Building Collaboration into Workspace Design

By Jeff Avallon & Amanda Schneider

An office is an external expression of a company's ethos and personality. Employees, customers and prospects draw significant — even subliminal — associations with organizations based on the place they call home. Collaboration, creativity and innovation are key components of the modern workplace and an increasingly important recruitment tool for successful companies to attract top-tier talent.

Given the nature and speed of business today, how can the workplace contribute positively to employee performance and retention? There is no blueprint for creating innovative work environments, but there are physical and environmental characteristics that can be emulated and adapted by every creative business.

What is important to note is a subtle but significant shift away from personal space to community and shared areas. This ratio used to be 80:20, but an added focus on collaborative spaces has moved that ratio closer, anecdotally, to 60:40. Community and shared spaces are viewed as the work horses of innovation — and are thus competitive differentiators — so creating a highly collaborative work environment should be at the forefront of most companies' minds.

The pervasiveness of mobile communications devices allows employees to work from anywhere in the world at any time. Businesses now view the workplace not just as a place for work, but as a place where their top talent go to work together. Many associate the term "modern workplace" with grand visions of an organization's entire workforce leveraging video conferencing, mobile tools and high-tech gadgetry to get the job done. This Jetsons-like dream will never be fully realized because it lacks a vital element of successful creative companies: in-person communication.

Despite advancements in technology that empower employees to conduct work

from anywhere at any time, person-to-person interactions have proven to be the best way to continually drive innovation within a company. Businesses think of their offices as mother ships where employees go to recharge and gain inspiration from colleagues. While certain employees can be more productive at home, long-term telecommuting can negatively impact overall employee creativity.

Understand the collaborative needs of the business

The first step in planning office layouts that better enable collaboration is to fully understand the type of collaborative work that is undertaken within the company in question. For instance, advertising and technology companies need to be able to swarm together and ideate quickly, so they may place emphasis on mobile furniture, while law offices or insurance companies require more solitary spaces for focus work and formal, traditional conference rooms for meetings. "Heads-down" spaces and conference/meeting rooms were once the focal points for facility managers; however modern offices now have an entire toolbox of options for types of group spaces. Meetings can now take place in cafés, brainstorm areas or even open reception areas.

Variety is the spice of innovation life

Would you consider ordering the same meal from the same restaurant every time you went out for dinner? Many organizations essentially ask their employees to do this by only offering meeting areas in the form of standard, static conference rooms. Close your eyes and picture a conference room that regularly hosts brainstorming sessions. What does it look like? Most people likely imagine a room containing a long table that seats six to 10 people with a phone in the middle, somewhat uncomfortable wheeled chairs, a TV screen, a writable surface at the head of the room and a few potted plants. It's a fairly banal environment that has a formal, heavy feel and can dampen creative thinking.

Rather than having a single ideation space, companies need to create many more dynamic collaboration areas throughout the entire office. These do necessarily need to be expansive; rather, they simply need to be locations where people feel comfortable getting together and working, like cafés, lounges or even roof decks. Create disparate environments so employees can match each location's function to the process on which they are currently

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working. Leave room and create spaces for impromptu collaborations as well. Creative organizations find that great ideas flow more easily over a cup of coffee than in a traditional, structured environment. Graphic facilitation is a key factor in these collaboration spaces, as 'Eureka!' moments can strike at any time. Leave dry-erase surfaces and markers in the kitchen, TVs in communal spaces and warm, natural light and boldly colored walls in windowless rooms. All of these elements appeal to different personality types and can serve as catalysts to productive collaboration.

Another key trend that innovative companies are embracing is the notion of making the workspace multi-task. File cabinets with erasable surfaces and movable walls that allow employees to change the dimensions of an idea room allow businesses to extend the usefulness of their current assets and do more with less space. The creation of unexpected spaces can spur spontaneous innovation.

Make personal interactions as frictionless as possible

Instantaneous collaboration is a critical component of any innovative office design. Big ideas flit into people's brains quickly and must be acted upon immediately, so it is important to enable collaboration on short notice. An overreliance on conference room booking systems or other cumbersome processes can cut brilliance off at the knees, so it is important to make it simple for people to interact with each other by removing barriers to teamwork.

