Further assessments should be made on this topic.

Sit-Stand Desks

A major theme from the data shows that the employees perceive that sit-stand desks will benefit them as employees within their physical space. There are some employees in the space that have brought their own sit-stand desks, but the organization's policy is that they will not pay for these for a company for all of their office staff. Allowing people to sit or stand at their convenience would be ideal to standardize across this company. Implementing sit stand desks in the workplace significantly improves the perceived health of employees (Ma, et al., 2021). The organization should work to purchase sit-stand desks for all employees in the corporate office.

Privacy

A theme emerged around privacy from several employees within the space. Having the ability to have a place to go to have private conversations as well as seated privacy still is important while working in an open office layout. There are several options that can be explored such as headsets and privacy screens to help promote seated privacy. The organization already has seated privacy cubicle walls of roughly 50 inches in height; there wasn't enough data collected from the employees to understand if they preferred taller cubicle walls than what they already have.

Organizations have continued to pursue an open office layout to assist in collaboration across employees (Bernstein & Turban, 2018). As noted from the data from the employees, assisting with privacy this may assist in productivity from noises around the office. The employees interviewed where most of the younger population and the majority did neither have a positive, or negative, perception of working in an open office layout. This aligns with Yunus & Ernawati (2018) who noted that younger generations do not mind open office layouts that were more inclined to working in them. Two employees were interviewed that preferred private offices over as they held positions prior that allowed for them, this aligns with their perception along with a Kim et al, (2013) paper showing that private offices showed greater employee satisfaction. This study is not conclusive to significantly modify a structure of private office versus an open office concept, and future expansions will still have a mix of mostly cubicle seats with sparingly private office for senior members.

A theme generated around the use of headsets for privacy is important to note. Some employees have headsets and use them, while many others do not have them or access to them. There is not standard policy in the organization on who gets these, or how

to get these if wanted. An additional item on privacy involved the use of privacy screens to overlay monitors and laptop screens. Similarly, some people in the office have these screens, while many others do not; again, there is not a standard process of who gets the screens, and/or how to request these as employees. Employees want access to both of these tools, and these should be made available for all.

Artifacts and Pictures

Another theme emerged around the use of artifacts and pictures within the physical space. Hatch (2018) noted that a sense of place takes place when there is an emotional association, as well as aesthetic association with symbolic significance. The participants noted that there was a desire to have more artifacts and pictures within the space, with some participants wanting something showing their mission and the people they serve within the organization. The company should work to establish these within its physical space at the corporate office.

<div align="center">

Action Plan

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The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of open office environments from employees as it relates to the new office layout from the recent expansion. The action plan will use the lived experiences and perceptions from employees that occupy the new expansion space from the open office area. The information gathered will be used by the Real Estate team to make changes within the physical space to enhance efficiencies and morale of this rapidly expanding organization.

Several employees stated their dissatisfaction with their working environment. The action plan will assist employees as the company is already looking to expand into another floor in the same building, and purchase office cubicle furniture.

CHAPTER THREE: DESCRIPTION OF ACTION

Action Intervention Process

This chapter will discuss the steps required to make the organizational change

proposed from the data from the participants. As indicated in the logic model (Figure 2),

the critical goals that this action plan wanted to address was to understand the perceptions

of employees within the open office workspace and to implement ideas from the study

that will improve morale and productivity.

Action Plan Tasks

Due to the fact that the office employees work in an organization with a top-down

hierarchy, the first task will be to engage key executives to ensure that resources and

funds can be used to better improve the working spaces of the open office community.

With the data provided from the perceptions of employees, the executive buy-in should

not be difficult to obtain for the additional funding resources as the executive team knows

there are some frustrations within the space.

The key action implementations will be further discussed below, but suggestions

from the data for the physical space include: putting organizational mission artifacts

within the space, ensuring IT equipment is working, developing policies for pandemics

and other health situations that are specific to each individual employee, getting healthy

snacks and additional coffee into the space, and purchasing all employees sit-stand desks,

communication headsets, and privacy computer screens.

Purchase of Furniture Fixture and Equipment

Part of the action plan will involve purchasing items to immediately impact the employees. Of the action items listed above, the costliest are the sit stand desks that run roughly $250 per employee, communication headsets costing $150, and privacy screens that are $20. A snack bar within the space is free, if a third-party vendor is used and costs are paid by employees similar to a high end healthy vending environment. Commercial coffee makers cost roughly $2,500 for the three floors needed. Additionally, there will need to be an operational budget established for ongoing coffee supplies.

For the smaller amounts of funds needed for $2,500 this can most likely fit into a budget without long planned forecasting. For the sit-stand desks and other equipment I will need to negotiate a new lease with the landlord. As part of most commercial real estate transactions a landlord will provide a tenant improvement allowance that can be used to improve their physical space. The last expansion with the current landlord was done two years ago; the company received roughly $275,000 for cubicles, information technology equipment, and other items. The success of this project is dependent on expanding to an additional floor so that the organization can again renegotiate a lease to get funds for improvements. This is a standard practice in this field.

Artifacts and Pictures within the Space

The marketing team will be engaged to assist in designing and promoting the inclusion of artifacts, pictures, and slogans throughout the physical space. This team will also be needed to explore colors within the space. This marketing team encourages engagement on initiatives similar to this action plan in the many therapy centers throughout the nation, but there hasn't been any engagement similar to this DiP for the corporate office. This initiative to boost the morale of employees that reside in this

physical space is a project that this team will easily accept and want to be a part of. Instilling morale and energy is a theme they urge on others, and this should be an easy task for this team, so long as funding can be obtained to print and install pictures and graphics within the space.

