



## What It Takes to Innovate

Successful organizations recognize that innovative teams are unique, and the spaces where they work should be too.



### Key Insights

- **Organizations need rapid and continual innovation to succeed, and they are looking for new ways to empower the teams charged with this task.**
- **By nature the teams responsible for innovation are highly collaborative and improvisational. They interact seamlessly and take ownership of their spaces by expressing their identity and forming team norms.**
- **The Clubhouse Setting, which has five distinct work areas intentionally arranged in proximity to one another, is uniquely suited to enable the creativity of these highly collaborative improvisational teams.**

Work is changing. New management mindsets and technologies have given people unprecedented freedom to work at home, anywhere in the office, or places in between. The nature of work has shifted, too, now that competition is global and technology has made imitation easier and faster. The solution is to keep innovating, which is why organizations now value innovation above all else. Ninety percent of executives who responded to an Accenture study said that the success of their company depends upon innovation.<sup>1</sup>

That same study showed that companies that took steps to create a formal process for stimulating innovation, including efforts to increase speed and flexibility, were more confident in their ability to innovate.



The highly collaborative, improvisational teams we studied described five distinct types of work areas that were essential to the way they interact.

Companies are encouraging and fostering creativity, synthesis, and social engagement, and leaving more of the repetitive, process-driven work to technology. For example, many companies are interested in collaboration because it increases the chances that ideas will meet and recombine in unique ways.<sup>2</sup> A study by Google found an 81 percent correlation between collaboration and innovation.<sup>3</sup>

Forward-looking organizations are entrusting highly collaborative teams to do the type of rapid-fire ideating and problem solving required for innovation. Many of their workplaces, however, offer only one type of space for teams to work together—traditional conference rooms. Because these spaces haven't been designed with collaboration in mind, traditional conference rooms don't enable teamwork or provide the tools people need to do creative work.

Herman Miller believes that the best way to cultivate the many different tasks people do today is by creating workplaces that offer a customized mix of defined settings arranged to enhance people's unique work activities. To achieve an office landscape that offers purposeful variety, organizations must first understand the needs of individuals and teams.

Living Office® equips organizations and their design partners with a human-centered perspective on work and workplace, as well as a toolkit for creating an office that fulfills the needs of people and the business.<sup>4</sup> As part of this point of view, we acknowledge that while many typical work activities can be enabled by standard workplace solutions, certain types of teams benefit from an approach more tailored to their distinctive team dynamics. By identifying these dynamics, an organization can align their management methods and tools with the needs of the team, and be more precise when creating the setting—or mix of settings—that will allow the members of that team to do their best work.

## A Research-Based Approach

Herman Miller is helping organizations gain a deeper understanding of their people and the work they do with initiatives such as the Team Landscapes research project. The Team Landscapes project is an ongoing, qualitative research study of organizations (including some multinational employers) representing a variety of industries. Each company identified a high-performing, highly collaborative team within their organization for us to study. "High performing" was defined as having a strong team culture, doing fast-paced work, and having a sense of team space ownership.<sup>5</sup>

Researchers reviewed floorplans, took a guided tour of the teams' spaces, and interviewed team members about their activities and the effectiveness of the spaces. Using a combination of video, audio, and photography, the researchers documented what they saw and then analyzed the data.

What we have learned so far is that highly collaborative teams have different styles of working together, one of which is improvisational—much like the interactions of musicians in a jazz band. This means that team members collaborate spontaneously, solving problems on the fly. The following research findings further define these team dynamics and identify the types of spaces that help these highly collaborative improvisational teams flourish.

## **Team Members Move Seamlessly Between Activities and Interact In-Person**

Unlike teams that value controlled, planned, and scheduled interactions, improvisational teams prefer quick, unplanned, and smooth transitions between activities. Teams described fluid interactions in various ways, but their descriptions shared certain kinds of cues, e.g., body language, eye contact, and sounds that promoted connection between team members. Furthermore, team members agreed that connection with their colleagues drives work forward. In particular, physical presence is essential to maintaining the team's seamless and efficient workflow. MIT research confirms this preference; it found that “the number of face-to-face exchanges alone provide a good rough measure of energy” and that “thirty-five percent of the variation in a team's performance can be accounted for simply by the number of face-to-face exchanges among team members.”

