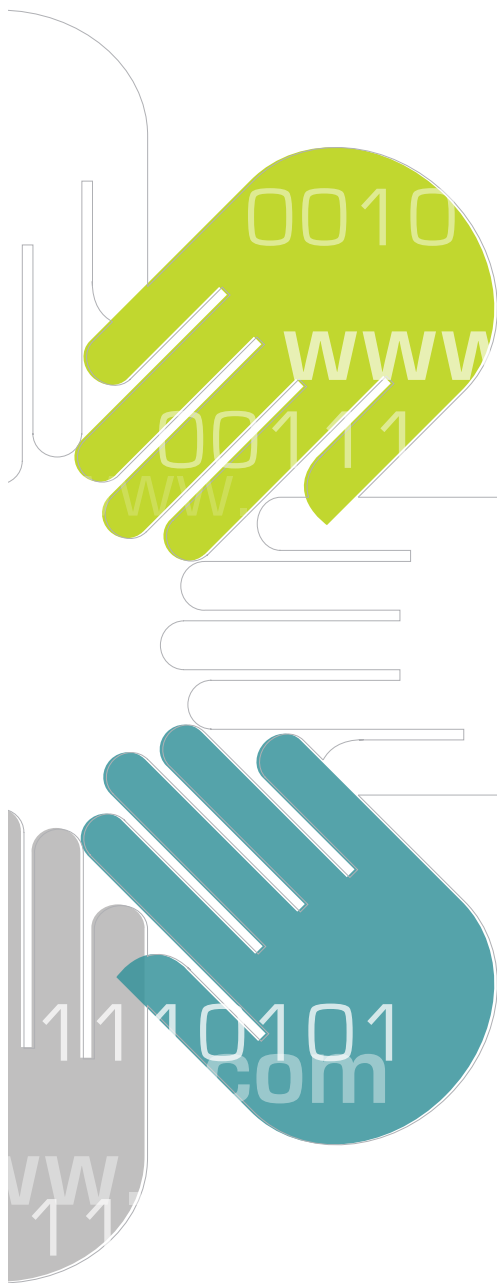




**There's no "I"  
in teamwork—**

But there's plenty  
of future



The faster business moves, the more trends seem to come and go. In recent years, knowledge workers have thrived (or survived) with MBO, TQM, learning organizations, act-like-you-own-the-company, lean this or that, and many more.

Some of these strategies have legs, but one is simply irrepresible: collaboration. It's beyond trend, really. Call it group work, teamwork, or collaboration, it's a fact of life in offices worldwide and it's not going away. It's like your favorite sweater: hardly trendy, a little worn maybe, but you wouldn't feel right without it.

Collaborative work has huge implications for the built environment and it's a topic of discussion with every client, say designers, architects, educators, and researchers. "Teamwork is increasing even in corporate cultures that are physically mired in a much older generation of workplace," says John Mudgett, project director in the Princeton, NJ office of CUH2A, the science and technology design firm.

"The workforce is all about 'we,' it's more collaborative. Nothing is ever one hundred percent your idea," says Linda O'Shea, a practicing interior designer and associate professor of the interior design program at Kean University, Union, New Jersey.

"Collaborative work is definitely increasing," says Lew Epstein, the California-based director of advanced product marketing for Steelcase who

helps companies sort through their workplace issues. "There's an increase in project work in all types of organizations around the world, and that drives an increase in spaces where teams can collaborate. What's the reason for a renewed em-

**Call it group work, teaming, collaboration, or something else, it's how we work today.**

phasis on collaborative work? Three reasons are cited most often: the speed and complexity of business today, the efficiency that results from collaboration, and tools that allow people to work together more than ever before.

**A tougher business environment requires teamwork**

Businesses operate in a faster, more complex environment today, says Epstein. "First, over the past twenty years and more so in recent years, you have this flattening of the world, as Friedman puts it in his book. It's becoming a global community. You're not competing locally anymore, by and

large. It's far more competitive than that. Customers are everywhere, so we work everywhere."

"Second, business today is increasingly complex. The problems are more diverse. You can't solve today's problems like yesterday's problems."

"Back in the day, it was more of a linear process. Things are more complicated now and the way the world works requires interaction on so many levels. As a result, collaboration is inherent in the culture these days," says Joe Rondinelli, a senior associate at Shepley Bullfinch Richardson and Abbott, Boston.

In this more complex, more competitive world, the speed at which an organization can increase productivity and innovation is the key to success. "Productivity gains make you more profitable, and innovation separates you from the pack. The best way to increase both of those is collaboration," says Epstein.

#### Collaboration is more efficient

Doesn't collaboration take more time? Not at all, says John Mudgett. "It's more efficient. Put people working on a team in the same area, where they can even overhear each other's phone calls. The guy sitting next to you may have the answer, but he doesn't know the question you have. If the phone call has no concern or interest to you, you just tune it out. But if it's the same project you're

**A collaboration space with mobile furniture at Proctor & Gamble.**  
(Photo by Christopher Barrett, courtesy CUH2A)

working on, your mind picks up on key things and you tune in. It's disruptive to you, yes, but it's constructive to the team and the project."

