

The Square and the Tower

Why meetings and meeting spaces are more important than ever

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Why meetings and meeting spaces are more important than ever

In his 2018 book *The Square and the Tower*, the historian Niall Ferguson argues that over a period of hundreds of years the world has been shaped primarily by two distinct organisational forces: networks and hierarchies. These are the square and the tower of the book's title. Their interplay has been at the heart of major world events and the lessons that arise apply to what we now mistakenly assume to be a uniquely networked era.

Although the book addresses the great themes of history, it also offers up a compelling metaphor that can be scaled down to describe a number of other human domains. One of the most important of these is the workplace, which has its own challenges when it comes to both networks and hierarchies.

And this is perhaps most evident when we witness how the demand for greater collaboration (delivered by the tower) intersects with the way people network with each other (in the square). This is the point at which the objectives of the organisation intersect with the needs of people and teams. In a word, we are talking about meetings.

The subject of meetings is one of those that all too frequently generates as much heat as it does light. It is just as emotive a subject for people as office temperature, noise and distractions and the volatility of technology. Everybody has sat through unnecessary or misbegotten meetings. Everybody has left them with an awareness of to-dos that will remain undone.

Yet at the same time, meetings are essential in a world that is reliant on relationships and the exchange of ideas and information. Organisations are focussed on collaboration, togetherness and serendipity for very good reasons. Knowledge, engagement and personal interactions are the foundations of their success.

People also rely more than ever before on their interactions with colleagues and others for a similar number of interrelated reasons: to meet the objectives of their own role; to have a sense of belonging; to learn and develop; to build relationships; to create and make things happen; and to become engaged with what they do.

The reason why meetings often frustrate us so much is because we are aware of how important all of those factors are. That is the root cause of the emotional responses we have to both good and poor experiences in meetings. A good meeting can facilitate all of the factors that drive organisational and personal success and wellbeing whilst poor meetings can frustrate them.

It is essential that the places in which all of these things take place provide a sophisticated and adaptable response to these complex needs. Even though more and more meetings take place online, we still rely on face to face interaction, which remains the very best way to develop relationships with colleagues and clients and which is demonstrably the best way to exchange ideas and information.

The objective of this White Paper is to explore the current state of play with regard to meetings and especially why they are still so important and why we must design cultures and offices that make sense of the new era of networks. I hope you enjoy it.

Mark Barrell
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The need for meetings

In theory, it is no longer necessary for people to work and meet in the same physical space. It's been a theory for a long time now and it hasn't happened yet and for some very good reasons.

Remote and flexible workers can often feel left out. A survey of 1,700 flexible workers from Timewise found that nearly 60 percent thought their skills were falling behind those of their office based colleagues, two thirds said they felt isolated from collaboration with colleagues, a similar proportion said they felt they missed out on informal information networks because of the lack of meetings and many said they missed the social aspects of working with others.

Of course, such people also enjoy some of the benefits of flexible working but there is clearly a tension. One of the key areas of research that describes this tension is found in the work of Tom Allen at MIT.

In 1984, Allen published the book that made his name and introduced the world to what we now call the Allen Curve. In *Managing the Flow of Technology* he graphed the powerful negative correlation between the physical distance between colleagues and the frequency of their communication. So precisely could this be defined, that Allen demonstrated that 50 metres marks the cut-off point for the regular exchange of certain types of technical information.

In his 2006 book *The Organization and Architecture of Innovation* co-authored with German architect Gunter Henn,

Allen sets out to explore how physical space, networks, flows of information and organisational structure interact to foster creativity and innovation.

In particular, the authors note how the physical office building is becoming more important despite the availability of collaborative technology.

Indeed, they argue that technology does not replace meetings but makes them more commonplace and vice versa. "Rather than finding that the probability of telephone

communication increases with distance, as face to face probability decays, our data shows a decay in the use of all communication media with distance", they write. "We do not keep separate sets of people, some of which we communicate in one medium and some by another. The more often we see someone face to face, the more likely it is that we will telephone

the person or communicate in some other medium."

What this suggests is that the quality of our relationships with others is determined to some extent – perhaps largely - by our proximity to each other.

