Creativity is increasingly seen as a critical skill for continued success, but is the blanket application of a programme to make you more creative really the answer?

There was a time when “creative” was reserved for the most distinguished group of right-brain professionals - writers, musicians, artists, animators, and designers etc., who alongside craftsmen and makers were revered for their individuality and imagination. There was a time when “creative” was reserved for who alongside craftsmen and makers were revered for their skill for continued success in developing economies, is backed by the blanket application of a programme to make you more creative really the answer? But herein lies the risk, as an important workplace “thinking / creative thinking” culture that trusts employees to seek different spaces?

In February 2014, Google purchased a little known but highly creative tech business called Nest Labs. Nest Labs make internet enabled thermostats. What stood Nest Labs apart was that while other domestic thermostat manufacturers concentrated on incorporating unconscious novelties, Nest Labs focused on creating a device that would learn how a family used their home. They argued that the complexity and unpredictability of modern family life made it nearly impossible to program a thermostat with a regular schedule. Equipped with sensors that detect whether people are in the house, the Nest Labs device automatically adjusts the temperature to save energy when no-one is home. In a few days, it learns the habits of the household and takes care of the temperature settings itself. This is an example of a business looking at its market and applying creativity and innovation to product development and dramatically elevating the expectation applied now to the whole sector. And attracting a $3.6bn sale price to Google in so doing. Fifty-three percent of our 100,000+ Leesman Index respondents employees cite “thinking / creative thinking” as an important workplace activity for them in their role and forty-three percent “collaborating on creative work.” So it certainly appears that creativity has permeated the knowledge economy workplaces we have measured.

Tech futurist Daniel Burrus suggests that creativity is a function of knowledge, curiosity, imagination, and evaluation. He argues that the greater the curiosity, the more ideas, patterns, and combinations you can achieve, directly correlates to creating new and innovative products and services. Perhaps not a coincidence then that our first analysis of the Leesman Index database by independent statisticians found that those selecting “collaborating on creative work,” had a significant statistical probability of selecting “variety of different types of workplace” as a key workplace feature – an indication of a serious desire to seek different spaces?

But herein lies the risk, because some associated with workplace design believes that they can help facilitate higher creative energies in their client’s organisation purely buy designing designated space for creative innovation. Think tanks, float rooms, innovation pods, knowledge zones etc. now proliferate architectural plans. The result? Groups of employees discuss to those rooms to be creative, management consultants sent on courses on the art of doodling and accountants being trained in the impact of a timely white board marker flow diagram or mind map. In 21st century creativity battery farming. Anyone who believes this approach can foster creativity and innovation is catastrophically misguided. Here, creative culture surely trumps strategy. Santa Clara University’s Professor David Caldwell, describes this as the invisible stuff that glues organisations together: things like purpose, values, approach that are the hardest to codify, difficult to evaluate, and even harder to measure and manage. But our own work has now codified the infrastructure of collaboration and creativity. Leesman’s Dr Peggie Rothe explores these findings in detail to pages four and five, looking at how work activities statistically cluster and how the infrastructure items that support each can be mapped. Organisations can now use this infrastructure map to build a workplace landscape, which is supportive of creativity and collaboration. And to understand that variety is imperative. So developing a culture that trusts employees to be curious and imaginative in the spaces they seek and how they use or configure them, is important. The value of teaching creativity to left brainer remains unmanoeuvred, and as a right brainer I remain unapologetically biased and sceptical. But whether your left or right hemisphere dominates, all organisations need to see workplace as a critical component in the infrastructure of organisational performance. Understanding then why the workplace can support employees in the role or strategy they are employed to undertake, be that creative and intuitive, or organised and systematic, is critical to delivering an operationally effective knowledge economy environment.

Lenna and Tomas Lid Falkman
What scares us about collaborating virtually with people? Lena and Tomas Lid Falkman discuss the advantages of working apart.

Allison Tsao
Why is there such a disconnect between what we know and the slided way we continue to work? Allison Tsao explores.