As an example, Mudgett points to a project his firm worked on when Proctor & Gamble combined a variety of R&D departments into one facility. "The culture was very much a closed door environment. Everyone lived in their own

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little silo. There was little interaction, little communication, and I suspect minimal teamwork. They wanted to change that."

CUH2A and P&G developed "an extremely open office with a team-based approach where everyone lived in 50 sq.

ft. workstations with low panels. Everyone would know what was going on, you could see and hear everyone else, etc. Interspersed in the environment were the elements you need to counter all that openness: small enclosed work settings, huddle rooms, small meeting rooms, etc."

Not long after the move-in, Mudgett visited the facility on a weekend for a photo shoot. "I saw a scientist sitting at his workstation and struck up a conversation."

While the scientist confessed the changes took some getting used to, he added, "But we would never go back. This works."

It's not unusual to use space to help drive culture change, but change takes time. (More on this later.)

**We work in groups more because we can**

Another driver of collaboration is technology that frees us to work practically anywhere. Meetings are no longer tied to specific locations in the built environment. Video conferencing technology has matured to the point that virtual meetings can replace the need for some





Shepley Bulfinch (Boston) designed their new offices to encourage collaboration. Their two-story high “living room” is a popular work space. Giving people the ability to move around, work in different postures, and interact informally, helps keep people more engaged in the work at hand. (Photo courtesy Shepley Bulfinch)

in-person get-togethers. This so-called tele-teamwork or tele-presence can’t replace face-to-face collaboration, but it can reduce the need for some business travel, and it definitely facilitates the collaborative process for team members separated by geography.

Other technologies, such as online file sharing, social networking sites, wikis, voice-over-internet telephony and web conferencing, facilitate collaboration with colleagues around the world or in the next workstation. “I don’t know of a major player in the tech industry that isn’t focused on further developing their collaborative suite of tools,” notes Epstein.

Technology tools drive space changes, too. For example, when flat screens replaced big CRTs, workers needed less room for their monitor and they could finally move out of the corner of the workstation. This had the added benefit of freeing up space where two people can now work side by side in a workstation. This two-person, or dyadic, work style is the most common form of collaboration. Younger workers get it right away.

They’ve grown up with connected technologies and worked frequently on teams in college, where collaboration rules. Interior design schools, for example, are required by accreditation standards to offer teamwork in their curriculums. At Kean University, “in every one of our design courses — 18 of them, a mix of studio and lecture courses — students engage in teamwork,” says O’Shea.

#### Collaboration demands more flexible space

IFMA reports that in the five years between 2002 and 2007, the amount of space devoted to conference, training, and break out areas in the workplace increased 17%. The causes, they say, are management’s desire for more collaboration and the reduction of individual workspace footprints.

Executive offices average 241 sq. ft. in size, according to IFMA, down 50 square feet from twenty years ago. Senior professionals average about 98 sq. ft. of space, although many designers

say the days of ten-by-tens are gone, replaced by eight-by-eights or even smaller spaces.

Workstations are indeed getting smaller (as discussed here: [Working in Four-Part Harmony](#)), but smaller individual work spaces may be as much the result of increased collaboration as the cause of it. Most knowledge workers are away from their desk for large chunks of the day, meeting and working in project rooms, cafes, small enclaves, etc. Since much of this collaborative work happens in small groups in small spaces, those spaces are also used for individual focused work.

### “The ‘F’ word is much bigger than four letters.”

What this means is that the collaborative workplace has fewer spaces dedicated to just one type of work, and more space that adapts to changing work processes. “Individual” workstations need to support two people teaming up to work. Group spaces must work for two to six people in different postures and with varying needs. The overarching principle is flexibility.

“The ‘F’ word is much bigger than four letters,” says Frank L. Effland, senior vice president, interiors at HKS Inc. in

Dallas, TX. “Everything must be flexible so it can multitask. The coffee bar is more than just a place to get some coffee, it’s a training space, a conference room, a happy hour room, and more.” Designers are looking for walls, panels, and furniture that easily move and reconfigure. “Everything must do multiple duty,” says Effland. “You want the client to be able to use it all day long because they have different needs for it. How quickly can it convert and morph itself to a number of different functions?”

Even adjacencies are affected by in the increase in teamwork. “Food serves as a major attraction so you tend to make that function part of the center of these zones if you’re trying to promote interaction,” says Mudgett. “You’re trying to make a collaborative space that draws people to it just to be there, and they feed off that energy with all these little conversations going on.”

Collaboration means space must be ready everywhere. “We even look to the outdoor space as an opportunity,” says Effland. “Part of the psychology in teaming is a change in the environment. You walk away from your desk and go somewhere else, whether it’s a café for larger meetings, or smaller meetings in pockets of the cafeteria.” For Radio Shack’s corporate headquarters a few years ago, HKS included a variety of work settings, including outdoor decks with tables, seating, even rocking chairs.

Team areas must be close at hand. “You don’t want people spending time trying to find space to interact,” says Rondinelli.