There is other important research that backs up the fundamental principles of this idea. A study in the 1950s of students at MIT carried out by the psychologists Leon Festinger, Stanley Schachter and Kurt Back found that the students who lived on the same floor typically had closer friendships with each other than with those who lived on a different floor. Relationships were also affected by how close people lived to shared spaces such as stairwells and entrances.

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There is a positive feedback loop in all of this. A study from Roni Reiter-Palmon and Stephanie Sands from the University of Nebraska – Omaha which set out to establish the links between meetings and creativity found that the link was dependent on the relationships between participants and especially their levels of trust in each other.

The core problem

None of this is to suggest that there aren't problems with meetings. Arguably the most common complaint is that they are unnecessary or at least don't make the best use of somebody's time. The core issue was addressed in a famous interview with Elon Musk published by the website Elektrek in which he said: "Walk out of a meeting or drop off a call as soon as it is obvious you aren't adding value. It is not rude to leave, it is rude to make someone stay and waste their time."

He has a point. The State of Meetings Report 2019, based on proprietary data from a scheduling platform called Doodle and a survey of 6,528 workers in the UK, Germany and the USA estimates that the average manager now spends an average of around two hours a week in what respondents consider to be pointless meetings.

Interestingly, although a large majority of people prefer face to face meetings (76 percent), more than a third of people said that unnecessary meetings were the biggest cost to their organisation (37 percent). Similarly, over a quarter (26 percent) stated that poorly organised meetings impacted their relationships, while over two in five feel they create confusion in the workplace (43 percent), impact their ability to actually do their work (44 percent) and a third feel unable to contribute in any way (33 percent).

A study in the Harvard Business Review also found that meetings can be seen as a hindrance to getting work done. It surveyed 182 senior managers in a range of industries: 65 percent said meetings keep them from completing their own work. 71 percent said meetings are unproductive and inefficient. 64 percent said meetings come at the expense of deep thinking. 62 percent said meetings were missed opportunities to bring the team closer together.

Culture shifts top down

The quality of meetings is not just dependent on what happens in the squares, it can also be determined by the tower and perhaps should given that this is (or should be) the main source of cultural shifts. A 2011 study led by Steven G. Rogelberg of the University of North Carolina and published in the journal Group Dynamics, found that the one person who usually leaves a meeting feeling good about it is its leader.

In part this is about the skills of the individual – and their level of self-awareness – but it can also be addressed by defining the nature of meetings at an organisational level.

1. Keep it small

Jeff Bezos of Amazon instituted a two pizza rule for meetings, meaning that if it would take more than two pizzas to feed everybody taking part, the meeting has too many people involved. This idea has a long history. In the 1958 book Parkinson's Law – best known for the adage that work expands to fill the time available for its completion – the author introduces the science of comitology which determines the optimal size of teams of people.

This is based on the idea of a coefficient of inefficiency



What makes a good, or bad meeting?

Respondents to the State of Meetings report were asked what they thought makes a good or bad meeting:

What makes for a good meeting?

- Setting clear objectives – 72 percent
- Setting a clear agenda – 67 percent
- Not having too many people in the room – 35 percent

What makes a bad meeting?

- People taking phone calls or texting during meetings – 55 percent
- Participants interrupting each other – 50 percent
- People not listening to the contributions of others – 49 percent
- People arriving late or leaving early – 49 percent
- People talking about nothing for long periods of time – 46 percent

which means that teams get less efficient the more people are involved beyond a certain number.

Although humorous, the research eventually caught up with the fiction. There have been a number of studies such as a 2010 research project conducted by consultants Bain & Company which found that for each additional person over seven members in a decision-making group, decision effectiveness was reduced by approximately 10 percent.

2. Keep it short

The unwritten rule is that a meeting lasts a minimum of an hour regardless of what it's about. However Steven Rogelberg suggests that it might be advisable to restrict it emphatically to 48 minutes to put pressure on attendees to get through the meeting quicker than might be seen as the norm.

He cites something called the Yerkes–Dodson law, which maps an inverted-U-shaped relationship between stress and performance, so long as that stress is only moderate. No need to point a gun at people's heads. He also notes that the tight schedule means that people will not become frustrated by a meeting that drags on while they have other things to get on with.

A similar idea is that of a meeting time bank in which a set amount of time in a given period – week, month – is allocated to meetings and no more.

