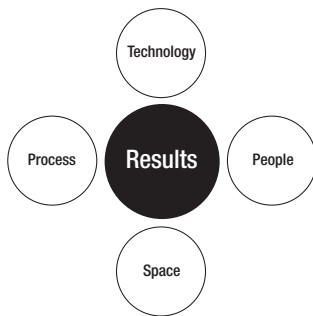




manage connections

There are sound business reasons for treating your work environment as a strategic asset... regarding it on the same plane with people, business processes, and technology.



As a strategic asset, the workplace must function as a high performance environment that seamlessly integrates architecture, furniture and technology through insightful planning.

The following discussion centers on Managing Connections. It is one of six planning principles that enables you to plan and create a workplace that becomes a critical management tool, supporting the corporate strategies that have a direct impact on your business results.

Exploring the Issue of “Managing Connections”

Managing connections is defined as the transfer of knowledge to people and *between* people.

In their landmark book, *Working Knowledge*, Lawrence Prusak and Thomas Davenport point out a dichotomy in the management of corporate knowledge: “The mere existence of knowledge somewhere in the organization is of little benefit; it becomes a valuable corporate asset only if it is accessible, and its value increases with the level of accessibility.”

When workers need to tap into corporate knowledge, they have several choices. For example, they can seek answers via conversations with co-workers, conduct electronic search and retrieval, or leaf through piles of paper documents. They tend to have individual preferences, based on how they learn, how they remember, and the choices available to them in the workplace.

It is the responsibility of the organization to sustain those preferences within the work environment, which plays a key role in gaining access to the information people seek.

How to Think About It

A well-planned workplace helps your people improve individual work processes, manage knowledge, enhance relationships with co-workers, speed the development of ideas, improve learning and mentoring, and quickly gain access to information. All of this is made easier by paying attention to the three primary ways of managing connections to and between your people:

Technology

- These are the electronic connections that permit your people to gain access to networked information... and to other people in and around your organization.

Easy access to paper-based information

- Materials are managed most effectively when they are organized in some predictable way... such as designating work and storage zones — active, anticipated, and archival — in the work environment.

Facilitating people-to-people exchanges

- Thoughtful planning locates people close to those they work with most and causes them to cross paths frequently.

Steelcase research indicates that the entire organization benefits when the workplace is planned around these management concepts.



manage connections

What To Measure

Review methods used for “managing connections” by focusing on three concepts:

Information Staging

- Paper-based information is managed most efficiently when it is staged in three zones: an active zone, an anticipated zone, and an archival zone.
 - Things used on a daily basis reside in an “active” zone, within easy reach and as visible as possible.
 - Things that might be needed on short notice or referenced frequently — a file for a project you’ll work on later in the day or week, or binders for an end-of-the-month meeting — are kept in an “anticipated” zone within your homebase.
 - Things that are used only rarely — historical documents, old project files, and ancient “but still necessary” documented procedures — are placed in an “archival” zone away from your homebase.

Networking Anywhere

A plethora of information is available electronically via intranets, extranets, e-mail, and database searches... great, new ways to communicate.

This superhighway slows to a crawl, however, when your people must constantly return to their desks to search for and retrieve electronic information.

People need to gain access to technology wherever they are doing their work — whether alone or in a group — at their homebase, impromptu gatherings, team spaces, lunchrooms...everywhere.

Talking With Other People

No matter how technologically advanced your organization, “talking with other people” continues to be a very valuable source of information (according to 68% of respondents in a recent Steelcase HotHouse Seminar Survey, 2001).

It might be nothing more than helping a co-worker to “think out loud.” Or looking for input from someone who’s tackled a similar problem in the past. It’s all a matter of locating and talking to the right person.

Where people talk has an impact on the quality, tone, depth, and length of an interaction. Since different spaces elicit different interactions, it is important to recognize that valuable encounters often take place in transitional spaces like hallways, coffee bars, or outside a doorway. The furniture in your transitional or in-between spaces can encourage impromptu exchanges and have direct impact on the quality and productivity of the resulting interactions.

How To Experiment with Change

Share this document with one or two groups in your organization. Ask them to consider the concept of “information staging” for materials they use: placing things used on a daily basis in an “active” zone... other, less immediate work in an “anticipated” zone... and items used rarely in “archival” zone.

Ask participants to provide feedback on how their work areas — individual, group, and in-between spaces — might be better equipped to accomplish this objective.

Try placing café tables with stools and marker boards in your transitional locations to encourage impromptu exchanges. Provide comfortable lounge furniture and coffee tables in group areas to invite more relaxed, extended exchanges.

Convene a small group of representatives from various departments to discuss how to seamlessly integrate your technology with workplace furniture and architecture. Brainstorm to identify inexpensive improvements. Seek ideas for how and where to add access points for computers, PDAs, fax machines, and other appliances so that information sharing is improved. Begin a process of long-range facility planning.

Evaluate the Investment

Remember, one of the six planning principles of a high performance work environment is the use of space to manage connections so that people can do their most effective work.

If you’re interested in using this or any of the other building blocks to help define or redesign your work environment — by strategically integrating the architecture, furniture, and technology used by your people — let us help.

For more in-depth information on managing connections, see the Steelcase knowledge papers at www.steelcase.com; Tools & Insights.

- *Creating Order Out of Chaos: Strategies for Organizing Your Work* (S11278)
- *Reclaiming Buildings: Strategies for Change* (S10560)
- *Nyuk, Nyuk, Nyuk: More Cabling Please*
- *Face to Face, Screen to Screen: Collaboration in the New Workplace* (S11457)