**This issue:** Collaboration: Cultural alignment, power of design, mapping infrastructure and dealing with distance
Design for collaboration

Insight | Joseph White

Everyone agrees it’s a good thing, collaboration at work. Studies show strong correlations between collaborative work styles and employee engagement and between collaborative organisational cultures and corporate success.

But there’s surprisingly little research to draw on when it comes to understanding and designing workplace systems that support and encourage collaborative behaviors.

From recent studies designed to fill that void, Herman Miller has gleaned essential insights into the nature of group work in offices today and the ways in which current work environments get in the way of successful collaboration.

Outdated workplaces

Most organisations struggle to make collaboration happen in workplaces designed to accommodate two broad categories of work — individual and group — with two generic types of spaces — workstations and conference rooms.

We must focus on creating systems of purposeful variety, making use of the entire office landscape to support fluid interaction and smooth transitions between different modes of work.

A new approach

To design for the true nature of collaborative work, we must focus on creating systems of purposeful variety, making use of the entire office landscape to support fluid interaction and smooth transitions between different modes of work. We call this “Living Office” — a conceptual framework to help organisations and their design partners make sense of and plan for the complexities of the modern work experience.

Living Office identifies and provides a custom-tailored network of settings for the full range of work activities — most of them involving collaboration — that people perform in the office today. Each setting is distinct in its purpose, scale, and sociability, aligning surroundings, furnishings, and tools (both digital and analogue) to work in concert for an elevated work experience.

Joseph White | Director | Herman Miller

Joseph White is Director of Workplace Strategy, Design, and Management at Herman Miller. He is responsible for bringing the company’s point of view on workplace strategy to the tangible design of spaces and the human dynamics that bring those spaces to life.

Learn more about Living Office:

www.hermanmiller.com/solutions/living-office.html
As a steward of workplace transformation, many of our clients ask for our support to help them reinvent their culture through re-designing their workspace.

One of the first questions we ask them at the start of their journey is, “What do you aspire to in your new way of working?” and over the past 25 years, one theme continues to resound – more collaboration.

Throughout the years, the conversation has remained the same. Leaders continue to strive towards this seemingly elusive goal of achieving more collaboration, in an effort to break down silos. Organisations are realising that collaboration has become a necessity. The growing complexity of the business environment and global connectivity is demanding that we draw on the collective rather than individualistic way of working. After all, two or more minds are always better than one.

Is that an assumption, though? Well, no. Numerous studies show that diverse perspectives contribute to more innovation, which translates into more efficiency and better products and services. Beyond the tangible results, collaboration and engagement and productivity.

Most leaders know this. Why the disconnect between what we know and the siloed way we continue to work?

There is a war on collaboration – this divide that has been created between widely recognised and at a criticality to our organisational survival and the inability to fully embrace it. Articles, studies, and seminars have been extolling the virtues of collaboration for decades. Case in point – Harvard Business Review’s November 2007 issue revealed its research findings around how to build collaborative teams. It provided a great blueprint for leaders to consider.

Yet, eight years later, the same challenges on how to effectively collaborate continue to rise to the top of Executive and HR agendas, and people continue to scratch their heads over this conundrum. So let’s start fighting this war.

Start with defining the term: Merriam Webster’s dictionary defines collaboration in this way: “working with another person or group in order to achieve or do something.” More controversially, they also define collaboration in the military context – “to cooperate, usually willingly, with an enemy nation, especially with an enemy occupying one’s country.”

Enemy nation? Sounds hostile. However, my own experiences in large, complex organisations is that there is often a feeling of dread crossing enemy lines, leading us to pursue collaboration with tentative actions, in an effort to protect our own “nation.” The consequence is that consensus begins to masquerade around as collaboration.

Consensus is the reaching of a general agreement. Sounds like a worthy goal in the face of trying to cooperate with a perceived enemy, and no wonder so many organisations spend time “socialising” or “aligning” to reach agreement to move forward. True collaboration, on the other hand, is about co-creation.