3. Keep it upright

One other way to limit the time spent in meetings is to hold them standing up. As well as ensuring that people remain focussed because they can't get too comfortable, the meetings are often shorter and often have a number of other benefits in terms of efficiency. According to a study published in the Journal of Applied Psychology, sit-

down meetings were found to be 34 percent longer than stand-up meetings, although they produced no better decisions. However significant differences were also obtained for perceptions of satisfaction with the meeting and awareness of allocated tasks.

Not only that, standing meetings are generally good for us. Standing in meetings offers the opportunity to sit less and move more which

is good for us in a number of ways. However, standing meetings can also make people feel both physically and psychologically uncomfortable according to research from a team of British researchers led by King's College.

Some participants found standing physically taxing, reporting aches and pains while others found the experience to be a 'social minefield' especially when encouraged to change posture between sitting and standing. People felt self-conscious while standing and worried that other attendees would see them as "attention seekers" while some were concerned that standing when the meeting host was sitting would be seen as a challenge to the host's authority.

“For each additional person over seven in a decision-making group, effectiveness was reduced by 10 percent”



Others worried that their standing would be interpreted as a lack of commitment to the meeting, as if they were getting ready to leave.

Collaborative overload

The signs that we can have too much collaboration are increasingly evident in the ongoing debate about the pros and cons of open plan, the 24/7 ubiquity of communication tools (especially email) and the amount of time spent in meetings. An in-depth look at the consequences published in the Harvard Business Review called the net effects of these and other issues ‘Collaboration Overload’.

The feature suggests that the downsides of excessive collaboration can sometimes outweigh its benefits and are likely to indicate some deep-rooted cultural failures that often see organisations attempt to address the problem with more collaboration, especially in the form of new technological tools. Collaboration becomes an end in its own right and not the means to an end.

Rob Cross and Peter Gray of the University of Virginia’s business school estimate that knowledge workers spend 70-85 percent of their time attending meetings (virtual or face-to-face), dealing with e-mail, talking on the phone or otherwise dealing with an avalanche of requests for input or advice. This is collaboration of course, but is it the best use of people’s time and skills?

Research from Bain and the Economist Intelligence Unit found that the most productive companies lose 50 percent less time to unnecessary and ineffective collaboration than the rest. The best companies save more than half a day a

week for all of their employees by reducing any factors that slow the organisation down, such as needless meetings.

“Excess collaboration saps energy and leaves employees with too little time to complete their work during the day, forcing too many workers to spend time playing catch-up after hours and on weekends”, claims the HBR report. “But it is possible to capitalize on the benefits of collaboration while reducing its ill effects. Doing so requires examining the whole organization—its structure, processes and cultural norms—and treating the root causes of collaboration overload and not merely finding new, inventive ways to manage the symptoms.”

Creating the right place to meet

Every physical meeting space sends clear signals to the meeting’s participants – signals that set the tone and provide a context for the conversation, even when they are subtle. We understand instinctively that the place where a meeting occurs has an impact on the nature of the conversation. There is a marked difference between a conversation around a boardroom table and another that takes place in a breakout space, with the participants seated in a circle on bean-bags.

Place matters but having choices about place often matters more. While many of us who are knowledge workers move around from one workspace to another, finding the place just right for getting a particular task done is often difficult. Sometimes we need a quiet place and sometimes

“It’s important to offer people a choice of meeting spaces that they can use depending on the purpose of the meeting and the people involved”

we want to engage with colleagues informally, while at other times we attend meetings with either focused group decision-making or open-ended brainstorming agendas. All other things being equal, each of those activities works best in a different setting.

Because of this it’s important to offer people a choice of meeting spaces that they can use depending on the purpose of the meeting and the people involved. This isn’t just about numbers but relationships too.

Perhaps the best option for achieving this is for an office to be designed around the principle of agile or activity-based working, in which offices are structured as a series of zones designed to meet the needs of people for different types of tasks and to meet the needs of different job functions and personality types. In this model people are free to choose where they work and with whom.

It is one thing to empower people to use the workplace in this way, another to determine the structure of the workplace that offers them the most appropriate choices. For example, there might be a mismatch between the size and type of meeting room available and the typical meeting taking place inside. A meeting room that accommodates 8 people but is usually the venue for a 2 or 3 person chat is not making the best use of space or offering people ideal surroundings.

