

Driving the Wellbeing of People

Why Smart + Connected Spaces Improve the Experiences People Have at Work

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Offices would be better places to work if they were more like cars. New car models are embedded with technologies that make driving easier, safer and more fun. Sensors tell drivers if there is a truck in their blind spot or if they are about to back into another car when parking. Some cars allow drivers to safely take their hands off the wheel. Many are Wi-Fi enabled. The car doesn't just provide transportation anymore—it actually helps people be better drivers.

So why can't we embed technology in the office to help people feel, work and think better?

"Today, a lot of people drive a smart car and go to work in a dumb office," says Allan Smith, vice president, global marketing at Steelcase. "People used to think that technology would make offices obsolete—but the opposite is happening. Technology will be embedded in offices so it actually helps people work better and makes the workplace even more relevant." In the near future, Smith notes, a network of sensors and other technologies in the environment will help make work a much better—and more humane—experience. Technology will serve individual workers, teams and organizations. It will help people cope with the sense of overwhelm they often feel as work has intensified and the pace of change has accelerated. It will also help organizations design the kinds of spaces that workers love to work in versus have to work in.

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ALLAN SMITH | Vice President, Global Marketing

ORCHESTRATION OF A TYPICAL DAY

Workers who used to be assigned to a single project team now find themselves juggling multiple teams and tasks, constantly switching from one set of tasks to another, transitioning from one work mode to the next and orchestrating their way through a maze of meetings. The constant context-shifting wastes time and drains energy.

REDUCING THE STRESS

Getting work done used to be a lot easier: Get the right people in the right place with the right information—and then let the creativity flow. People mostly worked at their own desks, their teammates were physically nearby and they had the information they needed at hand. And then things changed.

Today, mobile phones, laptops and Wi-Fi free employees who used to be tethered to their desks. It's liberating—people have more choices about where and how to work. But it is also harder to find the people you need. Technology has transformed paper-based information into digital data, which makes it easier to share and create more diverse formats. But it has also caused information overload as data has multiplied exponentially. Globalization brings new ideas and team members from all over the world. Teammates are distributed and can't always work shoulder-to-shoulder, building the trust and social capital required for innovation.

“Work is fundamentally more complex than ever before,” says Smith. “For example, videoconferencing makes collaboration across time zones easier. But it also means that you can't just book one conference room for a meeting—now you need to book multiple spaces for your global team's video call. So collaboration got better, but meeting scheduling got a little more complicated.”

Offices need to get smarter and more connected, Smith notes, to help people navigate this complexity and reduce their stress. “People need to be able to cognitively offload some of the tasks they have to think about today and leverage technologies that will be embedded in the physical environment to make their work lives easier.”

“Work is fundamentally more complex than ever before.”

ALLAN SMITH | Vice President, Global Marketing

HUMAN-CENTERED TECHNOLOGY

The Internet of Things, a concept in which essentially anything electronic—cellphones, headphones, watches, wearables, washing machines—is connected to the Internet and to each other, opens all kinds of possibilities to people at work. Imagine opening an app on your smartphone to see which colleagues are in the office today. Or what meeting rooms with videoconferencing capability are open at 1:00 p.m. As the meeting begins, the room automatically dials in the remote participants, adjusts the lighting and signals you when your time is running short.

Think about a conference room that can alert you before the meeting ends, to make sure you wrap up what you need to accomplish before the next group stands impatiently outside the door, waiting for you to get moving. What if it could recognize you and bring up notes from your last team meeting and adjust the lighting to the levels you prefer? Or, if the meeting is going past its scheduled time, imagine a room that can send a message to teammates in your next meeting that you will be a little late.

HELPING ORGANIZATIONS HELP PEOPLE

Companies that want to help create great workplaces can benefit from embedded technology not only by helping individual workers and teams, but from drawing on the data that's generated. Design, facilities and real estate professionals can make better decisions about where to focus their efforts if they have a data stream to tell them which rooms are always busy and which rooms no one seems to like. With this information, organizations can better understand what's working and what's not, so they can make it better.

The challenge with all data that can be generated in an office, says David Woolf, general manager of integrated technologies at Steelcase, is to make it meaningful.

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DAVID WOOLF | General Manager, Integrated Technologies

“When objects, like chairs or rooms, can sense the environment and communicate, they become tools for understanding complexity, identifying opportunity and responding to it swiftly,” he says. “They become tools for creating more productive, engaged employees who are in control of their surroundings and able to choose what they need to accomplish their tasks.”

Just as technology in today's cars is improving the driving experience, tomorrow's office will harness the power of emerging technologies and allow people to more easily navigate the complexity of work as well as help organizations create better work experiences for individuals and teams.

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