

Put “Working” Back in Activity-Based Working

What is Activity-based working?

Activity-based working (ABW) is a style of working in which individuals can choose where, when, how, and with whom they want to work based on the activities they need to perform. Activity-based working is facilitated by a physical environment that provides a variety of different work settings for people to choose from, as well as user-friendly IT/virtual capabilities that do not get in the way of people working more flexibly inside and outside of the office. Most importantly, people-centric culture norms value autonomy, flexibility, and trust.

Activity-based working aims to liberate traditional office workers who are often chained to a desk, empowering each individual to create the optimal work environment for themselves.

The modern worker has become incredibly creative with what they can do behind a desk: emailing, creating and editing documents and files, taking phone calls, eating lunch, “joining” virtual meetings and training sessions...the list goes on. But not every task can be effectively performed at a desk, and high performances do not only happen behind one.

Activity-based working also aims to restore the balance between individual focus work and collaborative, team-based work. Focused work is usually best done in a quiet and calm environment with little to no distraction, and a comfortable combination of desk, chair, and monitor. However, an excellent collaborative session might involve many conversations, some debates, messy drawings, and even laughter. You won’t be able to concentrate if you try to do focused work right next to a group of colleagues having a lively discussion. Likewise, if you want to hold a productive meeting, you would want a space that supports debates and idea sharing.

To get an idea of how ABW looks in the workplace, consider how companies usually “do ABW programs:”

1. Companies with considerable property investments may use activity-based working to optimize their real estate. They might look into developing overarching guidelines at the enterprise level to serve as the North Star for new constructions or renovations of workspaces.
2. Other companies also apply activity-based principles to reduce the overhead cost of renting office spaces. On average, in companies where everyone has assigned seating, the work stations are only occupied 40 percent of the time. These companies may follow some activity-based guidelines in office furniture selection and office renovation and use a calculator to determine the minimum space needed for their daily headcount.
3. Then there are companies using ABW to accommodate projected growth and the changing nature of their work. They may anticipate an influx of employees or prepare for the adoption of more flexible work arrangements. Although people still appreciate face-to-face interactions in the office, the technology is mature enough for people to work outside of the physical office.
4. And lastly, companies may adopt ABW to support a more collaborative and agile workforce that constantly evolves.

Where ABW can go wrong: Activity-based design versus Activity-based working

The most visible artifact of ABW is the physical environment. You can pick up elements of activity-based design in most co-working spaces: shared common areas with pantry and coffee stations; high tables and bar stools; phone booths; and, high-backed banquette seats (like you would see in a retro diner).

Some additional features also show up in corporate adoption of ABW: clusters of desks separated by thin partitions of varying heights; fishbowl-type, glass-walled conference rooms; and some form of a

central gathering area.

The design of an activity-based office, when done right, should cater to both how people currently work and how they intend to work in the future. Two companies may share elements of activity-based design, but how they work and interact with these elements can be very different. It's tempting to think, "I want the same thing," after a visit to a nicely renovated office, but a copy and paste approach never gets it right.

Amidst the excitement for and against open-plan offices, we continue to see companies spending millions of dollars on office planning without talking to the employees who will actually use those spaces. A study last year¹ showed empirical evidence that opening up the office doesn't automatically make people interact with each other more, and with that came a dozen sensational headlines claiming open-plan offices hurt performance and collaboration.

This pushback was not entirely unfounded. A completely open space with no physical barriers can breed distraction and make concentration more difficult. But for all the complaints about open-plan offices, how many companies actually did something about it? It's as if those designing the office spaces were oblivious to the needs of end users. The design was done to the users, not for them. When this kind of oversight occurs, we see even well-intended and expensive "activity-based" designs go wrong. The designs may look nice, but investing millions of dollars to just "look nice" is a waste of capital and energy.

Effective activity-based design starts with the user, and a successful ABW program is grounded in observations of how people work now and how people aspire to work in the future. Whether people are going to use the spaces the way you intended depends on whether the designs meet the requirements for job performance, and whether people know how to, and are encouraged to, use the environment and the settings flexibly to optimize their own performance.

One of the first steps in this kind of design is to study the existing behavioral patterns. How much time are people spending on individual work, on calls, in meetings, or coordinating with a team? How big are the meetings? Do people from different teams work with each other? If so, how often and what do they do together? To many organizations, transforming

