

Huddle Spaces: the New Look for Corporate Workspaces

If you work in an enterprise, you understand how essential collaboration among teams and across offices can be to company success. And you know that video communication systems have played a valuable role in bringing us together. While the traditional conference room with video conferencing is ideal for bringing large groups together, advances in technology have influenced and changed how we prefer to work.

Today, companies are adapting to our work preferences by adding “huddle spaces” to their office work environments. These small and convenient meeting spaces give employees technology-equipped areas where they can quickly get together in small groups without having to reserve a conference room. This is



the case because there's more of these smaller spaces to accommodate groups of 2 to 5. What's driving our need to get together on an as-needed basis is the freedom that technology gives us to work away from the office. Devices like the tablets and smartphones liberate us from the office. But the office is still where we come together, and the enterprise must join multiple offices to work toward common goals.

This paper characterizes the role huddle spaces play in the new corporate workspace. It also discusses the most important factors companies should consider when planning and deploying video collaboration technologies for huddle-space applications.

Huddle Spaces Help Companies Meet Gen Y Needs

- Gen Y employees conduct 38% of all their meetings virtually (compared to 32% of all employees)
- In the past two years, 61% of Gen Y employees have increased their use of virtual tools for one-to-one meetings

Source: Ovum

Informal video collaboration can invigorate business processes

The consulting firm Oliver Wyman, in a 2014 report examining the state of the financial services industry, urges companies to “re-examine your office layouts to encourage creativity and collaboration.” The suggestion is part of an overall recommendation that financial firms become “informal organizations” to better facilitate teamwork and problem solving across business silos, functions, and hierarchies.¹ Huddle spaces, which are designed specifically to encourage collaboration in informal settings, can contribute directly to this recommended strategy.

One factor driving the interest in collaboration is the changing nature of the employee and client base. Business is increasingly influenced by Generation Y (Gen Y). Members of this demographic were born during the 1980s, grew up using video technologies, and are eager adopters of video calling on their computers and smartphones. They expect to have similarly convenient tools at work for interacting with colleagues, and as consumers they expect the same capabilities when interacting with businesses.

According to Ovum research, Gen Y employees conduct 38 percent of all their meetings virtually, compared to 32 percent for all users. Gen Y employees are also rapidly increasing their use of virtual tools for one-to-one meetings: 61 percent said they’ve increased this type of usage in the past two years. “Predictably, these young professionals are relatively more comfortable communicating and collaborating in a virtual space,” the report notes.²

A welcome environment for video collaboration

The term “huddle” denotes a small group of people who gather together in a close environment to talk or share information. In the workplace, huddle spaces bring people together in intimate settings to interact with one another via video conferencing and collaboration tools. Huddle spaces are intended for any employee or small group of employees to drop in and take advantage of the space at any time without concern for usage policies or “automated scheduling systems” associated with traditional video conferencing rooms.³ The ready availability of these spaces also frees up larger video conferencing rooms for big groups and eliminates potential conflicts between groups that need meeting space. Increased work flow is an important, beneficial outcome of room availability.⁴

Huddle spaces are versatile in concept, design and function. They can be configured and installed with a combination of technologies and services depending on a company’s budget and the types of meetings and collaboration sessions the company wants to foster.

A minimalist huddle space

In the most basic implementation, a huddle space offers a designated area in the office that is available for workers to stop by, open up their personal devices and quickly log on to the company’s network via a cable or wireless connection and launch a video conferencing or collaboration application. The huddle space can be established simply by configuring the furniture in an open area to facilitate informal collaborative meetings or it might be set off from the office environment by partitions, glass walls or other design features. This set-up would include a small table, chairs for a few people, a speaker and microphones. Participants might also have the capability to place their devices on end tables or other occasional tables.

Typical huddle space

Companies can also establish huddle spaces for closed-door collaboration. These rooms are equipped with a table and chairs for three to five people. The technology includes network connectivity, a display for video conferencing sessions or collaboration software, and the capability for users to stream content to the display from their personal devices. These rooms also include speakers and microphones installed in the table or ceiling, perhaps a number of headsets, a video conferencing camera and a telephone.

