HermanMiller
Living Office

The Origins of Herman Miller's Activities

The story behind Herman Miller's Activities begins like most stories within our organization: as the nature of work changes, we seek greater understanding of how those changes affect people and their environments.

Over the past 20 years, improvements in communication, transportation, and information technology allowed businesses to expand to international markets. Opportunities and risks materialized in unpredictable ways and companies scrambled to keep their competitive footing. Creative, non-linear work began to take on new importance as quantitative process-based work increasingly became automated. While individual work continued to be prevalent, groups could more reliably and swiftly solve the complex problems presented by this new global landscape of work. Companies accommodated group work by reallocating space rather than incurring the cost of adding new space.

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As networked technology became increasingly prevalent and anyone could instantaneously connect with any other person, idea, or device, group work went by a variety of names, including "together work" and "collaboration." To better understand these changes, our researchers partnered with Cheskin Research on a report in 1998, *Collaboration: Applied Exploration Report.*[1] And in 2006, we partnered with a leading A+D firm on the study *When Groups Work*, which explored the relationship between the built environment and group work.[2]

More recently we embarked on in-depth research of "group/collaborative/community work" with the intent of creating solutions supportive of that kind of work. Could Herman Miller do for collaboration what our contributions to ergonomics have done for the performance of individual work? Could we take the design lead in provisioning workplaces that enhance the experience and results of people working together? And, in the process of learning more about collaboration, what could we learn about other behaviors in the workplace so that we could better support them, as well?

Our approach was to review what others had already learned and then build on it with our own primary research. We commissioned an environmental psychologist and workplace strategist to conduct a literature review of the research into the psychology of collaboration spaces.[3] That review highlighted the impact of psychological factors on collaboration and the implications for workspaces, namely that teams with a mix of personality types create the most effective collaborations and require specific support from design, layout, furniture, and technology. In addition to the literature review, we drew on the U.S. Office of Naval Research's cognitive model of team collaboration.[4]

Our systematic look at the popular press furthered our thinking. For example, one study of interactions between scientists showed that most of their important breakthroughs happened at one physical location, demonstrating a potent connection between physical space and different parts of the collaborative process.[5]

In 2011, we launched a primary research study to learn more about the role of workplaces in collaboration and to gather hard data about when, where, and how often people were collaborating.[6]

In the U.S., U.K., India, and Australia at 14 companies (that had identified themselves as highly collaborative), we observed 2,900 collaborative events as they happened and kept detailed logs over the course of over 700 hours of research. Researchers then dissected the collaboration process, looking for associations between the behaviors and the environments in which they occurred. We learned that 70 percent of collaboration happens at the desk. Our research also showed a disconnect between the essence of people's needs and the organization's *perception* of those needs. In spite of their organizations' best efforts, people avoid 66 percent of so-called meeting spaces because they don't meet their needs.

In 2012, we conducted another proprietary research project with the aim of empowering facility managers, architects, and other decision makers in the office design process to make better choices about their spaces.[7] The study took a magnifying glass to the act of a collaborative event *as the worker experiences it* to understand both how it begins and ends, and the unique needs of people (from physical environments to furniture to tools) across distinct stages of the process.

Using a working definition of collaboration as "involving two or more individuals working towards a common goal and creating a new product (e.g., an idea, solution, or insight) beyond what they could have achieved individually," the team established the objective of learning three major things:

1. The purpose—Why collaborate?
2. The activities—What are people doing?
3. The behaviors—How are they doing it?

To gather and make sense of the data, the researchers used the U.S. Office of Naval Research's model. The model includes four distinct cognitive stages of collaboration—knowledge construct, team problem solving, team consensus, and outcome evaluation and revision—and the steps in those stages.[8] We built on that model by adding two new stages: Project alignment and kick-off, and final reporting.

In this qualitative research, we took a multi-method approach with exemplar organizations (a digital interactive agency, a consulting firm, a manufacturing company, and a technology company). A total of 70 employees from these companies self-reported moments of collaboration using personal technology to capture more than 750 images of collaborative acts. The research also included scouting trips (observations)

to those companies, ethnographic interviews, stakeholder interviews, journals that documented each participant's day at work, and secondary research.

After the data collection phase was completed, researchers clustered the end users' images based on why and for what purpose they needed to collaborate. The related data was used to understand the behaviors and activities that drove each of those collaborative events. Interestingly, although the research was on collaboration, participants did not exclude individual ways of working. For example, some participants sent photos that included no people other than the participant. When we asked why they included such photos, they said that they needed time to process, contemplate, and do individual creative work alone in order to fully contribute to collaborative efforts.

Initially, the collected data was grouped into 35 different types of events. Using an organized analytical process, we synthesized the events into a list of 10 behavior types— the Activities. The first seven Activities are done together and consist of collaborative activities between two or more people. The last three Activities are done alone and consist of focused, individual activities.

