TURNING POINT:

COLLABORATION SPACES TRANSFORM SPIDER WEBS INTO CORAL REEFS

"Starfish organizations are taking society and the business world by storm, and are changing the rules of strategy and competition" (Brafmin and Beckstrom, 2006).

Let us discuss the unrelenting demand to be productive and competitive and the value of building technology habitats that foster innovation and collaboration. Back in 2006, Brafmin and Beckstrom identified the need for organizations to behave more like a starfish than spiders as a means of adapting to change in the environment. Fast forward to today and the threat of cyber-attack reinforces the importance of transferring knowledge and solving problems creatively. Global leaders now manage hundreds of starfish teams, all moving rapidly along on the periphery of the organization's ecosystem, given decision-making autonomy, sidestepping each other and corporate bureaucracy. Starfish communities require interconnecting geographically dispersed teams through a porous "society" of desktop collaboration and team touchdown stations.

20th century silos of audio and video technologies effectively connects strands of communication but not easily interoperable desktop application sharing, too expensive an investment to cast aside and the rooms are still appropriate for larger meeting. Filling the gap between the desktop and the conference rooms are lighter weight communication solutions that match the real-estate churn going on in every major city. Integrating technology into furniture and overall facility design is the new norm. Walk into Google, Facebook or an IBM's Watson Center and you will see colorful banquet seating with laptop connections near the expresso machines. Companies find these open designs much less expensive to build than traditional videoconferencing suites, and they have an added benefit of attracting Millennials. Young stars emerging from schools, start-ups and competitors with smaller footprints were unconstrained by government regulations and corporate firewalls; moving information faster and leveraging social networks (McChrystal, Collins, Silverman and Fussell, 2015). While the trending collaboration tools like Slack could be years from adoption in large companies, it is still possible to create the highly reactionary team experience by stitching together lightweight huddle systems.

Figure 1. High -op Multimedia Station

McChrysal (2015) points out that introducing nerve centers can maximize a company's global efficiency because they the right information into the hands of individuals at the front

lines of the organization faster than the competition. The challenge is that these nerve centers feed on dynamic collaboration in order to sound out the organization's drumbeat. Idea formed in these knowledge cells are a company's most important assets, teams have to collaborate across the network faster and easier than ever before. In other words, the starfish operational model requires unified and collaborative technologies that are so cheap and simple to use that they can sprout up everywhere and literally proliferate throughout the organization.

Coral reefs emerge by tearing down the walls of traditional conference rooms and inserting collaborative furniture into the vacated spaces. The Wainhouse (2015) study on workplace transformation confirms that transitioning from larger conference rooms to smaller, less expensive huddle rooms is critical to the success of today's businesses. A well-built multimedia conference room costs $100,000 and takes eight weeks to build. Collaboration furniture gets ordered from a catalog and costs less than $10,000 to build. As a result, companies are peppering touchdown stations throughout open seating plans. High-tops, kiosks, and room-in-a-box all save power, network, and ventilation. At a time when offices managers are compelled to increase floor density to save lease costs, these tech zones provide a break from cramped desktop arrangements without having to reserve a conference room.
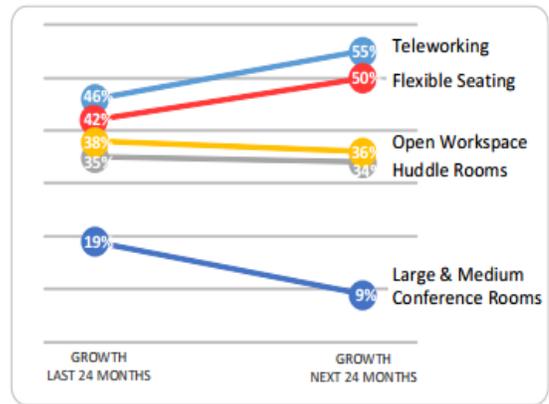

Figure 2. Workplace Transformation (Wainhouse Research, 2015)

With such obvious value, it is tempting to overlook the backlash of supporting inexpensive collaborative spaces.

- The technology resides in an informal self-service setting: with no obvious ownership users will simply walk away when there is a problem.
- Floor administrators that previously supported a handful of conference rooms now have a greater number of shared spaces clean and ready for business.
- A problem with Skype for Business in a team room is not the same as a single desktop
- Videoconferencing and graphics sharing has to work just as well as the high performance conference rooms they are replacing (or connected to)
- Systems have to be foolproof and standardized
- Remote support spans three silos: hardware, software and multimedia
- The cost of ready-for-business support does not scale down to the cost of the system
- Over-qualified technicians have to service a new generation of simplified componentry
- Outsourcing tech support to a furniture provider is a new frontier with its own hurdles

Significant thought should go into configuring these systems into a facilities plan. Collaboration spaces require physical standardization and creative engineering to maintain some semblance of privacy and to mitigate the distraction that two-way audio and video can have on adjacent seating. Acoustic fabric in backrests, shrouds and footstools provide absorption. Sound masking creates bubbles of perceived isolation. Next generation USB speakerphones have beam-array microphones that reduce the transmission of ambient noise. Linear speaker arrays direct sound precisely at the participants instead of spreading out across the space.

The final step in the successful starfish habit is the most important: providing teams working at these stations instantaneous connections to teams working at other stations, desktops and traditional conference rooms. Graphics sharing and annotation is more important to the experience than the video. Connecting to external parties provide competitive advantage and thus a strategic imperative. Tying these spaces into new and existing networks is so significant that it warrants a discussion of its own. Suffice it say; companies need to invest in the most recent advancements in virtual, on-demand video "servers" that dynamically scale and serve as seemly gateways, connecting voice, video, graphics, annotation, IM and presence.

Returning to General McChrystal's reflection in Afghanistan after introducing the concept of nerve centers and the value of collaboration to counteract terrorism:

"In place of maps, whiteboards began to appear in our headquarters. Soon they were everywhere. Standing around them, markers in hand, we thought out loud, diagramming what we knew, what we suspected, and what we did not know. We covered the bright white surfaces with multicolored words and drawings, erased, and then covered again. We did not draw static geographic features; we drew mutable relationships—the connections between things rather than the things themselves. - General Stanley McChrystal, U.S. Army, Retired

Now consider what is achievable in an organization when hundreds of low cost collaboration stations are introduced, capable of connecting to thousands of desktops, telephones and external parties.

TURNING POINT is Mark Peterson's personal take on innovation and collaboration influencing today's corporate strategy. To have a conversion about what takes to implement collaborative solutions efficiently and at enterprise scale, [contact Mark Peterson](#).

Reference

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