Proximity and mobility are key to enabling instantaneous collaboration. Collaboration areas need to be pervasive throughout the entire workplace and adjacent to personal workspaces. Movable furniture is helpful for planning this type of group work as it helps employees align each room or space for their exact specifications quickly. Static, immovable objects like whiteboards are counterintuitive to borderless collaboration.

Items like mobile dry erase surfaces and high tables, however, create inviting collaborative spaces ideal for reviewing drawings or text. Experiment with different types of furniture and collaboration tools to find out what works best for employees.

Multi-functional spaces suited to various types of meetings create value for the workplace by making it enticing for workers to use. It's always depressing to see an aesthetically gorgeous room go unused because it simply does not fit into people's normal workflows. Avoid these beautiful, deserted spaces by designing areas around people's movement to create natural communication lines and "go-to" ideation hideaways.

Town square concept

Many noteworthy workplace designs have a central area where employees gather for meals, major announcements from executives or just to hang out. Community spaces are critical for establishing a positive, creative

board games can give employees a chance to blow off steam and create lasting, productive relationships with their colleagues.

Avoiding the "How do I use this?" conversation

After imbuing a workplace with innovative traits, the worst thing a facility manager can do is allow the spaces to go unused. Giving employees a quick facility tour can help by identifying and demonstrating all of the co-working spaces and tools that are at employees' disposal, especially in a new office space or layout. Workers who are not used to collaborative tools may be intimidated, so it is important that companies remove those doubts to make the best use of corporate funds. HR must also be incorporated into this demonstration because it is important to set rules and boundaries for the workplace to ensure everyone has equal opportunity to leverage the collaboration spaces.

Despite numerous advances in technology, personal collaboration is — and always will be — the one true source of competitive differentiation. Highly collaborative work environments are inviting to new talent and help retain established business leaders. Empowering the workforce with collaboration solutions that suit their workflow is a challenging endeavor but one that pays for itself tenfold if executed correctly. **FMJ**

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environment for the entire company. They set the tone for the rest of the office and the heart of the company and can also serve as the epicenter of innovation. Communal refreshments, snacks and great views can serve as natural enticements for employees to conduct ideation sessions within these spaces.

There are two unconventional methods that can enhance a company's central communal space: serendipitous collaboration and community crowdsourcing.

Serendipitous collaboration seems oxymoronic because it violates the very definition of the word 'serendipity;' however, many smart organizations are weighing the value of this trait when their offices are in the blueprint stage. Smart, talented people come to the office each day, but companies often only tap into the minds of a small fraction of the larger group. Executives who are looking to break through talent silos should take measures to ensure employees mingle and collaborate frequently, even unintentionally.

Former Apple CEO Steve Jobs designed his company's Cupertino, Calif., USA headquarters to have one staircase within the entire building to necessitate that co-workers from every department rub shoulders with and engage one another. This encouraged interdepartmental discussion, sharing of perspectives and the gain of insights, all between a few flights of stairs. Personal interactions drive innovation, so consider

enhancing unconventional collaboration areas — i.e. printer stations or stairways — with dry erase surfaces or other idea capture tools to enable this type of co-working.

Community crowdsourcing runs under the same serendipitous collaboration umbrella but requires different facility management tactics. The idea is to offer the option for departments or even individuals to pose challenges or questions within a communal area. Like the Steve Jobs model, this strategy provides access to a wide range of skills and perspectives that could potentially be used to solve an issue that has plagued a project team. For instance, Reebok designers put their drawings on a common area wall for others to critique and troubleshoot problems anonymously. Sales teams could highlight "big fish" in the hopes that one of their colleagues had contacts within that organization. Tapping into the collective wisdom of a company is no longer a daunting task and is instead a chance for workers to help colleagues in need.

All work and no play makes companies dull

Play is an important part of everyday work life in a corporate office. No one wants to walk into Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall" video where people walk in, sit down, remain quiet and then leave. Workplaces need to be vibrant places that welcome energy and personal interactions. Foosball tables, Xbox consoles and even