EVIDENCE SPACE

The benefits of collaborative spaces in office environments

Many organisations today recognise that group work is central to success; however many often struggle to offer effective collaborative spaces within the workspace [1]. Places for staff to congregate in a more social setting and not to be disturbed directly by the working environment are vitally important. They help to drive a cross-pollination of ideas, employee engagement and foster a sense of community, which can serve to strengthen a company's culture. Sadly, these spaces are sometimes lost in a drive to increase density, which usually generates short term cost savings; however this can be counter-productive to the organisation's overall aims [2].

This article describes how spaces can be created for collaboration and interaction between employees both in terms of the physical indoor environment and the corporate culture, and the benefits this can bring to employees and their organisations.

Trends in workplace collaboration

Organisations have had years of experience in building conference rooms and other formal meeting spaces. These spaces are designed to facilitate large group work processes, efficient exchanges of information, and decision making. However, two key elements of collaboration have fundamentally changed in recent years, both from the perspective of the employees, and their employers [1]:

- Firstly, employees increasingly desire social connection and engagement as part of their collaborative experience [1]
- Secondly, organisations need both operational excellence and innovation to succeed. Operational excellence is related to process efficiencies such as speed of group decision making. Innovation is nurtured through informal, social and creative interactions [1]

This combination of shifting employee expectations of group work interactions and the evolving needs of organisations is driving the charge towards a greater variety of collaborative workspaces [1]. Transforming larger spaces into different, sometimes smaller types of collaboration settings could prove a good strategy for planners seeking to maximise the performance of an organisation [1].

Spaces designed for collaboration

The nature of collaboration is making a broad shift towards small, unplanned informal meetings and away from lengthy formal interactions having many participants. Today, the spaces built to support group work are also starting to reflect this trend—in particular the social component of work. Spaces once thought of as having a purely social function, such as cafés and lounges, are being understood as legitimate places to work - while retaining the social aspect of interactions [1].

In order to best create collaborative spaces, the design should take into account the proximity to other spaces, be visually connected and should consider the patterns of movement within the workplace. Most importantly the design should embrace flexibility to encourage the different activities needed to promote team building [3]. When beginning the process of creating collaborative spaces, the designer needs to consider the different interactions desired, such as spontaneous conversation, relaxed informal communication, collaborative teams areas and semi-private conversation areas. All these interactions reinforce the cohesiveness of a group generating positive synergy and teamwork [3].

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The space has to be the right size and conveniently located, open and readily accessible to employees. The search for far-flung meeting spaces can waste time, and discourage their use. Meeting spaces that are too large can make small groups feel uncomfortable and discourage their usage. To support informal interactions in small groups, meeting spaces should also offer a relaxed sensibility – the 'casual feel' is one of the more important characteristics of successful collaborative spaces [1].

Bringing people together is only half of the solution of collaborative spaces. The business must support the employees and the spaces through the use of resources and corporate culture [3]. The problem with some overtly social spaces within a work context, is that they do not feel or look like places where legitimate work is conducted. Thus, employees may avoid using these spaces for fear of looking like they are not working. In these spaces, casual social interactions must be protected by offering a 'seriousness' of the look and feel that projects a place where work gets done [1]. The design of these sorts of spaces therefore needs to balance both the casual feel and a seriousness to meet the objectives.

Creating the space

Collaborative spaces must offer auditory privacy for people to feel comfortable creating and sharing content or having frank discussions [1]. The same is true of creating acoustic comfort in and around busy open plan environments to enable people to concentrate and not disturb others whilst collaborating with colleagues. To improve acoustic comfort in the workplace acoustical engineers and consultants traditionally use a method called "the A, B, C's" [4]. This convenient acronym describes the three factors that need to

be controlled to achieve good speech privacy i.e., Absorption of sound waves (such as by using a high performance acoustic ceiling tiles), Blocking (such as by using high performance sound reduction partitions, walls, and windows, etc.) and Covering (such as adding a source of low-level background sound to counter the office noise).

Gypsum-based plasterboards can enhance the interior aesthetic, including flexible boards for creating attractive curved walls and ceilings and drywall solutions with a choice of smooth or textured finish to complement the interior design [5]. While straight walls deliver crisp, clean lines and are easy to work with, curved walls offer something rather different. They may not be as common, but walls that curve and bend automatically bring a sense of flow and energy to a room [6]. This could be ideal for spaces where informal, social and creative interactions are desired.

Enabling people interaction

Spaces for collaboration need features that allow employees to display a wide range of work materials [1]. Shared content plays a fundamental role in collaborative work environments as it fosters the creation of a shared understanding, supports the coordination of activities and provides a shared memory for the group [7]. The space may also need to accommodate a wide range of activities and therefore needs to have flexibility in the design, furniture layout and include a range of tools (such as IT connections, interactive surfaces, etc). The same space could be used for a highly interactive session in the morning, followed by a completely different purpose immediately afterwards with possibly a very different set of performance requirements. The space therefore needs to be able to flex and adapt to meet the user's needs to be successful.

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To facilitate interaction in the space along with the flexibility to accommodate different types of activity, some of the elements to consider are:

- Shelves or tables on which reference or other written materials or work artefacts can be displayed. These items may trigger an idea when viewed by others [1]

- Casual lounge seating and tables to promote a range of postures and groupings, reflecting the informal nature of preferred exchanges [1]

- A large flat screen to display information during a work session [1]

- A "toolbox" with coloured pens, scissors, tape, etc used in creativity and brainstorming exercises [1]

- Wall-sized blackboards, whiteboards, or tackable surfaces on which to leave work problems, display ideas, and share project information [1].

- Magnetic surfaces are a good solution for displaying content on walls in collaborative spaces. A magnetic wall can help a group organise thoughts, conjure up mood boards or showcase plans. Papers can be mounted on the wall and moved around quickly and easily.

Conclusion

The combination of shifting employee expectations of group work interactions and the evolving needs of organisations is driving the need for better collaborative workspaces - benefiting employee engagement, operational excellence and the organisations innovation effort. The 'look and feel' of these spaces must balance both the need for a casual feel and workplace seriousness to meet these objectives. The space must also offer flexibility to suit the different types of interaction required by the occupants. The designer must also consider the acoustic performance to deliver auditory privacy, and the interior of the room needs careful planning in terms of both design and the contents to facilitate the desired speedy, informal, social and creative interactions.

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References

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