

Industry in Depth

Let's Get Together: Developing Collaborative Areas

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ollaborative work is on the rise, and it isn't just a fad. Organizations are finding plenty of sound reasons to encourage collaboration and provide for it in the way they design and equip their facilities. As work continues to change from primarily repetitive tasks to a mixture of creative work, assimilation of knowledge to create new knowledge and complex problem-solving, a broad range of different spaces are required that accommodate specific collaborative activities and support change hour-by-

hour or day-by-day. Collaborative spaces must be both flexible and evolutionary in order to optimize space and support these evolving work patterns.

Younger workers especially are comfortable with collaborative work, perhaps in part because teaching methods in schools have evolved during the past 15 to 20 years to much more collaborative experiences. These new workers consider collaborative activities normal, expect them in the workplace and are highly flexible in finding that collaborative space.

shared vision.”¹ Projects often move faster toward successful ends when people can share knowledge and experience, get instant feedback, build trust and camaraderie, and profit from diverse ideas and points of view. Collaboration also is a great way to pass tacit knowledge in the workplace from one generation to the next. This knowledge-sharing will become increasingly important as the baby-boomer generation quickly approaches retirement. Much of the knowledge “assets” will walk out the door with valuable know-how that will be lost unless it is shared.

So if we build it, will they come? We have observed that many space planners have been disappointed with the poor utilization of collaborative spaces. There are many reasons for this lack of utilization, including lack of management support for collaborative areas, the mismatching of open spaces and those looking for the space, not providing the right type of space for the right collaborative activities or simply not performing the type of work that requires collaboration. As a result,

Cultural shifts and technology advancements like wireless Internet that allow people to work virtually anywhere, including their neighborhood coffee shop, also have enabled this shift and have been incorporated into today's workspace.

So why are organizations encouraging employees to collaborate? It wasn't long ago that huddling around the water cooler was viewed as simple socializing or part of sharing unsanctioned information.

Today, by contrast, organizations are designing the workplace to encourage this kind of behavior, having realized that social interactions support behaviors, attitudes and goals that lead to trust, collaboration and, in turn, innovation.

As Judith Heerwagen, social psychologist, points out, “Innovation arises from those social interactions in which concepts are shared and merged with others to create a collective understanding and a

too many areas that are provided for collaborative work are empty much of the time.

There is no right approach for every situation. Each organization, every project and every design initiative can be unique. However, there are some general things we know. Based on our observations and discussions with various organizations, we've developed the following tips for planning and outfitting collaborative workspaces that go beyond conference rooms.

UNDERSTAND THE WORK PROCESS

As stated above, many spaces dedicated to collaborative work go unused because the spaces often do not reflect the type of work being done or the type and amount of collaboration employees need to accomplish the activity. So before assigning space, establishing standards or choosing furniture, find out what kind of work and, more specifically, what kind of collaborative work is going on (or should be). This is the first step to determining appropriate space.

Three general types of work — creative, problem-solving and knowledge transfer — can require somewhat different types of collaborative spaces.

Highly creative teams likely rely on artifacts or visual materials and can benefit from the “over-the-life-of-the-project” display of these items. The proximity of these

spaces to the team’s individual work areas also can be slightly less important than for other types of workers, since the creative process can sometimes benefit from removing oneself from distractions of the phone or the work on one’s desk. On the other hand, teams working 24/7 on brand-new technologies might be most comfortable in a space that merges individual areas with collaborative areas and supports a high degree of chaos and instant reconfiguration.

Problem-solving, process-oriented teams may have relatively less need for visual display, but proximity may be more critical, as these teams will grab another team member to quickly tackle a problem as soon as it arises. In the case of software engineers working out the bugs on an upgrade to an existing application, they may need to sit side-by-side in a team member’s workstation so they can both see the monitor to check a line of code.

Knowledge transfer activities may be well-supported by more traditional meeting spaces — conference rooms or training areas — where the ability to easily use technology is the most critical factor.

Watch and discuss with employees how they work. However, be careful in having workers define the solution without observing the actual collaborative activities taking place. Also important to note is the length of time people spend collaborating,

the number of people involved and the formality or spontaneity of the collaboration.

When you know what type of work the team does, and how much and what kind of collaboration is taking place, the picture of how much space to devote to collaborative areas vs. individual areas and what kind of spaces are needed becomes much clearer.

A QUICK TOUR OF COLLABORATIVE SPACES

Though not an exhaustive list of collaborative spaces, the examples below demonstrate how different collaborative spaces can support various situations.

Commons areas. The community area, cafeteria or “commons” area for many companies can be the central gathering place of the organization and often can promote informal and spontaneous communications. In addition, there always seems to be an open spot in these areas to meet, so employees don’t have to worry about reserving a space in advance, thus saving time and preserving the spontaneity of many interactions and addressing the frequent complaint of difficulty in finding or reserving an available room.

The openness of these areas could cause someone to think that privacy is a major issue. In reality, it often is not an issue because workers have “aural” privacy. They can sense who is around them and

moderate discussion topics and voice levels accordingly.

The areas can be furnished with everything from lounge furniture to cafeteria-style tables and chairs, depending on workers' needs. The Starbucks-like feeling provided by some of these areas is appealing for many workers. Obviously, the presence of food can determine the need for tables, while the need to write or type on a laptop can require the need for tables, tablet arms or power/voice/data capabilities.

Project rooms. Dedicated project or "war" rooms often are ideal for teams engaged in semi-permanent missions or long-term projects. They give the team not only a place to gather, but also a place to store artifacts and records, chart progress, communicate messages and display information. A project room benefits groups working under deadlines and those whose work is highly interdependent. It also is popular with groups engaged in new-product development and prototyping. New members learn faster by modeling behavior, including picking up the tribal knowledge they gain from interactions with teammates. In addition, questions can be addressed immediately, rather than waiting on formal meetings or processes.

