Activating Collaboration in the Open Plan (Transcript)

Open Office Truth Podcast Series: Episode 5

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This episode features: former Steelcase CEO Jim Keane and Microsoft Chief Product Officer Panos Panay

INTRODUCTION

Jim Keane: So when people think of collaboration, they think of meetings and when they think of meetings, they don't think of their favorite experiences in the workplace. They think of boring long events where they're sitting in a chair, in a formal conference room and there's just a few people talking. And in fact, if you watch how people who are adopting new practices around innovation are actually working, they're using design thinking, they're using agile, and these are naturally processes that are about activity.

Chris Congdon: That are very interactive.

Jim: There is a sense of progress and energy and everyone's participating, but they're all participating differently, because they're all different people. So active collaboration is that idea. And yet when people try to practice that today, it's clear they don't have the tools they need.

Host Katie Pace: Welcome to What Workers Want. A Steelcase 360 Podcast and the new 360 real time. We're a Steelcase podcast with behind the scenes conversations about what we're learning about the places where people work, learn and heal. I'm your host Katie Pace and I'm here today with our producer Rebecca Charbauski.

Co-host Rebecca Charbauski: Glad to be back.

Katie: So Rebecca, this is our final episode in our five part series about the open office truth. We're almost at the end and as you heard at the top, former Steelcase CEO, Jim Keane, he's going to talk about collaboration today, the last piece in his open office puzzle. So we're going to bring you the conversation that Jim had with Microsoft chief product officer, Panos Panay, in New York a few months ago on how to improve collaboration in the open plan.

Rebecca: We want to let people know that if you haven't been listening to the podcast series, you can start with us right now. Listen and learn about collaboration, especially since I recently read a study from Microsoft that says you and I, Katie, were on two times as many teams as we were just five years ago.

Katie: Wow.

Rebecca: Does that feel right?

Katie: Yeah, that sounds right. There's a lot more collaboration today.

Rebecca: If people want to hear the previous four episodes that can go to <u>steelcase.com/openofficetruth</u> where we put them all in one place. We have episodes about the neuroscience of privacy, about designing for privacy with new and exciting solutions, and about how to create shared spaces that people actually use instead of they sit pretty and empty. That's at <u>steelcase.com/openofficetruth</u>. And we want to make sure people subscribe to What Workers Want because we have some really good conversations coming up with authors and CEOs that you're not going to want to miss.

Katie: Let's go back a minute to the first episode, when we talked about the history of the open office, we established then that the intentions weren't bad, right? Organizations wanted to break down walls, build trust, add collaboration, serendipity, all of these really good things that were going to supposedly lead to more creativity, more ideas, more innovation, better business results, right?

Rebecca: Yeah. We were going to figure out teamwork the best way to do it.

Katie: But throughout, we've also learned that maybe knocking down all the walls and opening up the plan, maybe that wasn't really the one way or the right way, and that the way we're working, the way we're collaborating is fundamentally changing. And what's interesting is decades ago it was changing and it's still changing today, right?

Rebecca: And people spend more than half their day. We know collaborating these days. In fact, I think Harvard Business Review said 80% more of your time is spent than two decades ago working with others, that's everything from meetings to emails to phone calls. And we learned from episode three that the way we work is changing. So instead of a relay team where I hand the piece of the project to you and you do your piece and hand it to someone else, we're more likely to go back and forth like a basketball team and to be iterative. So we're going to start the conversation about collaboration with Jim Keane, the former CEO of Steelcase talking about this <u>fundamental shift</u>.

Jim: So, five years ago or 10 years ago, maybe everything was fixed. You'd come in the morning, you went to a very predictable place to work. That was your assigned workstation. You didn't move from there unless you went to a meeting room and then maybe you came back. That began to change, it started really when laptops came along and then we were able to be more mobile because of Wi-Fi and suddenly people were able to get up and move, maybe people used less assigned desks. But for the most part, the furniture, the technology, most of these things were still relatively fixed. When we really give people the tools they need to do what they want to do naturally; what we've found is that they want everything to be moving. So they want to <u>reconfigure their space on demand</u>. They want to be able to change the furniture, change the privacy screens, go from individual work to collaborative work and do it in a way that's super frictionless.