High-end huddle spaces

A more extensive-equipped huddle space offers a choice of tools and services to allow a range of collaboration functions. In addition to the capabilities offered in the typical huddle space, a comprehensive huddle environment provides multiple wall-mounted digital displays as well as built-in video conferencing cameras, whiteboards, or a projector. The collaboration software allows multiscreen sharing to facilitate collaborative work on a document. Displays might offer gesture-based controls to simplify manipulation of a screen's content. In advanced rooms, free-standing telepresence robots or telepresence-enabled tablets or desktop displays might be available. The mix of technologies available makes these rooms the most versatile, allowing employees to participate in video conferencing, collaboration sessions or to deliver presentations to colleagues or clients.

The benefits of versatility

The huddle space's size, design and location in the office setting can vary widely. In an office environment that has a broad, open floor plan, a company can create a partially enclosed area to serve as a huddle space within the common area. Alternatively, the company could install alcoves in low-traffic areas to establish more private meeting environments. Companies often convert vacant offices that have private doors into huddle spaces to ensure meeting confidentiality and minimize interruptions. Another option is to configure the huddle environment as a small office suite that gives visitors a choice of collaboration spaces. The suite could include a reception area with comfortable seating, cubicles or private rooms, each equipped with video conferencing and collaboration tools and technologies tailored to the particular setting.

Huddle spaces can have added value for companies with limited office space that are trying to accommodate teleworkers. It can be a "hoteling" space for teleworkers who come into the office occasionally. Traditional onsite workers can use the room as a huddle space when it is available.

Huddle space versatility can also have cross-departmental business benefits because employees from any departmental unit can make use of a huddle environment, regardless of its location in the firm.

The open access to these spaces also makes it easier for employees to interact and collaborate across divisions, which helps bridge traditional business silos.

Technology components and implementation considerations

Many companies tend to install huddle spaces as part of new office construction or as part of a renovation, however huddle spaces can be introduced into any business setting. While each installation will have its own implementation requirements, careful attention to key deployment considerations ensures that huddle spaces deliver the best possible meeting environment and collaboration experiences for the users—whether the users are participating from within the huddle room or remotely.

General considerations

Huddle space design must be optimized for its specific location in an office. This can be more challenging than expected because these work spaces can be deployed in all types of environments, from closed rooms to hallways. Each design should consider the effects that ambient light from lamps, windows or skylights might have on the video image that appears on the displays. The design should also take into account the impact of room size and acoustics on the effectiveness of audio equipment. The room and equipment must be configured so personnel and clients have privacy, if needed, to view and discuss content.

Cloud video services

Huddle spaces offer an ideal opportunity for companies to employ cloud-based video conferencing and collaboration solutions. The cloud services model enables employees to use their own devices for connecting to virtual meetings in a huddle space. Cloud-based solutions also enable remote colleagues or customers to join in the video collaboration from any capable device. The services are easy to use, enabling employees to manage their own virtual meeting rooms without IT support. Cloud solutions can be included with and integrated into any unified collaboration platform or strategy.

Features of Huddle Spaces		
Minimalist	Typical	High-End
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cable or wireless network connection • Network access to video conferencing or collaboration applications • Speaker • Microphone • Small table • A few chairs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Room with private door • Table with 3-5 chairs • Cable or wireless network connection • Network access to video conferencing or collaboration applications • Display for video conferencing or collaboration applications • Speaker • Microphone • Headsets • Video conferencing camera • Telephone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private room or suite of rooms • Broad choice of tools and services • Network connection • Multiple wall-mounted displays for video conferencing or collaboration software • Whiteboard • Projector • Multiscreen content sharing • Gesture-based controls • Telepresence via tablets, desktop displays or freestanding robots • Speaker • Microphone • Headsets • Video conferencing camera • Telephone

Companies gain many cost benefits because the cloud-based collaboration application can be obtained without installing any hardware or software, which reduces upfront costs. The services are purchased on a pay-as-you-go subscription basis, allowing companies to deliver as much meeting room capacity as their employees need, in real time. The business model reduces the risks and failed ROI associated with traditional video conferencing rooms that are left idle due to accessibility and usability problems.

