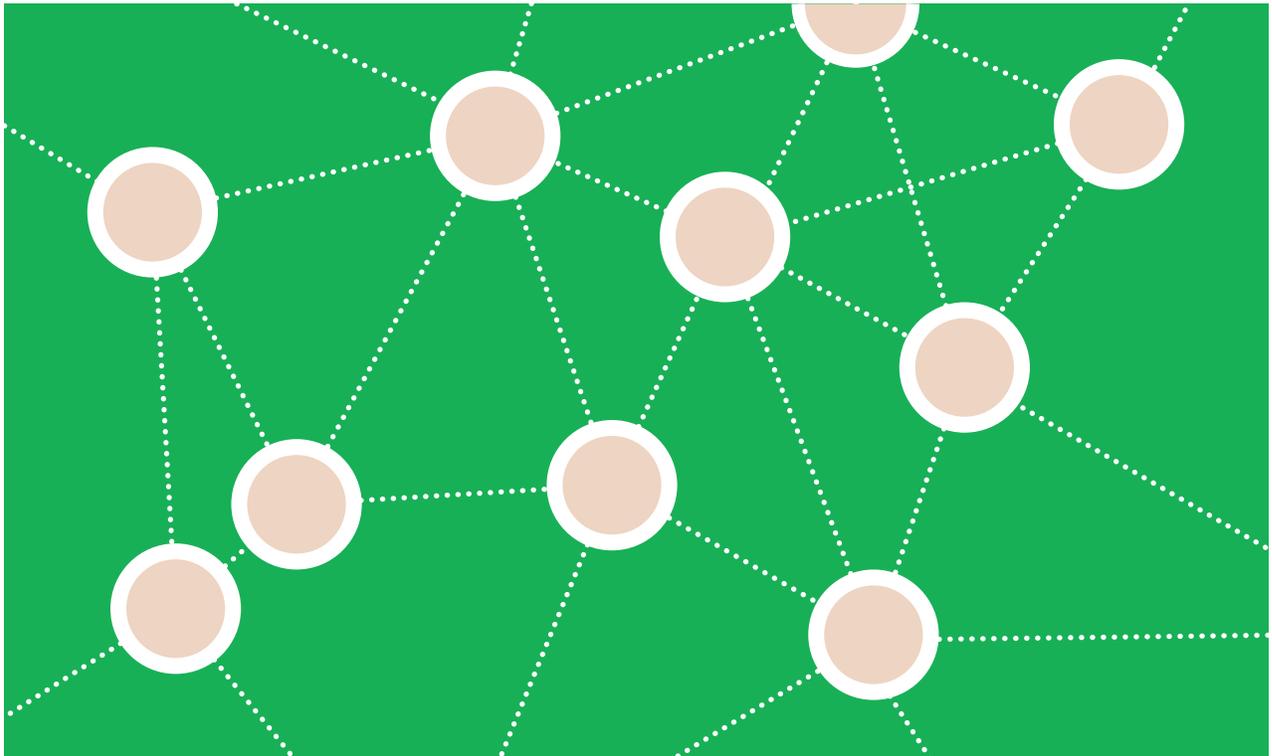




What It Takes to Collaborate



Key Insights

- **Research shows a strong positive correlation between collaboration and innovation.**
- **On average, collaborative events are under 30 minutes, consist of two or three people, and involve few tools; 70 percent of collaboration happens at the workstation.**
- **To stimulate collaboration, increase collaborative space but also provide a variety of settings so people can choose the space most appropriate to the task.**

People work together all the time, yet it's difficult to *make* collaboration happen. To better understand collaboration at work, Herman Miller conducted research on four continents, and learned that offering a variety of settings, providing vertical space for display, and improving wayfinding can all help people collaborate. The findings influenced our thinking when identifying the 10 office activities we call the Modes of Work.

Collaboration is a work style effective for handling evolving business conditions and the speed of change. It's also effective for managing the *interplay* of these factors, which is the real challenge of doing business today. As former IBM CEO Samuel Palmisano wrote, "...events, threats and opportunities aren't just coming at us faster or with less predictability; they are converging and influencing each other to create entirely unique situations. These first-of-their kind developments require unprecedented degrees of creativity."¹

There's a strong correlation between collaboration and corporate success. An international study that Google commissioned with the Future Foundation found an 81 percent positive correlation between collaboration and innovation.