And when they tried to do that, they get 90% there, and the last 10% is what kills them. They try to move that desk, but the cords won't come apart and they… it's these easy details that stop you from being able to do what you want to do. Or they want to move a device, a technology device from the conference room back to their desk. But to do that, they need to turn it off and they have to unplug it and you have to reboot it, and that period of time breaks the continuity of work that they really desire. That's what's changing all the stuff in the office, it has to be more fluid. Everything has to be reconfigurable, not by facilities managers, but by users themselves.

Katie: So one of the reasons Jim and Panos were in New York was to introduce new designs in this new technology that helps people work together.

Rebecca: Right. You were there, Katie, Microsoft had this big dramatic moment where they pulled back this beautiful black curtain to show this dazzling large scale Surface Hub 2X, and if you haven't seen it, it's this interactive, slim, sleek device. And it also can come in a really small footprint

Katie: And Steelcase actually worked together with Microsoft to create Steelcase Roam; a mobile cart in an easy to hang wall mounting system that allows you and allows workers to pull the hub or take it anywhere. It's literally a cart on wheels and 360 editor, Chris Congdon was there with Jim and the Panos in New York. Let's hear the part of her conversation with them about how new tools like this will help improve collaboration.

Chris Congdon: One of the things I'd love to find out a little bit more from your perspective about, it has to do with this study that we did earlier this year where we were looking at what are some of the ways people are collaborating and the things they need to collaborate. And we found something really interesting that the vast majority of people actually do want to have devices like the Hub to be able to collaborate together. But when we broke it down, we saw that it was kind of interesting that the people who are doing the vast amount of collaborating don't have as much access as some of the other people, particularly people in like the C-suite who have more access to devices. I'm just thinking about the design and the form factor of the Hub 2X like how is that going to make this technology more accessible to more people?

Panos Panay: Yeah, it's a great question. There's something about the mobility of this device that changes it. When you get into the static nature of a piece of tech or the static nature of a collaboration device in its traditional sense, it's going to be in a room and maybe that's not in a room that's accessible to everybody. And I think that's maybe one of the physical blockers up there.

But as the workplace changes and there's more work, open workspace, less offices, the idea that we can take Roam, which was created by Steelcase, just incredible idea between the teams coming together and then we're able to move this product to anywhere it wants to be used, you start to unlock some of these barriers that are in front of... hey we have a piece of tech but it's only in a certain space. I think that makes sense that the tech is in a certain space today, but I think the future kind of begs us to make sure as the workplace changes the product can adapt to it, and this is part of it. When we designed the product, we made it modular so you know you can have this product with the Surface Hub built in, you can have it as a two way screen that's modular that you can connect to any Surface device. I think there's so many different ways to get access to this product. It's pretty exciting.

Jim: It also feels to me as I was watching you demonstrate it today that it's not simply a display, it's really something that integrates with Microsoft Teams in a new way. It's almost like as you're developing Microsoft Teams, you needed something like this to be the primary device you would use when you're gathered as a team.

Panos: Yeah, it is. Teams is all about collaboration, it's an incredible product. I mean Microsoft Teams has done outstanding job of bringing teams together. I'm a Microsoft person telling you that, but I will tell you it is a powerful tool, and having an integrated version of it with the device is pretty incredible and that it not only, it's inspiring to me, but it'll enable so much more collaboration to happen.

Katie: So Rebecca, this really all circles back to this conversation we've been having about the open office.

Rebecca: Yes.

Katie: Like the way we're working is changing and the work we're doing is actually changing. And so then their spaces need to change as well. And these shared spaces away from the desk, these collaborative spaces, they become even more important and it puts so much pressure on them to help us do our jobs well.

Rebecca: Exactly. It's not enough for them to sit there and look pretty. I need to be able to get work done. And Katie, when you're in Chicago and I'm here in Michigan now I can finally wheel you in instead of just pulling you up on a little cell phone or even a small laptop, you can actually be part of the conversation almost like you're right there with us.

Katie: Like in my own little robot in the space.

Rebecca: Exactly. And think about how that can be different within a meeting room as well. So instead of everyone just sitting around the conference room table, it's about being up and active and engaging with the content. It's this idea of using our bodies to activate our brains. So Chris had this conversation with Jim in New York and let's pick up there

Chris: Jim, what Panos was just describing really feels a lot like the concept that you introduced today; this notion of <u>active collaboration</u>. And it had its Genesis and some of the work that we've done in learning and in the classrooms and understanding how that happens. Can you tell us a little bit about what active collaboration is and where that idea came from?

