Creating Environments to Work Across Distance

🕐 Read 12 minutes

PRESENCE DISPARITY MAKES DISTRIBUTED COLLABORATION CHALLENGING

As businesses compete to become faster, smarter and more innovative in today's highly competitive global market, talent is becoming more important than ever. Leveraging that talent has seen the rise of distributed teams as companies bring together the best people in their global organizations to innovate and solve problems, and apply the best available skills and experience to each project, wherever their people may physically be.

As distributed teams become pervasive, the demands and challenges that employees and businesses face to make them successful are becoming evident. For employees, the new skill sets demanded today include the ability to successfully work across different locations, time zones, countries and cultures, to navigate distributed teamwork that is cross-functional, cross-cultural and cross-organizational. For employees and businesses alike, presence disparity, in which the experience of teammates who are participating remotely is disadvantaged compared to those working side-by-side, threatens productivity and makes collaboration challenging.

1

MAKING DISTANCE DISAPPEAR

Researchers at Steelcase have studied distributed teams and the problems they face for several years. They found that the most efficient way for two people to get things done is sitting right next to each other. However, for various different reasons, companies choose to separate people and teams by time and distance when there is an advantage, but the bonds of social trust become strained. Steelcase wanted to experiment on new ways to reconnect these strained bonds and make distance disappear.

Anticipating the needs and challenges of distributed teams and co-located work in the Asia Pacific region, Steelcase embarked on a long-term test of the integrated workplace utilizing technology to work across distances. The test used the concept of 'wormholes', a continuously-open, real-time, high-definition video connection that acts like an open window between two locations. It linked sales teams in Steelcase WorkLife centers in markets throughout Asia with dedicated Sale Resource Network (SRN) support teams in the Steelcase Global Business Center. The Center is home to 350 people who provide product specification, renderings, and other sales and marketing support for various Steelcase offices and dealerships throughout Asia. The SRN support teams aim to give local sales teams throughout the region a competitive edge in their respective markets by drawing on the wide range of skills and depth of resources in Kuala Lumpur.

The wormholes were first introduced in 2011, driven by the desire to build trust and understanding between distributed team members. The goal was to create personal connections among colleagues as if they were working side-by-side. Prior to the integration of the wormholes , the SRN was under-utilized as the sales offices were frustrated with the perceived slow response times and discouraged by the complexity of working across distance with the team in Kuala Lumpur. Wormholes were initially piloted in Steelcase offices in four countries, to link the WorkLife with the center. Today, there are 11 wormholes in all.

The wormhole set-up aims to create a seamless real-time collaboration experience that removes the distance between members of a distributed team. The physical set-up is critical to minimizing this gap, by optimizing the design of the space and video experience to mimic being collocated. For the Steelcase WorkLife sales teams in each market, video conferencing units with large TV screens are normally set up on or close to the bench where the sales people work. In Kuala Lumpur, the SRN team that supports each market also sits at a bench with a telepresence unit at one end. When they look up they can see directly into the screen and into the sales offices, as if it is a continuation of their own bench. The effect essentially is like having your support team just sitting a few seats away from you, instead of in another country. The hidden value of the wormhole is not just sharing information, but rather creating 'ambient awareness'. Simply being aware the remote team is physically present and available creates social awareness.

"For distributed teams, the design goal should always be to eliminate the gap of not being collocated."

_____

PATRICIA KAMMER | Researcher, Steelcase Inc.

CUTTING DOWN ON COMPLEXITY

The use of wormholes has enabled the GBC to transition from a very functional-based shared service set-up in which people were sending emails to each other and scheduling phone calls to having a dedicated support team speaking face-to-face in real time with the sales people they are supporting. Prior to their introduction, sales had to input their request into a generic email address and hope someone in Kuala Lumpur would have time to do the work requested. It was difficult to build trust over the phone, and the process was often drawn out, especially for creating larger proposals that included pricing, drawings, quotes, insights, and more.

The implementation of the wormholes, together with the restructuring of teams in the GBC to support individual markets, cut down on this complexity. With one contact person always available, there is an immediate response and face-to-face interaction. Content like renderings and layout drawings are discussed step-by-step over video for more clarity, with real-time interaction providing much more understanding.

12% improvement in meeting sales requested due dates.

20% increase in 1 day turnaround times for requests submitted by sales.

For distributed teams, having a visual connection is especially important when the team is comprised of people from different countries and cultures. Visual cues help break down language barriers among regional and global teams. Different accents, dialects and semantics can make it difficult to understand certain words or phrases. Being able to see confusion in a person's eyes gives you an immediate visual cue that you're not being understood, so you can restate or ask for feedback. As a result, people become better communicators and more sensitive to cultural differences.

BUILDING TRUST ACROSS DISTANCE

The more rapport that is built over the wormhole with each successive project, the more an unspoken bond forms between the two teams. In fact, individuals often spend more time talking to a person through the wormhole than they do to someone sitting on the other side of the same office. It becomes a very strong working relationship as they work side by side. It is also improving individual interpersonal skills, as they learn to interact and work with different personalities.

For individuals in the teams, the wormhole creates more trust in the workplace. As distributed colleagues get to know each other better, through work and socially on a daily basis, the quality of the collaboration improves. There's more empathy towards the team on the other side of the camera as they establish personal relationships. Andrea Albiez, Sales Manager in Steelcase Sydney, explains: "Getting to know our support team has been important for the development of a relationship, we chat to them about their families and what's happening in their lives."

"The wormhole creates a happier environment in the workplace. There's more empathy towards the team on the other side of the camera as we know them personally."

CHRISTY LEE | Sales Manager, Hong Kong

Barbara Reimbold, Steelcase GBC Managing Director, has seen the change: "Over wormholes, we find people are gentler, more understanding and considerate than if they are talking over the phone. The relationships and trust that are built through everyday face-to-face interaction through the wormhole are invaluable, and can't be replicated by planned conference calls. You can socialize over the wormholes – and even celebrate birthdays."

"If you've ever sent an email to someone late at night and they respond immediately, it makes you smile knowing others are working so late. This is an example of reconnecting the bonds of social trust. In our experiments with wormholes, that same smile happens when one team overhears another singing happy birthday and joins in the celebration thousands of miles away."

JASON HEREDIA | VP of Marketing, Asia Pacific

CREATING A GLOBAL COMMUNITY

For Steelcase India, the major advantage of the wormhole is that it makes them feel they are part of a bigger global team. Rahul Shetty, Steelcase Mumbai Sales Manager, explains: "We are a small office with only 30 people, yet we don't feel isolated. The KL office over the camera is an extended team, they are part of our office. We feel like we are part of a bigger community of Steelcase." When clients come into Steelcase Mumbai, they use the wormhole to talk to the renderers and designers, and can see that Steelcase is a global company with global resources. It provides a real time showcase of the advantages of working in distributed teams, being able to draw on a world of skills and resources to tackle the project in hand.

Francesco Yan, Leader Sales Support in Shanghai concurs. "The wormhole is always a stop for clients who visit our WorkLife. We will introduce our clients to the team in KL, the people who are working on their renderings, quotes and pricing, and introduce the team to our clients. It allows our clients to put a face to the work that is being done for them. They can also understand our global resource capability."

As the experience with distributed teams at Steelcase AP shows, there are numerous advantages to be gained when the interaction is seamless. When the gap between members of the collocated team is eliminated by the appropriate integration of space design and technology, and supported by clear processes and allocation of work, the face-to-face relationships and trust between distributed team members will grow. The real-time interaction through the wormholes has enabled each sales office throughout the region to leverage the talent and resources of the GBC to their best advantage.

Featured Product

media:scape