Project rooms should provide for visual display of information and artifacts, timelines, to-do lists,

shared goals, inspiration, progress and knowledge. There should be mobile marker boards and tack boards for hanging and writing that are so important in the creative process. They also tend to have images, colors and mottos that stimulate creativity and *esprit de corps*.

Because they are semi-permanent and dedicated, people don't have to waste time setting up and taking down or bother with scheduling. These spaces always are available for impromptu gatherings for the team, and confidential information can be safely stored if these rooms can be locked so that people outside the team can't steal secrets or walk off with furniture, tools or artifacts. Walls can be semi-opaque to provide visual privacy of the group work, especially when clients or vendors are frequenting the area.

Often, it is beneficial to locate the project room, unlike many other collaborative spaces, in an out-of-the-way, off-to-the-side area. It may be a true enclosed room, or walled off using screens or partitions.

To furnish a project room, use furniture that is moveable, but not necessarily mobile. People should be able to rearrange the furniture easily, but not walk off with it. It should be equipped with the display tools and technology needed, as well as a system for storing and securing the group's "stuff." Think in terms of whiteboards, tack

boards, lounge furniture, and multiple tables and chairs that can be moved apart or pushed together.

The need for power, data, audio/visual and telecom can vary from team to team. If there is a big central table, and the only power and data connections are in the walls, you can experience wire management issues.

Pods/bullpens. In their 2001 study, "Offices that Work,"² Frank Becker and William Sims from Cornell University discuss the many benefits of the "pod" concept — commonly defined as individual workstations or offices that surround a group or commons area. The group area frequently has small meeting tables and storage furnishings. These are especially popular for work that requires both heads-down work and frequent spontaneous interaction, as well as a sense of trust between team members, such as the work of software engineers or research scientists.

An advantage of this pod concept is that people can go easily and quickly from their individual areas to the central collaborative area. Interestingly, "good" distractions happen when people can overhear discussions and quickly help with problems others are having. This saves time because people are using collective knowledge and are not recreating an existing solution. Another timesaver is that occupants

don't need to schedule the space, because the team owns it. Finally, pods help foster a sense of community and camaraderie.

Because individual workstations and offices are open to the commons area and serve as the perimeter, one trade-off of pods is they don't accommodate a lot of vertical display, like a war room can, unless portable visual display tools are provided.

As with the project room, the central area will need power outlets and polycoms to be centrally located. And you'll want to choose furniture that is relatively mobile, so the group can configure according to its needs and adapt to change.

People in pods tend to develop social rules and a sense of community. An example might be that it's OK for someone inside the group to interrupt, but not an outsider. People want to be free from visual and vocal distractions from outside. However, within the group, it can be welcomed, or at least much easier to tolerate. So walls around the perimeter serve a privacy function as well as a delineation of the team's turf. It's not unusual for teams working in pods to put up their own boundaries using partitions or file cabinets to form a sense of privacy.

Individual workstations/offices.

Individual workstations are important collaborative spaces, even though they are designed as a home base for individual workers. The individual workstation often does double duty — as a place for both individual and one-on-one collaborative work — and often are the primary place for one-on-one collaboration (or for small groups in the case of many private offices).

Workstations can invite collaboration with guest seating; with work surfaces shaped to provide a place for guests to put a notebook, coffee cup and other accessories; or through the nesting of a table and a pullout, cushion-topped mobile pedestal under the work surface to quickly turn the workstation into a one-on-one collaborative area. The area may need to be configured so that displays, such as the computer screen, can be seen by all parties. In addition, lower panel heights (42 to 54 inches) or glass stackers provide line-of-sight — an important catalyst to collaborative encounters. Having tables that quickly can be turned from an individual work surface to a collaborative meeting table also can support one-on-one meetings.

Informal meeting areas. Informal meeting areas can have the most variability of usage. As we know, their placement and the degree to which people feel free to use them can have a dramatic impact on the frequency of use. Place these drop-in areas at strategic locations — near the watering hole, the top of the stairs, entrances to team areas, etc. — that invite people to have spontaneous collaboration. It often is helpful, however, not to have people feel they are on display.

Informal meeting areas can range from stools with standing-height tables to lounge furniture to very casual beanbags. Considerations for these areas include the presence of work surfaces for writing, mobility of the furniture and the availability of mobile screens for visual privacy.

A PARTING THOUGHT

Collaborative environments already are a large part of our spatial vocabulary and are becoming even more so, making it increasingly important to “get it right” — matching the space and its attributes to the work and activities it needs to support. Different kinds of work mean different requirements for privacy, ownership, spontaneity, technology and the “persistence” of visual display. Form follows function yet again.

(1) Heerwagen, J. (May 2004), *Creativity at Work Newsletter*, www.creativityatwork.com/Newsletters/May04Heerwagen.html.

(2) Becker, F. and Sims, W. (2001), *Offices That Work*, Cornell University, International Workplace Studies Program.

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Let's Get Together

Adapted as an exercise by Heather Jakusz, IIDA Senior Director of Education and Professional Development

exercise:

- 1) What part of your office space could benefit from a modification toward a collaborative style of design? Why?
- 2) What can managers do to encourage collaboration that will benefit the organization?
- 3) What are some problems that can occur with an open, collaborative space?
- 4) What technical challenges can arise from the different types of collaborative spaces?
- 5) How would having a collaborative space change or improve your workplace?

contact information:

Name _____ Firm _____
Mailing Address _____
E-mail Address _____ Phone _____

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