Organizational Policies

Policy changes from the Human Resource Team will be needed to meet health and Safety recommendations for pandemics. It is important that individual considerations during a pandemic environment be explored. This team most likely already explored this policy in depth, but not from the perspective of employees working within the actual space. Additionally, a new policy needs to be explored in regard to notifying the IT team when equipment is not working. Having to sit and wait for a computer to start and load is a loss of productivity and a frustration for the staff. Working with the information technology team is needed to simply ensure already funded IT equipment is working when delivered to employees and to provide a way to notify and process fixes as needed.

It was noted by many participants that they benefited from sitting near their team members within their division. While this is true for the majority of staff, some individuals are placed away from their teams due to lack of space at the time of their hiring. The Real Estate Team working with the Human Resource Team needs to review the current seating chart to see if there can be any simple relocation of staff members that can benefit all. A new formal policy should be considered to ensure placement of employees near their immediate team.

Additional Tasks

An additional task is for the Real Estate Team to discuss the themes and issues derived from the perceptions of these employees. The Real Estate Team heads the process for new design and construction efforts across the organization. This team will work to correct and procure any idea for the space and promote and physically construct change for the future as well. Also, the Real Estate Team will work to engage an outside furniture vendor to discuss issues and ideas that the office employees currently have with the space and see if there are any quick solutions available to change and improve the space that have not been thought of.

The company is rapidly expanding and will need to expand an additional floor within the next two years. The study was trying to explore if there were suggestions or ideas that can come from employees that work in open office cubicles on how to improve worker productivity and morale. The participants perceived that enhanced privacy, access to resources, proper technology, snack or coffee bar, and collaboration areas were important for open office settings. Most of the participants touched on these themes. Meeting and mingling are important to these participants to increase office morale. Building structures in place such as coffee bars, lounges, or sit stands desks are appropriate to be considered when designing workspace. When working to design the future space for additional floors, the furniture designer should not skimp on ensuring additional conference rooms and private rooms are available for people that reside in the cubicles.

Further Considerations

By working to implement these achievable organizational changes, there is the possibility of improving the perceived physical working spaces for employees. These

employees reside in their office space for many hours a day. There is also incentive for the organization, as there has been significant turnover, as some of these employees' frustrations have been known to come from their working environment. The organization is currently budgeting for a future expansion. As part of this expansion, ideas from this study are to be at the forefront of office modification and future expansions as well as analysis of any changes that are made.

Process and Timeline

The company is rapidly growing and is working to see when to expand to another floor. As part of the planning, the Real Estate Team is tasked with putting together a budget for the future expansion needs within the space. While budgeting for the expansion space, the team can also add to the budget to retrofit existing working spaces for sit stand desks and communication headsets to assist staff currently working at the corporate office. The timing for the expansion is within the next twenty four months. Design and furniture vendor selection will need to take place within the next nine months for the future space. The organization has been working to grow significantly and planning meetings have already occurred to discuss this rapid growth. Procurement and build-out of the future space and existing space can take up to six months. Full project implementation can be completed within a year after acquisition of funds. Understanding the stakeholders of the action plan is essential to understand that many parties are involved in this organizational change effort; additionally, there will need to be a coordinated communication plan as this action plan will impact many teams and employees.

The process to apply the action plan is similar to what the Real Estate Team does at the current time for other major projects. A budget is created by this team to benchmark funding for the project. Once funding is secured the team will quickly work to purchase sit-stand desks, headsets, and privacy screens and implement these through the office within a few weeks. The team will also develop a design for the new floorplan. The team can work with the Marketing Team to develop artifacts and artwork to go in the space which will be produced to showcase throughout the organization. The Real Estate Team can also quickly purchase and install commercial coffee makers for each of the three floors, as purchasing appliances is part of their current role now. The team holds an operational budget for facilities and monthly coffee procurement will be added to this budget for all floors. This Real Estate team will also work with third party commercial snack vendors to bring in healthy options to the building. This team has already identified a space in the building to earmark a place for these services.

The most difficult part of the action plan will be to try to implement policy change for human resources policies and make all information technology equipment work properly. This Real Estate team will set up meetings with both teams to show the data to suggest outcomes from the study to their teams. Real Estate does not have any oversight or leverage to make these two different teams work to improve their policies and manage their teams. Real Estate will handle the budget and manage the project, which are easier goals to achieve.

Description of Stakeholders

There are many stakeholders that will play a role in creating a better working environment for the office community that resides in the cubicle open office space. The

stakeholders discussed in this paper are important to understand when comprehending how to improve the office space for these employees. Identifying the issues within the space is critical, but understanding the additional stakeholders necessary to truly implement change is essential to comprehend for this action plan.

Stakeholder Analysis

The stakeholder analysis will assist in understanding the complex dynamics between these groups of people that will be touched in the implementation of the action place. It is important to analyze these groups.

Office Staff

The first primary internal stakeholder of this action plan will be the office staff that physically sit in the open office environment. There is high turnover of many staff members that work in the cubicle environment, and there is tension in these areas as the space was not designed for these office employees. The cubicles were already existing from a prior tenant in a mid-rise office building and the organization simply re-used them. These employees reside in these cubicles for eight hours a day, but nobody has asked what they like, or don't like about their physical space. Every employee within an organization has individual priorities and unique work styles (Sugerman, 2009). These stakeholders have a high interest in the outcome, as there is an opportunity in the near future to obtain funds to physically modify to improve their working spaces.

Executives

The next important primary internal stakeholder of the organization audit are the executives of the organization. These executives have a desired interest to ensure the morale and the productivity of the work are high. The executive team has significant

ability to fund the future changes required from the findings of the DiP. They are already planning an expansion to another floor and budgeting for expenses to improve all floors within the office. This stakeholder has high interest in this audit and has a high ability to create positive change within the organization for the office employees that reside in the cubicle space.

