CREATING AN ADAPTABLE, SMART HUDDLE SPACE

The Ultimate Guide to Fueling Collaboration

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Is it time for you to invest in a more cost-effective and collaboration-friendly meeting space strategy for your office? If you've been considering shifting away from large, expensive conference rooms and moving to huddle spaces and breakout rooms instead, you're not alone.

With the increase in remote and hybrid workforces, hoteling, and the demand for tighter budget management, companies have been shedding commercial real estate and reimagining the spaces they have. In particular, companies are focusing on making the most of shared spaces to foster collaboration, build culture, and support positive team growth.

One popular trend that's gaining steam is transitioning existing spaces to huddle spaces or investing renovation dollars in smaller areas. Huddle spaces are informal collaborative spaces that are equipped with the latest office technology and furnished with flexibility in mind to accommodate any meeting. They can transform your commercial real estate footprint and make it easier for your employees to effectively communicate in any context.

Here's a closer look at huddle spaces and specific steps you can take to leverage this emerging collaborative trend— and the technologies that power up these spaces for success—for your unique business needs.

THE SHIFTING COLLABORATION FOOTPRINT

In the wake of the COVID pandemic, many businesses rapidly shifted to remote or partially remote work. While the reasons behind the changes were challenging, overall, these changes provided important data for businesses. As the Harvard Business Review noted:

"Research from before the pandemic established that some workers in wealthy industrialized countries can work effectively from home, and that about 80% of them would like to do so, at least some of the time. After months of working remotely, employers, too, have learned that most tasks are accomplished and most meetings go just fine without the office.

Of course, companies won't suddenly abandon their offices, because going to the office has never been just about work. And technology won't make socializing less dependent on direct interpersonal contact anytime soon. But we do need to rethink the cube design that all too many offices exemplify."

Increasingly, organizations are either adopting long-term hybrid work models or looking for ways to bring select employees back into the office part time. Revisiting how you're using office space in general, and common spaces such as meeting and collaborative areas in particular, are key to taking the next evolution of today's meeting spaces.

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WHAT IS A HUDDLE SPACE?

For decades, companies have relied on large, fixed meeting spaces—such as conference rooms or boardrooms—for collaboration. However, this approach has several downsides. Large meeting spaces are expensive and complicated to maintain, and they're becoming increasingly impractical in a world where many employees are remote, hybrid, or working in different time zones.

Huddle spaces are an attractive alternative. Sometimes called a meeting pod, breakout room, or dedicated collaboration space, a huddle space can be an enclosed room or a more informal alcove that's designed to support on-the-go meetings or smaller sessions. According to the Wall Street Journal, 73% of meetings include just two to four people—yet 53% of rooms are designed to accommodate seven or more participants. The huddle room design offers an effective alternative for companies seeking to right-size meeting space to the realities of today's meeting landscape.

However, the move to remote work introduced unique collaboration challenges that employees must adapt to. As companies rapidly transitioned to remote work during the pandemic, many employees quickly felt the loss of easy collaboration. It was no longer a matter of simply walking across the hall to ask a question or meeting up with the team for lunch and casual brainstorming. Instead, last-minute collaboration could end up feeling like an awkward virtual interruption and trying to coordinate effective meetings between workers in the office and their remote colleagues became important topics.

Today, as many companies are partially or fully back in the office, the dynamics have changed yet again. And reimagining meeting space for informal collaboration offers the chance to incorporate more effective collaborative spaces into your office's design, while building in the technology that knowledge workers need for maximum contributions anywhere.

THE BENEFITS AND USE CASES FOR HUDDLE SPACES

Why should you consider creating huddle spaces instead of retaining a more traditional office and conference room design? There are several benefits companies capture when they make the move to huddle spaces that can help put these decisions into financial, cultural, and technological contexts:

COST SAVINGS

One estimate by AV Networks found that huddle rooms cost $10K to operate annually, while that number soared to $55K for large conference rooms. The cost savings can be an impressive benefit for any company that's seeking to get its operational expenses or capital investments tightened up. Compounded over time and across multiple rooms and locations, the savings can significantly add up to boost the bottom line.

A huddle space can also be less expensive to outfit with a videoconferencing system and other smart room technology than a larger space. The huddle spaces companies are investing in double as smart rooms and are equipped with all the tools needed to host virtual and hybrid meetings. Some estimates to equip a conferencing system for a huddle space range between $1,350 and $5,000, while training rooms that support 15+ employees can reach as high as $60,000. If you're faced with the choice, it's possible to set up multiple huddle space areas for less than the cost of a single large room.

