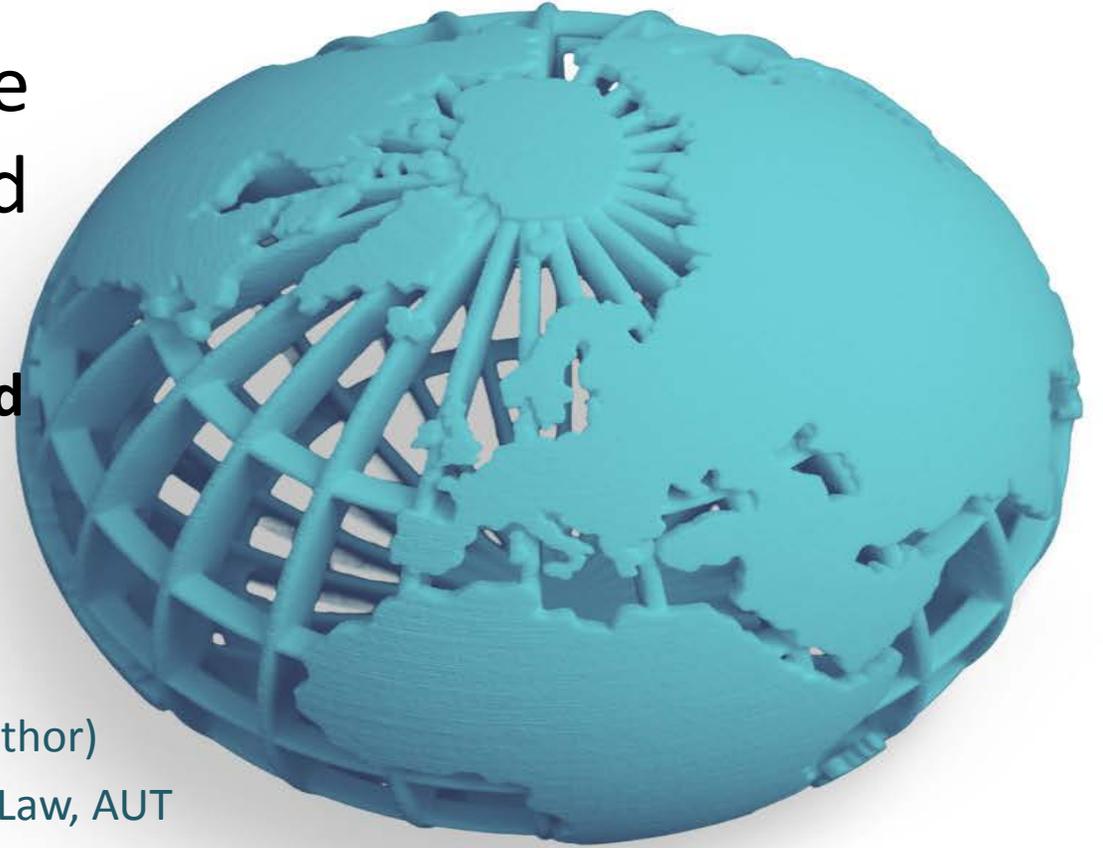# Distractions and workplace angst: Are shared workspaces all they're cracked up to be?

(The demands and resources arising from shared office space)

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Shared office space

- Offices have altered dramatically in recent years

- Until recently, even if people were in "open plan" offices, they were securely bound to their desks...

(and could "personalise")
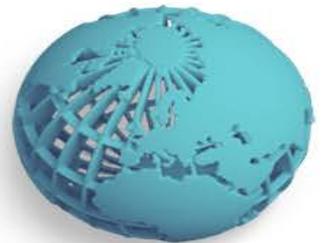
Now…

- High cost of office space
- Mobile technology has enabled a significant change in the physical spaces and places that work is carried out.
- Desire for tele-work and to use physical office space more flexibly.
- Enter: Hotdesking
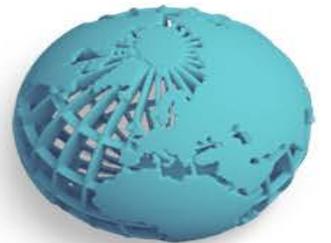
Benefits of shared spaces?