The power of this research lies in its self-documentation methodology, which we intentionally chose because it allowed researchers to observe a social phenomenon—how people behave while collaborating—through the participants' eyes. The participants themselves identified the behaviors behind the Activities. Without that input, we likely would have classified some behaviors differently. In some cases, we even used the exact language they used for a behavior when we named a mode, e.g., Divide & Conquer.

ACTIVITIES

Together

Chat	Converse	Co-Create	Divide & Conquer

Huddle	Show & Tell	Warm Up, Cool Down

Alone

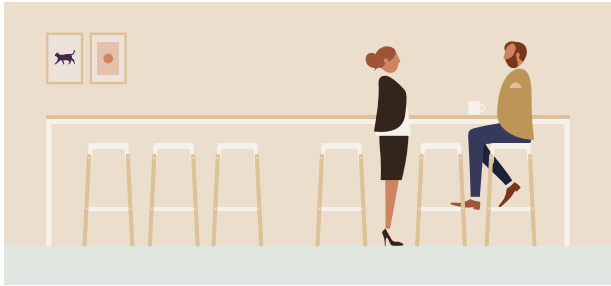|		
Process & Respond	Contemplate	Create

Together

Chat is an incidental and impromptu interaction with a colleague. It offers a chance to catch up, ask a quick question, or seek out an opinion. Chat often begins with a social focus that then sparks an idea or touches on an issue.

Co-Create is the generation of new ideas and content among groups. The activity may range in scale and formality from a quick problem-solving exercise at a white board to a multi-day retreat with an elaborate agenda. A variety of digital and physical tools assist people in sharing and generating ideas. Active engagement, conversation, content sharing, and creation are the key behaviors.
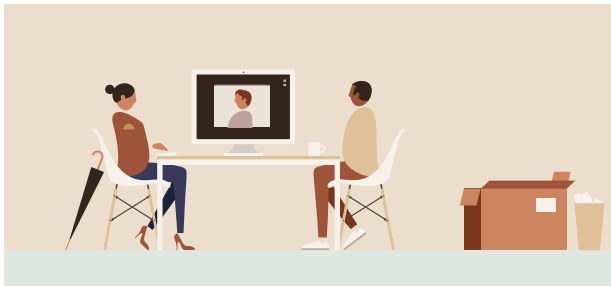

Converse is a purposeful interaction between two to three colleagues who address a defined topic. The activity varies in formality and privacy in accordance with the subject matter being addressed and the familiarity of the participants. One or more of the parties may participate through a digital device.
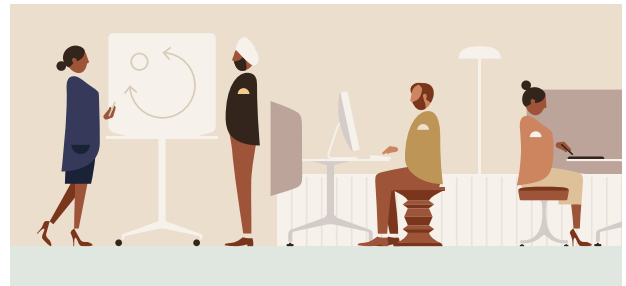

Divide & Conquer happens when a team with a common goal finds it valuable to work on individual components of a project while maintaining close proximity to one another. Working in parallel helps to resolve issues quickly and enables spontaneous collaboration as the need arises. Developments and content are shared among the group as the goal is reached.

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Together
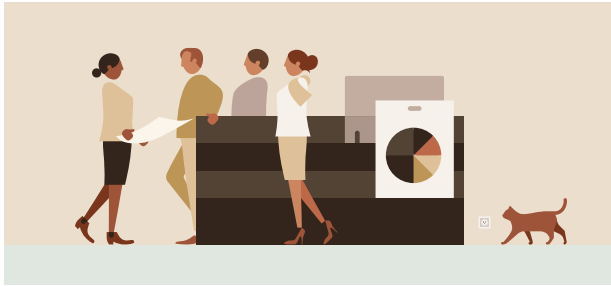
Huddle occurs when a team needs to address an urgent issue, or discuss and receive instructions for a plan of action. The goal is shared resolution and accountability, with only a brief disruption to the flow of work.
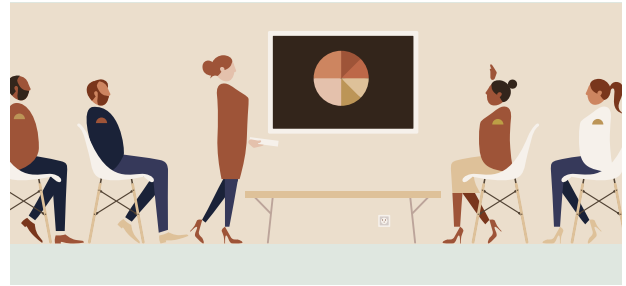

