Working Together and Staying Focused: How Open-Plan Offices Shape Productivity and Job Satisfaction in Public Relations Agencies

Nurul Batrisya Zailani[1], Mohd Yusof Zulkefli[2*], Nurul Aishah Ab Raman[3], Hamizah Sahharon[4], Muhammad Azim Zaid[5]

[1]Centriq PR,

[2,3,4,5]Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, UiTM Shah Alam

***Corresponding Author**

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.102100218

Received: 09 October 2026; Accepted: 14 October 2026; Published: 24 October 2026

ABSTRACT

Open-plan offices present a persistent organisational dilemma: physical proximity can facilitate coordination while exposing employees to distraction, reduced privacy and unwanted social demands. This dilemma is particularly relevant to public relations agencies, where practitioners alternate between collaborative activities and cognitively demanding individual work. Existing research documents office-related outcomes, but a more explicit account is needed of how spatial conditions interact with communication practices and changing task requirements in agency work. This conceptual paper develops a framework explaining employee productivity and job satisfaction through the joint operation of collaborative resources and environmental demands. It synthesises selected peer-reviewed workplace studies and integrates the job demands-resources perspective with person-environment fit and privacy regulation. The proposed framework distinguishes physical openness from functional accessibility and identifies two explanatory pathways. Useful coordination can support task completion, whereas attentional strain can impair concentration and increase the effort required to sustain performance. Task–space fit conditions both pathways, while perceived boundary control is proposed to weaken the relationship between environmental exposure and attentional strain. Supportive communication norms are expected to make spatial choices usable and to strengthen the translation of accessibility into coordination. Six propositions specify these relationships and establish a research agenda for public relations agencies, including those in Malaysia. The paper contributes a task-sensitive explanation of workplace effectiveness that treats access to colleagues and the ability to regulate interruptions as complementary organisational resources. Practical implications include equitable access to quiet, confidential spaces; agreed interruption protocols; and performance evaluations that consider quality and employee effort alongside speed. The framework remains conceptual and requires empirical testing; it offers a basis for examining when open-plan arrangements support sustainable professional work.

Keywords: open-plan offices; public relations agencies; employee productivity; job satisfaction; boundary control

INTRODUCTION

Office design structures the conditions under which employees exchange information, concentrate and regulate access to their work. Research on open-plan environments identifies a recurring tension between opportunities for interaction and dissatisfaction associated with noise and limited privacy (Kim & de Dear, 2013; Gerlitz & Hülsbeck, 2024). An open-plan arrangement places several employees in a shared workspace with limited physical separation, but its effects depend on how employees use and experience that space. For public relations agencies, the tension can be conceptualised in terms of professional

communication: practitioners may require immediate input from an account team and uninterrupted time to formulate a message or prepare a client document.

The argument for openness often assumes that removing barriers produces collaboration and improves performance. Published evidence challenges the reliability of that assumption. Bernstein and Turban (2018), examining two organisational transitions to open workspaces, found a substantial reduction in face-to-face interaction alongside increased electronic communication. Their evidence demonstrates that visibility and proximity do not necessarily produce the intended behavioural response. It does not establish that every open-plan agency will experience the same change. Rather, it raises a conceptual question about the conditions through which spatial accessibility becomes useful interaction. Workplace design requires explaining those conditions before collaboration can be treated as an assured benefit.

The wider literature reinforces the need for a conditional explanation. James et al. (2021) compared open-plan and cellular offices and found generally unfavourable associations with satisfaction, productivity, and other employee outcomes. Gerlitz and Hülsbeck (2024) similarly examined office concepts in relation to individual and organisational performance, highlighting the relationship between work requirements and environmental conditions. Read together, these reviews challenge an evaluation based primarily on space efficiency. However, their office categories encompass different configurations and implementation practices. The positive experiences described in the longitudinal case examined by Morrison and Smollan (2020) indicate why differences within a layout also require explanation.

Public relations provides a useful context for applying this question because agency activities can require both coordinated decisions and concentrated formulation. The literature on workplace design and creative work provides a basis for examining this combination (Gerlitz & Hülsbeck, 2024; Samani et al., 2017). For example, campaign planning may require collective discussion, whereas drafting a response statement requires careful individual judgement. Client coordination can demand timely access to colleagues, while sensitive conversations require confidentiality. Extending the literature to this setting suggests that an overall judgement of an office as collaborative or distracting may obscure differences between activities.

This paper asks: how do open-plan spatial conditions and organisational communication practices jointly shape employee productivity and job satisfaction in public relations agencies? Drawing on the distinction between work demands and resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker et al., 2023), it proposes two explanatory pathways. The resource pathway concerns useful coordination, through which access to colleagues assists work. The demand pathway concerns attentional strain, through which involuntary exposure consumes concentration and regulatory effort. Task–space fit is proposed to condition both pathways, perceived boundary control to moderate exposure-related strain, and supportive communication norms to influence how spatial resources are used.

