

It's good to talk

 By [Peter Townshend](#)

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In the mid to late 90s, British Telecom (BT) in the UK ran a successful advertising campaign where the payoff line, "It's good to talk", was delivered by a friendly, charismatic and remarkably easy to mimic Bob Hoskins. This has stayed in my mind not because of Hoskins's affability, but because the simple message is so powerful: it really is good to talk.

This is as true in the workplace as it is when talking to a loved one, and companies are increasingly seeing the value of encouraging staff to talk and to collaborate in their daily work routine - both socially and on work matters.

Consistent research is being released, together with well-documented case studies, that highlight the importance of collaboration between knowledge workers, even in businesses that have traditionally focused on the individual.

For example, data collected across various industries by Herman Miller¹ shows some startling trends:

- Private offices are unoccupied more than 70% of the time
- Workstations are unoccupied 60% of the time
- Conference rooms are rarely used to capacity - in larger ones, four out of five seats typically sit empty.

Further research reveals a continuing shift towards collaboration in the workplace. Back in 1985, just 30% of an individual's output depended on working within in a group; by 2010, that figure was up to 80%.¹

But, what is it about talking that is so good? What makes collaboration so powerful? The answer is two-fold. Firstly, and most persuasively, there is strong evidence that collaboration motivates engagement, creativity and inspiration - vital characteristics of any successful company. Secondly, by adopting more collaborative spaces and lowering the number of personal spaces, companies are saving on their floorspace, often significantly.

An article in The Guardian in 2011 said that this was the decade of collaboration: "Collaboration encourages the transcending of traditional boundaries used to atomise and separate teams, departments, business units and organisations; it interconnects artificial separations in business, encouraging sharing, creativity, empowerment and innovation."²

An IBM study³ found that "extensively collaborative" companies performed better than their peers, and companies that collaborated with external sources made more money than those that didn't. An international study that Google commissioned with the Future Foundation found an 81% positive correlation between collaboration and innovation.³

Expanding the "we" space

Highlighting this, is global engineering company, Hatch, which, according to HOK, reinforced its emphasis on teamwork by expanding its "we" space (lounges, meeting rooms) to 26% from just 4% and reducing its "me" space (offices, cubicles) to 70% from 93%.⁴

Also, an international bank found that 40% of its employees were working remotely on an average day; shifting them out of "private environments" and into shared spaces allowed the company to save on real estate, with the ratio of workers to seats increasing to as much as 2:1.⁴

What has now become the pin-up-boy of office space design, Google, were early adopters of collaborate spaces, realising the impact that these spaces have on creativity. In the internet giant's offices, engineers are encouraged to spend 20% of their time developing their own ideas, which often requires recruiting and collaborating with colleagues. At one time, half of newly launched products, including Gmail, Google News, and AdSense, originated in those collaborations.³

Workspace design is becoming more intelligent as companies increasingly see the value efficient workspace. Science and psychology are being mixed to develop the ultimate workspaces and with virtual technologies, soaring real estate costs rising, and with the cost and hassle of commuting, we are seeing the demolition of offices walls and the destruction of the hierarchies they imprison. We are seeing workspaces that mirror our active lives, which are open, free, light and encourage us to communicate and inspire one another.

South African companies are behind the curve on matters of evidence-based office design and need to get up to speed and start re-designing their office spaces to better reflect the changing work environment and to maximise on resources and minimise costs. South African businesses need to learn that Bob Hoskins is right: it is good to talk.

References:

1. [*Collaboration Scenario*](#)
2. [*Biomimicry business transformation collaboration*](#)
3. [*What it takes to collaborate*](#)
4. [*Workplace design - more we than me*](#)

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