Jim: Sure. So when people think of collaboration, they think of meetings and when they think of meetings, they don't think of their favorite experiences in the workplace. They think of boring long events where they're sitting in a chair, in a formal conference room, and there's just a few people talking. Maybe somebody is making a big presentation and you're just trying to get through it. And it reminds us of what it felt like to be in school in the old days when students would sit in a classroom and the professor would talk on and on, and your job as a student was simply to take notes, memorize everything, and play it back on the exam.

Chris: Yeah.

Jim: So we've already learned in the world of education that if you really want people to learn, you have to engage them more completely. And different people learn in different ways, so some people learn by building things. Some people learn through debate and dialogue. Some people learn by thinking deeply, maybe writing their own version of what they just heard. But however it is you learn, it's clear that you learned by being active, not by being passive. So if we take those same lessons about what it means to be human in a classroom and think about that in the workplace, we need to activate these spaces more, to activate these meetings to bring more energy. And in fact, if you watch how people who are adopting new practices around innovation are actually working, they're using design thinking, they're using agile, and these are naturally processes that are about activity.

Chris: That are very interactive. Right.

Jim: You're brainstorming, you're generating ideas, you're going through the divergent phase of innovation. Then you begin to synthesize and make choices about what you're going to keep and what you're going to discard. And, you're developing a point of view, and then you go through it all over again. There is a sense of progress and energy and everyone's participating, but they're all participating differently because they're all different people.

Active collaboration is that idea. And yet when people tried to practice that today, it's clear they don't have the tools they need. They want to work that way, and they walk into a conference room with a big table and chairs and it's beautiful…

Chris: And it will be weird if you stand up.

Jim: Yeah. And you've got art on the walls. I want to use those walls. I want to write on those walls. I want to put my ideas up on the walls. But they're not set up for that. So teams are struggling to actually do active collaboration because they don't have all the capabilities from architecture, from furniture and from technology, but we're getting ready to change that.

Chris: Yeah. That was one of the big findings in our research that a lot of people want to be able to move themselves and move their furniture and be empowered to be able to make those choices themselves.

Rebecca: Now Katie, you know as much as anybody being a distributed employee can be hard.

Katie: Yes.

Rebecca: Sometimes you miss a lot.

Katie: Yeah, it can. It can feel like I'm really missing a lot.

Rebecca: We're in those meetings and we're having the conversation and we say, "bye Katie" And then the conversation continues.

Katie: The conversation continues and I miss it. Or you're walking through and you see somebody at a bench and you say, "Hey, let's talk about this, let's talk about this, let's call Katie" and you know, you call me on your cell phone or something, and it's now with the Surface Hub 2, imagine if you could roll me over, call me and… Oh Hey, let's pull up the content. Let's collaborate on this piece together.

Rebecca: It's like you're right there.

Katie: It's like I'm right there. So Chris talked to Panos about this and asked just about those distributed employees. Let's listen to what they had to say.

Chris: So Panos, you're a global organization. We're a global organization. A lot of us have teammates who are scattered all over the world, all over the country. And that's always been a challenge. It's been a challenge we've been trying to work on for a while. So from your perspective and where you guys are going with the Surface family, and particularly with the new Surface Hub. But how was the design of the device changing the way we're going to have remote participants contribute in collaboration?

Panos: Here's what's amazing about the idea of companies that are continuing to be more global and using the global workforce to connect with each other and create. The amazing part is that the diversity that comes within product making and the inclusion of so many different voices and cultures coming together. I remember 15 years ago you were designing a product in the US you didn't have that many filters for what is it that somebody in Southeast Asia really wanted relative to this product, but now that the teams are all working together, we feel like we're in the same room and answering your questions.

This technology enables you to feel like you're in the same room. And all of a sudden the global scale has been shrunk down to all of us connected visually, we are at a point where we can see each other, the micro tells us that we talked about before or the behaviors, the expressions when you… you might be overseas, but you feel like you're in the same room.

I think the power of that is so incredible and that's what this technology is meant to enable; remove all those barriers. And it enables so many new opportunities like cultures coming together to create. And we see that, we see that in the design of our products showing up, we see it in inclusion when we think about how we want to continue to make our products more inclusive, how we want to draw into the world of how to make them more accessible. And what you start to see is so many people with different filters come to play and there's not one voice stronger than the other. And this is what I'm in love with; What Steelcase does because they understand room dynamics so well. They understand the concept of how people are communicating and who owns the room or how many people are talking at one time.