This concept paper adopts theory synthesis and model development, following the approaches discussed by Jaakkola (2020). Its analytical procedure compares findings concerning interaction, distraction, privacy and workplace control, distinguishes the outcomes assessed by different studies, and integrates their implications into a proposed explanatory model. Theory synthesis connects the job demands–resources perspective, person–environment fit, and privacy regulation; model development then specifies the relationships and boundary conditions derived from that integration. This is a non-exhaustive conceptual synthesis, not a systematic review. The propositions express theoretically reasoned expectations, and published evidence does not validate the complete framework. No primary survey, formal interview study or statistical analysis was conducted for this concept paper; consequently, it has no recruited respondent sample or response rate. The contextual report contains informal conversations with eight employees in one PR agency, including four self-described introverts and four self-described extroverts. These accounts provide contextual motivation only; they do not constitute a representative sample, a validated personality assessment, or an empirical test of the proposed model.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Physical Openness and Functional Accessibility

Physical openness and functional accessibility must be distinguished because opportunities for contact do notguarantee useful interaction. Bernstein and Turban (2018)

found that organisational transitions to open workspaces were accompanied by less face-to-face interaction and more electronic communication. Kim and de Dear (2013), examining workspace satisfaction, showed that easier interaction did not offset dissatisfaction associated with noise and privacy. Together, these studies challenge the assumption that shared space reliably delivers either effective communication or a satisfactory environment. Physical openness therefore describes limited enclosure, whereas functional accessibility is defined here as the ability to obtain relevant assistance when a task requires it. It explains why visibility alone is an inadequate indicator of coordination.

The literature also shows why environmental benefits and burdens should be considered together. The privacy–communication trade-off identified by Kim and de Dear (2013) concerns occupants' appraisal of their workspace. By comparison, Samani et al. (2017) examined personal control, environmental satisfaction, social interaction and creative outcomes in Malaysian creative multimedia industries. Their emphasis on control suggests that employees' opportunities to manage the environment deserve attention alongside its physical characteristics. Synthesising these accounts, accessibility and environmental satisfaction should not be assumed to improve simply by removing barriers. Workspace satisfaction must also remain distinct from overall job satisfaction, because the former assesses the environment and the latter evaluates the job more broadly.

Functional accessibility is treated as a potential resource because resources support goal attainment and managing work demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). However, the communication changes documented by Bernstein and Turban (2018) indicate that physical opportunity cannot substitute for evidence about actual exchanges. This paper therefore defines useful coordination through the task-relevant value of interaction: supplying needed input, resolving uncertainty or improving the timing of dependent activities. Increased contact alone does not meet that definition. In professional communication, a clarification may prevent revisions, whereas an unrelated conversation may interrupt a task without improving its outcome.

Distraction and Attentional Strain

Environmental exposure here refers to involuntary contact with speech, visual movement, unsolicited approaches, and surrounding activity. Its attentional consequences cannot be reduced to sound intensity alone. Banbury and Berry (2005) documented employees' reported concentration difficulties associated with office sounds, particularly background talking and unattended telephones. Their account identifies the disruptive character of particular sounds and cautions against assuming that continued exposure produces habituation. The task-switching mechanism discussed by Leroy (2009) adds a complementary explanation: distraction can matter because attention does not necessarily transfer completely when work changes. These accounts draw on different evidence, but together support examining both the exposure itself and the difficulty of sustaining or recovering task-directed attention.

This paper defines attentional strain as the difficulty and effort involved in sustaining or recovering task-directed attention under competing demands. It is not a clinical diagnosis or a synonym for burnout. Attention residue explains how a preceding activity can continue to occupy attention after task switching (Leroy, 2009), while the demands–resources perspective explains why work conditions requiring sustained effort may cost employees (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Integrating these perspectives, an interruption may impose both a switching difficulty and additional effort to resume work. Applied to an agency drafting task, the employee may need to reconstruct the argument or restore the context of a decision.

The relationship between distraction and outcomes requires methodological care. Banbury and Berry (2005) examined reported concentration difficulties, whereas Sander et al. (2021) assessed responses in a simulated

office environment. The latter study found adverse well-being effects without a corresponding reduction in immediate cognitive task performance. The broader comparisons reviewed by James et al. (2021) nevertheless indicate generally unfavourable productivity-related outcomes in open-plan settings. These findings need not be treated as contradictory because they assess different outcomes, conditions and periods. Their synthesis supports measuring employee experience and performance separately.

The proposed model consequently evaluates exposure in relation to the focal task. The attention difficulties associated with office sounds (Banbury & Berry, 2005) and the work-related distinctions considered in the office-concept review (Gerlitz & Hülsbeck, 2024) support this contextual treatment. Discussion may support joint problem solving but interfere with individual editing. Involuntary and task-irrelevant exposure is therefore expected to produce greater attentional strain, while an urgent intervention may justify switching tasks. Organisational practices must enable employees to identify which exchanges require immediate attention and which can be deferred, rather than treating every instance of surrounding activity as equally useful or equally disruptive.