Real Estate Team

The Real Estate Team's role is to design offices to ensure the employees' needs are met. The Real Estate Team also has to communicate and implement any changes to the physical space. As the researcher, I am the head of the Real Estate team. I have significant authority to assist and implement future change from a real estate standpoint. This team will use the ideas about technologies, artifacts within the space, or conveniences throughout the space in a thoughtful manner to make the changes in the space. This team has a high ability to assist with change as they will drive the work on all of the tasks of the action plan to assist in change, including communicating with Executives, as well as Marketing, IT, and Human Resource teams.

Human Resource Team

The Human Resource is another internal primary stakeholder. There is significant turnover of many staff members in the corporate office. The Human Resource Team has incentive to remove any reasons for unwanted resignations. Exploring office workers' perceptions is critical in helping to create a positive work environment that had not been thought of before. Human resource teams have a high desire for a good outcome of the study, and a high ability to force positive change within the organization with changes in policies.

Information Technology Team

The IT team works hand in hand with the Human Resource team as there are constant policy changes, compliance needs, and new hire technological needs required daily. Many of the items in the action plan require assistance from the Information Technology team and coordination from Human Resources will be important. Communicating with the Information Technology team is imperative as a key factor to dissatisfaction in the space is improper use of technology.

Marketing Team

The marketing team of the organization handles branding throughout the organization. This team easily helps out when needed to promote the organization on many levels. Although we have not significantly worked to showcase their abilities in the physical space, this team can be engaged to assist in providing artifacts and large graphical pictures in the space to assist in promoting morale. Simple items such as artwork and other forms of expression within space can enhance partnerships (Dumlao, 2018).

Furniture Vendors

The furniture vendor is the last stakeholder of the action plan. This is an external and secondary stakeholder. Furniture vendors are not affiliated with the organization, nor do they have a strong desire to improve the working spaces or social justice issues within the organization. Their main goal is to obtain a contract for design and installation of new office furniture, they have a low interest in the company's goals, but a high ability to assist in actual implementation of design changes necessary. Commercial furniture vendors have significant design knowledge and market information of new office trends.

Understanding issues that other organizations similar to this organization is helpful to understand, and their knowledge of this complex furniture space can be beneficial. This stakeholder has a low interest to help our organization meet our objectives, but a high ability to assist in creating desired outcomes by designing and installing office furniture. Specifically, in regard to getting a contract for the implementation of sit-stand desks and the design and construction of furniture systems for any expansion onto additional floors.

Prioritization

Due to the fact that the office employees work in an organization with a top-down hierarchy, the first stakeholders that were engaged were the executives to ensure that the DiP interviews were approved. The executive buy in was not initially difficult to get, as the team knows there are some frustrations within the space. However, after eight interviews were given, the researcher was informally told to pause. This organization is not an educational setting, and not familiar with studies of its staff members. Asking low-level staff about their physical space, and recording them, and then showing them typed up transcriptions of the recordings of their physical space made the lower level staff members uneasy. Especially since, most of the staff members did have negative comments about the space. These low-level members have had high turnover already, and their managers got slightly anxious as well. Nevertheless, excellent data was gathered and will be presented to these executives again, as they will need to be engaged again to approve any action plan items before the action plan proceeds.

The engagement between the staff and researcher was through interviews. Interviews were used as they can better frame significant issues facing this community (Shalowitz et al., 2009). After the data was gathered from the office worker stakeholders,

the real estate team will be engaged to discuss the themes and issues derived from the audit of these employees, as well as the action plan items. Understanding the perceptions of the office staff was of critical importance to many stakeholders, not just the end user. The other stakeholders noted above have an important role to play in order to make the workspace better for the office staff. The way furniture is set up can hamper social interaction (Dumlao, 2018).

Lastly, since the Real Estate Team is driving the action plan and communication within the organization, they will reach out to the other stakeholders. They will coordinate efforts needed by the IT, Human Resource, and Marketing Departments. Additionally, they will coordinate design efforts for the physical space with the external furniture vendor. Refer to Figure 3 in the appendix for additional stakeholder notes.

Communication Plan

The communication between the researcher and the stakeholders are a critical component for the action plan. One of the most critical communications will be from the researcher to the executive team. The executive team has significant ability to fund the future changes required from the findings, or stop any future plans if any ideas or themes miss the mark. While important to get this stakeholder information, it cannot be excessive. Brief monthly meetings will take place with the executives, and the researcher will present in slide deck format to these stakeholders.

The office staff are the next stakeholders that need to be considered in a communication place. It is important that these individuals receive brief monthly feedback. These monthly communications will be emails from the researcher quickly noting where the action plan implementation is in the process. Some communications

may be in person, and presentations may be made depending on preference of the researcher.

Since the researcher is head of the Real Estate Team, they will receive weekly communications throughout. Additionally, the IT, Marketing, and Human Resource Teams will be part of brief weekly meetings throughout the implementation of the action plan. These weekly meetings may be brief, but these teams are critical for the future implementation of any changes required to the organization. They must be a significant part of the process throughout, and communication will be paramount with these teams.

Another stakeholder that will be minimally communicated to will be any furniture vendor. Furniture vendors have significant design knowledge and market knowledge of availability of new office trends. The evaluator will reach out to this stakeholder at their convenience to communicate next steps, if any, during the evaluation and any future procurement efforts that are required.

As the researcher and head of the Real Estate Team, I will be setting up all communications and meetings noted above. It is important that the researcher not take too much time from all internal stakeholders, as the company still needs to function their other duties. This is a tough balancing act, as the researcher needs to get commitment to make positive change, while at the same time not overburdening multiple stakeholders. Understanding these challenges is an important part of the process and will be integral in the success of the action plan. To further understand these communication efforts please reference the appendix Figure 3.