The most wasteful types of space in this regard are often boardrooms, but there are solutions. Boardrooms can become adaptable with the specification of folding room dividers and modular tables.

Crucially, we now also have the technology available to us that allows us to monitor precisely how rooms are used and generate aggregated data to make informed decisions about which to redesign, divest or improve.

It is also possible that by measuring usage in this way we can discover how the introduction of serendipitous encounter points, for examples in shared areas of the office can be furnished to provide 2 or 3 people with the ideal space for the exchange of ideas or just a quick conversation.

Similarly, we must be aware of the way people are likely to use the space in ad hoc ways, such as using dining tables for meetings. Ad hoc this may be, but the organisation can play an active role in engineering serendipity.

The masters of this are arguably the world’s tech giants whose palaces are designed to foster this kind of interaction between employees and visitors. Apple’s newest headquarters are designed to maximise the incidence of chance encounters between people and harness their potential. The work ecologist Stowe Boyd coined the term coincidency to describe this attempt to increase the chances of creating serendipitous moments. It’s not just about getting people to come together, but about adding value, as it should be for all meetings.

The upshot of all this is that the creation of a range of meeting spaces should not just look at the issue of how to bring people together in prearranged ways, but also how we get them to collide with each other and produce a spark.

A blurring of boundaries

Activity Based Working is a logical step for organisations not only because it makes business sense, but also because it is so well aligned with human needs and is a way of resolving the intersection between organisational hierarchies and networks.



There are a number of benefits associated with this work style, including faster project times, better ideas and working relationships and a reduced need for space. There's also good evidence that this is the kind of environment in which people prefer to work and it's certainly better for them.

Perhaps the primary reason why schools and universities worry less about ergonomics than a traditional office is because the pupils and students move around regularly, something that is important for their physical and mental wellbeing.

This has been coming for a long time. In his 1989 book *The Age of Unreason*, the legendary management writer Charles Handy describes a very familiar sounding organisational structure.

He called it a federal organisation in which power and responsibility devolve from a small corporate centre to business units and, ultimately, to those closest to the action. In other words, a core organisation with a devolved network of teams and individuals supported by contractors, freelancers and consultants. The tower and the square.

It is this devolution of power away from a hierarchical core that defines activity based working. Coinciding with this functional shift, there has been a blurring of the aesthetic distinctions between offices and public spaces such as cafes and hotels as well as people's homes. This is the defining aesthetic characteristic of coworking space and it is now also mainstream in office design terms.

These are spaces for individuals, and so it should come as no surprise to see their forms and materials co-opted into office design and in the spaces we create both for individuals and for the ways they meet and collaborate.

Conclusion

The workplace is often full of paradoxes. Nowhere is this more evident than when it comes to meetings. They are clearly one of the most time consuming and often frustrating parts of the working day. The research shows clearly that people are fully aware when meetings have no clear purpose or are distracting them from doing what they would prefer to be doing. Not many of them feel confident enough to follow Elon Musk's suggestion that they simply walk out, so instead they either disengage or fume.

At the same time, we also know that meetings are essential. We understand about how they forge relationships, facilitate the flow of information, catalyse ideas and bind us to the organisation and its wider objectives. Digital meetings may have grown in number, but there is no sign yet that we are seeing the end of face-to-face meetings. Nor are we likely to, given all that we know about what makes people tick.

As ever, the paradox can only be resolved by taking a sophisticated stance. In the case of meetings this involves the development of a deep understanding of the context in which meetings take place, often unique to the organisation and building in the flexibility that allows people to choose how best to meet with each other.

This can come from the implementation of a model of design that empowers people to make the best choices about where and how to work and with whom. Activity based working is often the best way of achieving this.

Although implemented at the personal level, this culture comes from the top. The shape of the squares in which people come together to meet is defined by the tower.





About Boss Design

Founded in 1983, Boss Design is one of the UK's market leading manufacturers of high quality office seating, upholstery and tables, and enjoys global success within this design-led sector.

The company leads by example and continues to improve on the delivery of an intelligent and evolving portfolio, whilst maintaining the best ethical standards. Now employing more than 300 people across the globe, Boss Design has a wealth of experience in helping to enhance customers' corporate environments, offering choice, reliability and exceptional service.

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