Reinvent the human connection of collaboration:

Once you know what collaboration is not, then the conversation around what it can can begin. Most conversations start with what it looks like. Yet, for me, one vital ingredient continues to be missing in the research – the fundamental recognition that to collaborate effectively is to firstly establish human connections.

We need to start asking “what does great collaboration feel like?” It certainly shouldn’t feel like dread or distrust. The Harvard psychologist, Amy Cuddy, suggests that trust and competence rise to the top when first meeting someone – people fundamentally want to work with others that they feel they can rely on.

Once we know what it feels like, we are better able to distinguish what it looks like. Drawing upon people’s experiences of these feelings is a powerful guide to knowing when you’re getting it right, because when you are not, people’s behaviours will quickly change to avoid “enemy” lines, drawing us back into neutral consensus territory, unable to charge forward in the pursuit of shared outcomes.

Provide genuine choice:

It is tempting to rush to create structures to encourage collaboration. This often takes the form of new performance management processes, organisational design such as self-managing teams and perhaps even a funky innovation room complete with bean bag chairs and colourful walls.

Our experience with clients who rush to create structures that they send a message to employees that collaboration is something to be achieved, an end rather than a means, tempting employees into consensus building, or worse, over-collaboration in an effort to be rewarded.

However, being told what to do has never been the best strategy in helping people to authentically change their ways. With bean bag chairs and colourful walls. Our experience with clients who rush to create structures that they send a message to employees that collaboration is something to be achieved, an end rather than a means, tempting employees into consensus building, or worse, over-collaboration in an effort to be rewarded.

In Conclusion

Our experience suggests that there is a formula for true collaboration that starts with some fundamentals before charging across enemy lines.

True Collaboration (TC) = Feelings (F) + Choice (C) + Structures (S)

For true collaboration to exist, we must reconnect with the feelings that it elicits (and reframe our past experiences with consensus), voluntarily make the choice to collaborate as individuals, and design the right structures to support and reinforce this choice. Only then will we end the war on collaboration and make friends across enemy lines once and for all.

Allison Tsao | Veldhoen + Company

Allison has a background in HR Consulting and has been working with global clients to enable transformational change for the past 10 years. In her role at Veldhoen + Company, she helps clients define the possibilities for their future and enable a new way of working through Activity Based Working (ABW). Originally from New York, she now lives in Sydney, supporting clients in Australia and New Zealand.

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In his 2012 book “21st Century Management,” Swedish futurologist Mats Lindgren suggests that “innovative companies nurture an open, sharing and generous culture that supports playfulness and searching. They have people personally committed to innovation and a well functioning infrastructure that supports smooth and rapid innovation.” So to what extent does the hard and soft infrastructure influence organisational innovation and creativity?

Let’s first accept that changes to the physical structures alone won’t transform an introverted, individually focused organisation overnight into an extroverted, creative hotbed. But can our “301,000+ Data Report” help identify the workplace features that are the critical ingredients for fluid knowledge transfer and collaboration?

The report, with analysis across our first 100,000 employee database responses by independent statisticians, Formulate, statistically grouped (via factor analysis) our 21 standard Activities of work into distinct cluster groups. These groupings are based purely on the statistical patterns created by employees consistently selecting common activities. There were four clear groupings that emerged, three of which are reviewed in the report. The first, “collaboration / interaction,” I will examine here. This group statistically clustered five of our 21 possible choices of activities that are “important to employees in their work.”

1. Collaborating on focused work
2. Collaborating on creative work
3. Informal, unplanned meetings
4. Informal social interaction
5. Learning from others

The second group of activities consists of the more prearranged, formalised type of working together, namely:

1. Planned meetings
2. Larger group meetings or audiences
3. Video conferences
4. Hosting visitors, clients or customers

The difference between the two is really in the nature of collaboration. The latter set of activities is more structured and planned, and perhaps more about sharing information and coordinating. The first is about knowledge creation, transfer, and dissemination, and comprises the interaction that is more difficult to explicitly define and that has more diverse spatial needs.

