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Experience the Design

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This is the fifth in a series of six articles on Business Community Centerssm (BCC) as a “third place” alternative work location. For those just tuning in we’ve covered a discussion of the forces driving commercial real estate in this direction, what makes these work places different and where to locate them. Now we are zeroing in on the business aspects of the operation. This month we focus on how BCC’s get designed to maximize their use.

In September we discussed the forces driving the economy towards less complex, smaller work organizations (“[Social Forces Driving a Simpler Way of Working](#)”). Then in October we took on the rules of industrial economics (“[The Dismal Science Dives into a Dismal Swamp](#)”). In November we laid out the emerging “triple bottom line” approach to measuring performance (“[The Triple Bottom Line](#)”), and then last month in December (“[Location, Location, Location](#)”) we took on that most basic of all questions: where should you put your BCC?

This month we focus on principles for designing an actual BCC.

We always design from data. So what we offer here is based on almost two decades of research into making workplaces effective in the future. The work of Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, [The Experience Economy: Work Is Theater & Every Business a Stage](#) (link is to Amazon.com), serves as our jumping-off point.

BCC’s aren’t just containers; they are social spaces that enable the formation and sustainability of social networks. What are the guiding principles you should rely on to design a workplace—the stage upon which the future of work is enacted?

From our perspective, there are six fundamental principles of design that can guide you to make the workplace a viable social space.

1. Develop and Foster Community

People naturally desire to live and work in communities. Community membership gives them a sense of identity, of belonging, and of unity with others. As people have become mobile they have begun to sense a loss of community. And the personal relationships that we forge with colleagues and clients in our workplaces have begun to substitute for the ones we used to rely on in our neighborhoods and villages.

One of the catch phrases of the new workforce is "It's not who I work for, but who I work with, that's important." We have defined a core principal in our own practice of consciously creating conditions that foster a sense of community in the workplace. Promoting close, informal, and frequent interaction among people is one way to do that.

Another is by providing physical cues like signage, logos, and "wayfinding" directions that identify individual teams or work groups.

2. Sustain Learning

The only way people can stay "employable" today is by continuously improving their current skills and developing new ones as well. The resurgence of adult education, the demand for on-the-job training, and the growing desire to seek out new experiences in real work environments via internships are all evidence of this new requirement. Learning is an activity that is as fundamental in today's work world as producing value on a daily basis.

Of course, learning includes a wide range of specific activities. Our vision of a BCC includes an environment that actively supports continuous learning with key technology tools, regular learning events, a supportive physical environment, and a management system that clearly rewards members for creating and participating in collaborative learning activities.

3. Provide a Means to Negotiate the Demands of Worklife

The pace of today's work life is clearly very rapid—and increasing all the time. Most of us feel lots of pressure to have a productive and satisfying work life along with a satisfying and nurturing family life. We want it all, but many of us are getting to the point where we simply can't achieve the balance we so desperately crave. The resulting tension inevitably leads to burnout, and that in turn leads to disaffected workers and below-optimal organizational performance.

While there are no simple solutions to this new reality, we believe that work environments that more closely integrate the need for childcare (or elder care), flexibility in work hours, and access to a strong social support network in the community help people cope more effectively with all those competing demands. That is clearly one of the core ideas behind the evolution of the BCC concept.

4. Acknowledge and Encourage Different Working Arrangements and Work Styles

Much is being said these days about the value of having management accept and enable different kinds of work arrangements, such as flextime, telecommuting, and job sharing. Recently there has also been more openness to different *styles* of work, which today we see manifested in terms of what many people call "casual work" policies.

We are convinced that the range of these kinds of work arrangements and styles will grow with the development of more sophisticated technologies and the continuing integration of differing cultures into the workforce. This constant evolution of work practices confronts workplace designers with the constant challenge of developing new design solutions and the necessity of integrating these new work styles into a coherent and equitable structure. BCC's provide organizations (and individual employees) with a "laboratory" for experimenting with these evolving work practices.

5. Provide Access to Key Resources

The most potent driver of these new work styles is the increasing demand among employees that they be given access to the latest technology and other tools that enable them to be more productive. Sometimes the "other" tools take the form of ergonomic furniture and other office equipment, and sometimes the tools include more effective ways of accessing and processing information.

Thus the "new" workplace must incorporate easy access to these kinds of key resources. We see this access including ways to connect easily with other people (such as with videoconferencing and other collaboration technologies), personal tools (such as computers and powerful software applications), space (conference rooms, informal meeting places, heads-down workstations), and all kinds of information (company information as well as external data resources).

6. Promote an Egalitarian Workplace

Without doubt, we're seeing a flattening of work organizations and a decrease in status and power differentials among people in these new workplaces. That is not to say that we expect to see the emergence of a leaderless or completely *ad-hoc* workplace. We do believe, however, that the workplace *is* becoming more egalitarian and team-oriented; it is being driven towards collaboration as the best way to get work done—and that has all kinds of physical design implications. Again, it is these spatial, technological, and management practice manifestations of this "egalitarianism" that we try to blend into our design solutions.

Now, the secret sauce that we bring to the table is the knowledge of how to translate these design principles into reality. What we seek is a collaborative relationship among four different but equally important professional design groups: us as the “social architects” of the workplace; traditional architects; organizational design specialists; and engaged management.

Next month we’ll close out this series (in our new format) with an activity-accounting analysis of workplace services, usage patterns, and—most importantly—revenue opportunities for the entrepreneurs who own and operate Business Communities Centers™.

[Please send your comments directly to us.](#) We look forward to learning from you.

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.

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