Outcomes

As noted in the logic model there are both short- and long-term objectives noted for this action plan.

Short-Term

As noted on Figure 2, there are several short-term outcomes from the study that should be addressed. The first item is that there needs to be a new design standard created around the open office cubicles to ensure that all cubicles are equipped with sit stand desks, communication headsets, and monitor privacy screens. Procuring and installing these items, specifically for these cubicle employees, is one of the most important items that needs to be accomplished, as this should work to be budgeted, procured, and installed within the next two years.

Another short-term outcome needed is the necessity to budget and procure communication headsets, and computer privacy screens. Additionally, frustrations have developed around not having a computer that works and or additional monitors to use to aid in productivity. Ensuring there is a budget to procure these items will be key in both promoting morale and improving productivity. Additionally, ensuring that each employee's information technology equipment is operating correctly needs to happen in the immediate future for employees that have computers and other equipment that are not functioning properly.

An additional item from the data gathered was about improving the physical artifacts within the space to increase morale. Currently there is not a lot of artwork or pictures on the walls of the space. Working internally off of suggestions from employees will be an important urgent task for the future space design. Gathering additional team members to see what should be showcased will be part of the Real Estate and Marketing

teams goals. Additionally, the Real Estate will procure commercial grade coffee makers for all floors they currently operate on. This team will install the large coffee makers and coordinate ongoing operational funding for coffee and accessories. The Real Estate team will also engage the landlord to install third party healthy vending services in the building. There is a nice area to install a healthy snack kitchen in the basement, and the landlord can assist in procuring these services for Ohio Medicare Care, its largest tenant. By working on the above noted items, the short-term outcome is for employees to increase morale and productivity.

Long-Term

The organization currently has significant turnover of staff within the open office working spaces. From the data, it was shown that people are not satisfied sitting in their working spaces. By improving the working spaces for staff, a long-term outcome is to reduce the turnover of these lower-level team members. Every individual is unique and doing one study on these individuals within this space is not enough. As people, trends, and technology change, open office employee needs have to stay at the forefront of office design solutions. As new and innovative ideas emerge in the market, Ohio Medical Care needs to guarantee that these are thought of for the employees that work in their physical space. As the company expands to additional floors in the building the organization needs to ensure that there are enough collaboration areas, private spaces, and break areas for future building designs.

Logic Model

The logic model shown as Figure 2 below and in the appendix notes the resources, activities, and outputs for this program. This logic model assists in showing the

process of defining indicators that are needed for the program goals and outcomes of the evaluation (Giancola, 2020). The outputs for the study are important to understand for key executives if resources and financial outlay are needed to improve the space. Long term outcomes are important to reduce turnover of office staff for executives.

Figure 2

Logic Model

Goal: To understand the perceptions of emplyees within an open office layout, and to understand and implement design elements that will keep both employee productivity and morale high.				
Resources	Activities	Outputs	Outcome (Short Term)	Outcomes Long Term
Employee time	Interviews	Understanding perceptions of emp,oyees within space	New open office setting	Decrease Turnover
Real Estate Team Effort	Assessing and coding of data	Likes and Dislikes of the space	Implement artifacts (artworks/themes/pictures)	Keep new and innovative ideas at the forfront of future office design
Human Resource/IT enagement	Furniture Design	Ideas for implementing technology within the spaces	Purchase new furniture, fixutres, coffee/snacks	
Executive buy in/commitment	Updating exectuives of results		Increase productivity	
Money	Executive buy-in		Increase Morale	
Furniture Vendors	Budget for action plan			

Analysis and Future Implementation

The change process has not yet started for the organization. It appears that the funding will be negotiated possibly within a year. There are a few items that could set back this project that are outside the control of the company, but inflation is a key factor that is currently being monitored that could be a factor that might impact parts of the project solely due to impacts on the finances of the organization. Should hiring slow down, and the need for employees reduces, the need for expansion funding will not be able to be obtained. Figure 4 can be referenced in the appendix to show the power and interests of each stakeholder for this action plan and change management process.

The internal stakeholders of the organization would have little pushback for the implementation of and items that are furniture, fixtures, or artifact related as funding will

come from outside sources via tenant improvement lease negotiations with the existing

landlord. Policy considerations are the items that will be more challenging. Specifically,

regarding working procedures during times of a pandemic or any future health crisis our

Human Resources team required people to be in the office. Changing Human Resouce

policies are challenging from my working perspective in the organization. As noted, each

individual had their own idea of how they preferred to work during a health crisis. While

I can work to communicate this to the Human Resource team, any policy change is

outside my control. Similarly, if there is an issue with suggestion changes to the

Information Technology team. The participants wanted working technology, and to have

better equipment, is a significant challenge for the project. We can try to promote best

practices, but I do not have significant leverage to make another Information Technology

team buy new computers that work better. I can budget to procure headsets and privacy

screens for the team out of a specific budget negotiated specifically for expansion that the

Real estate team controls, but I cannot purchase better computers for the entire

workforce.

From a physical workplace project standpoint, the team I am a part of can work to

put artifacts within the physical space, as my team oversees all real estate. We can also

budget for sit-stand desks and design the future expansion to the new floor. My team also

purchases new appliances and break rooms in the space. We can procure coffee makers

as part of the expansion budget and develop a small operating budget to have coffee and

throughout the three floors of the organization. I can work with external snack providers

to bring light healthy refreshments in the space, as this is still part of my Real Estate

Team's realm. The internal stakeholders within the organization will not have an issue

with this as it does not come out of their budget and will not impact other divisions operating budgets.