FLEXIBLE, INFORMAL MEETING AREAS

Top talent is hungry for greater collaboration, transparency, and teambuilding opportunities. Trends in the way that Gen Z and other employees want to collaborate have increased the need for huddle spaces and other flexible conference rooms that can adapt to an informal brainstorming session with remote colleagues, a training session, and a client presentation in the same day. Huddle spaces can be equipped with flexible furniture options and technology that make it easy to adjust to specific meeting needs with the click of a button or the shift of a piece of furniture.

THE BENEFITS AND USE CASES FOR HUDDLE SPACES CONTINUED

DEMOCRATIZING MEETING SPACE

A significant frustration for junior employees or smaller teams in office environments is that conference rooms may all be reserved. With executives' tight schedules and client or customer meetings planned months in advance, it can be impossible to secure meeting room needs via fully booked reservation systems. A larger room is also more likely to be coopted for an urgent need, leaving those with less high-priority sessions scrambling to find a new venue.

Huddle spaces and breakout rooms tend to be more democratic in their use. Because they're small, they're unlikely to be taken for a large team meeting or last-minute customer engagement. With smaller space and greater availability, many companies choose to make huddle rooms open for use on-demand for all employees. The Wall Street Journal has previously reported that 40% of employees waste as much as 30 minutes per day trying to find meeting space. Increasing the number of meeting options that you have available can greatly reduce that burden on your employees, while the availability of on-demand meeting space encourages your team to invest in real-time collaboration.

THE BENEFITS AND USE CASES FOR HUDDLE SPACES CONTINUED

IMPROVED SPACE UTILIZATION

Companies are looking closely at how effectively they are utilizing their current meeting space. The addition of huddle spaces allows your employees to more effectively match the size and tone of the meeting to the physical space they are taking up.
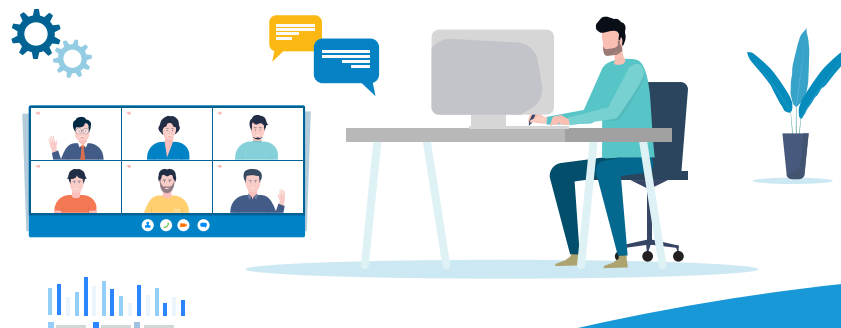
A larger number of breakout rooms allows teams to choose appropriately sized spaces, and you're less likely to deal with the frustration of needing a meeting room for twelve that's being used by two people. More effective space utilization increases productivity, and ultimately reduces operational costs as well.

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EASY-TO-USE TECHNOLOGY

With the right technology installed, employees can plug in and connect to meetings without needing significant input or support from the IT department. Huddle spaces can be created to be smart enough for any needs, with Internet connectivity, audio and visual equipment, monitors, smartboards, and compatibility for collaboration platforms like Zoom and Teams.

However, an emphasis on easy-to-use technology that delivers the right connectivity can lessen the burden on your IT team to support meetings—and allow employees, customers, and vendors to move smoothly through their day. Consistent systems across your huddle rooms make it simpler for employees to learn how to operate technology on their own, no matter where they're working.

THE BENEFITS AND USE CASES FOR HUDDLE SPACES CONTINUED

IMPROVE VIRTUAL MEETING QUALITY

Whether virtual or hybrid, your team spends a significant amount of their time in meetings. Meeting quality matters to both the employee experience and the quality of work produced. After spending significant amounts of time trouble shooting connectivity and other issues over the last two years, today's employees expect high-quality virtual meetings that flow seamlessly. The quality of the meeting includes factors like:

- Access to high-quality microphones to capture conversation in the room

- High-quality audio playback and professional sound systems to amplify the voices of all meeting participants

- Video capture and playback that allow meeting participants to engage with each other and read the non-verbal body language of everyone attending a session

- Projectors and/or screens to display content that's discussed in meetings

- Interactive whiteboards to allow for seamless collaboration and real-time document markup or brainstorming

- Connectivity that supports different collaboration platforms on demand, such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams

- A secure, steady network signal to power connections without sound quality problems or software interruptions

DEVELOPING YOUR SMART ROOM STRATEGY

With all these benefits in mind, it's easy to understand why organizations are prioritizing the development of smaller, technologically rich spaces for meetings and collaboration. Hand in hand with the rise of the huddle space, smart rooms are becoming a critical trend and a defining piece of organizations' commercial real estate and technology strategies. To recap, a smart room is a space that leverages technology to help employees get more done and connect with colleagues no matter where they're located.

