

Staying Connected at Work: 1900s to Now



Since the world's first skyscraper went up in Chicago in 1885, people have converged to work together for a common goal. Companies and how people work together have changed dramatically since then and, in recent years, these changes have come fast and furious.

Phones, dictation machines, personal computers — over time, the ways people stay connected to get work done has evolved in parallel with the cost, size and distribution of technology. The workplace has also adapted to accommodate communication tools as they became more prevalent and bigger and, then again, as they shrank in size.

Archive photos reveal how designers have created work environments since the first high rise to bring people, place and technology together to help people work better. And, now, for the first time, Microsoft and Steelcase are coming together to develop new spaces designed to unlock creativity at work.

1900-1950: LIMITED TECHNOLOGY

In the early 1900s as organizations grew, more and more people began working together. Businesses transitioned from a craft economy to a capital economy, and we began to see new philosophies around organizational structure. The efficiency of Taylorism in the early 1900s gave way to more creative work in the 1920s and '30s. Communication tools advanced as well. Phones and dictation machines were all dedicated to the most powerful people within the organization.

1950-1980: DEMOCRATIZED TECHNOLOGY

During World War II, the government developed systems to process reams of information quickly and efficiently. Following the war, business leaders adopted these efficiencies to speed up repetitive work, like sorting punch cards and data entry.

At same time, the distribution of technology became further democratized. More people had access to phones and multi-line phones became commonplace. Additional technology meant added connections and wires that all needed space within the office. In the mid-to-late 1970s, panels and moveable walls changed the way work environments were designed to accommodate the wires and allow for easy reconfiguration.

1980-1990: THE PERSONAL COMPUTER

In the 1980s, advancements in technology were paralleled by improvements to the work environment. More people had access to computers as the decades progressed and furniture helped support the modern worker — designed to allow people to connect to power right at their desks. The rise of the personal computer coincided with a shift in the workforce. It diversified the kinds of roles available, including a dramatic influx of white collar workers.

1990-2015: EMBRACING NETWORKS

In the 1990s, the flow of information accelerated and the speed of business sped up as well. Organizations began to see themselves in terms of social networks and cultures, as much as structures. The world was introduced to the internet, while collaboration around technology became an important part of the workplace.

NOW: SMART + CONNECTED

In today's workplaces, thresholds to and from space are being minimized. [Smart + Connected Spaces](#) are connecting distributed global teams no matter where they are working. People, place and technology are intricately linked. At the same time, technology is poised to take on repetitive tasks, leaving people to create and problem solve driving growth and innovation within organizations.

Until now, many organizations haven't thought about their investments in space and technology holistically. In order to help people reach their creative potential at work, Steelcase and Microsoft have introduced [Creative Spaces](#), a jointly developed range of technology-enabled work spaces designed to foster creative thinking at work.

Explore [Creative Spaces](#) and the [Microsoft](#) and [Steelcase](#) partnership. Plus, read what former Steelcase CEO [Jim Keane](#) says about the future of work with Microsoft.



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Rebecca, an Emmy-winning journalist, reports on global research impacting the places where people work, learn and heal. Over her career, Rebecca spent 17 years covering local and national news events on television and a variety of digital platforms. She directed a digital news group in Kansas City for three years before becoming news director in Grand Rapids, Michigan for more than five years. Prior to Steelcase, Rebecca worked with one of the four largest media groups in the United States to coordinate news coverage among 48 newsrooms from the east to west coast.

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