But once the Activity groupings are defined, it is then possible to look for statistical consistency in the infrastructure items employees then go on to select as “important features in an effective workplace.” It is important to say that these are not specific infrastructure features employees have pointedly selected to support specific activities. Rather they are infrastructure items that cluster numerically around the activities that have been selected. The statisticians refer to these as “odds ratios”: the statistical likelihood or “odds” of someone selecting particular physical or service features based on their prior Activity preferences.

These “odds ratios” expose two distinctly different infrastructure shopping lists for the two different forms of “working together.” The “collaboration / interaction” group are more likely to choose as important (compared to the pre-arranged, formalised group) “accessibility of colleagues,” “small meetings rooms,” “informal work areas / breakout zones,” and “variety of different types of workspace.”

The schedule continues with “wired in-office connectivity,” “natural light,” “quiet rooms for working alone or in pairs” and “atriums and communal areas.” So statistically these are the things we need to see as the infrastructure of collaboration and interaction.

But while one organisation might increase “accessibility of colleagues” through a more open space figuration, another organisation with a highly mobile workforce might look at introducing virtual collaboration tools to achieve the same objective. So each organisation still needs to investigate and consider the localised solution for themselves. The same problems don’t necessarily require the same solutions.

Looking then at the features that are important for formal meeting activities, we find “large” and “small meeting rooms,” “desk / room booking systems,” “audio-visual equipment” and “guest / visitor network access.” All of which make sense. Though it should be noted that only “small meeting rooms” is common to both shopping lists.

Mapping the Infrastructure of collaboration

Innovation and creativity are the raw fuel of the knowledge economy and workplace designers have long since sought to help organisations by applying their own inventiveness to the issue. But have they been looking in the wrong place - are the physical building blocks that support creativity and innovation quite what we think?
Of course looking at what has statistically made it to the respective lists is interesting, but considering what did not make it onto the lists is perhaps even more telling. Are there features employers believe fuel collaboration and creativity that actually have no impact at all – like open plan workspaces? Reviewing the features lists for both collaboration and interaction, and planned meetings, there is no mention of “desk” amongst our 100,000+ respondents. Those employees seem to agree that collaboration is not done at your workstation, it’s done elsewhere.

So while “informal work areas / breakout zones” and “variety of different types of workspace” do not emerge as distinguishing features for those who have selected the formal meeting activities as important, they are important for the collaborators. As I have highlighted in past articles, this once again puts the spotlight on the importance of variety in the workplace. It all suggests that your typical open solution environment with two types of work settings – work stations and meeting rooms – might support a formal meeting culture, but that supporting collaboration and interaction requires an entirely more diverse workplace landscape. The December (2015) issue of Harvard Business Review highlighted the notion that eating together enhances group performance and the article “Team building in the cafeteria” suggested that devoting spaces, time, and resources to communal eating might be more effective than creating spaces that promote serendipitous encounters.

Interestingly enough, “Tea, coffee and other refreshment facilities” and “Restaurant / canteen” did not statistically emerge as a feature distinguishing collaborators from non-collaborators. These features are important to everyone regardless of activity profile. So perhaps having a break and enjoying a cuppa is important for resetting and preparing, giving yourself the mental space between collaborative and individual focused work? An avenue for further investigation I suspect.

Because though we have focused here on the importance of collaboration, let us not forget that most of us will still need some space and time for individual work activities. Knowledge creation is a process that consists of different phases, of which some are done together and some require time for yourself. So being successful in even the most creative, innovative and collaborative of job profiles will require some time to reflect and internalise on your own – and a high performing workplace will successfully provide space for this, alongside space for collaboration.