The way that huddle spaces and breakout rooms are designed—and the technology stacks that pack tremendous power into small spaces—can be transformative to how your teams collaborate and work. The overall strategy and technology that drives your investments is crucial to capturing the full long-term benefits of huddle spaces. Here are six aspects of huddle room design and technology to consider as part of your larger smart room strategy:

Huddle Room Design

One of the first factors to consider when you're outfitting a huddle room is the overall look and feel. These spaces are often less formal than a board room or a traditional conference room. The goal is to create an environment where your team is naturally comfortable and can brainstorm, interact with each other, or host meetings with ease. Put the focus on informal.

How does that translate to your facility decisions? A design that's light and airy helps to create a space where your team will want to spend time. This might include natural light or soft light options, minimalist furniture that doesn't crowd a small space but is comfortable to sit in, and humanizing touches like art or plants to help make a space inviting. Aesthetics matter and can help create a space that's conducive to quick meetings or longer detailed brainstorms.

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DEVELOPING YOUR SMART ROOM STRATEGY CONTINUED

Flexible Furniture

The furniture in a traditional conference room is often fixed and difficult to move around. Think of a large table and the familiar office chairs crowded around. Meetings and employees must adapt their activities to the furniture, rather than choosing layouts that fit their needs.
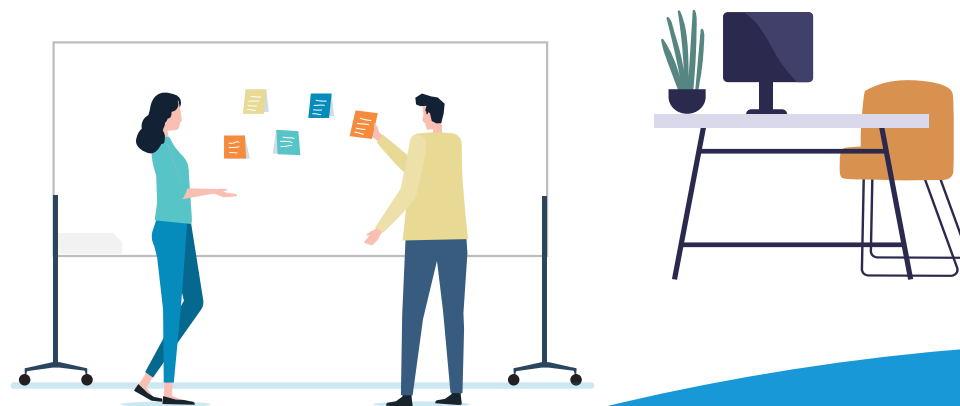
The most successful huddle room strategies are designed with flexible furniture that can accommodate a range of different configurations, whether that's shifting seats so everyone can see the interactive whiteboard or a setup that maximizes sound quality. Companies may find that tables and chairs that can be shifted because they have wheels or sliders make it easy to customize a huddle space. Moving beyond traditional furniture toward flexible choices—such as standing desks or more cozy chairs—creates an inviting alternative within the larger office environment. This can become an important selling point that increases adoption of your huddle spaces.

Interactive Whiteboard

A whiteboard or writing wall provides the space for your team to think big. Whether they're imagining what's possible with a new product or fully redefining a process, having the space to sketch, jot notes, and capture ideas for everyone to see can spark innovation and breakthroughs.

As the center of a huddle space, an interactive whiteboard provides a focal point that fosters real-time collaboration and idea generation. This critical piece of conference room technology offers a range of features— from displaying documents that can be marked up to capturing content for later review. With freestanding and wall-mounted options, any space can be customized for its unique environment.

DEVELOPING YOUR SMART ROOM STRATEGY CONTINUED

Audio Quality

Audio quality contributes significantly to meeting quality—and when you're thinking of the audio aspects of a meeting space, there are two options to consider as part of your smart room strategy.