Jim mentioned today he was used to these meetings that are tiring and just two people talk and everybody watches. And this product, this technology starts to remove those cultural dependencies We used to have in creating with a classic meeting and we started opening the window and doors to more of it. And then now you take the modularity and the movement of the product and where it can be and could be, it may not look the same like oversees, the room changes. There are all these little dynamics that change the emotion and I think we're going to see that this product specifically is going to enable more diverse perspectives.

Chris: Inclusiveness.

Panos: It matters a ton to me and I think seeing that and feeling it and hearing our customers talk about how they now connect globally and how we build products now and how we think about it, it's pretty inspiring.

Katie: So another reason everyone was in New York was to introduce the [Steelcase Flex Collection](#). Super cool collection designed specifically for teams to empower them to adapt their space however they need to.

Rebecca: Exactly. And if people haven't seen the Steelcase Flex Collection, it's this moveable collection of desks, tables, whiteboards, carts, space dividers, accessories.

Katie: It's cool.

Rebecca: It is. And the height adjustable desk is super cool. You can stand at it with your laptop and it won't move if you push it or lean against it. But if you come to it sideways, you can literally push it with a fingertip. It is really unique in the way that it's made it easy for teams to move it around and create the spaces they want to create just on the fly.

Katie: So much of the magic of this collection is in a details and the designers, they didn't miss anything, and they really watched teams around the world work in agile ways. And it's cool to see the pictures that they brought back of how these teams work, the little tiny details that they need. So since we can't show you all those details, let's listen to Chris and Jim talk about them in more detail.

Chris: So with the Steelcase Flex Collection, there's a lot of interesting things about it. So I'm curious from your perspective, Jim, what are some of the things you love the most out of that collection? Are there, are there a couple of favorites that you could pick out and say, this is really cool?

Jim: Yeah. So the first thing I love the most is something that's sort of meta, but it's the fact that the team that developed Flex actually used Flex prototypes to develop the product line. So from the first week or two I saw them working, they were already prototyping ideas, like the <u>Acoustic Boundaries</u> that are now in the product line were just crazy ideas. I remember standing there next to that team space and looking and thinking, there's no way that's ever going to turn into products.

Chris: Yeah.

Jim: It was big. It was unclear to me what it was going to do, but they kept iterating on it and now I look at the Acoustic Boundary as product and I say, of course, and everyone who looks at it says, of course, that's exactly what we wanted. We really had no idea. It was all about experimentation and by using it themselves, they discovered what was useful and what wasn't.

Chris: Yeah. The Acoustic Boundary for people who are listening to the podcast, I remember one of the working names was like a Sound Tree because in some ways almost this fabric that covers it. To me looked almost like bark, at least that's how I associated it, but it almost looks like a tree, but it actually has sound absorbing properties, right?

Jim: Yeah. It first of all, it helps you create space, so it's a stand on wheels, you can move it around, it's this gigantic monolith. It's very difficult to describe it, but you grab it and you move it and suddenly you have a wall right where you wanted a wall just for a few minutes. It also absorbs sounds, so if you're having a discussion with your colleagues and a few feet away, someone's trying to concentrate, there is a sense of separation that's also acoustic.

And finally it works pretty hard. It can hold whiteboards, it can hold tackable surfaces. It's tackable itself. It does so many things. I think the reason it's turned into such an interesting product though is because the team didn't design it for someone else. They designed it for themselves.

Chris: Interesting. So they designed it based on their own experience of what they were struggling with.

Jim: That's exactly right. And we, we put them in exactly that kind of space. So they were in the middle of this sea of people, sea of teams and by creating that product as a prototype, they began to surround themselves with the product and they would reconfigure it. Every time I went back there it was different somehow. I think they discovered… And so many parts of the Flex Collection actually grew up that way where the teams were using it for different purposes.

Another one is the simple product that we use to hold up whiteboards; this is the stand that you connect to whiteboards so you can set down your laptop. Again, it's kind of a multipurpose device. It's very simple, very elegant, and it does what it does very well.

Chris: Yeah. You can surround yourself with literally whiteboards. You can, you can make your own little room out of whiteboards if you wanted.

Jim: Yeah.

Chris: A lot of teams do that.