Two other factors were important to seamless transitions. The first factor was movement, which manifested itself through ease of motion and the ability to quickly transition from one workpoint<sup>6</sup> to another, depending on activity. The second was autonomy, or the freedom to choose, which manifested itself through the team's ability to tailor the space to their needs.

For example, one team member chose to sit at a desk that afforded her the view of the back of a colleague's head—but also the front of his screen. This way, she could see when he was working on something related to her work, and thereby know the best time to talk to him about that work.



Improvisational teams require work areas that put them in close proximity to the people and tools they need.

This example highlights the fact that the teams' work required frequent and regular feedback for quick decision-making, so visibility to work in progress was important. In addition, their work heavily relied on team members' ability to freely collaborate and discuss ideas, and members transitioned often and fluidly from working alone to working together. They moved from generating new ideas as a large group to working in parallel as small groups or individually to get the job done. Team members made these transitions in the moment, similar to the way that jazz musicians approach music, with each member riffing off the others.

## **Teams Take Ownership of Their Spaces**

These kinds of teams take ownership of their spaces by demonstrating identity and by establishing team norms. The spaces included expressions of both the company and the team, including inside jokes, mascots, and awards. Teams established their own team rules and practices within the space, and team members honored these norms, resulting in a strong team dynamic.

Teams paid attention to what was successful and felt empowered to change things in the space that weren't helping them work together. For example, one organization gave its teams work surfaces and chairs set at 120-degree angles, with a round table at the center. This meant that people had their





For the individual workpoints in team spaces to be effective, they should have furnishings and tools that allow fluid transitions between individual and collaborative tasks.

backs to each other while doing work at their desks and had to turn around to meet at the table. The organization believed this design would enhance collaboration, but failed to account for the team's preference to sit across from one another and connect by looking up and catching a colleague's eye. Ultimately, team members modified the space to suit their style of collaboration.

Conversely, researchers observed that teams seek alternative arrangements and approaches to work when organizations impose policies that don't align with people's needs. One company, for example, had strict "nothing left behind" rules for its offices, which were all free address.<sup>7</sup> While well-intended, this policy and design did not address one team's needs for a space where they could easily access work tools and one another, and share and display evidence of work in progress. As a result, team members situated themselves and their tools in positions that allowed them to stake out their preferred spaces and work with each other—a behavior we call "colonizing." When teams colonize a space, they band together and form an unofficial "territory." By doing so they are trying to maintain efficiency, build bonds with colleagues, and easily locate their teammates.<sup>8</sup>

## Teams Have Five Distinct Spatial Requirements

The teams we studied described five work areas within their workspaces that are essential to their improvisational and creative style of work.

### 1. Individual Workpoints

Researchers observed that team members needed to be physically available to each other—even while doing their individual work. For example, a team member updating a master schedule might walk over to a colleague to ask about a prototype that was behind schedule. The key for improvisational teams was that the spaces are purposefully adjacent to encourage fluid movement between individual and group work.

The work area the teams used for this "back and forth" activity is a series of individual workpoints arranged in a manner to encourage both individual work and impromptu interactions among team members. This area serves as a home base, where team members may spend most of their time and where many of the fluid transitions between activities take place.



Teams require flexibly furnished work areas where they can break into smaller groups to focus on specific parts of a project.

Equipped with tools, ergonomic considerations, and personal space appropriate for the activity, the workpoints in the area allow a person to focus on individual work while being available to the rest of the team. A workpoint's openness aids the team in several ways. Because team members can see and hear the way their colleagues work, the workpoint helps quickly establish and reinforce team norms. Clear sight lines also make it easier for team members to collaborate and give feedback on the fly.

## 2. Breakaway Space

One way that teams move work forward is by breaking into subgroups, which then tackle certain components of the work. Our study found that for this kind of small-group work, improvisational teams needed spaces where they could work together without disrupting other team members. Furthermore, they needed to have ownership over the space, including the ability and authority to tailor it to suit the team's needs, and generally “change things up” in perspective or posture.

The area that addresses these needs is a semi-private space that's visible and easy to access. Close to individual workpoints but set apart visually, this area can include specific tools for small group or one-on-one interaction, as well as a place where work in progress can be posted and updated out in the open, for the length of the project.



People on highly collaborative, improvisational teams feel a stronger bond with one another when they have a centrally located work area dedicated to socializing.