Productivity and Job Satisfaction as Distinct Outcomes

Productivity requires a definition that recognises both the output achieved and the conditions of its production. Gerlitz and Hülsbeck (2024) distinguish individual and organisational performance considerations in their review of office concepts. Sander et al. (2021) further show why an immediate performance measure may diverge from employees' well-being responses. Building on that distinction, employee productivity is conceptualised here as timely completion of appropriate-quality work relative to the time and effort used. In agency settings, proposed indicators include completion time, avoidable rework, accuracy and the usefulness of a deliverable. A document count alone may miss the judgement and revision required for professional use. Future assessment should distinguish perceived productivity from documented performance. With agency permission, records could establish the proportion of assigned tasks completed within an agreed period, deadlines met, revision requirements and structured supervisor or client evaluations of deliverable quality. Indicators should match comparable tasks and be interpreted against workload and task complexity; client feedback alone may also reflect account relationships rather than employee productivity.

Job satisfaction concerns an employee's overall evaluative attitude towards the job, whereas workspace satisfaction concerns the physical working environment. The environmental appraisal examined by Kim and de Dear (2013) should therefore be differentiated from the broader satisfaction outcomes considered in the review by James et al. (2021). Workplace fit offers another reason to preserve this distinction: compatibility with different aspects of employment can shape employee attitudes (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). The proposed framework treats spatial experiences as one contribution to job satisfaction through coordination and strain. It does not assume that environmental satisfaction captures the employee's entire assessment of employment. In subsequent empirical work, assess overall job satisfaction with an established, validated multi-item measure of the job as a whole, separately from workspace satisfaction. Any translated or adapted measure would require checks of comprehension, reliability and construct validity in the agency population.

Separating productivity and job satisfaction allows different response patterns. The well-being and immediate performance findings of Sander et al. (2021) demonstrate that these outcome domains need not change together. The relationships between control, environmental satisfaction and creative outcomes reported by Samani et al. (2017) additionally suggest that employees' capacity to manage their surroundings matters when interpreting workplace effectiveness. Synthesising these findings, the framework allows an employee to maintain output while experiencing burdensome conditions, or to experience greater comfort without an immediate productivity increase. Productivity and satisfaction are therefore modelled as parallel outcomes whose timing and magnitude may differ.

Job Demands and Resources

The job demands–resources perspective provides the framework's organising logic. Bakker and Demerouti (2017) distinguish aspects of work that require sustained effort from resources that help employees achieve

goals, address demands or develop. Their account explains how work characteristics can operate through different processes. Bakker et al. (2023) further emphasise developments concerning person–situation interaction, multiple organisational levels and employees' proactive responses. Together, these contributions justify examining the office as part of a broader work system rather than treating layout as an isolated determinant. The present paper applies that logic to spatial accessibility and environmental exposure.

The synthesis classifies functional accessibility as a potential resource and involuntary environmental exposure as a potential demand, applying the organising logic of Bakker and Demerouti (2017). The privacy and communication difficulties identified by Kim and de Dear (2013) illustrate why the same environment can contain valued opportunities and unwanted burdens. Neither classification is absolute: access may become demanding when colleagues expect continuous availability, while relevant surrounding conversation may assist coordinated work. The framework uses task–space fit to explain these conditional effects. This extension aligns with attention to person–situation relationships in the later demands–resources account (Bakker et al., 2023), but the spatial pathways proposed here require testing.

Maintained output does not necessarily indicate the absence of a demand. The attention-residue account (Leroy, 2009) and the separation between well-being effects and immediate performance observed by Sander et al. (2021) jointly provide a rationale for examining the effort involved in completing work. For illustration, an employee may repeatedly resume a demanding drafting task after queries from several accounts and still meet the deadline through additional effort. Conversely, relevant assistance may reduce uncertainty before extensive rework occurs. The distinction between helpful coordination and burdensome access matters because removing boundaries does not reliably produce the intended interaction patterns (Bernstein & Turban, 2018).

Person–Environment Fit and Task–Space Fit

Person–environment fit concerns compatibility between individuals and aspects of their working environment. Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) demonstrate the relevance of different forms of workplace fit to employee attitudes and other work-related outcomes. Their meta-analysis does not directly validate the task–space construct developed in this paper. It provides a theoretical basis for considering compatibility rather than assuming a uniform environmental effect. The proposed task–space fit is defined more specifically as the correspondence between the demands of the current task and the spatial and communication conditions available to perform it.