Differences in satisfaction will occur in the physical workplace and vary across age, job type, gender, and rank (Danielsson & Bodin, 2009). Employees all differ in regard to the amount of time they wish to spend at work, some people like work and others do not (Reynolds, 2003); so, ensuring that employees have working equipment is important to ease frustrations for people who don't want to be there. Personal dissatisfaction and loss of employee effectiveness will take place if information technology issues are not resolved for employees (Lazar et al., 2006). Funding is critical to the success of the project that I am physically able to oversee. Loss of funding for projects has a negative impact on employees (Freedman, et al., 2013).

Once the project is implemented it should be observed, and reflected upon. Using the Mertler (2020) model for action research can be beneficial for this project shown in Figure 5 in the appendix. The action research process starts with a planning stage, then moves to the acting stage, then the developing stage, and finally the reflecting stage (Mertler, 2020). This will not be the first expansion, nor do I expect it to be the last for this organization, this model can be repeated over and over again. As innovation in space design and technology improves there will constantly be change. Future evaluations of workspaces on employee satisfaction and productivity will continue to be needed (Van Der Voordt, 2004). It is my opinion that this is of paramount importance to stay on top of new future trends and ideas for office design.

Analysis of Organization Change and Leadership Practice

The organization is still planning to expand, but the action plan has not taken place yet for this organization. The assumption is that the action plan will take place within the next twenty four months.

Analysis of Organizational Change

The implementation of the future space and policies changes that are suggested in this study will lead to modifications adapted by the organization. As a key leader of the organization, I have considerable influence to ensure that these ideas and policies can come to fruition. The change process for the action plan is both prescriptive and emergent. Planning will need to take place for future space for design and development of furniture layout for additional expansion at the organization. There will need to be an emergent change process in regard to Information Technology and Human Resource policies, as there are policies and technology are constantly evolving.

The Theory of Organizational Aesthetics notes that there are various ways to promote organizational identity through artifacts (Hatch, 2020). The organization will easily adjust to changes made here as the financial obligations to add artifacts in the space are minimal. The use of artists can assist in organizational intervention, in which artwork can be displayed in organizations (Hatch, 2020). After speaking with our marketing team, we have an array of artwork from clients already ranging from fingerpainting to drawings; this artwork was already given to our teams, it is just not being showcased. This is an ideal opportunity to make artistic wall backer boards and install these kind messages from clients throughout the space. Workers gather impressions of their physical work environments and have their own direct experience within an aesthetic work environment (Strati, 2017). Photos showing the organizational

mission, and paintings from people who the organization have positively assisted are appropriate to put throughout the space. The idea of this organizational aesthetic work does not stop with paintings. Other logos, artwork, and design elements can be made with the Marketing Team to assist in bringing in positive experiences for employees. Organizational aesthetics are complex features within the space that can include logos, paintings, artwork, and photographs (Strati, 1996). Workspace aesthetics can be used as a form of control over employees (Hatch, 2018), it is important to ensure that any aesthetics provide positive experiences for employees.

Structural Contingency Theory notes that organizational history and social structure of the organization have a close relationship with physical structure (Hatch, 2020). There are only 13 private offices with the remainder of the workspaces being cubicles. The history of the organization since its inception has only had a large amount of cubicle office space. The participants were pleased with their cubicles, as most employees had only ever sat in a cubicle in this organization. However, there must also be integrity in organizations between physical structure and work environment (Pennings, 1987). By understanding that the current open office environment is currently satisfying is important to understand for the current employees and future open office design will suffice for future design planning. The study tried to find perceptions of employees of their space, and found generally similar themes from the participants about several aspects of the workspace.

An idea within structural contingency theory is that organizational designs, structures, and information technology, all have a strong relationship with each other (Morton, 2008). One of the most important changes needed to be made is to always have

properly working technology. Having working technology is important as noted to keep productivity high, which also was a question wanting to be understood in this study.

The creature comforts within the space such as the sit-stand desks, coffee and healthy snacks, and privacy headphones can have a quicker implementation time. Coffee and snacks are a non-financials way to motivate employees (Yousaf et al., 2014). These quick to market changes can have a positive impact sooner than later. An additional component of the study was to try to improve morale; these items can assist in increasing employee morale.

Analysis of Leadership Practice

Due to the senior title I have within the organization, I was able to organize this research effort. Had I not been pursuing this degree a study of this kind would most likely never have taken place. I have over 15 years of real estate experience and I have not touched a study that included this much feedback from the end user that works in the physical space. I have been a part of studies, but the information gathered is from senior executives and senior managers answering questions on behalf of their employees. My connections with senior stakeholders helped navigate this process through the organization.

The study was important for the organizational leadership, so that decisions could be taken away to improve the office space. The executive leaders in the organization could benefit from understanding other perceptions of employees for different aspects of the organization other than physical space. It might be beneficial to understand the perception of work-life balance and benefits from the viewpoint of employees. Action research is based on the knowledge of everyday employees that is taken for granted

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(Stringer & Aragon, 2021); leaders in the organization now can understand what is important to these people and have the ability to act on their perceptions to make positive change.

Many of these employees interact with the public and the clients the organization serves. Leaders of the organization need to ensure that the tools and equipment necessary are there for these employees to serve their critical mission. Resources are usually inadequate relative to the tasks workers are asked to perform (Lipsky, 2010). The leaders of the organization should listen to these employees' ideas from the study. It is very difficult to have an idea and to put yourself out there for others to hear (Brown, 2018). The participants did not need to participate, but they chose to assist in hope to make the workspace better.

The leaders at the organization should recognize the emergence of the ideas from the action plan and fully support implementation. Leaders should recognize positive change and work to grow, learn, and work on self-change (Quinn, 2015). Leaders should also work to listen to their employees better. This study looked to find the perception of the employees in this organization. Most of these ideas are not new, and have been stated before to team members prior to this study. Authentic mindful listening must occur when working with people from many backgrounds (Dumlao, 2018).