Content sharing

Huddle spaces are needed not only to facilitate video collaboration, but also to support and motivate employees to engage in ad hoc meetings whenever they need to work as teams. Employees will want to use these spaces to connect their devices wirelessly to virtual white boards or displays. They will want to use content-sharing applications to view and exchange documents and annotate content. Split-screen features are also important in these settings because the capability enables participants to interact with each other via the video session while viewing digital documents on the same screen. Wireless presentation systems allow meeting participants to present audio and video content to a room display and view the session remotely from a personal smartphone, tablet or laptop. Huddle spaces can be tailored to provide all of these capabilities. Companies that want to encourage content sharing in the huddle space will need to consider how wireless connectivity, white boards and displays can best be used to serve their business processes and their employee needs.

Audio quality

A good huddle space design pays strict attention to audio quality. Because huddle areas are designed into small spaces, companies often assume that audio quality is less important than it is in traditional video conference rooms, but this is not the case. Consistent, natural-sounding audio quality is essential in huddle spaces to ensure that everyone in the space and those participating remotely can hear and understand each other.⁵ Poor audio quality interferes with the collaboration experience and can even prevent a virtual meeting from taking place.

A small, professional quality table-top or ceiling microphone that connects to an installed audio system provides superior sound quality and reduces the background noise picked up by speaker phones and microphones embedded in laptops and tablets. Digital signal processing (DSP) and echo cancellation are especially important for enhancing audio in huddle rooms because these techniques ensure the participants have clear, natural-sounding conversations that are free of intrusive noise.

Companies can also provide a number of enterprise-grade headsets in each huddle room; these are particularly useful in closed rooms because the headsets enable each participant to engage in a video call without background interference from other speakers. Headsets can also be very important accessories in open huddle spaces because the devices reduce background noise from activities that are taking place beyond the huddle environment.

Integration of video and associated components

Proper selection and integration of components is essential to ensure that the collaboration tools used in the huddle space easily interconnect and interoperate. The implementation must have the flexibility

“Re-examine your office layouts to encourage creativity and collaboration.”

—Oliver Wyman

to allow users to share video and content via the devices they bring into the room, such as laptops and tablets. It should also meet the company’s need for multitechnology, multivendor solutions. A technology agnostic deployment based on technologies that use industry standard communications and networking protocols can satisfy these requirements.

Security and privacy considerations

For regulatory, security and customer privacy reasons, companies cannot let video, audio and associated solutions connect with or operate on their networks. Huddle spaces are also subject to these restrictions and can be configured to ensure compliance.

Standardized approaches

Many companies want to develop their own standard huddle space approaches and configurations that can be replicated for multisite implementations. This strategy has many advantages for the business. For the employees, a standardized huddle space ensures that users have the same experiences and capabilities at all locations. For the company, the approach creates an economy of scale that helps reduce purchase price. Perhaps more importantly, this approach can also standardize service and maintenance expectations and procedures to help ensure service reliability and reduce ongoing operational costs..

Conclusion

Small and convenient huddle spaces give corporate staff the areas they need for convenient, on-demand collaboration. They offer a wide range of deployment and configuration options, but the success of each deployment will require that the huddle space design addresses site-specific conditions as well as a company's specific video collaboration needs. The guidelines outlined in this paper will help companies equip their offices with the best possible huddle rooms to support their collaboration strategies. A skilled integration firm that has expertise in meeting-room AV systems and huddle environments can assist in all aspects of this work.



About AVI-SPL

AVI-SPL is the world's most trusted AV systems and video collaboration partner. AVI-SPL designs, builds, integrates, and supports the systems and environments that enable communication and collaboration. With highly trained and certified system engineers throughout 30+ offices across North America, the U.K., and the Middle East, and an international network of solution providers in 30 countries, we've built the infrastructure and partnerships to help any business meet its communication goals. We welcome the opportunity to help your firm address its specific needs for innovative video conferencing and collaboration work spaces.

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