## 3. Communal Space

The teams studied also needed a larger group space to connect and bond—a team-owned, communal space available to team members at all times for work and socializing. For these teams, socializing is more than just a break from work. It's “deeply critical to team performance, often accounting for more than 50 percent of positive changes in communication patterns.”

Our research found that the needs for connection, community, and expression of identity were met best through a team-owned communal work area. This “epicenter” is big enough for the entire team to gather at once but also useful for small groups or one-on-one interactions. There is often a physical landing area and/or large horizontal shared surfaces, which can contain team artifacts that remind people that they belong. An inviting area that draws in team members and visitors alike, an “epicenter” works best when it's highly visible and close to individual workpoints.



When teams have prominent vertical surfaces to share their ideas and work in progress, they are more effective and efficient.

## 4. Vertical Surfaces

Research indicated that these teams needed to make their work and processes visible. They did this to increase accountability, invite contribution, and help team members make connections to other work while identifying missing pieces—all factors that increase team effectiveness and efficiency. When team members can see and react to flow charts, drafts, and timelines, for example, work speeds up. The spatial feature required for these activities is the “wall of awareness”—the fourth work area in the team’s workspace that researchers observed. The “wall of awareness” is dedicated to making visible whatever is needed to drive the work forward. For some teams that means displaying their process—the schedule or resource map, for example. For other teams, the work itself is posted for feedback, debate, or editorial review.

## 5. Privacy Space

Finally, our researchers noted that team members needed a place to escape for respite, private conversations, or “heads-down” individual work, while still maintaining proximity to the rest of the team. Researchers observed that each improvisational team had designated a do-not-disturb space. Ideally, this work area is easy to access, since the need for private conversations often comes up quickly. If this area is not provided, team members may leave the team space altogether in search of privacy. A member’s absence disrupts the fluid, interactive style that is the hallmark of this kind of team, making the entire team less effective.



Even members of a highly collaborative team need work areas where they can retreat to focus or have private conversations.

## Design Implications


While there isn’t only one way to promote innovation in the workplace, there is a Living Office Setting specifically intended to promote the behaviors we found in improvisational teams—behaviors that lead to innovation. The Clubhouse is uniquely suited to improvisational teams because it contains these five kinds of work areas arranged in proximity to each other. These areas fulfill the spatial requirements and enable the creativity of these highly collaborative teams.

For a Clubhouse to be effective, the team that occupies it must own the setting so team members can seamlessly work near one another. This way, they never have to sacrifice connection to one another to work in a setting that’s optimized for the activity at hand. They can remain immersed in their work, moving naturally between working alone and working together, achieving a state of flow.

Our insight into the behaviors and space needs of highly collaborative improvisational teams can guide an organization as it considers the mix of settings that’s right for its people, given their unique character and activities. To learn more about Herman Miller’s Living Office, please visit [hermanmiller.com/livingoffice](http://hermanmiller.com/livingoffice) or connect with your local Herman Miller representative about engaging with a Living Office Specialist.

# White Paper

1. Chad Brooks, "Businesses Take Cautious Approach to Innovation," Business News Daily, May 13, 2013, <http://www.businessnewsdaily.com/4476-businesses-cautious-about-innovation.html>
2. Simonton DK. *Scientific genius: A psychology of science*. Cambridge University Press, 1988, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4370822/#pone.0121973.ref001>
3. BBC News, "Google: Mobile, Social, Cloud Changing the Way We Work," originally published Feb. 3, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-16858085>
4. Living Office unites ongoing inquiry and research with decades of learning and thought leadership into four areas of focus: point of view on people and work, placemaking framework, furnishings and tools, service and support
5. Herman Miller, "Team Landscapes: A Study of Clubhouses," company confidential, March, 2015, p. 4.
6. In the new landscape of work, people can choose from a variety of shared or owned workpoints, rather than sitting in one assigned workstation, which is typical of legacy plans. A workpoint is any spot within an office landscape that is intentionally designed to support people's activities and the postures they assume while working for varying durations of time.
7. Like any approach, free address works best when it's aligned with the character of people and their work. Free address may work well for other types of teams, but we don't recommend it for highly collaborative improvisational teams.
8. Herman Miller, "The Unassigned Experience," company confidential, Fall 2016, p. 22.
9. *Ibid.*

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