



Using the Nuances of Collaboration to Drive Innovation

Collaboration is more likely to lead to innovation if it's the right kind of collaboration and if it's supported in the right way.



Key Insights

- When people Co-Create (or collaborate to generate new ideas and content), the activity is supported by individual work done before and after the co-creation activity.
- Used together, Cove and Haven Settings provide optimal support for collaborative activities that spark creativity.
- Visual artifacts, which can be as simple as sketches on a whiteboard, serve as “critical sites of collaboration,” and can help teams innovate faster.
- Prospect, which includes both Creative Spaces for group work and Solo Spaces for individual work and features whiteboards, tackable surfaces, and media display, is uniquely suited to the work of teams, particularly those that are charged with being innovative.

Innovation Is Still King

At this point, anyone in business understands that innovation is not just the name of the game—it is the game. So much so that we likely don't need to quote a survey of 1,400 CEOs in 80 countries that found that innovation was the thing they most wanted to strengthen or give examples of the lengths companies will go to to achieve innovation.¹

Innovation is a bit of a mystery—if it was easy, every company would be innovating and no one would be asking questions about the best ways to do so. One of the things we do know, however, is that some ways of working are better for innovation than others. “While remote work clearly improves individual worker productivity by double digits, the more interactive and stimulating face-to-face interaction between employees is the key to dramatically increasing the much higher value (at least five times more) that is added by maximizing collaboration, creativity, and innovation,” says Dr. John Sullivan, a professor of Management at San Francisco State and an expert on human resources metrics.²

Evidence supports that working together does lead to innovation; for example, teams of inventors have more patents that are successful than those who work alone,³ and “extensively collaborative” companies perform better than their peers, according to one study.⁴

However, research also shows that brainstorming, one of the most popular ways of working together towards innovation, often doesn't work, and people actually come up with more original ideas when they work alone.⁵ Steve Wozniak, who invented the Apple I computer by himself, tells people who want to innovate, “Work alone ... Not on a committee. Not on a team.”⁶

So should people who want to innovate work together or alone? The answer is both. To understand why, it helps to know a little about human nature and a little about the nuances of collaboration.

Human Needs and Collaboration

At Herman Miller, we know from research that people have six fundamental human needs: achievement, autonomy, belonging, purpose, security, and status.⁷ Our understanding of those needs helped us develop Living Office. This research-based approach to placemaking provides a framework for creating a purposeful variety of settings based on people's needs and daily work activities. Although people do a myriad of activities throughout the day, our research groups these behaviors into 10 types. Three are categories of activities that people do alone; seven are activities people do together. While in the past, any sort of group activity was deemed “collaboration,” we now know that people work together in many different ways.

“You can't design for generic ideas like ‘collaboration,’” says Greg Parsons, Senior Vice President & Creative Director—Work, at Herman Miller. “Only by breaking [collaboration] down can you get to the spaces and the furnishings and the tools needed to support the activities people actually perform when they come together.”



Achievement



Purpose



Autonomy



Security



Belonging



Status

An understanding of the six fundamental human needs informed Herman Miller's development of Living Office.



Co-Creation Has an “I”

One of those seven “together” activities is Co-Create, i.e., generating new ideas and content or solving a problem as a group, either on the fly or in a planned session. It includes everything from quick, impromptu problem-solving at a white board to a multi-day retreat with an elaborate agenda. Because they lead to deeper engagement with the content, talking, drawing, and sharing ideas in various media are hallmarks of co-creation. In fact, research shows that physical objects like drawings help team members arrive at a shared understanding about what constitutes the task they need to complete, in essence becoming “critical sites of collaboration” without our even being conscious of it.⁸

Co-creation is of special interest because it is a particular type of collaboration—the type that can lead to innovation. The fundamental human needs of achievement (striving for excellence and pride in accomplishment) and belonging (the desire for a meaningful connection to others) are particularly relevant to co-creation. The need for achievement can motivate people to come up with new ideas. And a strong sense of belonging puts them at ease among their colleagues, which can make it easier for them to share their ideas.

Brainstorming is one common method of co-creating. And although that is a group activity, research shows that when individuals take some time to think through issues in advance of getting together, it leads to better idea generation in the brainstorming session.⁹ A hybrid method of brainstorming, in which individuals come up with ideas separately and then get together to discuss them, generates three times more ideas.¹⁰

Settings for individual and group work are both needed to support co-creation. Teams need the ability to gather quickly when inspiration strikes, but the individuals on the team also need a place to prepare for the group work and to carry out individual tasks needed to realize ideas.