While many workers protest at what they hate about shared offices and hot-desks (distraction, noise, lack of privacy, and not being allowed to "personalise" their workstation, etc.); many maintain the benefits (cost savings and increased collegial communication and cooperation) made up for it.

- It turns out that may be wrong… if you don't have your own space (or perhaps just share with a couple of colleagues), perhaps you are better off working remotely with your cat for company.

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Theoretical framework: Job demands and resources

- Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007)

- Within the JD-R model of stress, *job demands* are the aspects of a job that require cognitive and/or emotional effort; incurring physiological, psychological "costs"

- While *job resources* are the aspects of a job that help in achieving work goals, reduce the impact of demands, or stimulate growth
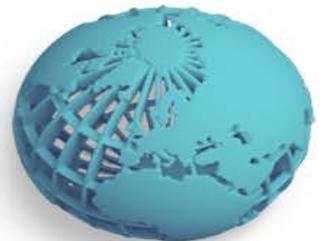
Demands

- We focus on those demands outlined by Bakker and Demerouti (2007) which have been found to be associated with shared work environments.

- Measure Employee Social Liabilities (ESL) – An umbrella construct comprising four sub constructs (Morrison & Macky, 2015; Morrison & Macky, In press).
  - Distraction
  - Negative interactions / relationships
  - Uncooperative behaviours
  - Distrust

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Resources…

HAPPINESS IS
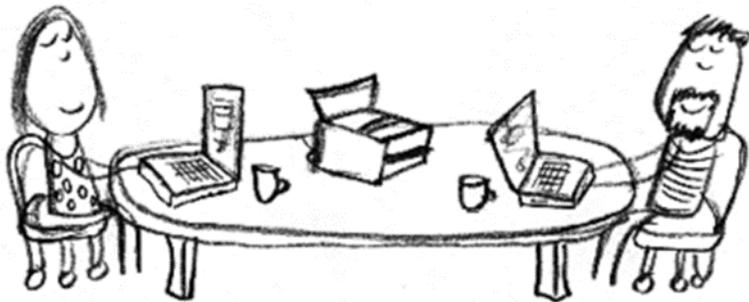
…having a co-worker who becomes a friend.

- Our focus here is on the specific resources which have been posited to come from working in shared spaces:
  - more collegial friendships
  - increased support from managers and others

(Chigot, 2003; Elsbach & Bechky, 2007; Irving & Ayoko, 2014; McElroy & Morrow, 2010)
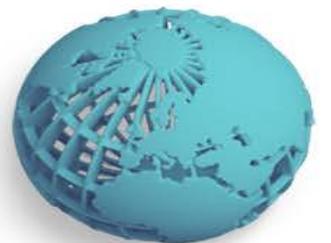
Hypotheses

- **H1-H4: Those in shared office environments (with hot-desking being at the extreme end of the continuum) will report higher levels of ESL from colleagues.**

