

Warning: Your open-plan office can make you ill

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Don't blame other commuters if you catch a cold this winter: blame the people who designed your office. According to a study published in the current issue of *Ergonomics*, workplace layout has a surprising effect on rates of sick leave.

Four Stockholm University scientists examined data from nearly 2000 employees working in seven different types of [office](#). Key to their research was the number of short and long-term illnesses the employees had, as well as their total days off sick each year.

After crunching the numbers, the team found a 'significant excess risk' of short sick-leave spells in three types of open-plan office, especially among women. The study also revealed a higher prevalence of both short sick-leave spells and a higher number of sick days among men in flex-offices: open-plan layouts with no individual workstations, but some meeting rooms.

Long suspected by the employees who use them, evidence from this and other studies confirms that in general, 'traditional open-plan offices are less good for employee health'. Why this should be so is not entirely clear, but environmental stresses (including being exposed to 'irrelevant sound', the lack of 'visual privacy' and a reduced ability to control one's own personal space), as well as the risk of infection, the types of jobs done in open-plan offices and group dynamics might all play a part. As the authors note, group dynamics have been shown to have a preventative effect on [sick leave](#) in small offices, and can even lead to

'presenteeism': employees coming to work when they're actually ill.

This fascinating study is an important initial investigation into the long-term effects of the modern office environment on employees. It prepares the ground for longer future studies more focused on the office environment itself – with all its complex physical, psychosocial and organisational factors. Expanding this line of research is important because, in the words of its authors, "with such knowledge of the office environment's influence on different dimensions of employee health, important gains can be achieved in the long run." For their sake, and the progress of their upcoming research, let's hope that the Stockholm team isn't working in an open-plan office.

More information: *Ergonomics* [DOI: 10.1080/00140139.2013.871064](https://doi.org/10.1080/00140139.2013.871064)

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