Jim: I remember being in one of the product reviews, and of course in any product development project you have 20 or 30 or 40 or 50 different ideas and you have this moment where the team has to now begin to cull it back to what is actually going to have enough meaning for users that it stays in the line. And they had all these boards and all these ideas up on the boards and they were using the stand prototype to hold all those boards up. And I remember a point in the meeting where we said, well that's definitely staying.

Chris: Yeah. That was cool.

Jim: We couldn't have had this meeting without that product.

Chris: Yeah. That is really cool.

Jim: I'm happy to see it make it to the end.

Rebecca: So that's cool to hear. Jim described the development process and what that looked like. And Steelcase Flex recently introduced a new part of the collection, which is Mobile Power. And it's literally the idea that when you come into the office, you pick up your cup of coffee and you pick up your Mobile Power, take it with you, you can work in the cafe, you can work in these informal spaces and you have power with you for you and your team. Wherever you go.

Katie: It really solves that need of what our VP of design, James Ludwig calls, power deserts?

Rebecca: Yes.

Katie: Right. These beautiful spaces that look good for Instagram, but nobody sits there because there is no power. Steelcase Flex Mobile Power is designed to solve for that.

Rebecca: And this is nearing the end, Katie.

Katie: This is the end.

Rebecca: The part of our series, but before we go, we want to put a bow on it and we asked a lot of the people we talked to throughout these five episodes, what do they think the future truth is for the open office?

Katie: So we're going to hear from researcher Caroline Kelly first, then retired industry consultant, Dave Lathrop, journalist, Rob Kirkbride, and of course, O+A founder and designer Verda Alexander.

Caroline Kelly: The future of the open office is human centered. I think the more we understand about how people really work, how their brains work at work and how their social constructs matter at work, we're going to be able to more responsively both design open plan offices for them, but also empower them to adapt the office to their needs as their work evolves.

Dave Lathrop: So I think the key is to be less deterministic about what they need, "and more open to a dialogue about who they are and what they want to do as they become these high performing humans that we hope they will be." So my answer to, is there a future in the open offices? Of course there's a future in the open office. It's part of the scenario. It's part of the landscape. It's not the answer.

Rob Kirkbride: Yeah. I think the easy answer would be to say choice, give people choice and where they should work. That's the obvious answer. I think we also need to create products that help them to do that, to make good choices in the office. The industry does a good job in addressing some of these things, not so good in other ways, but obviously the open office is not a bad thing in and of itself. It's just the way that the design is applied and if it's applied well, people are happy with the place that they work.

Verda Alexander: And so I think the office will be landing somewhere in between. We'll be going back a little but we'll of course not lose the progress that we've made in so many areas. Definitely open office is not going away.

Rebecca: So before we go, we want to thank Chris, Jim and Panos for bringing us that conversation from York and we also want to remind you if you want any information that you've heard us talk about here, if you want to see Steelcase Flex, Steelcase Flex Mobile Power, Steelcase Rome, you can go to steelcase.com/openofficetruth where we've put all of that information along with a link to all five episodes in our series.

Katie: Well Rebecca, this is it, this is the last episode.

Rebecca: I'm sad, but I also know there's a lot more good stuff to come.

Katie: Yeah, there's a lot more good stuff to come. So we have coming up a conversation with James Ludwig, our vice president of global design and engineering and he sat down with Steven Yang, who's the CEO of Anchor Innovations, which is the organization that we worked with to develop the Steelcase Flex Mobile Power. Great conversation there. We also talk to Ingrid Fetell Lee on her book Joyful: the Surprising Power of Ordinary Things to Bring you Extraordinary Happiness. She was really interesting. Let's listen to what she had to say.

Ingrid Fetell Lee: Oh, it's such a misconception, right? That joy and work are separate, because the reality is that little moments of joy can radically improve our performance at work.

Katie: So that was a really fun conversation. And to make sure you don't miss it by subscribing to What Workers Want, a Steelcase 360 Podcast and share this podcast with your friends in case they need a little joyful design or a little truth about the open office,

Rebecca: I could always use a little more joy, right?

Katie: Yes.

Rebecca: So reminder; if you want to hear any previous episodes, go to steelcase.com/openofficetruth. We want to thank everybody for joining us. Katie. Thanks for hosting all of these episodes.

Katie: Thank you, Rebecca, and that's it. I can't believe we made it.

Rebecca: It's a wrap.

Katie: Five episodes that's a wrap.