



## WATCH & LEARN: BUSINESS TRENDS WORKSPACE DESIGN: OPEN OFFICES HISTORY OF THE OPEN OFFICE (6:26 min) VIDEO Script & Vocabulary (page 1 of 2/v35894)

Starting  
Off

*Open offices have been around a surprisingly long time, but they're relatively misunderstood for their role in workplace culture. Where did open offices and cubicles come from, and are they really what we want?*

- 1 Read the **Video Script** below. The words in **bold** are defined in the **Vocabulary** section. Look up any new words in a dictionary.
- 2 Go to the **Your Turn** section at the end of this document. Practice using new words and expressions from the video script to prepare for your next class.
- 3 Look at the **Discussion Questions** and prepare your responses for the next class.

### Video Script:

**Phil Edwards, Vox Journalist:** Stop!

How did open offices get so **over-rated**? Let's **break this down**. We all know open offices are bad. There've been studies that show that private offices "clearly outperformed" open ones. Open offices are

about saving money. **Pricey** real estate means that every square foot's a dollar sign, and that's fine. But we don't like to talk about it that way. We act like it's about interaction and collaboration, even though studies have shown that ease of interaction is not an issue in any type of office.

To be clear, I am **throwing stones from a glass office**. This is where I work. My desk is incredibly close to my poor neighbors, I always have to wear headphones to concentrate, and nobody ever.....talks. But when you look at really cool companies, **across the board** they all have open offices to "encourage interaction and openness." Dog vacation website? Open office. Charity website? Open office. But this is not just **penny pinching**. We talk about them like they're better, and they used to be. Open offices were once works of art. They were just ruined...by too many bad copies.

This is an open office. It's a post office from 1872. Open offices weren't invented by **hip millennials**. This is not a barista. This is not a **feng shui** consultant. Clerical work was done in big open spaces as early as the 1750's. But small rooms were most common. By the 1900's, more and more people were spending their days in offices. One genius wanted to make offices more open, and he wanted open spaces to work better.

**Voiceover:** The **eminent** American Architect **Frank Lloyd Wright**.

**Frank Lloyd Wright, Celebrated Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Architect:** Come in lad. Instead of a building being a series of boxes and closets, it became more and more open, more and more a sense of space.

**Edwards:** Wright's known for his houses, often with open plans, but he designed offices too. In 1909, he experimented with open offices in a Buffalo building. In 1939, he created a **masterpiece** in Wisconsin. The SC Johnson company needed a new **headquarters**, so they asked Wright to design it. They make cleaning products like...

**Stock footage of very old TV commercial:** RAID!!!!" (bugs screaming) Yes Raid, new bug killer discovery from Johnson's Wax."



### ADVANCED LEVEL (C1) AND ABOVE

- ◊ Read the script and note new vocabulary
- ◊ Write three sentences using new vocabulary
- ◊ Prepare for the discussion questions

### Discussion Questions:

- ◊ Do you work in an open office?
- ◊ Do you think it's more practical to work in an open office or private office set up?
- ◊ What could be done to improve the open office experience?

### Vocabulary:

- **over-rated** - considered to be better or more important than it actually is
- **break (a subject) down** - analyze or explain something in detail
- **pricey** - Expensive; costing a lot of money
- **don't throw stones in glass houses** - don't criticize others for faults you have yourself
- **across the board** - applying to all areas or categories
- **penny pinching** - being very careful with money; frugal
- **hip** - trendy or fashionable
- **millennials** - people born between the early 1980s and late 1990s to early 2000s
- **feng shui** - Chinese practice of arranging the physical environment to harmonize with spiritual forces
- **eminent** - famous and respected within a particular sphere
- **Frank Lloyd Wright** - an influential American architect known for his innovative designs that often mimicked or integrated nature
- **masterpiece** - work of outstanding artistry, skill, or workmanship
- **headquarters** - main office or center of operations for an organization





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**WORKSPACE DESIGN: OPEN OFFICES**  
**HISTORY OF THE OPEN OFFICE (6:26 min)**  
**VIDEO Script & Vocabulary (page 2 of 2/v35894)**

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**Video Script continued...**

**Edwards:** The administrative building was the **highlight**. It was a stunning open office. Wright believed new materials, like **steel**, enabled bolder designs.