Show & Tell is a planned gathering at which information is shared among teams, with clients and colleagues, or more broadly to the organization. The key focus is always the presenter or information being presented. These gatherings range from informal status updates and project reviews, to regimented and rehearsed speeches. The level of audience participation varies accordingly.
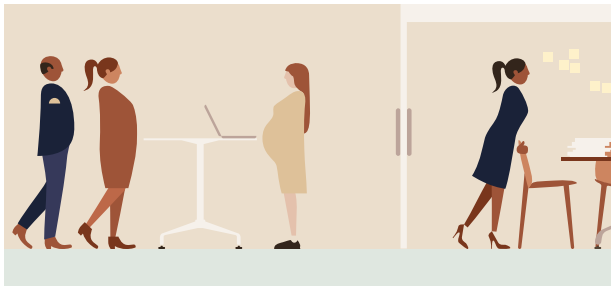
Warm Up, Cool Down occurs in the time leading up to and immediately following more formally scheduled engagements. The "warm up" may consist of last-minute adjustments to a presentation, or productive conversation with colleagues. The "cool down" offers an opportunity to discuss the content of the meeting, set next steps, and ensure alignment.

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Alone
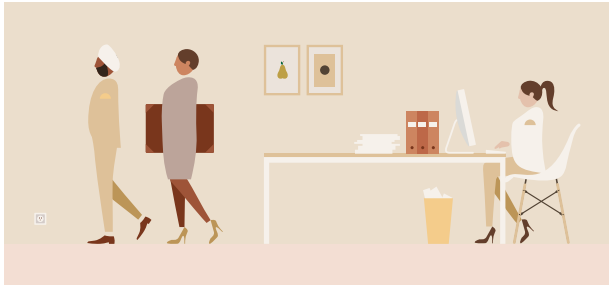
Process & Respond is the work generated by work. It occurs in response to (and generates) the feedback loop of emails, phone calls, texts, and messages that drive work forward. An individual may choose to set aside a specified time to do this work, or fill in the gaps of their day with it. It generally does not require extreme attention or deep thinking.

Contemplate is an opportunity for an individual to pause and consider the best way forward in their work, or ignore it momentarily and provide respite. The activity consists of whatever calms, inspires, and recharges the individual: enjoying a view of nature, reading a book or magazine, or sketching in a notepad. It also provides an opportunity to digest complex information with the necessary degree of focus.

Create occurs when a person engages with the specific content associated with their role, solves problems, and develops deliverables. This activity is not limited to traditionally creative fields, but rather reflects the mix of concentrative, individual tasks that help move all work forward.

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The Activities research is being used in two major ways. First, we're using it to help organizations understand the whole spectrum of needs people have as they move through their workday, transitioning between Activities. Understanding and supporting those needs and transitions will improve individual and organizational effectiveness, as evidenced by the exemplar organizations studied.

Second, once they understand the Activities, companies are using them to purposefully consider the behaviors they feel will help them meet their business objectives and to design spaces that support those behaviors. We believe space provides cues that encourage and signal the importance of desired behaviors.

The Activities help form the foundation of Living Office. They drove the development of our Settings (e.g., Haven, Forum, Landing). Each Setting meets behavioral, cognitive, and physical criteria based on our understanding of work modes. Strategic Placemaking, in which Settings are purpose-fully arranged within a Landscape (or floor plate) in such a way that they bring an organization's unique strategy to life, is essential to creating a Living Office.

Because of our understanding of the Activities, we can help organizations consider how to better provision for their people, their work, and ultimately their business.

1. Herman Miller, Inc., (with Cheskin Research) internal document, "Collaboration: Applied Exploration Report," 1998, as cited in "Making Room for Collaboration," http://www.hermanmiller.com/research/research-summaries/making-room-for-collaboration.html.

2. Herman Miller, Inc., and Gensler, "When Groups Work: A Joint Research Effort Exploring the Relationship Between Space and Group," 2007.

3. Nigel Oseland, PhD CPsychol, "The Psychology of Collaboration Space," on behalf of Herman Miller, June 2012. More than 50 sources were reviewed.

4. Norman Warner, Michael Letsky, Michael Cowen, "Cognitive Model of Team Collaboration: Macro-Cognitive Focus," 2005, p. 3; pdf: http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA476887.

5. Steve Johnson, *Where Good Ideas Come From*, Penguin Group, 2010, citing Kevin Dunbar's research, "How Scientists Build Models."

6. Herman Miller, "Ws of Work: A Global Exploration on Collaboration," September 2011. http://www.hermanmiller.com/research/research-summaries/what-it-takes-to-collaborate.html.

7. Herman Miller internal document, "The Anatomy of Collaboration," 2012.

8. Norman Warner, Michael Letsky, Michael Cowen, "Cognitive Model of Team Collaboration: Macro-Cognitive Focus," 2005, p. 3; pdf: http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA476887.