**The conclusion**

Clear patterns emerge, codifying the infrastructure needs of work activity groupings. So we can say statistically that collaboration is not happening at the desk, and that smaller and more informal meeting spaces are critical to support collaboration. We can also once again see the importance of ‘variety’ – the option to choose a space appropriate to that particular type of collaboration.
Q.1 How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the design of your organisation’s current workspace?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>Agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-20k</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20k-40k</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40k-60k</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60k-80k</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80k-100k</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100k-120k</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120k-140k</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>140k-160k</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q.2 Which activities do you feel are important in your work?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-20k</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20k-40k</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40k-60k</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60k-80k</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80k-100k</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100k-120k</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120k-140k</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>140k-160k</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data review

The data reported above shows highlights from the aggregated results across the 135,567 individual respondents received at 31 December 2015. These results are provided through the Leesman Index employee workplace satisfaction e-survey, which has been conducted across a range of pre and post occupancy workplace projects as shown.

The survey is based around a fixed core module in which the questions asked do not vary. This provides us with an unrivalled ability to report and benchmark consistently across that data and offer valuable insight into differences between any number of variables, including industry type, location, gender, age or length of service.

- 904 locations in 49 countries
- 74% pre-project, 15% post-project, 11% other
- 64% average response rate
- 11 minute average response time

The quarterly publication of this data is something we do since the formation of Leesman in 2010 and is a mark of our continued commitment to the distribution of the knowledge and findings we uncover from the data. Academics with an interest in the the subjects that interest us can access the data from the full database. Contact Peggie Rothe for more information.

peggie.rothe@leesmanindex.com
4.2 Which service features do you consider to be an important part of an effective workspace?

1. Tea, coffee and other refreshment facilities 87% (Neutral (0))
2. General cleanliness 82% (Neutral (0))
3. Toilets / W.C. 80% (Neutral (0))
4. Printing / copying / scanning equipment 80% (Neutral (0))
5. IT Service / Help desk 79% (Neutral (0))
6. Restaurant / canteen 79% (Neutral (0))
7. Telephone equipment 78% (Neutral (0))
8. Computing equipment, fixed (desktop) 76% (Neutral (0))
9. WiFi network connectivity in the office 75% (Neutral (0))

Q.3 Which physical features do you consider to be an important part of an effective workspace?

1. Desk 92% (Neutral (0))
2. Chair 91% (Neutral (0))
3. Temperature control 80% (Neutral (0))
4. Meeting rooms (small) 80% (Neutral (0))
5. Personal storage 77% (Neutral (0))
6. Natural light 77% (Neutral (0))
7. Noise levels 76% (Neutral (0))
8. Meeting rooms (large) 72% (Neutral (0))
9. Air quality 70% (Neutral (0))
Many of us will answer the person sitting next to you. But experience and research says that it can work to be apart; it can work very well, and as a bonus bring us some advantages. What is it that scares us about collaborating virtually with people? One reason that often comes up is the issue of trust. It seems to be harder to foster trust if we do not know and meet someone in real life. One study shows that teams that work virtually can indeed build trust, but it is built in a different way.

In a team that collaborates virtually, trust is created based on actions. Trust emerges based on how the team members deliver. If I experience that my team mate, who I might never have met, contributes wisely to pieces of work and delivers on promises in a timely manner, I start to trust this person. Trust is created based on our perceptions of people and whether we like one another. In a team that works within the same office and meets in person, it is easier to feel how our days and lives are, turning telling one another what we smell like, but we do know other very personal details. Whenever there is a break in the meeting, the web conference continues to run, so that team members can start chit-chatting as they return to their computers, replicating a real life scenario. Taking the time to get to know each other and create a social atmosphere is worthwhile when working together.

My colleague Tomas worked as a global team leader where the team consisted of members in Dallas, US; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and Stockholm, Sweden. Due to reductions in the budget, travelling was restricted and the team had to rely on telephone conferences, but the team continued its collaboration. The teams were in different time zones, so the time for the meetings changed regularly, ensuring it was not always inconvenient for the same people all the time. Another important key factor for the team to collaborate was consistency. It was important to have a scheduled meeting, even if there was nothing particularly pressing to discuss. In these instances, the meeting was shorter but time could be spent hearing what was happening in other locations within the company.

Many of the people who tried web conference meetings early in the tech evolution still carry the misconception that video and web meetings simply do not work. Before we relied on video conferencing with expensive and complicated equipment. Now that the technology is simpler, cheaper and more intuitive, we all have a potential meeting in our pockets, in the form of our smart phones, laptops or tablets.