**Wright:** The box was a fascist symbol and the architecture of freedom and democracy needed something beside the box.

**Edwards:** Just in case you missed that, he just said boxes are fascist. Yeah. Doesn't that sound a lot like modern open office hype? But there were big differences between what Wright made and what we have today.

This thing was incredibly well designed. First are these **dendriform** columns. Dendriform means tree like. They were so elegantly **skinny**, they worried building inspectors. The ceiling let in natural light. Visitors compared it to a cathedral. Wright also specially designed each of these desks and chairs. Just look at all the space between them. And managers got private offices on a mezzanine. Wright said that it **paid off**.

**Wright:** One of the first consequences was tea in the afternoon, and they didn't like to go home.

**Edwards:** But Wright's open office was very different from the open **drudgery** in, say, 1960s "The Apartment." People eliminated Wright's careful design work and made a copy of a copy of a copy. Open, but without Wright's genius behind it. That's why people thought a "**cubicle**" might be the solution.

The May 1968 issue of Progressive Architecture has a lot of gems. Like this flooring that's...asbestos tile? **Hindsight 20/20** probably shoulda gone with linoleum. Page 174 has a spread about a movement called Bürolandschaft. It means "office landscape," and started in Germany in the 1950's. By the 60's, it had made its way to America.

Look at this diagram of DuPont Chemical's boxy, very organized offices before Bürolandschaft. And now look at the fluid, organic layout they ended up with. The idea was to make offices open, but keep them flexible. Herman Miller did the same with their "Action Office."

**Narrator of stock footage of an office space:** And what exactly is "Action Office"? Well, I'm walking through it right now.

**Edwards:** Herman Miller's Robert Propst designed it to **break up** space, but it allowed for easy interaction and rearrangement. There were even special task groups for each part of the office. The idea was constant flexibility with specifically designed furniture. But when people copied Bürolandschaft and Action Office, they forgot the flexibility and attention to detail. They only saw the walls. So over the decades we got a copy of a copy of a copy. And went from thoughtful design to cubicle farm.

**Footage from "Office Space" movie:** We'll go ahead and get this all fixed up for you. Great.

**Edwards:** Today's supposedly hip open offices are, in part, a reaction to cubicle hatred. But many lack the care and attention of the open offices of Frank Lloyd Wright, or the partitioned privacy of Herman Miller and Bürolandschaft. We've kind of got **the worst of both worlds**. The open offices we have are overrated **bullpens**, but the idea is worth executing well. Because it matters too much to stop trying to fix it.

**Narrator of stock footage of an office space:** By that we mean the 40 hours a week, the 87,000 hours, the nearly 10 full years of your life you spend inside the four walls of one room.

**Edwards:** So I don't wanna leave you with the impression that Frank Lloyd Wright's open office was perfect. His custom-designed three legged chairs **turned out** to be kind of unstable, and they were eventually replaced.

**Vocabulary continued...**

- **highlight** - most important or memorable part of an event or period
- **steel** - strong, durable metal made from iron and carbon
- **dendriform** - having a shape or form resembling a tree
- **skinny** - very thin
- **pay off** - yield good results; to be worth the effort
- **drudgery** - hard, monotonous, or dull work
- **cubicle** - small partitioned-off area of a room, often used for workspaces
- **hindsight is 20/20** - it's easy to understand something after it has happened
- **break up** - separate into smaller parts
- **the worst of both worlds** - having the disadvantages of two different situations
- **Bullpen** - an open workspace where multiple employees work together
- **turned out** - to result in a particular way

**Your Turn! Using new vocabulary is the best way to learn and remember it.**

- 1 Choose three words or expressions from the video that are new to you and write a sentence using each one in your notebook.
- 2 Try to use them in a context that is familiar to you to help you retain them.