First, how will you capture the sound of participants that are physically in the room? Options can include a speakerphone or an integrated videobar with individual microphones. Increasingly, meeting spaces are equipped with devices that have multiple microphones to effectively capture all voices in the room and improve the audio experience for onsite and remote participants.

Second, how will you play the sound that's coming from remote participants and relay that to people in the huddle space? Simply relying on the meeting host's laptop speakers doesn't deliver the immersion and connectivity needed to power a truly productive meeting. Increasingly, a range of professional speaker options are available for small meeting spaces, from integrated videobar technology to discrete ceiling-mounted front speakers that can accommodate the most modern design.

Videoconferencing

Videoconferencing is crucial as it helps bring team members in the office and those calling in remotely or from other offices around the world face-to-face. Today's breakout rooms have multiple video components that create a strong visual experience:

- High-quality cameras that can capture and relay video of multiple participants in the meeting room to everyone in the session

- Capturing and relaying images of remote participants to the huddle spaces

- Displaying non-participant images such as shared content, presentations, or a document that's being reviewed for real-time communication via a projector or large digital screen

By focusing on both the input and projection aspects of video as part of your overall smart room strategy, both onsite and remote participants will have an immersive video experience.

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DEVELOPING YOUR SMART ROOM STRATEGY CONTINUED

Collaboration Platforms

The most helpful huddle spaces have the technology platforms needed to support collaboration platforms of choice. Even if your company relies on a single provider such as Zoom, employees may be asked to join customer or vendor meetings hosted on Microsoft Teams. The flexibility to change with ease, often multiple times in the same day, is critical.

By recognizing that collaboration can be fueled by a range of platforms, it's important to choose technology that can adapt to and support different needs. Flexible collaboration platform integrations give your team the flexibility to collaborate when and where they want, with anyone that's crucial to your business. Considering interoperability for all aspects of your huddle space technology will maximize flexibility and minimize frustrations.

HOW TO IMPROVE HUDDLE ROOM ADOPTION

If your team isn't familiar with huddle rooms and what they can offer, integrating them into your corporate culture may require a bit of planning. However, with a few key steps you can improve adoption and help your teams get the most out of your new meeting room environment.

Provide technology training: Offer training sessions on an optional basis to employees who are working onsite. When teams see what is possible with a dedicated smart room and how it can transform meeting quality, they're more likely to embrace it. By providing training, you'll build baseline confidence and help eliminate any sources of stress for those who may be nervous to dive in. If there are technology concerns, having an IT support person on-call for the first week or two after the huddle spaces are opened can further address these issues.

Share strategies for meeting types: Reimagining collaboration in the office may benefit from some creativity. Does your team need ideas on how to make the best use of your huddle rooms? Consider them for daily standups, team-level all-hands, brainstorming, product demos, and training sessions. They can also be used for onboarding, interviews, and performance reviews. Providing these ideas can help employees see where huddle spaces address their most important meeting needs.

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HOW TO IMPROVE HUDDLE ROOM ADOPTION CONTINUED

Think creatively about how you name spaces: The Harvard Business Review notes that the way you name a space matters, and that taking the extra step to creatively name a space can help make it seem more inviting. They report that the office is "a place for collaboration, creativity, and learning, where an employee feels nurtured and a sense of belonging. Names of buildings, floors, areas, or rooms should reflect this intent. Terms like 'learning center' or 'innovation space' communicate the new perspective, shape design changes, attract talent, and influence behavior."

Ask for feedback: As companies change the way they're using their space, it's important to gain feedback from end users. What do they like about the current setup? What's missing? By taking this feedback into account, it's possible to continuously adapt to new opportunities and challenges and keep your meeting space ready for whatever comes up for your business—and meet the changing needs of your employees.

Track adoption metrics: Data can provide critical insights into how you're using space and where there's room for improvement. Sensors and tracking software can be used to help you better understand when and how your breakout rooms are being used, as well as developing a clearer picture of which technology is being utilized for a variety of meetings. Consider implementing these systems and reviewing metrics quarterly to drive a process of continuous improvement.

NEXT STEPS

A huddle space can help your organization adapt to the needs of a dynamic hybrid workforce that's rediscovering how best to drive collaboration in today's business landscape. By investing in the right technology and designing these spaces with collaboration in mind, you can save money, create spaces that work with any meeting, and dramatically increase the quality of the virtual and in-person meetings that you host.

However, selecting the right technology and building an optimal huddle space technology stack can be intimidating. You don't have to go it alone. Contact Connection today to arrange for a personalized consultation with an experienced conference room technology expert.

Contact your Connection Account Team for more information.

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