Environments that are conducive to co-creation have seven characteristics:

1. Remove distractions to increase focus.
2. Encourage visual thinking.
3. Provide a safe space for creativity.
4. Promote equal participation.
5. Get people moving.
6. Put the tools close to the work.
7. Support creativity together and alone.

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Havens, Coves, and the Work of Innovation

Although there are many different settings in which people can successfully innovate, taken together, the Haven and the Cove are two settings that create the ideal conditions for co-creating that can lead to innovation.

A Haven is a small shelter where a person can do focused work without distraction. It can be an enclosed room or a semi-sheltered or screened-in space out in the open, and ideally it's easy for people to locate and identify.

A Cove is a compact space close to individual workpoints or common areas that enables people to get together and interact for short periods of time. In some cases, a Cove includes enough boundary that the people using it won't disrupt others working close by.

Each setting plays a role in supporting co-creation. The Haven gives a person space to focus and think, and the Cove gives the team a place to gather, share, and build on each other's thinking. The proximity of these settings to each other is also critical to the task of co-creation. People must be able to move easily between these two kinds of settings, as dictated by the kind of work they need to do.

Prospect: Mission Control for Creativity

While Havens and Coves can be designed with a variety of products, Herman Miller's Prospect was intentionally designed to support both, and it supports the seven core characteristics of co-creation.

Prospect is a portfolio of semicircular freestanding furniture designed to support creativity together and alone, allowing small teams and individuals to naturally transition between working together (in Creative Spaces, which create Coves) and on their own (in Solo Spaces, which create Havens). It features whiteboards, tackable surfaces, and media display, making it easy for people to share their thoughts visually and for the team to build on ideas and take them to the next level. In a way, it's mission control for group and individual creativity.

Creative Spaces support the visual thinking, iteration, and collaboration that are proven ways of getting to the right questions and better answers. Inside the Creative Space, sharing ideas is as easy as turning around and scribbling on a whiteboard or pinning up work to review.



Havens give people a place to escape distraction and focus on individual work.



With its semicircular design and its whiteboards and tackable surfaces, Prospect is mission control for group and individual creativity.

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Prospect offers other benefits, as well. The semicircular design reduces distractions (visual and audio) and provides a safe space for creativity. Providing a measure of privacy for the creation process increases the likelihood that people will put forward their most radical ideas—and innovation needs that. For example, one administrative assistant at an industrial manufacturer suggested using a robotic spider, like one she'd seen in a movie, to carry a camera inside a difficult-to-reach airplane part to inspect it. The idea seemed silly to many, but the chief technology officer thought it was worth a try. It worked, and the inspection of that part now takes only 15 percent of the time it used to.¹¹

The design of the Prospect Table and Stools promotes equal participation: the height puts sitting and standing team members at the same eye level. Meanwhile, the shape (round, so it has no sides) and size of the table encourages active engagement. Because people can sit or stand, Prospect also encourages postural variety and gets people moving. According to research conducted at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, “groups working together on a project while standing are measurably more engaged and less territorial than while seated.”¹² The Stools store neatly under the table.

Taken together, the size of the structure and table create a proximal relationship between people using the space and the tools within it, which puts everyone close to the tools

and the work. People can grab what they need and write on the surrounding white board simply by reaching out. The ledge is designed for leaning, giving people another postural choice, as well as a spot to hold phones or coffee cups so that people can reach them without disengaging from the discussion. The sections of the interior structure can be changed to either use them as a white board or allow work to be tacked up.

Solo Spaces are ideal for individual creative work or simply a place to settle in and tackle a quick task that requires quiet or concentration. The round shape offers visual privacy—unique within an open floorplan—and the soft, sound-absorbing acoustic pads create a peaceful spot for working.

The impetus for this “both/and” design came from designer Richard Holbrook’s observations of forward-thinking workplace strategies around the globe. He wanted to design something specifically to support best practices in creativity so that people wouldn’t have to develop work-arounds like foam core boards in traditional conference rooms. He didn’t want people to have to go home in order to find a place where they could do the individual, focused work that collaboration also requires.

“Today,” he says, “with so many challenging problems to solve, it seems to me that we can all certainly benefit from more creativity, more connection, and better collaboration.” Prospect gives organizations a graceful way to achieve that.



Prospect provides a sense of visual privacy—and that can make team members more comfortable about sharing offbeat ideas.

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