

Delta Newsletter

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This Issue

1 Office life is bad for you

Foreword

Here is an article that was sourced from virtualmedicalcentre.com earlier this month and is a commentary on open plan office work environments. Reference is made to research carried out by Queensland University of Technology and published in Asia Pacific Journal of Health Management.

As we move into a time when telecommuting and home base work is on the increase, it may be prudent for companies to look at the risks to health associated with open plan work environments. Companies are looking at new and innovative ways of creating work environments such as working from home/ telecommuting together the OHS and environmental factors that may come with such decisions.

Office life is bad for you

It's a sneaking suspicion many of us have had at one time or another and a new Queensland University of Technology study has confirmed it – working in open-plan offices is bad for our health.

QUT researcher Dr Vinesh Oommen, from the Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation, has done a large-scale literature review of everything written and researched about open-plan offices and how they affect employees, and the news, he said, is not good.

"The evidence we found was absolutely shocking," he said.

"In 90 per cent of research, the outcome of working in an open-plan office was seen as negative, with open-plan offices causing high levels of stress, conflict, high blood pressure, and a high staff turnover.

"It has been found that the high level of noise causes employees to lose concentration, leading to low productivity, there are privacy issues because everyone can see what you are doing on the computer or hear what you are saying on the phone, and there is a feeling of insecurity.

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"There is also a higher chance of workplace conflicts – sitting so close to someone that each time their phone rings you can get irritated; I think most of us, including myself, can relate to that."

Dr Oommen also said that working in an open-plan office could contribute to higher blood pressure and an increased risk of illnesses, as bugs such as the influenza virus were easily passed around in that environment.

"Based on these findings, I think employers around the country need to rethink the open-plan environment in their offices," he said.

"The research found that the traditional design was better – small, private closed offices."

However, he said some workplaces may be unwilling to change the office style.

"The problem is that employers are always looking for ways to cut costs, and using open-plan designs can save 20 per cent on construction.

"But the question for employers is, do you want happy workers, or a high staff turnover and high absenteeism – that is a choice faced by all employers.

"Having an office environment that promotes health and high productivity would be more beneficial to employers in the long run."

Dr Oommen's study has been published in the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health Management*.

(Source: Queensland University of Technology: *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health Management*: February 2009)

For professional advice on work environments and home based worker risk strategies please contact Delta on the details below.

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