

Knowledge management Feng Shui: designing knowledge sharing-friendly office space

Marc Steinlin

What I needed

After 15 years in a nice old residential building, Helvetas decided to move to a new site offering more adequate office space. That was my longed for chance, as a knowledge manager, to influence the design and arrangement of the new office environment in accordance with the ideas and ideals of knowledge sharing.

I had some ideas for the new design, but I was not too sure about them, so I decided to draw on ‘my community’. I posed the following question to KM4DEV:

‘I have the rare opportunity to advise someone who is about to move into new office premises, where they can design the physical space according to their wishes with relatively few limitations. They asked me whether I have ideas, models, tips and more on how to design and equip it to be knowledge-sharing friendly.

Can you provide me with some information, experiences and more? Do you know of some outstanding examples which we might look at? Do you know of some organisation which specialises in such questions?’

Within two days I received a considerable number of responses, providing ideas on how to optimise workspace, which criteria to take into account, what other experiences might serve as examples, who could share more experience and expertise and more.

My thanks go to the following contributors (‘in order of appearance’): Urs Egger (SKAT), Stephanie Colton (SparkNow), Julie Ferguson (Hivos), Barbara Weaver Smith (Smith Weaver Smith), Lucie Lamoureux (Bellanet), Alim Khan (ILO), Allison Hewlitt (Bellanet), Peter Thorpe (Centre for Health and Population Research) and indirectly (quoted) Steve Song (Connectivity Africa/IDRC).

Experiences, ideas and tips

Some concrete hints

- The best knowledge-sharing workplaces that I have experienced devote minimal space to separate ‘offices and maximum space to group-work areas. Including moveable furniture and white boards so that groups of many sizes can configure a workspace to suit their current project needs.
- [ISNAR has some] neat physical spaces that they have introduced in their building. They have installed coffee areas at strategic points in the building. Each

area (or at least the ones I saw) has a couple of tall tables where you can either stand or sit on tall stools; has a coffee machine where the coffee/tea/cappuccino, etc., are free; and has a white board and pens. I'm guessing the spaces are about 3 m wide by 6 m. In the 15 minutes I spent at one of the tables, I was introduced to a remarkable cross-section of staff. It struck me as a simple but effective mechanism for enhancing a simple coffee machine into a collaborative space. I'm sure the free coffee helps.

- Mix 'n match: Put people from different sectors/divisions in rooms together so they know what the others are doing. More room for cross-fertilisation!
- Is there a specific person/section for coordination of knowledge sharing? Or other people critical for this function (knowledge brokers)? Put them at a 'busy intersection' of the building (e.g., near the entrance) where people pass by a lot, so everyone knows who they are and people will drop by a lot.
- Share lunch! This is the ideal opportunity for knowledge sharing between colleagues who may not do so during regular business.
- Along the same lines, put a nice 'standing table' in an open hall-area, near the coffee machine. Spontaneous knowledge sharing is guaranteed to occur. (We have been advocating one of these for ages; not been successful yet though!). Also, include a few comfortable corners/spots where people can have informal meetings, and notice boards/pin boards near each department for people to hang up their announcements/posters/etc.
- No central library! The most interesting literature remains in people's own collections, so you may as well leave them there. Further, person-to-person knowledge sharing still continues to work best. (A digital library can support this system, e.g., <http://obiblio.sourceforge.net>).
- If there are really no limitations: a cocktail bar!! Knowledge sharing happy hour... (Peter Ballantyne's invention).
- Check out *Dilbert's ultimate cubicle* on their Web site <http://www.ideo.com> for inspiration.

On the concept of 'caves and commons'

Integrated interior systems (School of Building & Real Estate, NUS 2/3/99)

- Individual small workstations that could be partially closed off (caves), surrounding commons areas for meeting, spreading out work, and relaxation, in addition to shared project rooms, conference rooms, and equipment rooms;
- Different specialties could be brought together in new neighbourhoods for an innovative project;
- Matching of building services to the increasing density and diversity of work spaces;
- The sparse air diffuser density, thermal zoning controls, window access and lighting fixture configuration that has repeatedly been inadequate in conventional open plan configurations with medium and high partitioning will prove even more problematic in the mini semi-enclosed offices and dispersed, varied teaming spaces.

Personal harbours and coves

- Small, partially closable individual offices;
- Mobile furniture that can be taken to alternate work locations;

- Shared work area furniture for conferencing, relaxing, concentrating, teaming, laying out or presenting work, and multi-media-ting;
- Mobile, personally owned furniture like chairs, work surfaces and storage on wheels, to support teaming activities and individual work in alternate work sites throughout the building.

Personal enclaves

- New furniture designed to increase closure and privacy of the open office, with new ceiling and wall sections, doors and windows, and new furniture for enhancing the settings for shared work and 'teaming';
- Larger closed offices assigned as project rooms and a number of mini closed offices used for temporary meetings or concentrated work.