Google cultivates that creativity through an approach they call Innovation Time Off. Engineers are encouraged to spend 20 percent of their time developing their own ideas, which often requires recruiting and collaborating with colleagues. At one time, half of newly launched products, including Gmail, Google News, and AdSense, originated in those collaborations.²

Not all companies are like Google—nor should they be—but their process illustrates what many studies show: There's a strong correlation between collaboration and corporate success. An international study that Google commissioned with the Future Foundation found an 81 percent positive correlation between collaboration and innovation.³

Collaboration provides a competitive edge, and for that reason, companies are figuring out how to foster and support collaboration in a way that works for their culture.

The most successful companies take a holistic approach to collaboration, understanding that there are many factors that influence collaboration, including management methods, tools and technology, and places—all of which also have an impact on employee productivity and satisfaction.

To learn more about the role of physical space in collaboration, Herman Miller conducted research at 15 companies (which had identified themselves as highly collaborative) in the U.S., U.K., India, and Australia. Time was spent at each site observing collaborations as they happened, and keeping detailed logs of those collaborations. In all, over 700 hours of research were conducted and 2,900 collaborations were observed. Then researchers dissected the collaboration process, looking for disconnects between activities and the design of the facility. This paper is an overview of what Herman Miller and others have learned about collaboration, how facilities can better support it, and other factors that influence collaboration.

Research Insights

In spite of technologies like FaceTime and WebEx, which allow people in remote locations to see each other and share documents as they talk, people still value face-to-face communication. Heightened interaction and interconnectivity, better clarity, and an increase in efficiency are some of the reasons they still like to go to the office. Even individuals on virtual teams find that getting to know team members in person paves the way to a better virtual working experience. Carsten Sorensen, a senior lecturer in IT and innovation at the London School of Economics, told *Director* magazine, "Some of the groundbreaking research within my field has shown that people who know each other quite well and who stay in touch don't feel any different [using collaborative tools] than if they are in the same room."⁴

Behavior: People Seek the Simple, Familiar, and Functional

In the traditional sense, collaboration implies organization: Meetings get scheduled, people are invited, and rooms are reserved. But our research shows that collaboration is primarily spontaneous—and sometimes even a little chaotic. It's often unplanned and undefined. On average, collaborative events are short (34 percent last fewer than 15 minutes and 60 percent are finished in under 30 minutes), consist of only two or three people, and use few tools. Also, we've found that 70 percent of collaboration happens at the desk. People seek out meeting spaces when they need more privacy or different tools or when they are concerned that the meeting will take long enough that it will constitute a real disruption to colleagues around them.

In short, when people want to collaborate, they seek out the simplest, most convenient solution. If their workstation has everything they need, they'll use it. If it's not big enough or they need a certain kind of technology, they'll go to the nearest meeting space that has it—and where they know the technology will aid them in their pursuit. They'll use conference rooms they don't like only as a last resort. Also, larger groups tend to be more structured and formal in their collaboration, meeting in enclosed spaces for longer periods of time and using more tools.

Across the continents included in our research (all of which were more culturally similar than different), we saw that the ways in which collaboration happens are universal, just as the ways in which work happens are universal. Similar jobs at different companies and in different countries are very similar in their work processes. For example, a project manager in Australia uses the same technology, uses comparable sheets of paper, has the same kind and number of meetings, and interacts with the same types of people as would a project manager in the U.S.

Technology: Tools Determine Use of Space

Technology and other collaborative tools available in a space dictate what the room will be used for and drive how people interact while in the room. At one company that occupied multiple floors of a building, we saw people using WebEx to attend meetings even when they were all present, just to save time. And at many companies we saw people using flat screens as a collaborative tool, when they are available, rather than just for presentations.

Paper—perhaps the most fundamental collaborative tool—is used in 65 percent of meetings, but 3 of the 15 companies in our research are reducing paper consumption through strategic, top-down initiatives, including training programs, dedicating teams to paper reduction, and installing multiple monitors to make it easier to compare documents on screen, rather than having to print them. We also saw that the approach to paper use varies widely even within a company; one floor can be almost paperless while another department, located on another floor, is heavily dependent on paper.

Design: Enable Spontaneous Interaction

The offices of the companies that participated in the research show a trend toward more open and flexible office environments, especially in Australia and the U.K. Some companies are adding atriums to the middle of their buildings and lining the walkways in the area with amenities like coffee bars and bank machines. The intent is to pull people away from the elevator and get them out in the open, where spontaneous interactions might blossom into fortuitous encounters.

Another observation we made was that while community areas are easy to create, getting people to actually use the areas for collaboration is more difficult. For people to see community areas as truly useful, they need to be conveniently located and equipped with the right tools. Furthermore, people must believe it's okay to actually use the spaces. They make this determination by watching others. Do their colleagues use community spaces? When and how? What about their manager? What about members of the C-suite?

