Our office will be undertaking a huge renovation project this summer, and, as collateral damage, some of my colleagues and I will be displaced from offices to more open workspaces. I am not excited about this. How can I prepare (both physically and, maybe more importantly, mentally) for this move?

Maribel: Every time I hear about an upcoming new renovation in our office, I dread the thought of having to move to a cubicle or open workspace. It may help to look a bit on the bright side, if only to keep from becoming a complete grump by the time you move to your new desk. Reframe potential annoyances as potential benefits. Increased personal interaction may mean that you get the office gossip faster, or can more easily find someone to go to lunch with. Being in an open space and hearing and seeing what others are working on may spark opportunities for creativity and collaboration. Since it seems like you have some time before the move, you can take this time to tidy up your work stuff, Marie Kondo-style, so that your uncluttered new cubicle sparks some joy. At the very least, not having to move a bunch of unnecessary junk to your open space should be nice. I say all this never having worked in an open space myself, and Scott and Dolly may not be as Pollyannaish as I am.

Assuming you are not convinced that this is a good thing, and assuming that you have no control over whether you move to an open space, there are a few things that you can do to prepare for this change. First, treat yourself to a nice pair of headphones. Being able to block out unwanted extra noise can be enormously helpful. Keep hand sanitizer at your desk. Studies show that people who share offices or
work in open-plan spaces do tend to take significantly more sick days than people who work alone in an office. In addition to decluttering your office, find out ahead of time how and where you can have meetings and confidential calls. Think of ways to configure your new space to give yourself some semblance of privacy.

I mainly encourage you to be patient and open-minded. Your new space will definitely require you to make some adjustments, but I hope that you are able to figure out how to make it work for you quickly. Good luck!

Dolly: Open-plan offices have been scientifically proven to be the worst, so no wonder you feel great dread. Administrators love open-plan offices. At a former employer of mine, where productivity already suffered due to an exceptionally cramped open-plan office, administrators were contemplating moving to “hot desking”—a model where either multiple people are assigned one desk on a staggered basis, or open desks that are not permanently assigned. Open-plan offices are blamed for everything from more frequent illnesses to (ironically) lack of face-to-face communication, but they save money and space while allowing administrators to feel as though they are “disrupting” those old boring paradigms, which is why they are still being widely implemented.

So, you’re justified in not looking forward to this transition, even though you probably have no say in it. Maribel offers solid advice in saying this does give you the opportunity to de-clutter your workspace. Additionally, give some real thought to what you will need from your new workspace. Are you frequently on phone calls or webinars? Check in with your leadership about reservable environments. Many people who work from home (a very “closed” office environment) actively need to go to a coffee shop (the most open of “office” plans) or other public place to be productive. In a perfect world, we would all be able to choose our own ideal working arrangements, but since that’s usually not an option, try to embrace the opportunities that an open office can provide. Refuse to be the sickly, unhappy, unproductive librarian that science and circumstance have doomed you to be.

One of the most obvious drawbacks of an open-office plan is the noise generated by colleagues. I would suggest that if one of your co-workers is engaged in an especially loud phone call or conversation, instead of getting frustrated, look at it as an opportunity to get up from your desk and walk around for a bit. Get some fresh air; get a drink of water; walk up and down a flight of stairs. You keep telling yourself that you’re going to make more of an effort to move around during the day, right? Think of your co-workers as built-in pomodoro timers, and mentally thank them for reminding you to get some much-needed exercise.

Since you obviously can’t spend all of your time away from your desk, I agree with Maribel that it might be time to invest in a good pair of noise-cancelling headphones. Don’t be afraid to test the waters of a periodic remote working arrangement, whether that means working from home or working from another location in your building when necessary. You may find that your supervisor is more open to discussing alternative work arrangements given your new office layout.

To the extent that it’s possible, focus on the good aspects of your office layout. In the end, that’s all we can do with most situations out of our control. You might just find yourself pleasantly surprised by the shakeup to your current routines. Good luck!

Maribel: I think it’s fair to say that Maribel and Dolly have effectively laid out the case that open-office plans have a fair number of drawbacks. The evidence, both anecdotal and empirical, is pretty damning for the open offices. We all react differently to stimuli in our working environment. Many people who work from home (a very “closed” office environment) actively need to go to a coffee shop (the most open of “office” plans) or other public place to be productive. In a perfect world, we would all be able to choose our own ideal working arrangements, but since that’s usually not an option, try to embrace the opportunities that an open office can provide. Refuse to be the sickly, unhappy, unproductive librarian that science and circumstance have doomed you to be.

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