



Influencing organizational commitment through office redesign

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ABSTRACT

Prior research on the effects of office redesign on work-related outcomes has been largely atheoretical and yielded mixed and conflicting findings. Expanding on individual reactions to office design changes as specified by social interference theory, we propose that office redesign affects organizational commitment and this relationship is mediated by employee perceptions of the broader work environment. This conceptual model is tested using 121 financial services employees who experience office redesign and 136 who do not. Results indicate that perceptions of innovation and collaboration mediate the effects of office redesign over and above negative personal reactions such that affective organizational commitment is enhanced among those experiencing reconfigured offices. Findings provide support for an expanded rendition of social interference theory that provides for favorable (as well as unfavorable) employee reactions to office redesign. Such a theoretical explanation is asserted to increase understanding of how the physical environment influences employee attitudes.

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1. Introduction

There is sustained interest in how physical workspaces influence employee interaction in the conduct of work and employee satisfaction (e.g., [Elsbach & Bechky, 2007](#); [Hua, Loftness, Heerwagen, & Powell, 2011](#)). Unfortunately these relations are not well understood. How the design of office environments, for example, affects employee attitudes and behaviors, has yielded a wide array of disparate empirical findings ([Elsbach & Pratt, 2007](#); [McElroy & Morrow, 2010](#)). One possible explanation for these mixed findings is that a theoretical perspective has seldom guided examination of these relations.

The purpose of this paper is to increase our understanding of how office design affects employee attitudes based on an expanded model of social interference theory. We propose an extension of this theory and then test it by examining how specific office design elements can be used to influence one employee attitude, organizational commitment. We focus on organizational commitment for several reasons. Organizational commitment continues to be valued by organizational leaders ([Morrow, 2011](#)) despite the fact that organizations are currently operating in an historical era no longer characterized by long term employment (e.g., [Cappelli, 2000](#)). In addition, downsizing and the emergence of a new generation of employees have been identified as possible explanations for lower commitment levels ([D'Amato & Herzfeldt, 2008](#)). Given this, there is increasing concern over how organizations can establish and restore organizational commitment among employees and the idea of redesigning office space in ways that foster organizational commitment is an intriguing possibility. We pursue this research objective by reporting the results of a field experiment in which changes in office design were guided by a desire to alter employee perceptions of specific elements of the work environment that affect organizational commitment.

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2. The effect of office redesign on employees

Researchers with a variety of backgrounds, including architecture, environmental psychology, and management, have demonstrated that physical settings affect peoples' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Brennan, Chugh, & Kline, 2002; Cohen, 2007; Kornberger & Clegg, 2004; McElroy & Morrow, 2010; Pitt & Bennett, 2008; Zalesny & Farace, 1987). This research has ranged from very micro-oriented design topics, such as desk placement (Morrow & McElroy, 1981) and seating arrangements (Sommer, 1969), to more macro-oriented issues such as organizations as physical structures (Pfeffer, 1982). This study takes a mid-level view by studying the effects of open-office designs on office occupants.

Research on open offices has traditionally looked at the contrast between private offices and cubicle workspaces and demonstrated that moving employees from private offices to cubicles results in negative reactions from employees due to increased distractions, noise and decreased privacy (Becker, 1981; Oldham & Brass, 1979). However, such changes can also result in positive affective reactions if office design results in positive interpersonal experiences for occupants (Oldham & Rotchford, 1983).

In an extensive review of the literature, Oldham, Cummings, and Zhou (1995) use social interference theory as a framework for assessing the diverse effects of office design on employee reactions. In essence, this framework suggests that elements of office design (e.g., density and openness) can cause unwanted or unexpected social interaction. One's ability to handle or control these interruptions and the degree to which they affect goal accomplishment affects the occupant's satisfaction with the office design and their work performance, work satisfaction and withdrawal behaviors. While their review offers considerable support for social interference theory, we propose that the model might shed more light on the consequences of office design changes if it were expanded to include how design characteristics might also facilitate work behaviors among employees. A broader and more balanced outlook on the effects of office design might also bring clarity to the largely atheoretical plethora of mixed findings that characterize office design research. This is especially true since the bulk of this research is 20 to 30 years old and involves large magnitude changes in office redesign, i.e., changes from private offices to cubicles that were more likely to be perceived as generating social interference.

Furthermore, work processes have changed significantly in recent years due to increased complexity of organizational problems and the need for organizational members to work both collaboratively and individually (Peterson & Beard, 2004). This type of work requires workspace that facilitates interaction as well as privacy. More contemporary open-plan office redesigns seek to balance the need for privacy and functional communication among employees by removing physical barriers that hinder the flow of work and communication, housing all personnel in a common open space, facilitating multiple and ever-changing workgroups, and promoting spontaneous interaction among employees (Zagenczyk, Murrell, & Gibney, 2007).

In summary, contemporary office redesign refers to more subtle alterations of the cubicle office arrangement, not to the demise of the private office. The motivation behind today's office redesign efforts includes modifying work environments to fit team-based operations, employee retention (Earle, 2003), and decreasing space requirements in order to cut occupancy costs (Pitt & Bennett, 2008). Consequently, Oldham et al.'s (1995) notion that officeholders' perceptions of how office design affects

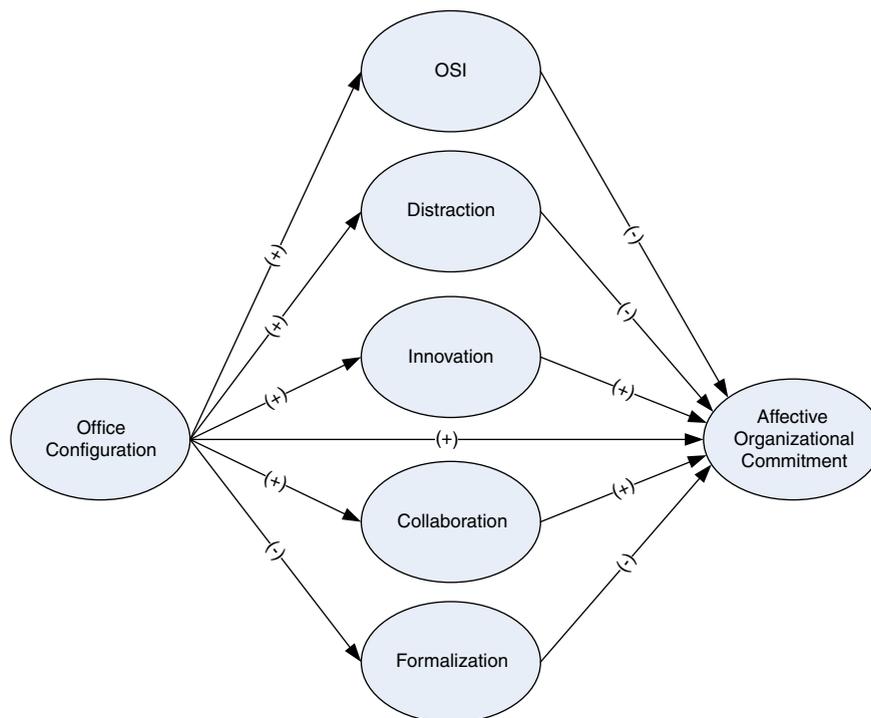


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of perceptions mediating relations between office configuration and affective organizational commitment. Pluses represent positive hypothesized relationships, and minuses represent negative hypothesized relationships.

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