

BBC Learning English

6 Minute English

1 May 2014

Modern offices



NB: This is not a word for word transcript

- Rob:** Hello, I'm Rob. Welcome to 6 Minute English. I've got Finn with me today.
Hello Finn.
- Finn:** Hi Rob, how's it going?
- Rob:** All right. You might notice it's a bit noisier than usual – that's because we're in our **open-plan office**.
- Finn:** Yes, it's a big room full of desks with no walls between them and, as I look around, I can see maybe about 50 colleagues working very hard at their computers!
- Rob:** And today we're talking about open-plan offices – and learning some language related to office life.
- Finn:** That's right. Rob, shall we just go back into the studio where it's a bit quieter?
- Rob:** Good idea. Let's go. *(in the studio)* Right, come in here.
- Finn:** That's better. That's good, isn't it?
- Rob:** Lovely.
- Finn:** Rob – a question? You know a lot about sound, don't you?
- Rob:** Well, a bit.
- Finn:** What do we call a kind of noise that contains the full range of sounds that humans can hear? Is it...

- a) white noise
- b) green noise
- c) pink noise

Rob: Good question. I'm only familiar with the term 'white noise', so I'll go for a) white noise.

Finn: Well, we'll see if you're right at the end of the programme. So shall we continue talking about offices?

Rob: Yes, millions of people like us work in open-plan offices these days, but they're not new. Do you remember Henry Ford, the American **industrialist** from the late 19th Century and early 20th Century?

Finn: Yes, he owned factories and he made the famous Ford cars.

Rob: He's also one of the main names in the story of open-plan offices.

Finn: Yes, Henry Ford was really concerned with efficiency, wasn't he?

Rob: Yes. Efficiency is one of main reasons for open-plan offices – they increase communication and **collaboration** among **staff**.

Finn: Now, a company's staff – its employees – work together for the same goals – they collaborate, exchanging information and ideas. This can be nice, but there can be too many of us in a small space!

Rob: Franklin Becker, social psychologist at Cornell University in the US, thinks the reason open-plan offices have become acceptable and popular, or as he says – the reason they **have taken root** – is different. What reason does he give?

Franklin Becker, social psychologist at Cornell University, US:

*The fundamental reason why open plan **has taken root** has nothing to do really with communication or collaboration or even flexibility. It has to do with the fact that you can reduce the amount of space **per person** in an open-plan versus any kind of a closed cellular office.*

Finn: Well, it's all about saving space and money. He says it takes less space **per person** in an open-plan office than it does in a cellular office – that's an office which is made up of lots of small, closed rooms.

Rob: In those offices, the space for each individual – per person - is limited. Which is why open-plan offices have taken root.

Finn: So some very good reasons for open-plan offices. But what about the noise?

Rob: The noise! Yes! Although open-plan offices can save a company money, they have hidden costs. Sound expert Julian Treasure explains what they are. He uses a very important word for business. Which word is it?

Julian Treasure, chairman of the Sound Agency:

*Nobody can understand two people talking at the same time. We have bandwidth for about 1.6 people talking. Now that's key when we are talking about open-plan offices because if I'm trying to do work it requires me to listen to a voice in my head to organise symbols, to organise a **flow** of words and put them on paper, for example. And if you're talking at the same time, then you're taking up one of my 1.6. I'm left with 0.6 in my head. That doesn't work very well - it reduces my **productivity** dramatically.*

Finn: The word, right at the end there, was **productivity**. Workers in open-plan offices get distracted when others speak, and their ability to produce work – their productivity - is reduced.

Rob: The expert says we can concentrate on 1.6 voices saying different things at the same time. That's not even two people!

Finn: No, not really. He says one voice is in your own head, to organise the **flow**, the movement, of words and ideas when you think and write.

Rob: And the other is... well, people like you on the phone all the time!

Finn: Oh, come on Rob. I suppose I do speak on the phone quite a lot but I didn't know I was disturbing your work.

Rob: You are.

Finn: Oh, sorry. Shall we go back to the question I asked earlier?

Rob: Okay.

Finn: I asked you about the colour of noise that contains the full range of sounds that humans can hear. Was it white, green or pink noise?

Rob: Yes. And I went for white noise.

Finn: The answer is, in fact, pink noise. That's the name scientists give noise...

Rob: Interesting colour.

Finn: ... the full range of audio frequencies or sounds that humans can hear.

Rob: Okay. Well, it's almost time to go but could you remind us of some of the English words we heard today?

Finn: Of course. We heard:

open-plan office
industrialist
collaboration
staff
to take root
per person
flow
productivity

Rob: Thanks Finn. Well that's it for this programme. Please join us soon again for 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English.

Both: Bye.

Vocabulary and definitions

open-plan office	big office which has few or no walls or rooms inside it
industrialist	owner of factories who is influential in business
collaboration	working together for the same goal, exchanging information and ideas
staff	group of people who work for a company or organisation
to take root	to become acceptable and popular
per person	share for each individual
flow	movement, especially movement that is smooth and continuous
productivity	rate at which goods are made

Read and listen to the story online

http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/general/sixminute/2014/05/01_6min_modern_offices.shtml

More on this story:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-21878739>