Task–space fit is treated as temporally variable because an employee's spatial requirements can change between drafting, consulting colleagues and conducting a confidential call. The fit perspective supplies a basis for examining compatibility (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), while the review of office concepts highlights the relevance of work and individual differences to environmental outcomes (Gerlitz & Hülsbeck, 2024). Taken together, these accounts support examining the person undertaking a particular activity rather than assigning employees permanently to collaborative or solitary categories. Fit is proposed at the task or episode level, with broader workspace appraisals understood as potentially accumulating across activities.

High task–space fit means available conditions match the access, concentration, and confidentiality required by the activity. This proposed definition combines the compatibility logic of Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) with the privacy and communication tensions examined by Kim and de Dear (2013). Low fit can arise through either excessive exposure or insufficient access. A quiet room may support writing while hindering ongoing joint decision-making if collaborators cannot participate; an open desk may facilitate clarification but may be unsuitable for sensitive conversations. This implies that fit should be evaluated by matching task requirements, rather than inferred from quietness or a preference for one office category.

The proposed moderating role of task–space fit extends workplace compatibility theory (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) to the two spatial pathways. The office-concept review supplies further grounds for treating task demands as relevant to environmental effects (Gerlitz & Hülsbeck, 2024). Accessibility is expected to generate more useful coordination when reciprocal input is required, whereas involuntary exposure is

expected to produce greater strain when concentration or privacy is essential. Empirical assessment should measure task requirements separately from productivity and satisfaction.

Privacy Regulation and Perceived Boundary Control

Privacy regulation focuses on employees' ability to manage access to themselves and their activities. Altman (1975) conceptualises privacy through dynamic regulation of social contact rather than permanent separation. Applied to agency work, this perspective supports examining how employees vary their availability across tasks. The framework defines perceived boundary control as employees' belief that they can regulate interruptions, visibility and access to confidential work without an unreasonable interpersonal or organisational penalty. The construct includes practical opportunity and perceived permission. A room that exists but cannot legitimately be used provides limited control.

Samani et al. (2017) examined personal control, distraction and creative outcomes among employees in Malaysian creative multimedia industries. Their results linked personal control to environmental satisfaction, social interaction, and creative outcomes, while environmental distraction did not significantly affect creative outcomes in their model. This evidence is particularly useful because it discourages a deterministic account of distraction and highlights the relevance of control in a Malaysian creative-work setting. It does not establish equivalent relationships in public relations agencies. The present framework consequently treats boundary control as a proposed condition requiring separate examination in agency work.

Boundary control is proposed to have physical, temporal and communicative forms. Dynamic regulation of contact provides the theoretical basis (Altman, 1975), and the relationships reported for personal control in creative work provide relevant empirical support (Samani et al., 2017). The implementation-sensitive account of Morrison and Smollan (2020) suggests why usable options should also be considered within the organisation of the workplace. The resulting agency applications include access to suitable rooms, protected concentration periods and accepted signals of availability. These options are not interchangeable: headphones may signal attention needs while providing little protection for confidential speech. The synthesis therefore treats control as the capacity to regulate a relevant boundary, rather than the mere presence of flexible furniture or an alternative seat.

The moderating argument connects privacy regulation to the capacity to manage demands. Altman (1975) supplies the regulation perspective, while Samani et al. (2017) identify the relevance of personal control to environmental satisfaction and creative outcomes. Together, they justify asking whether employees who can regulate exposure experience less attentional strain under comparable conditions. Sander et al. (2021) also caution against treating control as a complete remedy for exposure. Poor acoustics or overwhelming workload may exceed available regulatory options.

Communication Norms and Organisational Conditions

Supportive communication norms are defined here as shared expectations that legitimate appropriate availability, respectful interruption and equitable use of workspace options. Edmondson (1999) links psychological safety to team learning, providing a basis for considering whether employees can raise difficulties without undue interpersonal risk. Morrison and Smollan (2020) focus on implementation and assessing employee needs in an open-plan environment. Synthesising these accounts, examine the availability of a spatial option and the legitimacy of using it together. The proposed norm construct remains narrower than psychological safety: it concerns the expectations governing interruption and boundary use.

Evidence varies across designs and settings, so synthesis is more informative than a universal verdict. The unfavourable associations identified in the review by James et al. (2021) contrast with the positive experiences described in the longitudinal law-firm case of Morrison and Smollan (2020). The latter does not overturn the review; it indicates that particular implementation conditions may warrant closer examination. Likewise, the physiological-stress review of Schuller et al. (2025) identifies methodological inconsistency and limited generalisability. Together, these sources support examining office use conditions and distinguishing employee reports, performance indicators, and physiological measures.

The conceptual gap is consequently one of integration and contextual explanation. Kim and de Dear (2013) document communication and privacy tensions, Bernstein and Turban (2018) describe changes in interaction, and Samani et al. (2017) highlight the relevance of control to creative work. The demands–resources and fit perspectives supply complementary explanations of effort and compatibility (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). This contribution connects these accounts through the alternating communication requirements of public relations work. It distinguishes usable assistance from physical openness and proposes that communication norms influence both coordination and boundary control.

