



CHESTER
BUSINESS SCHOOL

CAN OPEN PLAN WORKING PROVE BENEFICIAL?
MBA DISSERTATION

VILMA GRATTON

CHESTER BUSINESS SCHOOL

JUNE 2009

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank her colleagues who put up with endless questionnaires and returned every one within the allotted time. And special thanks to Steve Page without whose ultra-fast feedback this document would never have been finished.

Declaration

This work is original and has not been submitted previously for any academic purpose. All secondary sources are acknowledged.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Abstract

This research uses social identity theory as a lens when examining whether open plan working can prove beneficial, bringing together several disciplines in one office. The research finds that benefits are evident but cannot be guaranteed in all circumstances. Similar benefits may not be replicated if a similar exercise were carried out elsewhere.

The research finds that the main benefits lie in an easing of the tension between process and practice and faster and improved communication. Additionally, learning about one's colleagues due to increased interaction can increase tolerance levels and improve relations. However, the starting sub-groups are found to persist through time and this can affect the standing of the newly created group. Leadership of the new group is also a cause for concern.

Further opportunities for research are identified. Placing deviant employees within an open plan environment can help mediate their behaviour (although the employee does need to possess a desire to remain a member of the ingroup and this desire is not something which can be easily manipulated). The benefits of possible behaviour modification of "difficult" employees warrants further investigation into how this outcome can be guaranteed. Additionally, the research indicates that there may be a possible link between low global self-efficacy, high organisational self-efficacy and citizenship behaviours and expended effort.

Table of Contents

	Page No.
Declaraton.....	2
Abstract.....	3
Table of Contents.....	4
Introduction.....	6
Table 1 - UK furniture imports-worldwide totals per annum.....	7
Table 2 - Profit and loss for upholstery manufacturing.....	7
The threat from cheap labour.....	8
The research company.....	8
The research question.....	9
Justification for the study.....	9
Outline of methodology.....	11
Literature review.....	12
The learning organisation.....	12
What is knowledge?.....	14
Types of knowledge - tacit and explicit.....	15
Learning.....	16
Self-efficacy.....	17
The standard paradigm versus the emerging paradigm.....	19
Communities of practice.....	21
Work groups.....	23
Communication.....	26
Leadership.....	28
Methodology.....	32
Research strategy.....	33
Deduction or induction?.....	34
Research design.....	35
Methods.....	36
Instrumentation and administration.....	36
Semi-structured interviews.....	36
Observation.....	36
Questionnaires.....	37
Administration of instruments.....	40
Semi-structured interviews.....	40
Observation.....	41
Questionnaires.....	41
Findings and analysis.....	42
Does being placed within a group guarantee membership of the group?.....	42
Does the office environment help mediate deviant behaviour - John's story.....	45
Has the open plan office increased the degree of co-operative behaviour?.....	48
How should the group be led and who is the leader?.....	52
Has the office increased learning potential and the creation of new knowledge?.....	53
Conclusions.....	55
Critique of the adopted approach.....	55

The research question.....	56
Has the degree of co-operative behaviour increased?.....	56
Can the behaviour of “difficult” employees be modified by being placed within a larger group?	60
Can the sharing and transfer of knowledge be improved by moving to an open plan environment?.....	61
Will the larger group work harder and more efficiently in order to achieve the company’s goals?.....	63
In conclusion	64
Limitations of the research.....	65
Further Further study?.....	66
Bibliography	67
Appendix 1 Questionnaires used	75
Organisational self-esteem and task interdependence	75
Type of Leadership	78
Style Questionnaire	79
Political Skills	80
Self Leadership	81
Need for Autonomy.....	84
Degree of Reflective Behaviour.....	84
Degree of Information Exchange.....	85
Appendix 2 Findings 2006.....	86
Appendix 3 Findings 2008.....	98