- **H5-H6: Those in shared office environments (with hot-desking being at the extreme end of the continuum) will report higher quality co-worker friendships and increased supervisor support**
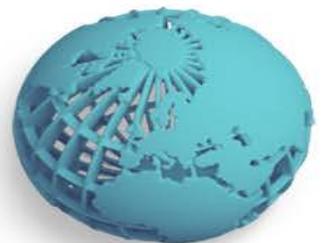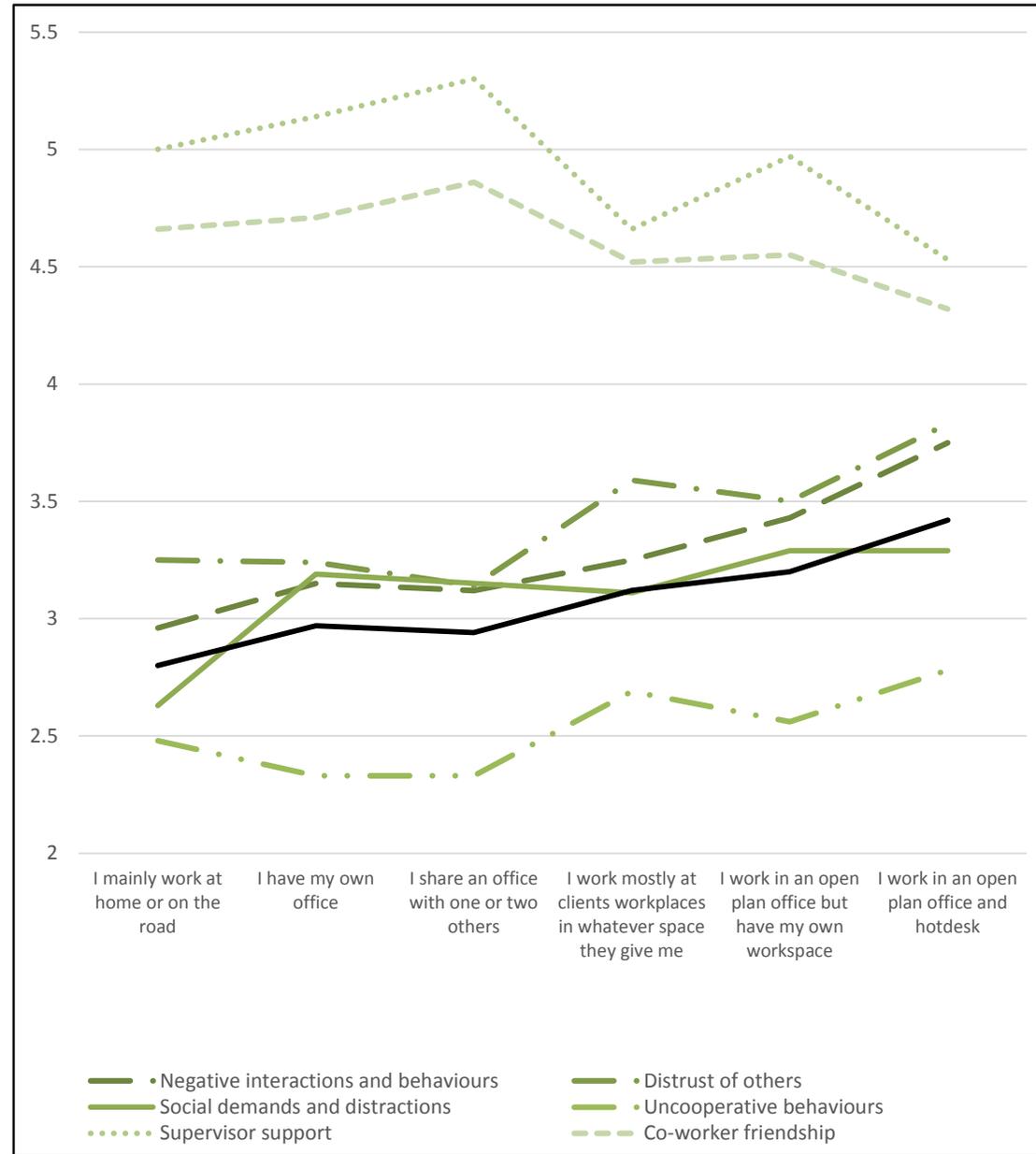
The study

- 1000 Australian participants in permanent employment, aged 18 and over, were recruited in 2014 using a Qualtrics survey panel.

- Representative of workforce.

Results

Legend:
- Negative interactions and behaviours
- Distrust of others
- Social demands and distractions
- Uncooperative behaviours
- Supervisor support
- Co-worker friendship

X-axis categories:
- I mainly work at home or on the road
- I have my own office
- I share an office with one or two others
- I work mostly at clients workplaces in whatever space they give me
- I work in an open plan office but have my own workspace
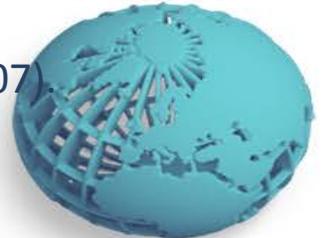- I work in an open plan office and hotdesk

H1 to H4 supported

Hell is other people.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit* (1944)

- The differentiating factor is working in open plan office environments.

- Consistent with the JD-R model

- When in shared open plan office workspaces (hot-desking or not) the four liability variables are likely to place additional demands and increased load on workers (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007)

H5 and H6 not supported

- Results showed that co-worker friendships are actually of *worse* quality in hot desking and open plan office arrangements, when compared to those with their own offices or who share offices.

- They are even significantly lower than those who mainly work at home or on the road!