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For our book Virtual Meetings (Virtuella Möten, 2014, Liber) we met six organisations, each radically different from one another, to see how they have worked with implementing their virtual collaboration. These organisations consisted of a governmental institution, a small non-profit organisation, the nation-wide Swedish church, a consulting agency with many local offices, an education provider and a large global tech corporation. Each and every one of these organisations all learned, adapted and evolved their own best-practice regarding distributed collaboration. The governmental institution organised conference meetings early in the tech evolution still carry the misconception that video and web meetings simply do not work. Before we relied on video conferencing with expensive and complicated equipment. Now that the technology is simpler, cheaper and more intuitive, we all have a potential meeting in our pockets, in the form of our smart phones, laptops or tablets.

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Can Big Data Analytics provide new Insights into collaborative performance?

Organisations, the world over, are looking to improved collaboration to increase innovation, boost productivity and contribute to better business results.

Would it not be of tremendous benefit if one could measure collaborative performance, thereby providing the ability to benchmark and establish improvement as a result of initiatives undertaken to improve?

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In addition to these relatively new elements in the work environment, a number of organisations are undertaking Transformations through which they are seeking to change culture, workflows, processes, environments and implement new technology tools. These are often multi-year initiatives, cost millions and are typically led by multi-stakeholder teams who are all wrestling with establishing the starting point and measuring progress toward the objectives. Improvements in IT collaboration tools are facilitating these changes to more remote work, flexible office configurations and distributed teams.

Now to measurement: each of these collaboration tools maintains an activity log; a record of who did what and when and who else was involved. These activity logs can be used as a basis with which to measure collaborative performance. Each activity can be mapped against the four components of collaboration: sharing, communicating, socialising and searching. From this, one can derive everything from a measure of “collaborative culture” down to how well a team collaborates amongst its members and how well it leverages its respective networks. This also creates a very valuable baseline against which to measure progress, good or bad, and allow organisations to take action with a high degree of confidence. Depending on availability, environmental data from building systems can be added in order to gain additional insights.

The consensus is virtually unanimous: collaboration is critical and improving collaboration is one of the primary objectives of many initiatives. Thus far it has not been measured because it has been seen as a great mystery; as being “soft and squishy”, and therefore immeasurable. Moreover, between 60 and 70 percent of those surveyed say either “nobody” or “do not know who” “owns” collaboration in their organisation. Changes in our environment and new technology, paired with analytics, are now making it possible to measure collaboration. With a clearer picture of performance, strategies to become better at collaborating can be developed with a higher degree of confidence of outcome.

Collabogence has just launched a research project to validate its model. We are in search of organisations interested in learning more about how their organisation and teams collaborate. If you are interested in participating, please get in touch.

Peter Smit  I  Founder  I  Collabogence Inc.

Peter Smit is the founder of Collabogence Inc., an organisation committed to measuring organisational collaborative performance, helping companies understand the collaborative balance of their people, processes and tools, and thus how to improve performance. He has lived in seven countries and speaks four languages. His experience includes working with Honeywell, Siemens, Motorola, Telabs and Opendtext. The common thread linking all these positions is the orchestration of cross-functional resources, scattered around the globe, so that they all work together towards a common end—collaboration.
Collaboration is a multi-dimensional activity—so one-dimensional solutions just won’t work.

Employers of one-dimensional designers are unlikely to understand the complexity of creativity or trust that there are other three-dimensional landscapes where creative collaboration can more effectively happen.

Does that mean that Swedes are more creative? I’m sure they’d like to claim so. Or is it simply reflective of flatter Scandinavian hierarchies encouraging horizontal and vertical knowledge transfer? We are actively exploring this now and our “100,000+ data report” creates an investigative starting point. The report, based on the detailed statistical analysis of our first 100,000 respondents’ data by our retained and highly creative Swedish statisticians, provides a forensic evidence trail through collaborative creative work and the infrastructure that is needed to support it.