<http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/bdgwnh/www/MBS102/MBS102T7/sld027.htm>

Caves and commons case study: evaluation of a workplace strategy for improving team effectiveness

(Daniel Richard Welton, May 1996 – Loope Chair, Cutler Committee)

Abstract

This study investigated an innovative workspace strategy designed to support and facilitate group work in the office environment. Referred to as 'caves and commons,' this workspace strategy featured a series of work settings designed to promote crucial aspects of group process for a single team without significant space growth. The design consisted of compact and enclosed individual workspaces for supporting focused concentration and an open group space for supporting and facilitating collaborative work. Because this approach focuses on aspects of the workplace environment that are known to have a positive influence on group processes, it was hypothesized that the caves and commons approach should have a corresponding positive effect on team performance.

This hypothesis was tested through an exploratory case study conducted in real time under actual working conditions. The test period lasted six months. Behavioural evidence was collected before and after the installation of the caves and commons environment through a series of focused interviews and questionnaire surveys. The evidence was numerically coded, reduced, analysed and then graphed to identify rating differences. Results of the analysis indicated that the 'caves and commons' office setting had measurable positive impact on the team's overall performance.

http://www.asu.edu/caed/SOD/design/FACULTY/MEMBERS/CUTLER_abstracts.htm

Lessons from the leading edge

(Tim Stevens, July 1999)

Excerpt

In one such experiment, called 'caves and commons', a workspace was arranged with private, personal workstations surrounding a team space with movable tools and furniture, and the cameras rolled. 'We watched formal meetings and informal gatherings', says Keane. 'Sometimes two people would meet, start talking, others would join for a while, then leave, then return. So we were able to identify dynamics of the team space. When we asked people how they used the team space, they

mentioned the formal meetings, yet we observed the unofficial meetings which were also important uses of the area’.

The result of the caves and commons exercise was a workspace design concept called ‘pathways’ that includes a lot of informal team spaces, with white boards on a beam-and-post system, so people can make points and negotiate. The boards then can be removed or swung out of the way when sessions are complete. ‘Observational techniques are designed to help tease out the difference between what people say they do and what they actually do, what they say they need and what they really need’, says Keane.

<http://www.industryweek.com/CurrentArticles/asp/articles.asp?ArticleID=582>

Examples of ‘implemented’ KS office space

Switzerland

- Phonak (often cited in KM literature)
- Wüest and Partner (‘open offices around a meeting area in the middle with standing tables, high tables where you can stand around for meetings. Keeps meetings quite short and people do not fall asleep’.)
- SDC building in Bern (‘offices in glass boxes, meeting spaces and an interaction zone in the corridor. Exception is the canteen in the basement that is certainly not at the right place’.)

United Kingdom

- UK Dept. of Trade & Industry (ministerial floor)
- BBC
- Countryside Agency
- DFID Offices, Palace Street, London

Netherlands

- The former offices of ISNAR (cf. below; <http://www.isnar.cgiar.org>)

USA

- The Strategy Studio, Smith Weaver Smith, Inc. (Indianapolis; <http://www.smithweaversmith.com/strategystudio.htm>)

Advisory organisations

- SparkNow (in collaboration with Prof. Clive Holtham, CASS Business School), which has been implementing such spaces since 1997; references: UK Dept. of Trade&Industry, BBC, Countryside Agency; case studies/academic papers downloadable under: <http://www.sparknow.net/>)
- Innovation Labs (specialised in this design work for years, has written extensively about it; headquartered in California but has a significant presence in Europe and has worked with many large NGOs; info at <http://www.innovationlabs.com/>)

Further references

A large debate on the issue, with more ideas, references and examples, can be found on the Community of Interest for readers of the practical knowledge management

handbook *Learning to Fly*: <http://finance.groups.yahoo.com/group/learning-to-fly/message/824>

Reflections on the process

Within a remarkably short time and with little effort, I had assembled a good set of information and ideas. I sent out this concise ‘product’ to my colleagues and especially to the person leading the process of converting the new venue. This led to the sensitisation of the whole team. Our project manager included the summary of the KM4Dev brainstorming with the documents in the tender dossiers for interior designers. The product will later on serve as a basis for discussions of concrete projects. We will assess to what extent the submitted design proposals incorporate the indications in the product.

I am a strict defender of the ‘knowledge-on-demand’ principle, and I believe this experience has given me another convincing example. I was interested in learning about how to design knowledge sharing-friendly office space at a particular moment – not before and not after. The feedback on my specific question provided ‘tailor-made’ experience and knowledge, which was produced on demand. No ‘prophylactic’ information (‘reserve supply’) would have served my purpose, nor would it have addressed my point and answered my question within such a short time. Furthermore, it would have provided much more unsolicited details and thus ‘polluted’ the information base.

However, in order to obtain knowledge on demand, one must have a community of practice, which is capable of reacting as mine did. Such a community is an asset which requires considerable investment at the start but which pays off in moments of need.

About the author

Marc Steinlin has been leading the Knowledge Management Initiative of Helvetas in Zurich for 5 years and has been a member of the KM4Dev-community since its beginnings.

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