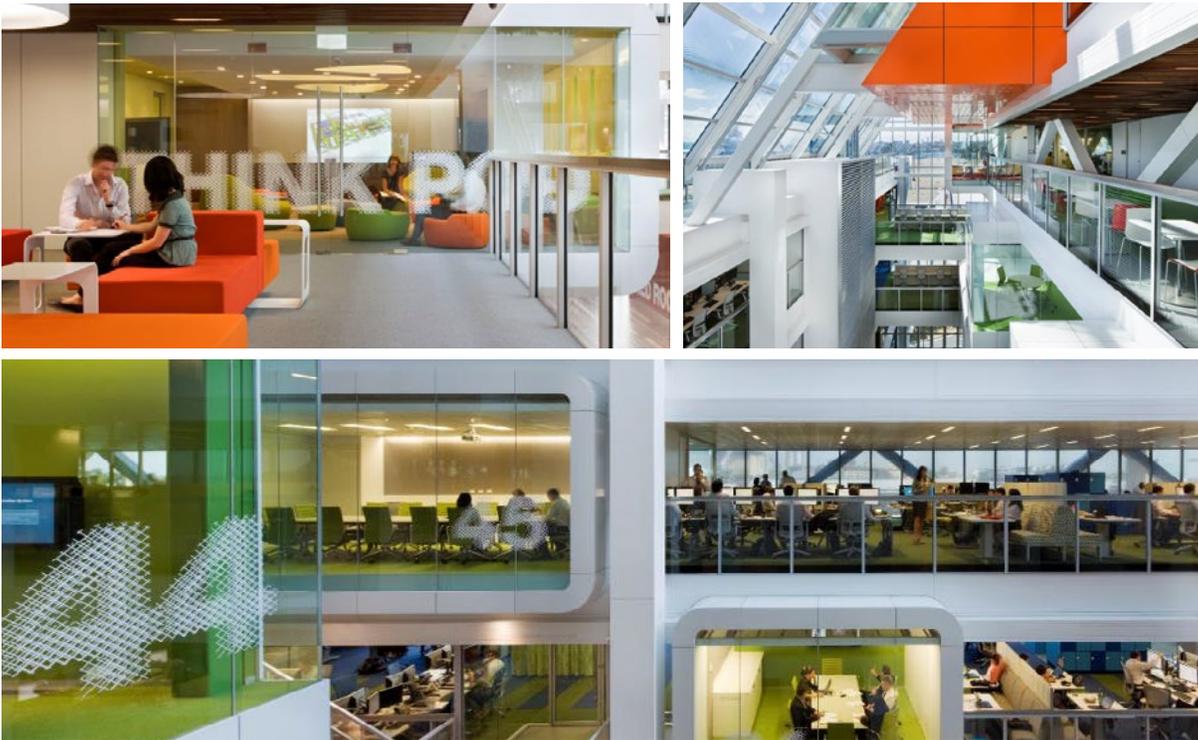
the office space also presents an opportunity to achieve cultural change, often with aspirations to have more desirable behaviors, such as more cross-collaboration, more transparency and openness, improved accountability, and so forth. The design can have built-in nudges to facilitate desirable behaviors.

For example, Company A needed to choose between two designs for a floor with work areas. One design was symmetrical, featuring high-focus areas located close to the building facades on both the east and west sides of the floor and shared social and collaborative space in the center. The other design also has a central social and collaborative space, but the allocation of focused areas was asymmetrical: more focused desks were placed on the west side and fewer on the east side. Architects who are usually lovers of order and symmetry will probably recommend the symmetrical design, but Company A chose to go with the asymmetrical design. Why?

They chose the asymmetrical design because if both sides of the floor were equal, people would settle in their own east or west sides after the first few days and rarely move to meet with people on the other side. An asymmetrical design will force some overflow when all seats are occupied, nudging people to explore an unfamiliar side of the floor and meet colleagues they don't usually work with. Company A wanted more cross-collaboration, and they designed for it.

However, it is also important for people to have the knowledge, skills, and permission to fully take advantage of an activity-based design.

Company B went through a painstaking process of adopting an activity-based design, removing all personal offices and cubicles. After people moved in, one senior leader started to use a small conference room as his personal office, slowly littering his personal belongings in this shared space. The hierarchical culture that was still in place kept people from challenging him, even though he worked remotely three to four days a week. The issue was more about the culture and underlying assumptions, and less so about the design or way of working, but, nonetheless, it cost Company B a conference room, and inadvertently reinforced the counterproductive cultural norm that having a higher rank lets someone do whatever they want, even at the expense of everyone else.



Photos of Macquarie Bank in Sydney. Photographer Shannon McGrath. Design by Clive Wilkinson Architects.

Try ABW today

People not working in corporate real estate or facilities management functions (which are most of us) don't usually think that they have much control over their work environment. When high cubicle walls and office doors keep us apart, we yearn to break down silos and connect with each other. But we grow attached to small slices of privacy when we are told to work in an open environment.

The reality is, you may need some privacy for some tasks, and open space with the possibility for interactions for others. No one should be forced to work in one setting for all their tasks. Setting up the right activity-based design is a huge help to materializing activity-based working, and it usually requires a substantial amount of investment from the company. If you have some basic support for flexibility and mobility (think laptops, Wi-Fi, flexible work arrangements), you can begin to experiment with ABW to see if it helps you perform better.

For a mini version of "ABW for me" that does not require a total physical overhaul, try the following steps:

Step 1: Start logging your activities:

- Do it as you go, or review at the end of the day. Reflect and make a note of what the setting was for the activity and how effective it was.
- **Example:** Write an article – at a desk in open area – average effectiveness, some distractions with people walking past me.

Step 2: Make a list of the activities that were not well-supported and answer the following questions for each one:

- What kind of environment will best support you in performing this task?
- What could be an alternative space or setting that can provide better support?
- If no alternative comes to mind, ask your colleagues for suggestions.

Step 3: Test the alternative settings:

- Keep a similar log of your activities, the setting, and perceived support.

Step 4: Plan your coming week so you can perform most of your work activities in an environment that provides the most support.

First implemented in the 1990s, ABW has proven to be transformational, a business strategy that can future-proof organizations with practical applications. You can list as many buzzwords in your values or strategic objectives as you like, but, fundamentally, how people work individually and with each other is where you see the gaps. Activity-based working puts a spotlight on the "how" – the processes, workflows, infrastructure – upfront, so that people thriving in a culture supported by it can focus on the outcomes. To unleash the potential in your people, provide them with the right work settings and empower them with the freedom and autonomy to choose what's best for them.

Endnotes

- ¹ Bernstein Ethan S. and Turban Stephen. The impact of the "open" workspace on human collaboration, Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences, July 2, 2018. <http://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2017.0239>

About the Author

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