DISCUSSION

The Proposed Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 integrates the demand and resource distinction (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), the compatibility perspective (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) and the regulation of social contact (Altman, 1975). Physical openness is treated as a contextual characteristic within which employees experience functional accessibility and involuntary environmental exposure. The model proposes that accessibility contributes to outcomes through useful coordination, while exposure contributes through attentional strain. Task–space fit conditions both relationships, and perceived boundary control moderates the exposure-to-strain relationship. Supportive communication norms are proposed to strengthen the conversion of accessibility into coordination and to support boundary control.

The framework allows benefits and burdens to coexist, consistent with the privacy–communication trade-off examined by Kim and de Dear (2013). It also accommodates the separation between immediate performance and well-being responses documented by Sander et al. (2021). An employee may receive useful advice and experience distracting activity during the same working period. The model proposes that coordination can affect a particular deliverable promptly, while repeated strain may contribute to a broader appraisal of the job over time. Separate measures of accessibility, coordination, exposure and strain are therefore needed to establish whether a favourable overall workspace judgement conceals difficulty or whether dissatisfaction coexists with useful exchanges.

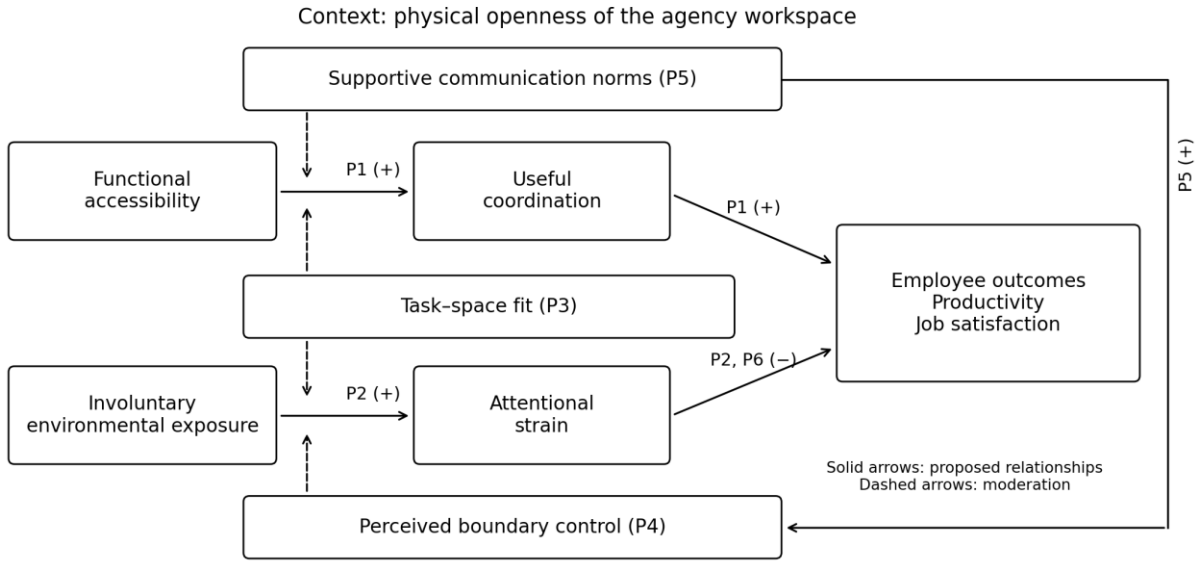


Figure 1 Proposed pathways linking spatial conditions to employee outcomes

Propositions Concerning Accessibility and Exposure

Proposition 1: Functional accessibility is positively associated with employee productivity and job satisfaction through useful coordination, with the indirect relationships expected to be stronger when the focal task requires substantial interdependence.

The literature provides conditional support for the coordination pathway. Personal control was related to social interaction and creative outcomes in the setting examined by Samani et al. (2017), and the longitudinal case of Morrison and Smollan (2020) illustrates that positive communication experiences can occur under particular implementation conditions. However, Bernstein and Turban (2018) show why physical opportunity alone cannot establish useful exchange. Synthesising these accounts with the resource perspective (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), Proposition 1 concerns assistance that resolves uncertainty or aligns dependent work, rather than contact frequency. The expected effects should be weaker for independent tasks. The proposed link to job satisfaction concerns receiving effective support; it does not assume that sociability itself improves employees' overall evaluation of their employment.

Proposition 2: Involuntary environmental exposure is negatively associated with employee productivity and job satisfaction through attentional strain, with the indirect relationships expected to be stronger for tasks requiring sustained concentration or confidentiality.

Proposition 2 brings together evidence on concentration difficulty (Banbury & Berry, 2005), task switching (Leroy, 2009) and the distinct well-being responses to office noise (Sander et al., 2021). These sources support examining attentional processes alongside output, while the review of James et al. (2021) provides a broader basis for considering productivity and satisfaction outcomes. The proposed mechanism is that repeated redirection of attention increases resumption difficulty or the effort needed to maintain quality. Confidentiality requirements may additionally prompt relocation or postponement of an activity. The proposition allows productivity costs to appear through time, effort, or rework, and treats recurrent strain as one potential contributor to job dissatisfaction rather than its sole cause.

