



Reprinted from *Future of Work Agenda*
September 2005

Business Community Centers as Third Places

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One of the most striking findings of the Work Design Collaborative research program in 2002-2004 was the discovery of a demand for a “third place” work location for the creative class of knowledge workers. We believe that as many as 20 million people will want to work one or more days a week in these kinds of facilities by 2007.

In fact, we wouldn't be surprised if that many people are already working one or more days a week in third places right now. Just think about your own work patterns; how often do you “log on” from a coffee shop, an airport hot spot, a hotel lobby, or some other location well removed from both your corporate office and your home office?

The concept of third places seems to be missing in most current discussions of workplace design. “Third place” is a term first used by author Ray Oldenburg way back in 1989 (*The Great Good Place* (Paragon House Publishers, 1989). By that he meant places that are not living areas and not “offices” *per se*. Third Places are typically smaller facilities (10,000 to 14,000 square feet) where people gather for a variety of reasons and to do a variety of different things. “A Starbucks on steroids” is a good image.

Third Places are clearly an adjunct to traditional “corporate” offices and home offices. Our research shows that workers of the future will most likely be spending approximately 40% of their time in corporate facilities, 30% in a home office, and the remainder in a “third place” (actually, that will most likely be a variety of third places over the course of a week or a month).

We believe these new workplaces will rise in usage and become very common over the next several years for a number of reasons:

- ◆ Organizations want to move away from a fixed-cost structure to variable cost models in order to reduce capital requirements and risk, while increasing their agility and responsiveness to changing environments;
- ◆ Remote and mobile workers do not have adequate alternative meeting places, office services, or technical support that are either affordable or convenient to their residential locations;
- ◆ Home-based independent workers also need and want more support and services because their home-based workspaces are limited and they generally have almost no useful meeting space. And like mobile workers they also have a need for office services and technical support.

Existing workspace offerings typically do not deliver everything that is needed at one location (that is, to meet all his or her needs a worker must go separately to a variety of different places like Kinko's, Staples, the UPS store, Starbucks, hotel conference rooms, and so on).

For us, third places are locations where people might spend part of a day, or perhaps two, or a maximum of three, days a week working. But even within these new kinds of social environments there is plenty of variety.

We believe there will be urban third places that serve local communities of working residents. There will also be suburban locations situated at the intersections of major transportation routes. And there will be rural locations that will function as “outposts” for major metropolitan areas.

We expect that most third places will take on the characteristics of the communities in which they exist. In the Wild West of the United States they might look like “work forts,” while in Europe we have already seen “work castles.” But “Third Places” can’t just be anywhere or be designed and built based on models of traditional office facilities.

Business Community Centers

As we have explored the growing interest in these “Third Places” we have developed a third-place vision that we’ve come to call “Business Community Centers,” or BCC’s.

In our minds a BCC is a membership-based organization that provides its members with access to workstations, and other office amenities on a shared, as-needed basis. Think of a health club, or a golf club; as a member you don’t generally own the facility or equipment outright, but rather share it with the other members. Each of you uses the equipment (or golf course) only occasionally. But this shared-cost/shared use approach gives you access to far more, higher-quality equipment than you could ever afford on your own.

Thus a BCC provides a part-time, off-site shared working environment primarily for residents of a local community and its surroundings who are either remote employees of larger organizations or are self-employed professionals or small business owners.

A BCC would be designed for use either by people who choose not to go to a distant corporate facility one or several days a week, or who as small business owners, sole practitioners, and/or “free agents” need part-time access to a workplace infrastructure and community on a cost-effective basis.

In contrast to what is offered by traditional office leasing and rental organizations, BCC members would pay for space and services only as they need and use them (there would be a base-level monthly fee required to maintain membership). This business model produces much lower costs for individual members, yet ensures high usage of the space, which in turn provides equity investors and lenders with profitable returns on their real estate and facilities investments.

A BCC provides its members with a variety of technologically advanced amenities such as conference rooms, workstations, IT technical support, wireless broadband Internet connectivity, back office administrative support, and informal café-type facilities – all in an ergonomically-designed environment and complemented by on-site professional development and business development activities and assistance. The real “secret sauce” of this model is that many of those providers of specialized business development and support services would themselves be members of the very same Business Community Center.

It is our vision that each local BCC would be locally owned and managed, with guidance and consultation (as well as some support services) being provided by a national management company formed to promote and guide the development of individual local BCCs. And those local BCCs would be networked with each other in a way that would provide all the members with access to each other, enabling them to operate as each others' suppliers and customers in a focused electronic marketplace.

And, in the spirit of full disclosure, we are currently in the process of forming that national management company precisely we can promote and support Business Community Centers around the country. And we are actively discussing the BCC concept with several different commercial property developers and local economic development groups at this very moment with the goal of launching one or more of them in the very near future.

We've decided it's time to stop talking about the future of work and begin building it. Stay tuned, it's going to be a wild – and exciting – ride.

About the Work Design Collaborative and *Future of Work Agenda*

Future of Work is a global network of resources – practitioners, thought leaders, researchers, and senior consultants – who are committed to building and implementing physical, social, and technology-based work environments that are cost-effective, socially and environmentally responsible, and personally satisfying.

We are focused on defining the future of work and helping our members and clients achieve new levels of workforce and workplace productivity. *Future of Work* produces and distributes management tools, surveys, benchmark databases, white papers and technical reports, conferences and workshops, newsletters, books and articles, and public presentations on the changing nature of work. The Work Design Collaborative, LLC, provides leadership and infrastructure services for the *Future of Work* community.

Future of Work Agenda is a free monthly electronic newsletter produced by the *Work Design Collaborative*.

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