



European Civil Service Federation Fédération de la Fonction Publique Européenne

Introducing open-plan (or Open Space) offices can seriously affect working conditions!

A good working environment is essential to the well-being of staff.

To better understand the issues, **the Federation** will now:

- Take stock of the experiences of implementing Open Space

And in its next two messages, **the Federation** will:

- Present the new approach of the Commission
- Highlight DGs' compliance and non-compliance with the new Commission approach



Since its creation in the early 1960s, **the Federation** has placed the well-being at work of colleagues at the heart of its union actions and the demands it has addressed to the administration.

The Federation naturally evolves with the times and continuously develops its positions to take account of progress: for instance, the introduction of new technologies and the new methods of organisation and ways of working that they bring with them.

To conduct its analyses seriously, **the Federation** relies on academic work and the results of practical assessments carried out by private companies and administrations.

As to the eventual introduction of Open Space offices, **the Federation** has always considered that two conditions must first be satisfied:

- 1) taking proper account of the affected staff's opinion on their individual situations and the feasibility of carrying out their tasks in an Open Space and
- 2) respecting a solid technical specification before carrying out high quality work in the office buildings.

Sadly, these conditions have never been fulfilled by our administration, and so **the Federation** has never supported the limitless introduction of open-plan offices / Open Spaces.

It is now almost 10 years since our administration haphazardly embarked on a path towards converting traditional office space into Open Space, guided solely by the aim to make short-term economic savings.

The results are laid out in a recent report^[1] by the Court of Auditors. The report confirms that the savings generated by the 2014 Reform are well beyond what was targeted, but have had highly negative effects on staff not only from the point of view of working conditions but also the attractiveness of the EU institutions as an employer.

The administration has been promoting so-called “wellbeing @ work” programmes such as “fit @ work” which encourage staff to use the stairs instead of the lifts. These are certainly commendable, but unlikely to treat or reduce the psychosocial risks (leading to depression and burn-out) that the deteriorating working conditions accentuate.

During our meetings with the administration, **the Federation** never misses the opportunity to cite studies established by major universities and human resource specialists which demonstrate the correlations between Open Space environments and falling productivity, demotivation of staff and significant increases in burn-out ([see details in the Annex](#)).

So the supposed savings are nothing but an illusion!!

The Federation reminds the Commission that the well-being of its personnel must absolutely be preserved and therefore:

- **that the budget for staff costs^[2] must not be treated as a variable for budgetary adjustments,**
- **that using budgetary economy as an excuse for moving to Open Space is not admissible** and that savings already made since the last Reform are substantially higher than the expectations of Member States ([message from the Federation of 27 September 2019](#)),
- **that it is imperative to follow a rigorous approach to analysing the need and impact on the staff (including their consultation)** before considering switching to Open

^[1] European Court of Auditors 24 Sept 2019 <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/Pages/NewsItem.aspx?nid=12590>

^[2] Chapter VII of the new Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027

Space, because the costs of de-structuring a service, increased illnesses (burn-out, depression, ill-being, etc.) and the decline in productivity can be considerable. Moreover, installing an open plan office costs just as much, or more than traditional offices.

The Commission has finally realised the importance of these issues because it has, at the end of 2019, adopted a Communication which the Federation will detail for you in its next message.

ANNEX

The University of Salford (Manchester)^[3] has established the direct and indirect effects of the office work environment on the quality of people's work, in studies going back to the 1920s. The study carried out by this university has highlighted a gap between the work environment and the aims of the organisation (whether a firm or an administration) which leads to considerable losses of productivity.

This loss of productivity is confirmed by innumerable other studies and the root causes of this decline in performance are identified and described in detail.

Take for example the studies carried out by other renowned universities: Harvard University and Harvard Business School (Cambridge - USA)^[4] which both came to the very surprising conclusion that colleagues who work in an Open Space in fact find themselves having fewer social interactions with colleagues rather than the purported increase.

This reduction in personal contacts has as a corollary in an increase in electronic communication between colleagues.

This increased connectivity which even tends towards a permanent state of hyper-connectivity can rapidly lead to burn-out, as shown in a study by Oxford Economics^[5].

This alarming observation is confirmed by Securex (significant player in the field of HR administration with a broad vision of public-private and international recruitment), which in its 'White Paper'^[6] established on the basis of statistics gathered from companies in Belgium that hyper-connectivity leads to burn-out and increased work stress.

More recently, an article from the Financial Times^[7] updates the findings of the Harvard Business School study and demonstrates that the decrease in interaction between colleagues along with new modes of office sharing such as 'hot-desking' further precipitate dehumanisation of work.

^[3] University of Salford 2016 <http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/39106/>

^[4] Harvard Business School/University 2018 <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rstb.2017.0239>

^[5] Oxford Economics 2016 <https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/my-oxford/projects/336497>

^[6] Securex 2017 <https://www.securex.fr/sites/default/files/2017-09/Enqu%C3%AAt%20-%20Hyperconnectivit%C3%A9.pdf>

^[7] Financial Times 6 Jan 2020, The dark side of hip office design, <https://www.ft.com/content/6990b29e-11d5-11ea-a225-db2f231cfeae>

A recent study by the Catholic University of Louvain on 'flexible office design'^[8] has shown that Open Spaces and flexible offices (shared offices) do not have the expected effects on employee productivity, or in terms of well-being, job satisfaction, or commitment to the organisation.

According to a 2019 study^[9] by Bright Link, a UCL spin-off in Louvain-la-Neuve, one in five office workers in Belgium is on the verge of burn-out because of stress factors such as excessive workload, the under-performance of their managers, too long hours in the office, transport difficulties, and hyper-connectivity via smartphone/tablets interrupting life at home.

These problems are not unknown to the staff of the European institutions...

^[8] Université Catholique de Louvain

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336382070> The dark side of office designs towards de-humanization

^[9] L'Echo, "Un salarié sur cinq est en risque d'épuisement" https://www.lecho.be/dossiers/barometre-de-l-epuisement/ou-vous-situez-vous-sur-l-echelle-de-l-epuisement-faites-le-test/10179635.html?utm_source=sim&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=extended_adhoc_mail&utm_content=&utm_term=