The resultant schedule of supporting infrastructure is based purely on a factor analysis of the Physical and Service features employees who have selected “collaborating on creative work” (as an important work activity) then go on to select as important in providing an effective workplace.

Statistically, the most likely feature is “variety of different types of workspace.” Second is “guest/visitor network access.” Third, “air quality.”

Across our 135,000+ employee sample, 43% report that “collaborating on creative work” as a workplace activity important to them in their role. That average masks radically different percentages—Swedish employees average at 59% compared to 35% in the UK.

Seventh most likely is “small meeting rooms.” We believe that this is significant. Because in one-dimensional worlds, cookie-cutter desk layouts proliferate in architectural plans, check by check with banks of meetings rooms to facilitate collaboration. But what if we can prove to business leaders, designers, space planners and facility managers that it is other spaces that fuel creative collaboration? And that air quality or audio-visual equipment or noise or art or photography are as important as building rooms?

In truth, one-dimensional clients probably wouldn’t care. Because employers of one-dimensional designers are unlikely to understand the complexity of creativity or trust that there are other three-dimensional landscapes where creative collaboration can more effectively happen. Perhaps they just don’t see that once inside those rooms, the promise of fluid interaction too often falls way short of the expectation. Not because of the participants, but because the basic tools of fully enclosed collaboration spaces so rarely work in concert.

It is a near weekly occurrence for us to arrive at a client office fuelled with enthusiasm, strong coffee, a MacBook-based PowerPoint deck, to find one or multiple productivity/efficacy obstacles awaiting.

That can be squatters in the booked room who resist the glares of our host, rooms that are too small, rooms that are way too big, rooms without AV, or rooms with AV but a smart-arse black-box interface that adds no value whatsoever in what, should let’s face it, be a simple device to cable to device wired interface.

And whilst it’s rare to have to face off with all of the potential problems in one meeting, any combination of two or more and the atmosphere starts to darken. A mix of apologies, embarrassment, suspicions, frustrations, even annoyance, starts to creep in. And the clock is still ticking. We see it as valuable presentation time slipping like hour-glass sand through our fingers.

The client sees it as their time wasted. Creative collaboration is as good as dead.

Collaborate at all costs, right? It’s what every commentator and management journal wants you to be doing. And if you can do it with creativity, all the better. The result? A swathe of organisations casting their staff into one-dimensional, banal open-plan offices in the misguided view that working without walls will instantaneously spark serendipitous cross-desk interaction.

Adding to the confusion are consultants suggesting they can flood you with techniques to fuel your organisation’s collaborative creativity. Some will come from an organisational psychology background, others from an interior design background and most others from the colourful spectrum between with varying credentials. But we think almost all are missing the multi-dimensional nature of the issue. Yes, the very premise of an organisation is the creation of a formalised group who come together to achieve things collectively that would not be possible individually. So any strategy that gets them engaged with each other more makes sense. Right?

But there is not one killer meeting room design, or collaboration app, or employee creativity coaching programme, or brew of coffee that is in itself going to be the programme, or brew of coffee that makes sense. Right?

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Thankfully Leesman is not consultative. We don’t fill in time sheets. We sell an off-the-shelf Software-as-a-Service measurement tool. What if we were lawyers in our own office with a $1,000 per hour fee on our heads and an 80% weekly chargeable time utilisation target to meet. If there were three of us in the room and we all lost 15 minutes to AV irritants that’s $750 billable time blown. Wasted.

Let’s say that happens to a third of the meetings booked in that room that day. It’s not difficult to see how one client meeting room could waste $3,000 per day. $15,000 a week. $700,000 per year of billable partner time un-utilised. And what if there were 20 meeting rooms on that one-dimensional architectural plan. Do the maths. It’s mega-multiples of the fit-out cost for the whole office.

It makes some of the better meeting room collaboration technologies look extraordinarily inexpensive. Yet these technologies struggle to hold their ground on capital or IT cost-plans because they are seen as wasteful tech gimmicks.