Propositions Concerning Fit and Boundary Control

Proposition 3: Greater task–space fit strengthens the positive relationship between functional accessibility and useful coordination and weakens the positive relationship between involuntary environmental exposure and attentional strain.

Proposition 3 extends the compatibility perspective of Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) through the work-related distinctions Gerlitz and Hülsbeck (2024) discuss. The privacy-communication trade-off in Kim and de Dear (2013) further shows why environmental requirements should include both access and protection from unwanted contact. The synthesis predicts that accessibility will produce more useful coordination when the available setting accommodates interdependent work, whereas exposure will be less straining when concentration requirements can be met. Fit can also be poor when collaboration facilities are insufficient. The proposition consequently concerns correspondence with the activity rather than the superiority of separation or openness as a general design principle.

Proposition 4: Perceived boundary control weakens the positive relationship between involuntary environmental exposure and attentional strain, including when the physical degree of openness remains unchanged.

Proposition 4 is grounded in the regulation of contact (Altman, 1975) and the relevance of personal control to environmental experience and creative outcomes (Samani et al., 2017). Integrating these sources with the demands–resources perspective (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), the paper predicts that greater boundary control will weaken the exposure-to-strain relationship within an existing layout. An employee able to reserve a suitable space or defer a routine query should have more capacity to contain the disruption. Its strength may differ across forms of control: confidentiality can require enclosure, whereas interruption

control may be exercised through scheduling. Acoustic conditions and workload must therefore be considered when evaluating the predicted relationship.

Proposition 5: Supportive communication norms strengthen the positive relationship between functional accessibility and useful coordination and are positively associated with employees' perceived boundary control.

Proposition 5 combines the team-learning implications of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) with evidence that open-plan implementation should account for employees' needs (Morrison & Smollan, 2020). It also responds to the finding that removing boundaries does not automatically increase face-to-face interaction (Bernstein & Turban, 2018). The proposed synthesis assigns norms two roles: clarifying when assistance is appropriate and legitimating decisions to protect attention. The relevant condition is enacted shared practice, rather than a written rule alone. Managerial behaviour may determine whether employees regard the rule as credible.

Proposition 6: Attentional strain can reduce job satisfaction even when immediate productivity is maintained; consequently, stable short-term output does not necessarily indicate a sustainable fit between employees' tasks and their workspace.

Proposition 6 develops the distinction between immediate performance and well-being responses shown by Sander et al. (2021), interpreted through the sustained-effort logic of Bakker and Demerouti (2017). It predicts that output may be maintained while employees experience conditions that contribute to lower job satisfaction. The methodological cautions identified by Schuller et al. (2025) support using carefully differentiated outcomes and avoiding a stress claim based on one indicator. Repeated assessment of task outputs, strain and satisfaction could test whether the anticipated divergence occurs and whether alternative factors explain it. Table 1 summarises the constructs and proposed indicator domains for examining these relationships.

Table 1 Conceptual constructs and illustrative indicators

Construct	Definition	Illustrative indicators	Role in the model
Functional accessibility	Timely access to relevant assistance	Access to expertise; ease of clarification	Resource antecedent
Environmental exposure	Involuntary contact with surrounding activity	Irrelevant speech; unsolicited approaches	Demand antecedent
Useful coordination	Task-relevant value of exchanges	Uncertainty resolved; revisions prevented	Resource mediator
Attentional strain	Difficulty and effort in sustaining attention	Resumption difficulty; concentration effort	Demand mediator
Task–space fit	Correspondence between task needs and conditions	Required concentration, access and privacy	Moderator of both pathways
Boundary control	Ability to regulate access without undue penalty	Quiet-space access; permission to defer queries	Moderator of exposure pathway
Communication norms	Shared expectations supporting appropriate access	Agreed urgency; respected focus signals	Moderator and antecedent of control
Productivity	Timely quality output relative to effort	Completion time; accuracy; avoidable rework	Employee outcome
Job satisfaction	Overall evaluative attitude towards the job	Separate global job-satisfaction measure	Employee outcome

Note. Indicators are proposed domains for instrument development; they are not validated scale items. Task–space fit concerns task requirements, while job satisfaction concerns the job as a whole.

Theoretical Contribution and Competing Explanations

The theoretical contribution is integrating accessibility, exposure, and regulation within a task-sensitive account of agency work. The unexpected interaction patterns in Bernstein and Turban (2018) justify distinguishing the possibility of contact from coordination realised through it. The outcome distinctions in Sander et al. (2021) justify separating completed work from the experience of producing it. The control relationships in Samani et al. (2017) and the fit perspective of Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) provide complementary warrants for examining regulatory capacity and compatibility. The proposed framework specifies how access to colleagues and managing unwanted demands may jointly affect productivity and job satisfaction as task requirements change.

