

From a financial perspective, I completely understand why the company is considering this change to an open-plan office environment. Personally, however, I am far from convinced that its benefits outweigh these savings. Studies show that, as far as social relations are concerned, open environments are a positive thing inasmuch as they foster greater interaction between people. What is far from clear is a) whether those interactions boost productivity and b) whether or not an open-plan office is the only way to achieve this goal. I suspect that the same results could be attained just as easily by providing a few extra communal spaces – for example, comfortably furnished coffee areas. For this reason, I would prefer it if the company first experimented with some smaller-scale measures in creating open-plan spaces, before committing wholesale to the idea.

Lastly, whatever decision is reached ultimately, it is very important, from the point of view of good labour relations, that the measures apply equally to regular staff and to the management of the company. I imagine it would be very damaging for morale if employees thought they were being asked somehow to accept inferior conditions of work.

Artificial fragrances in cosmetics and cleaning products are known to affect one in five people adversely, causing health problems such as nausea and migraines. They are particularly harmful for people with breathing conditions like asthma. Accordingly, the company is proposing a ban on the use of all scented cleaning products (soap, air fresheners, furniture polish, etc.) and on the wearing of perfume or aftershave in the office.