The Barco Clickshare wireless presentation system we have in our own space would sit on a cost-plan at seven or eight times the cost of the TV screen it is connected to. So looks unpalatably expensive. But we have never lost 15-minutes at the start of any meeting for AV connectivity issues. And would unreservedly report that it proactively supports our creative and focused collaboration.

The small group of Leesman+ offices (those workplaces achieving a Leesman Lmi of 70.0 or above — see Leesman Review Issue 181) may hold a critical clue. The three Activities where they most outperform those workplaces below the Lmi 70.0 threshold: “Video Conferencing,” “Relaxing / Taking a break” and “Informal Un-planned Meetings.” And the three Physical / Service features? “Airrooms and Communal Areas,” “Informal Work Areas / Breakout Zones” and “Variety of Different type of Workspace.”

We will probe these differences in detail in the next issue of the Leesman Review and in a new publication case-studying the Leesman+ locations, but in the meantime, if creative collaboration sits on a strategic objective list for your organisation, approach the issue with a three-dimensional attitude and consider the evidence across 135,000 employees: creative collaboration is more likely to occur away from a meeting room than in it, but if it does involve a meeting room and remote colleagues, tech will matter, so invest the time and budget in making collaborative technologies work.
Meetings are where ideas are exchanged, tasks are assigned, commitments are made and brains are stormed. Aren’t they? Whether they’re face-to-face, virtual, or a combination of both, meetings are an opportunity to connect with your colleagues, discuss critical tasks and issues, determine the important next steps to get work done, and collaborate to achieve more. At their best, meetings are productive, stimulating, and worthwhile—making them powerful team motivators. At worst, however, they can be distracting, boring, and pointlessly making them big time wasters.

That’s why there’s a saying: “If you want to kill time, a meeting is the best weapon.” And when you look at the numbers, you can see how true this is. Of course every meeting is different, but they all share a common currency: time. Every meeting takes the time of every employee that comes to the meeting. So first we must accept that there’s no such thing as a one-hour meeting—unless there’s only one participant. In other words, a one-hour meeting that includes eight employees is, in effect, an eight-hour meeting. When you think of meetings in this way, it becomes easier to understand their true cost.

In addition to the time cost, there are other costs to consider: the meeting space itself, travel, supplies, and possibly food.

The Harvard Business Review did a study of one corporation and calculated that a single weekly executive committee meeting actually resulted in a total of 380,000 hours of time spent each year.

The executive meeting itself took 7,000 person-hours per year of the executives’ time. However, there were 11 separate unit heads who spent a total of 20,000 hours a year meeting up in order to prepare for the meeting. And to support the unit head meetings, 21 teams spent a total of 63,000 hours a year amalgamating the information from the preparatory meetings. The total annual time commitment was 300,000 hours.

In a recent Plantronics survey, 40% said that, on average, three to five minutes are lost at the start of meetings because of technical difficulties or connection issues. And 51% said more than six minutes are lost. In an eight-person meeting, that adds up to almost an hour of lost time.

Of course meetings are about bringing people together to communicate with each other. So there’s a social cohesion element. Get the right mix of people in a meeting, and they can share a lot of valuable information or generate innovative ideas, together. But we also need to consider that whilst some individuals bring certain strengths to a meeting, others unfortunately may also bring weaknesses. Either way, a person’s behavior can influence the agenda, and the outcome, of the proceedings, so thinking through the invitation list is equally important.

And as today’s office can no longer be defined only by its physical space, many more of these meetings become virtual.

Virtual meeting technology has quickly become an essential tool for distributed workgroups—and in many organisations, it is the primary means by which colleagues interact with each other. As a result, there are a number of considerations that will help ensure a virtual meeting environment is working effectively for its users.

Consider the number of participants and where they are located—bigger is not always better. Know who’s driving and who’s participating—the most successful meetings have clearly defined roles: a leader, presenters, and participants.

Meetings are an important part of the workplace and, crucially, demonstrate how successful companies are able to communicate with one another.

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