I have personally learned through this process that obtaining sensitive information for an organization that does not sit in an educational setting is challenging; especially when the feedback generated is mostly negative. There were concerns that too much negative feedback could be problematic for the organization. Having participants answer interview questions, and then additionally confirm their transcripts and then also agree

with, both positive and negative, themes appeared unsettling in a professional setting that was not used in educational studies.

Learning from some of these challenges I found that the process for any future studies need to be discussed at length with both participants and stakeholders. Over communicating the process and the need for future studies will greatly help. The intent was to understand the perceptions of employees in hopes to make the working spaces better, which I truly believe the study will have on this organization.

Future Research

There are suitable studies that address the health effects of shared and open-plan cubicle layouts contrasted to individual private offices. However, in a world dealing with pandemics, further research needs to be explored in the open office environment as it relates to health and psychological anxieties of working in open office environments. Asking a simple interview question in this qualitative study gave some insight as to each individual employee wanting their own work options dependent on their own individual health. Future research should be gathered as well to assist in further understanding this concept across broader organizations in many markets.

This study was devoted to an organization that assisted medical facilities from a back-office standpoint, additional studies are warranted for different job sectors. There may be different themes that emerge from people that work in government, medical, and social science fields based upon work style. Future research is important enough to further explore, as people spend eight hours plus each day at their working space, that this should be explored at any large organization with a large open office layout.

Conclusion

In final thoughts, I believe that Hatch's (2018) Theory of Organizational Aesthetics still plays an important role in my organization. The staff within this organization note that senses and perceptions play a key role in organizations. Artifacts within physical space can include logos, art, décor, finishes, and basic appearance within space (Hatch, 2018), which the employees noted. Additionally, this organization affirms that Structural Contingency Theory ideals are accurate for their workspace. A stable environment works best because the efficiencies can be generated by using standard procedures (Hatch, 2018). Understanding the perceptions of employees to assist in developing the future working spaces and policies within this organization will benefit the employees and the company. Both of these theories should be contemplated for any future development or changes within the organization's physical office space.

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Figure 1

Participant Data

Participant	Role	Years With Company	Gender	Age
Eri	Middle Manager	3	Female	30
Ben	Middle Manager	5	Male	45
Emi	Low Level Employee	1	Female	27
Carrie	Senior Manager	2	Female	42
Macy	Low Level Employee	1	Female	30
Tony	Senior Manager	4	Male	52
Michelle	Low Level Employee	2	Female	33
Kendall	Low Level Employee	1	Female	35

Figure 2

Logic Model

Goal: To understand the perceptions of emplyees within an open office layout, and to understand and implement design elements that will keep both employee productivity and morale high.				
Resources	Activities	Outputs	Outcome (Short Term)	Outcomes Long Term
Employee time	Interviews	Understanding perceptions of emp,oyees within space	New open office setting	Decrease Turnover
Real Estate Team Effort	Assessing and coding of data	Likes and Dislikes of the space	Implement artifacts (artworks/themes/pictures)	Keep new and innovative ideas at the forfront of future office design
Human Resource/IT enagement	Furniture Design	Ideas for implementing technology within the spaces	Purchase new furniture, fixutres, coffee/snacks	
Executive buy in/commitment	Updating exectuives of results		Increase productivity	
Money	Executive buy-in		Increase Morale	
Furniture Vendors	Budget for action plan			

Figure 3

Communication Strategy

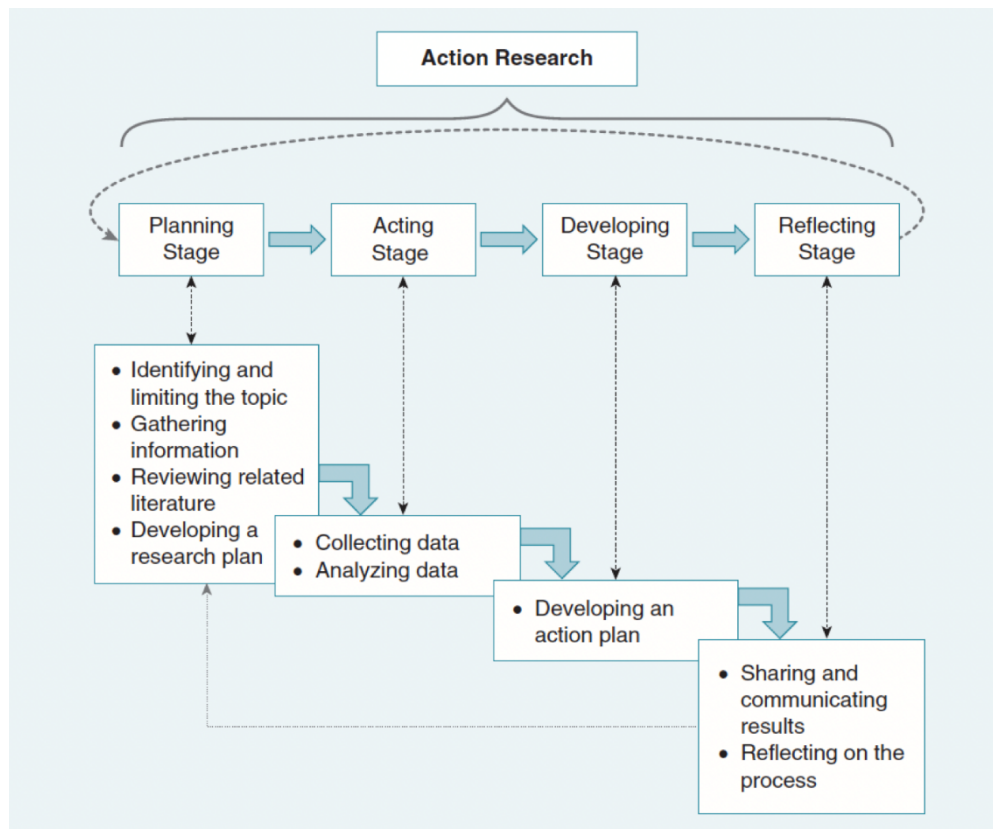| Stakeholder	Point of Contact	Topic/Issue/Idea	Approach	Format	Communication Tool
		What do you want to communicate?	*What is the best approach given stakeholder interests & power?*	*What type of format will work best for the stakeholder?*	*What is the best means through which to communicate?*
Stakeholder #1	Executives	The need to show that change is needed, or no cahnge needed to worksapce?	Make fincnail decisions and outlays	Monthly meetings.	Slide deck, in person meetings, executives summaries.
Stakeholder #2	Real Estate Team	Any construction activites that require a physical change to the space that impact real estate.	Assist in project delivery	Weekly meetings.	In person meetings, emails, powerpoints
Stakeholder #3	IT Team	That employees are having technical issues with ongoing IT needs.	Will ensure all It is working properly.	Weekly meetings.	In person meetings, emails
Stakeholder #4	Human Reseaource Team	Ploicies required for pandemics and seating assignments.	Will asssit in implementing policy changes for pandemics or seating change policies.	Weekly meetings.	In person meetings, emails
Stakeholder #5	Marketing Team	Artifacts and pictures within space.	Will handle design of artifacts and pictures in physical space	Weekly meetings.	In person meetings, emails
Stakeholder #6	Office Staff	To share the importance of the evaluation, and where they are on the process.	Low power	Monthly updates from participants of assessment.	In person meetings, emails, powerpoints
Stakeholder #7	Furniture Vendor	To assist in gthering proiect pricing, and industry best practices	Low power, used for budgeting	Rare in person meetings	In person meetgings.

