

# YOU ARE WHERE YOU SIT

THE POSITION OF YOUR DESK SPEAKS VOLUMES ABOUT YOUR PLACE IN THE OFFICE PECKING ORDER. MATT FARQUHARSON REPORTS. ILLUSTRATIONS BY PATRICK REGOUT

It was once so simple. The big chief got the big office and the rest could measure their importance in the square metres they were allocated. Then in the early 1960s came talk of better communication and concern over booming rental costs. As a result, we were all lumped in together – salesman and accountant, executive and administrator – and the open-plan office was born. Now two-thirds of UK offices are this way, yet more than 50 per cent of British office staff claim the open-plan is the single largest contributor to stress in their working lives. “They are terrifying to some people and loved by others,” says Angela Mansi, senior lecturer in occupational psychology at London’s University of Westminster. “Open-plan offices reek of rank, status and hierarchy.” However, with the surface uniformity of open-plans, this hierarchy is not always obvious. Certainly, if you are on a bank of desks surrounded by underlings you can consider yourself an office daddy and trusted table monitor. But the geography of that desk is all because, in the psychology of the open-plan office, your seating determines your standing...



## THE THRONE OF ENVY

“It goes back to when we were cave people,” says Dawn Gibbins, chairperson of flooring firm Flowcrete and board member of the British Feng Shui Society. “If you enter a room and watch where people sit, they always go straight for the seat on the far side, with the wall behind them. It’s a natural instinct. It’s the power position where they can see

everyone and know what’s going on.” In the corner furthest from the entrance, with generous natural light pouring in through your two windows, this is the prime spot for viewing your domain. It is also a source of squabbling, that only the most alpha of execs will win. “It can cause such jealousy,” says Angela Mansi. “Most offices will only have a few beautiful views and if five or six people have that constantly, it causes sibling rivalry. It’s very basic.”



## THE CAPTAIN'S TABLE

The MD may retain his private space, but the open-plan office has cast many senior managers into the bear pit. This is a lose-lose situation. Dr Andrew Kuczmierczyk is director of psychology training at City University, London. “It changes the dynamic of situations and interaction,” he explains. “Bosses who are brought to co-workers may

change certain behaviours. They may flirt less with their secretary or have fewer tipples of sherry. They’re under more scrutiny.” And, while this may hinder your promiscuous proclivities if you are a manager, it also has an obvious downside if you are a subordinate. Shaun Baker is a senior designer with office interiors firm Morgan Lovell. “Generally, people are intimidated when the boss is sitting there in their face, monitoring everything they’re doing,” he explains. >









### THE FONT OF ALL KNOWLEDGE

For those with Machiavellian leanings, a pew next to the MD's secretary is the ultimate prize. While the big boss is likely to be the only person with a genuine office of his or her own, a spot next to their humble administrator will provide all you need to know about the big jobs that are coming up and the big names that are heading out.



### THE GOSSIP CORNER

The only enlightenment this space is likely to offer is trivial tittle-tattle about the drinking exploits of Dave in HR or the frolics of Laetitia in finance. Your plot by the water cooler might be advantageous when you need to quench your thirst, but will have you flagged as a gossip monger for the duration of your tenure.



### THE SPHERE OF LIMITED INFLUENCE

"Sitting across from big, angular stanchions is a no-go area," says Gibbins. Tucked behind a column between filing cabinets, your hidey-hole may seem like a skiver's paradise. You could read – even write – a great novel and no one would be any the wiser. Equally, you could be compiling brilliant reports, and people will still assume your furrowed brow is caused by sudoku.com.



### THE TOILET MONITOR

"If you're by a corridor or an entrance or somewhere where there is very high traffic and energy, you're going to feel uneasy, as if you can't relax," says Gibbins. This seat by the entrance to the loos can develop a strange mix of pity and resentment in your fellow colleagues. It's an obviously lowly spot. Worse, are you tracking their ablutions?



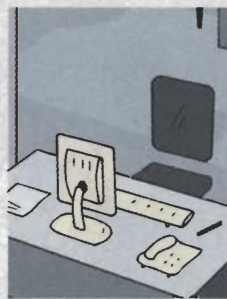
### THE DUNCE'S CORNER

In that little area that hasn't yet been filled by the predicted expansion, you're out of sight and out of mind. New staff will think you are a temp, seasoned colleagues will imagine you have developed odour problems. From here it is all too easy to be forgotten. "Extroverts love open-plan offices, because they need external stimulation that would come from chatter, social interaction, and constant buzz," says Mansi. But in this faraway secondment, there is just the lonely rattle of your keyboard.



### THE COOLER

"For introverts," Mansi asserts, "it can be quite stressful in an open-plan office, because they tend to work within themselves, they focus and are detached from the exterior world." In the cooler you have constructed your own no-fly zone after badgering facilities for four sturdy dividers to shield you from the threat of the open plains. "Who you sit next to is vital," says Mansi. "If you're going in on a daily basis with someone who really irritates you, that will cause stress. That has encouraged the use of screens."



### THE CROSSROADS OF SCENT

As the microwave pings out another reheated curry, your gag reflex endangers a morning's work. Gibbins contends that, "Scent can be stimulating and things such as freshly-brewed coffee can be a very positive aroma." While this may be true, this zone by the kitchen has two distinct disadvantages – the constant whiff of other people's food and immediate questioning whenever the accounts team's milk gets pinched. But perhaps most damaging to your career is the fact that your colleagues will assume you are a serial skiver: this area sees most traffic while you're out to lunch, and all they see is an empty chair day after day.



### THE CONFERENCE CORNER

Daniel Taylor is the MD of Metro Design. "I've found that turf fights normally break out with lawyers and accountants moving from private offices to open-plan spaces," he says. "But we also have a situation with a trade union, where they're arguing that they need private offices to make private calls." That's why every open-plan office has a meeting room for cosy chats and dramatic dressings-down. And a seat outside, preferably adjoining a glass partition, is almost as valuable as a plot by the MD's secretary. This is where new clients are won and lost, sneaky calls to head-hunters are made and illicit assignments are arranged. There is no better place for putting an ear to the wall.



### THE NAUGHTY TABLE

On the island in the middle, with monitors bared to all, every call and conflict is on show for surrounding colleagues like a horrific reality TV show. "Historically," says Baker, "managers have the window office, with the staff inside. That's crazy, because managers have twice as much space and all the natural light but are usually in the office half as much." Those who find themselves in this arena should not doubt why: like troublesome children called to the front of the class, they need constant monitoring. ●