- In addition… perceived supervisor support *decreases* as work environments become more shared
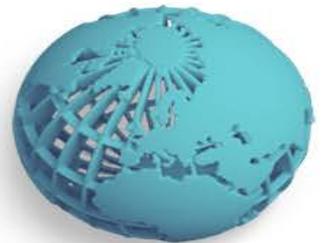
# Why are workers not accruing expected resources?

- Although <u>proximity = more/better friendships...</u>
- TOO MUCH proximity may have the opposite effect.

- Open plan offices have been found to not only increase distraction and reduce privacy, but also to increase employees' use of coping strategies such as **withdrawal** (Kaarlela-Tuomaala et al., 2009).

- If we have no PHYSICAL privacy or distance perhaps we attempt to create our own distance

Perceptions of supervisor support worsen in shared environments

- Perhaps when workers do not see their supervisors every day, the time they do have with them is perceived to be of higher quality.

- It is possible that ESLs at work impact on supervision relationships also.

- The employee, the supervisor, or both, may be irritated, distracted, and attempting to combat this by withdrawing, thereby damaging the supervisory relationship.
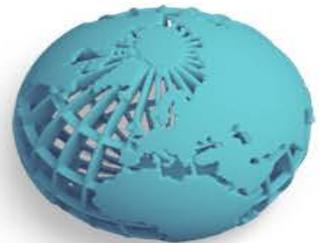
What to do?

Have your own office!

It is unlikely that the general move towards shared office space will be reversed however…

Recommendations

- A systematic approach should be taken.

- Individual differences

- We have yet to ascertain if there are particular roles, jobs, professions, or industries whereby the adverse effects of shared office work are greater.

- Perhaps, for example, there are particular aspects of work that make some employees more vulnerable.

- But for now…
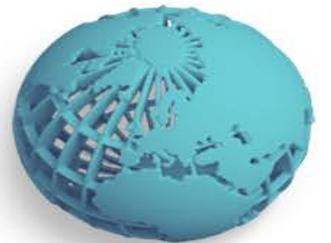
If you're going to do it, do it right

- Review "clear desk" policies, banning the personalisation of work spaces.
- Panels, living wall systems, shelves etc. for privacy
- Noise cancelling headphones
- Provide alternate spaces in addition to hot desks:
  - "touchdown areas"
  - "bookable offices"
  - "collaborative workspaces"
  - "break-out workspaces" (Pitt and Bennett, 2008)

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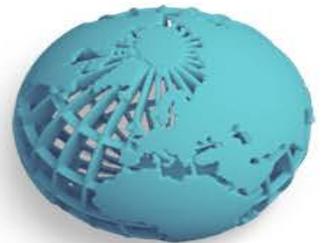
To conclude…
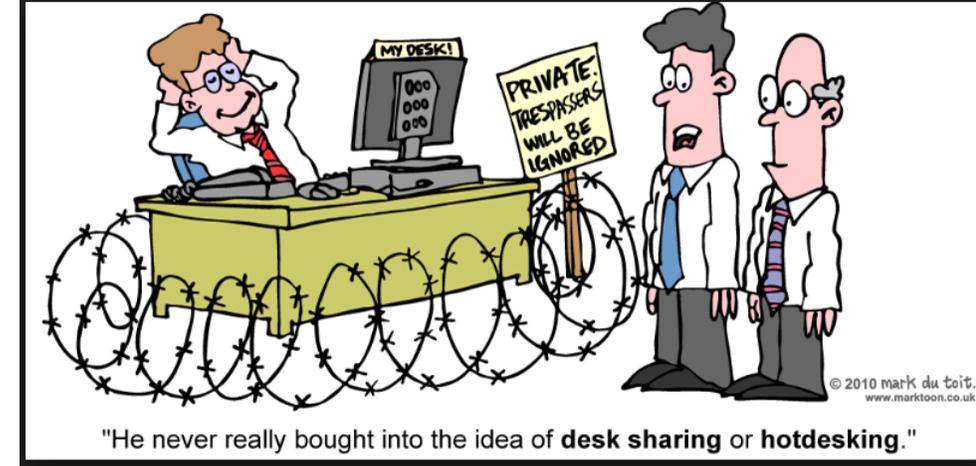
- We are not suggesting workers should be afforded unlimited privacy and solitude.

- There needs to be a "critical density of spontaneous interaction".

- Too much, and the distractions will outweigh any potential collaborative benefits. Too little and the benefits are not evident.