Figure 4

Stakeholder Matrix

Stakeholder	Point of Contact	Interests	Power	Notes
		Interests related to evaluation & outcomes	*Type of power and ability to impact evaluation plan & implementation*	
Stakeholder #1	Executives	There is significant turnover in the organization, making employees happy about their work environment is paramount.	Ability to purchase cubicles and equipment to fix office design flaws	Executives may not want to spend significant money to improve workspace. Proactive measure: is to be pfront that we will use best efforts to cheaply fix any findings if financially feasible.
Stakeholder #2	Real Estate Team	Real Estate will design the future office, if outcome requires a change within the office.	Some influence with senior executives.	The researcher is the head of this department. They have significant power to assist in coordinating with other executive stakeholders to work on action plan tasks.
Stakeholder #3	IT Team	Limited interest, as they will be required to do more work to fix current errors.	Significant power in relation to IT foxing errors with current technology	This team is overburdened with projects, having another "potential project on their plate might be a desire to show little engagement. Proactive measure: Help team understand the significant importance they can have on other team members.
Stakeholder #4	Human Resources Team	Has some interest as keeping employees from turnover is important	Signficant power to affect policy change	This team most likely has already worked on policy in regard to Health and Safety in a pandemic and offers on individual preference for teleworking or not, most likely have already been explored, albeit not from a perception from the employee.
Stakeholder #5	Marketing Team	Some interest, as they are always looking to assist in branding with staff, assisint in artifact and visual design in their space.	Limited power, but can greatly assist in development of artifacts and visuals within the physical space	Working on this action plan task is a project they would like to assist and most likely explore.
Stakeholder #6	Office Staff	High interest, as this study directly affects their workspace, and can possibly improve office environment	Some power, power in numbers.	The office staff will be excited for any possible postive changes within the space.
Stakeholder #7	Furniture Vendor	Furniture Vendor assist in shoiwing latest technology and industry trends, in hopes to gain business.	No power.	Engagment form a vendor may be limited if vendor does not think they may get business from assessment. Proactive measure: work to have vendor assume they are getting business if they truly help study.

Figure 5

Mertler's Action Research Model

APPENDIX B: CODING MATRIX

Name	Codes									
	Physical Environment	Physical Environment	Physical Environment	Physical Environment	Health and Well Being	Health and Well Being	Privacy	Privacy	Morale	Productivity
	Technology/Working Technology	Layout	Collaboration/Conference Rooms/Pri...	Breakroom/Snacks/Coffee	In-General	Sit-Stand Desks/Nice Chairs	In-General	Distractions		
Eri										
Ben										
Eric										
Tony										
Michelle										
Carrie										
Mary										
Kendall										

So sort of going back to another point about the seating arrangement, making sure that the people that are managing their teams at least have a good visibility to their people to help when there is potentially an issue of too much open conversation, not taking advantage of the privacy rooms. That's probably the one suggestion that I would make. Because I know that there are some managers in not close proximity to their employees.

Disruptions

Male voice - Researcher:

That's great. Does the artwork and artifacts, pictures, slogans, cultural aspects within the space impact you as an employee? And what would you recommend? Any changes or ideas for the workspace?

2nd Male Voice - Ben:

I think it does play a role initially when someone enters a workspace, having some recollection or some visibility, especially since our office is corporate and doesn't necessarily deal with our day to day services. There does become a bit of a disconnect of there not being some visuals or some kind of representation of why are we doing what we do every day? And I think that could be a good thing, especially initially once you join the organization. Obviously once you're somewhere for a while, it may not play as big of a role. But I think that is something that should be taken into consideration.

Male voice - Researcher:

Great, great, great. What would you change or use about the workspace to make the space more positive and morale boosting?