#### Learning to work as a team

There are many strategies designers recommend for a workplace that can flex with collaborating workers, including:

- lower panels that aid communication
- places that support unplanned collaborations, from a group of lounge pieces huddled off to the side to open team spaces with movable furniture
- small private rooms for confidential discussions and phone calls
- café spaces that attract everyone and increase those casual, often inspiring, conversations

A key part of designing collaborative spaces is involving workers in their development and testing. Yet even when they’re deeply involved in planning a new space, most knowledge workers need time and sometimes training to learn the best ways to use team spaces and processes.

### 3 key aspects of a collaborative work-space: social, spatial, informational

“You can give teams the right space, right tools, technology, and furniture, but if the people don’t know how to interact as a team, all the best tools won’t help them become masters,” notes Epstein.

“There are different things that will make a team effective: social skills, a team leader, even though we talk about an egalitarian process you still need a conductor, a team captain, a champion. Some organizations are really good at this. They’ve honed their understanding of team size, composition, etc., and they’re on top of it. Other organizations are so autocratic that for them to shift to a more team-based approach is a huge stretch.”

Leadership makes a huge difference. Management needs to play by the same rules as the rest of the organization, and involve workers in planning, testing, and implementing new space and processes.

“We stress the change management requirement. You can’t put a whole bunch of new tools out there and expect people to know how to use them.”

You've got an investment in those tools, too, so we encourage clients to spend a little time in education," says Effland.

Designers also have to learn how to use new collaborative spaces, even ones they helped design. Rondinelli's firm has an open office with various team spaces, including a gathering place they call the living room. "It's a double height space, all open, off the kitchen, always available. When we first moved in, my partner and I decided to try an experiment and do all our work sessions with one client in this space. It was all interior-focused: a couple of buildings, lots of materials, etc. Probably ten folks had to be in the space. It was our first real introduction to this open space to say, 'Hey, work is more visible now.' It really created more buzz around the office, taking things that would have happened in a conference room and bringing them out, showing it's okay to use the space this way. It was important to let the firm get exposed to different ways to use the space, to have clients see the firm and have the firm see them."

The experiment worked. "I could never get people's attention for more than an hour in an enclosed conference room.



In this open space, they can get coffee, check their phone calls, move around, and they were engaged the whole day. It helped us do our work better."

It's a good example of what Epstein says are the three key aspects of a collaborative workspace. "There's the social aspect, how people connect, challenge and inspire one another to achieve their full potential.

"There's the spatial aspect. Collaboration can happen anywhere, in physical spaces, digital domains, and often both. But wherever it occurs, space plays a central role in hosting and boosting collaboration.

"Then there's the informational aspect. The old saying that information is currency is truer than ever. It's the currency that teams use when they search for answers, solve problems, and work to innovate together. For example, workers today use laptops, Blackberries, iPods and these are personal tools. How do you turn them into team tools? How can you amplify or extend that information and share it with the team?"

These are the issues designers wrestle with every day, a process not unlike staging a play. "There's a lot of show business about the design of these spaces. You want to create a mood and a wow factor. There are very calm, quiet, nurturing atmospheres, and loud, boisterous, high energy places. Different people and activities are attracted to one or the other. A lot of this is theatre," says Mudgett.

Teamwork is playing everywhere, with no closing date in sight. "It's almost universal. We don't have a single project I can think of where the client isn't interested in these social, collaborative work settings."

## An idiosyncratic history of the team

### **Around 900**

The Middle English spelling of the word is *teme*.

### **1155**

First mention of King Arthur's Round Table, designed to prevent quarrels over seating precedence, as the circular table had no head.

### **1552**

To "team" means to yoke draft animals together.

### **1847**

Famed inventor Thomas Edison was born. The holder of over 1,300 patents was once asked why he had a team of 21 assistants, and said, "If I could solve all the problems myself, I would."

### **1869**

The first professional baseball team, the Cincinnati Red Stockings, starts play. Foreshadowing business a century later, the team is also the first to travel across the U.S.

### **1871**

"Collaborate" first used to mean "to work with someone."

### **mid-1880s**

Wilbur and Orville Wright's first formal collaboration is a small print shop. Later, in 1903, they perform the world's first air flight without an in-flight meal.

### **1913**

Woodrow Wilson inaugurated 28th President of the United States. Noteworthy quote: "I not only use all the brains I have, but all I can borrow."

### **1928**

First recorded use of the phrase "team spirit."

### **Early 1950s**

Professional wrestling introduces the tag team.

### **1983**

Immediately following the Super Bowl, "The A-Team" television series premieres on NBC.

### **1997**

First social network site, SixDegrees.com, launches.

### **2002**

"King Arthur's Round Table: How Collaborative Conversations Create Smart Organizations" is published.

### **2008**

Innocentive, a web site that lets anyone offer solutions to tough problems posted by various organizations, says it has solved 250 problems; ideas have been submitted by solvers in 175 countries.

(Sources: Random House Unabridged Dictionary, Random House, Inc. 2006; Britannia.com; Online Etymology Dictionary, Douglas Harper, 2001; "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship" by Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, 2007, Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication; "If You Have A Problem, Ask Everyone," by Cornelia Dean, The New York Times, July 22, 2008; Baseball Library.com; National Air and Space Museum.)

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