

Tents at Work?

The exciting new Steelcase Work Tents Collection brings privacy and comfort to the office

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Martha Stewart and Snoop Dogg. Pineapple and pizza. Polka dots and stripes.

Every now and again, two seemingly divergent ideas work together—like another unlikely combo: offices and tents.

Tents at work?

That's right, tents at work. But it wasn't that simple, as design challenges rarely are.

It started when the Steelcase Design team was doing a study on privacy. Building on research the company conducted with researchers at the University of Wisconsin, they knew that visual distractions can interrupt focus, often more than noise. They were shooting for an inexpensive solution, light in scale, using less material—something that could be easily moved and highly flexible. With a number of outdoor enthusiasts on the team they got inspired by one of the earliest forms of shelter and privacy—the trustworthy tent. They did an exploration of a variety of tent shapes, materials and functionality and recalled the psychological comfort and feelings of safety inside a tent. They wondered “could we design something to help workers feel the same way?”

A new combo

The team reached out to Chris Pottenger, an industrial designer who spent his career designing outdoor equipment for companies like Big Agnes, North Face and REI. Pottenger's portfolio of designs ranged from sleeping bags to backpacks, clothing and canteens. And yes, tents.

“Tents inherently make you feel comfortable and safe when you're inside of them, says Pottenger. “The idea of bringing tents to the workplace is so innovative and something I had to be a part of.”

Creating by unlearning.

The team quickly discovered that designing a tent was unlike anything they had ever done. “Steelcase is really good at designing objects with hard surfaces, such as wood and steel,” said Pottenger. “This is different. Using new materials allowed for more possibilities in the design.”

The team conducted a series of intense design sprints, bringing in engineers and upholsterers and began experimenting with tensile structures—a construction of elements carrying only tension, no compression or bending.

Initially, they conducted rapid prototyping using materials like pipe cleaners, string and duct tape to make small scale models—like a school science fair project. They found the structures are inherently dynamic and hard to predict how any given shape will behave.

Privacy. Pitched.

After months of tinkering and testing, iterating and imagining, the project was completed. The finished collection currently includes three structures, each with their own unique features, with more ideas in process. While they look nothing like the structures early nomads once used or anything you'll find in a campground, the original inspiration shines through—a perfect solution for anyone who needs a little control over their privacy at work.

The Steelcase Work Tents Collection currently includes three structures, all available now.

Boundary Tent

A lightweight and versatile freestanding screen. Reminiscent of more traditional workplace screens, the simple, flat design gave the team their first opportunity to work with tensile construction in its most basic form.

Boundary Tent is a freestanding screen that delivers on-demand privacy and space definition.

Table Tent

It sits on any worksurface, providing personal privacy when it's time to focus. With shielding on three sides and overhead, Table Tent blocks out visual distractions and quickly converts any desk, bench or table into a safe and private place to work. The design further challenged the team with tensile construction on a curved, three-dimensional frame, and poles that bent and crossed.

Table Tent is a personal screen that provides on-demand privacy and shielding at a desk or table.

Pod Tent

Most reminiscent of an outdoor tent, this design allowed the team to build a larger scale tent that not only stretched more, but stretched their design skills, too. Inspired by the iconic Gherkin building in London, England, the diagonal shape and simplified membrane made of aluminum tent poles create a wide mouth, open-air roof and exposed exoskeleton.

Pod Tent is a freestanding pod that provides a distraction-free space for an individual desk or lounge setting.

Helping You Work. Making You Smile.

In contrast to the heavy, linear expressions found in many workplaces, Work Tents feature light, airy, organic shapes. The simple screens and small enclosures challenge the norm, giving people unexpected and playful — yet hard-working — alternatives to help protect them from office distractions.

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