2nd Male Voice - Ben:

Positive, morale boosting. As far as the workspace goes, I don't know. That's a good question. I'm not really sure how to address that. Having, I guess, maybe some spaces that are a little bit more, not necessarily work related. And I'm not necessarily advocating for a pool table or a ping pong table, or maybe a free fountain machine. I'm not necessarily saying that. Maybe I am inadvertently. I don't know. But that's kind of the thing about if every single aspect of the entire office space is dedicated to the work, even though that's what you're there for, I know that in today's world, people want to be able to at least take that 10 minute break and be able to step away and not necessarily be in the middle of everything.

Morale

physical environment

Male voice - Researcher:

That's great. Yeah. Are there any conveniences in the space that you like or don't like? So for example, coffee maker, collaborative areas, meeting rooms. You just briefly spoke about that. I mean these-

2nd Male Voice - Ben:

Yeah. Yeah. I mean our offices, I know every now and then we're running into okay, there's no office space. I think all that's only happened once maybe in the last six months or something where we haven't had enough office space. Being with a new space, we can now take advantage of three different floors. The convenience of the coffee maker, I think we've done a good job on that. I mean, it's helpful. I think we have good collaboration areas, little common areas that people can just sit down and have a conversation if they need to, if there isn't an open office space. So I think from that stand, we've done pretty well.

Physical Space/ Coffee/ Breakroom

Male voice - Researcher:

What would you change about the workspace to increase morale and productivity?

2nd Male Voice - Ben:

So, one thing that I personally feel would be interesting to see would be every single department has KPIs that they're hopefully hitting on a regular basis or maybe super exceeding, or that they're shooting for. We as an organization seem to be doing really well in a lot of areas. And I think what would be cool would be to see that. Maybe there's a digital screen that shows, oh, this department hit this number this month or that quarter or succeeded with signing a lease of some sort, whatever. Those ==little wins create== ~Morale~ ==more of a team environment. So that way other departments have a better understanding of what other teams are doing as opposed to,== oh, they just sit over there and do whatever.

Male voice - Researcher:

That's really good. That's a great idea.

2nd Male Voice - Ben:

I know there would be a lot of logistics that would be hard to manage that and who's going to keep it up and stuff like that. But I think that would be kind of an interesting approach, because we do a lot of things digitally here and there's a lot of technology involved in every department. I think you could package some of that up and present it in a fun way. And, and then that creates a talking point between my department and your department.

Male voice - Researcher:

Wow. That's great. So having worked through the pandemic in an open office cubicle environment, what did you like or not like, and what would you have done different in regards of working in the environment?

2nd Male Voice - Ben:

I don't know. ==I think we did as well as anybody did. It was not easy. We did convert a lot of meetings to== ~Health~ ==being Teams meetings and nobody had ever been through this, so everyone kind of pivoted and did== ~Well~ ==what we needed to do.== So I think going to more of the team meetings and keeping everybody kind of in ~Being~ place helped with that. So I don't know that I would necessarily have done anything different. I mean, our space kept us far enough away through that process. And so I think we did pretty well.

Male voice - Researcher:

Got it. So that leads into the next question. Are there other office concepts that you would prefer? Private offices, teleworking, hoteling, desk chairing, higher or lower cubicle walls and then is it dependent on pandemic versus normal?

2nd Male Voice - Ben:

Well, so I think that the pandemic took the bucket of water that was already just at full and tipped it ~Health~ over as it relates to working at home. Again, going back to the point of there's so much digital work. I ~Well~ think that there are a lot of departments that can be successful and do it well. ==I also think that there are== ~Being~ ==individual issues that might come into play in terms of you have to meet a certain requirement or minimum requirements to be able to do that.== That's the one thing. Me living 40 minutes from the office space, that's the one thing that me personally, I think would be interesting to find that hybrid model,

which I said. Again, shoot 16 years ago at my job I worked at home all the time and it was never a problem. But yeah. So I don't know that necessarily a modification of the office space itself would have that big of an impact from my perspective. I'm fine with what we're working with now.

2nd Male Voice - Ben:

I think some of these are just more personal preferences in terms of standing or sitting or higher, lower cubicles or whatever. I don't know that the pandemic necessarily... Like I said, I think it triggered something that was there anyway, that people wanted to all work from home or at least have the ability to sometimes work from home.

Male voice - Researcher:

Great. What best practices would you suggest to bring to your current organization from any that you had worked for previously or heard about in regard to open office environments you just talked about?

2nd Male Voice - Ben:

Yeah. Yeah. So yeah. My old company, half of the company already worked remote anyway, because you needed to be in some of the spaces locally. So that made sense. And then from a programming standpoint, a lot of the programmers, they had already worked at home and continued to work from home. So that wasn't a big deal. Again, that's the main thing there.

Male voice - Researcher:

What are important design elements of an open office layout that you think will keep employee productivity high?

2nd Male Voice - Ben:

Oh gosh. That's such a hard question. I mean, again, I think so much of that is personal preference. I don't know that there's nearly] one thing that's going to say, oh, well this is going to make sure everybody's productivity's high. I mean, you have an event for staff and you get pizza and then there's going to be 10% that say, "I don't like pizza." And another 10%, "I only like cheese pizza." So it's such a ~~physical~~ personal preference thing. *environment*

Male voice - Researcher:

Great.

2nd Male Voice - Ben:

So it's hard to say.

Male voice - Researcher:

What characteristics of the office layout or items and conveniences within the space are important to promoting morale and constructive open office work spaces?

2nd Male Voice - Ben:

Again, going back to what I was just saying about everything being a personal preference, I think if you can get certain things and having some variety of things. Again, maybe you've got one floor that does *sib* have standing desks or whatever. Or you've got one office area that does have, I don't know, free food *stand*