Implications for Design of Office Environments

Work is constantly evolving. The increasingly global marketplace, the rise in complexity of problems, the decrease in time to market, and other factors all point to an increased need for collaboration. To better support collaboration the workplace should evolve in the following ways:

Decrease Individual Space; Increase Collaborative Space

When good collaborative spaces are available and convenient, individual workstations are used less. Herman Miller's research shows that workstations are not occupied 60 percent of the time, across industries, and private offices are unoccupied 77 percent of the time.⁵ Knowing that, some companies, especially in the U.K., are reducing the amount of floor space dedicated to assigned workstations and increasing collaborative space. One way companies are using space more effectively is by creating office layouts with unassigned workstations within a department or project area.

Provide Vertical Space for Display

Environments can also support collaboration by providing more vertical display space for people to tack up schedules, sketches, mind maps, lists, and other work-related artifacts so they can easily share and refer to them. This type of space has decreased as office layouts have gotten smaller and walls have become shorter.

Although information can be stored on computers, people still desire physical artifacts of work. We saw people improvising to create their own vertical space by tacking things onto Gatorboard or foam core, for example, and carrying the boards around with them.

Make Wayfinding Easier

The larger the facility or campus, the more of an issue wayfinding becomes. One of the participating companies in our research has more than 12 buildings on one campus. In the absence of good wayfinding, people fall back on the traditional (but not very effective) "Does anyone know where Mary Johnson in Building Four sits?" Collaboration becomes more difficult when people can't find one another.

Create Variety through Landscape Planning

Many businesses are thinking about offices in the same way that urban planners think about cities—as "highly image-able" places with unique qualities that stimulate the senses and encourage exploration, attention, and engagement. Urban designer Kevin Lynch defined these qualities as networks of paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks.⁶ Just as vibrant cities have multiple types of spaces (shops, restaurants, libraries, and parks) for various activities, so, too, should offices offer a variety of settings (outlined in the "Design Response" section) conducive to carrying out the various Modes of Work that we identified in other research.⁷

Living Office provides people with a variety of spaces that are optimized to support work and interaction.

Herman Miller's Design Response

The findings of this research help us understand the characteristics of a collaborative event and make it clear that providing a variety of settings from which people can choose is important to stimulating collaboration. Our response to the insights gained not just from this research but also other research projects is Living Office, a holistic approach that updates our management, tools, and places to drive greater connectivity, creativity, productivity, and ultimately prosperity for both individuals and their organizations.

Living Office provides people with a variety of spaces that are optimized to support work and interaction. We call those spaces settings. Each of the following 10 settings is distinct in its purpose, scale, and sociability. Each may be executed in a variety of ways to enable purpose, express character, or enhance the activities of work.

- Haven: A small shelter where focused work can be done without distraction—or alternatively, a place to unwind.
- Hive: A grouping of workstations where numerous people can harmoniously engage in individual and collaborative work.
- Jump Space: Highly approachable work points that facilitate work for a distinct and discrete period of time between other activities.
- Cove: A compact space within proximity to individual work points or common areas that enables people to assemble and engage with each other for a short period of time.
- Clubhouse: A working neighborhood that generally belongs to a team assigned to a specific, long-term project.
- Workshop: The ideal setting for people to work together to generate new ideas and drive their work forward.
- Meeting Space: A space designed to support information sharing—whether it’s a single speaker at the head of the room, or a group of peers conversing among themselves.
- Landing: An open perching spot adjacent to Meeting Spaces or Forums.
- Forum: An architecturally enclosed space designed to support the presentation and discussion of content and enabled by a clearly defined point of focus.
- Plaza: The vibrant and dynamic heart of the landscape, where people can intuitively take the pulse of the organization.

Although collaboration can happen anywhere, it’s not something organizations can easily make happen. Collaboration is dependent on culture: What kind of behavior is allowed and rewarded inside the organization? It’s dependent on the layout and design of the facility: Is there a place close by for work that requires concentration? And it’s dependent on technology: Are spaces equipped with the tools needed to get the work done?

Brian Green, senior researcher at Herman Miller and the person who led the research on collaboration, likens fostering collaborative behavior to the process of mixing music on a soundboard. “Sometimes, the organization is culturally supportive of collaboration but space is an obstacle, and there aren’t enough group spaces to meet the demand,” says Green. “Or maybe the space is ideal for collaboration but it never gets used. In that case, maybe the corporate culture needs some adjusting. The mixing of the factors matters far more than any individual factor.”

Insight

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