Competing explanations must be retained because work demands, resources and fit extend beyond office layout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Heavy workload may generate both frequent interruptions and dissatisfaction. A supportive supervisor may improve coordination independently of spatial conditions, while senior employees may receive different seats, discretion and assignments. Agency size and client demands may also affect exposure and performance. The variation in research methods and outcomes noted by Schuller et al. (2025) reinforces the need to distinguish association from the complete explanatory mechanism. A correlation between noise and dissatisfaction would support only part of the argument unless researchers also examined the proposed mediators and alternatives.

Reciprocal relationships should also be considered in light of the later demands–resources account, which attends to proactive responses and person–situation processes (Bakker et al., 2023). Employees may adapt their behaviour to a difficult environment, and team expectations may change in response to recurring disruption. Dissatisfied employees may also appraise conditions differently, so temporal order cannot be assumed from a cross-sectional association. The longitudinal approach illustrated by Morrison and Smollan (2020) supplies a useful methodological example for examining experience over time, without resolving every causal issue. The diagram shows the proposed direction for testing. Repeated assessments and accounts of specific work episodes would help determine whether changes in environmental experience precede changes in outcomes or accompany other workplace developments.

Implications for Public Relations Agency Management

The framework's managerial implications follow from Gerlitz and Hülsbeck's (2024) work-related distinctions and Morrison and Smollan's (2020) implementation-sensitive account. Agencies should assess recurring needs for rapid exchange, focused work, and protected conversation before deciding how to allocate workspace resources. Employees across roles and seniority levels should be involved because available choices and assigned tasks may differ. The objective is to determine whether suitable conditions can be obtained when required. Physical design should therefore be assessed by its support for professional activities, rather than by the general expectation that one arrangement will accommodate every employee throughout the day.

Quiet and confidential spaces are proposed as complementary resources within a communication-oriented office. This recommendation integrates the privacy dissatisfaction identified by Kim and de Dear (2013), Altman's (1975) regulation perspective, and the relevance of personal control in Samani et al. (2017). A space's usefulness depends on suitability, availability and legitimate access. A reservable room or protected concentration period may offer options within an existing arrangement, but their effectiveness would require evaluation. Morrison and Smollan's (2020) implementation account supports assessing employees' needs rather than assuming attractive alternatives are adequate. Headphones should not be equated with confidential enclosure, and a room continuously occupied by other activities provides limited control over the relevant task. Activity-based zones could distinguish quiet drafting areas, enclosed confidential-call rooms and collaboration spaces. Noise management could include locating extended conversations and online meetings away from focused workstations and assessing whether acoustic treatments are needed. Review access and booking arrangements with employees so the options remain usable across roles and seniority levels.

Communication protocols are proposed to translate environmental options into workable practice. Bernstein and Turban (2018) caution against assuming that access generates the desired interactions, while Edmondson (1999) provides a basis for considering whether employees can raise difficulties and help improve work processes. Applied here, teams could agree how to signal concentrated work, where extended discussions should occur and which requests require immediate attention. Managerial behaviour should make the arrangements credible, especially when routine queries could be deferred. The intended principle is task-appropriate responsiveness, allowing urgent coordination without making continuous availability a default obligation.

Evaluation should consider quality, timeliness and employees' experience of producing work. The separation between well-being responses and immediate task performance in Sander et al. (2021) supports collecting more than output indicators, while Gerlitz and Hülsbeck's (2024) office-performance review supports distinguishing different performance dimensions. Agencies could examine whether stable delivery reflects greater effort or deferred, concentrated work; those possibilities would need evidence rather than managerial assumption. Feedback should distinguish sound, availability expectations and access to suitable spaces. Edmondson's (1999) team-learning perspective provides a rationale for enabling employees to voice problems. Where client responsiveness and equitable access permit, agencies could pilot flexible hours or hybrid schedules that reserve suitable periods for focused work and coordinate shared attendance for interdependent activities. These are proposals for evaluation, not practices demonstrated to improve outcomes in this paper; changes should be monitored for workload displacement and unequal access.

A Research Agenda for Empirical Examination

A qualitative phase is proposed to examine how agency employees interpret useful coordination, interruptions and legitimate boundary use. This approach responds to the implementation differences illustrated by Morrison and Smollan (2020) and the control relationships identified in creative work by Samani et al. (2017). Purposive recruitment across multiple agencies should seek variation in account servicing, writing and management responsibilities, seniority, organisational tenure and working arrangements. Individual interviews could elicit specific episodes involving headphones, earlier or flexible hours, relocation to quieter areas and decisions to defer an interruption. Focus groups could examine shared norms, but separate groups by supervisory status may reduce pressure to agree with managers. Recruitment and stopping decisions should be documented according to the qualitative aim and the adequacy of the accounts, rather than treating the eight informal conversations in the contextual report as a completed interview dataset.

Repeated assessment would address the distinction between immediate performance and experienced strain raised by Sander et al. (2021) and the methodological inconsistencies noted by Schuller et al. (2025). Employees could record the focal activity, useful exchanges, involuntary exposure, control and strain during selected work episodes. Agency records of task completion and deadlines, together with structured quality assessments, could supplement perceived productivity, while overall job satisfaction would be assessed over a broader interval. Environmental assessment should record background sound levels at specified times, perceived speech disturbance, visual distractions, privacy and actual availability of quiet rooms and collaboration spaces. Acoustic readings should accompany rather than replace employee accounts, because equal sound levels may involve different speech content and task demands. Participation should be separate from employment evaluation, and recording should avoid confidential client content.

Measures would require validation in the intended population. The distinction between interaction behaviour and spatial opportunity in Bernstein and Turban (2018) supports separating accessibility from coordination. The environmental appraisal in Kim and de Dear (2013) and the personal-control model of Samani et al. (2017) provide relevant domains for distinguishing exposure, environmental experience and regulation. Functional accessibility should address timely assistance, while useful coordination should concern actual exchange value. Assess fit against task requirements without defining it through desired outcomes. Table 1 therefore offers indicator domains rather than a validated scale. Subsequent instrument development would need to determine whether the constructs remain distinct and meaningful in public relations agencies. Use

established measures when their constructs match the research question, and identify the original instrument source in a future empirical protocol. Newly developed items require piloting and psychometric evaluation; they should not be described as validated merely because they reflect published conceptual domains. Assess measurement equivalence before comparing satisfaction scores across workplace groups.

A multi-agency comparative design could include shared open-plan workstations, partitioned shared workstations and enclosed private offices. Document these physical categories through enclosure, occupancy and access to alternative spaces. Hybrid schedules describe work location and attendance patterns rather than a fourth physical layout, and should be recorded separately. For a subsequent survey, agencies could be recruited across layout types and eligible employees invited through a documented recruitment procedure. Sample size should be justified prospectively based on the intended model, expected effects, number of predictors, and clustering. Researchers should report agency size, functions, location, layout and scheduling arrangements, alongside respondent role, seniority, workload and tenure. Invitation, eligibility and completion counts should accompany a response rate with a stated denominator, together with an assessment of possible non-response bias.

Regression models should adjust for job role, seniority, workload and organisational tenure, while accounting for employees nested within agencies and repeated episodes within employees (Bakker et al., 2023). Multi-group analysis could examine whether proposed relationships differ across physical layouts, provided groups are adequately represented and measures are comparable. Such models would estimate adjusted associations, not establish that layout causes productivity or satisfaction. Longitudinal assessment before and after changes in room access, layout or schedules could improve temporal interpretation, following the implementation-sensitive approach illustrated by Morrison and Smollan (2020). However, concurrent staffing, client and workload changes would still require attention.

CONCLUSION

Open-plan public relations agencies require an explanation that connects access to colleagues with the protection of professional attention. The literature identifies communication and privacy tensions (Kim & de Dear, 2013; Bernstein & Turban, 2018), distinguishes performance from well-being responses (Sander et al., 2021), and highlights the relevance of environmental control (Samani et al., 2017). Synthesising these insights, this paper proposes two pathways: useful coordination arising from functional accessibility, and attentional strain arising from involuntary exposure. Task–space fit, boundary control and supportive communication norms are proposed as conditions shaping those pathways. The framework thus conceptualises physical openness through the employee's activity and capacity for regulation rather than treating layout alone as a sufficient explanation.

The six propositions translate the synthesis into testable relationships. Their practical implications combine the task-related concerns discussed by Gerlitz and Hülsbeck (2024) with the implementation-sensitive evidence of Morrison and Smollan (2020). Agencies could assess changing task requirements, equitable access to suitable spaces and credible expectations about interruption. Employee experience should be considered alongside performance because stable output does not establish that working conditions are sustainable. The literature informs these proposals but does not constitute interventions validated by the present paper.

The framework is limited by its conceptual design and purposive, non-exhaustive literature synthesis. Neither the synthesis nor the contextual material from one agency establishes causality, estimates the prevalence of open-plan arrangements or validates a measurement instrument. Hence, this concept paper does not document systematic recruitment, survey response rates, standardised outcome scales, or comparative performance records. Its informal accounts cannot establish a population profile or support generalisation across Malaysian PR agencies. Findings from other occupational settings may not transfer directly to agency work and self-reported environmental appraisals may reflect job attitudes as well as spatial conditions. Future multi-agency and longitudinal research should examine task episodes, organisational differences and competing explanations through complementary qualitative and quantitative

methods. The framework provides a basis for testing how collaboration, concentration, and boundary regulation relate to professional communication work, though its proposed pathways remain untested.

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