INNOVATION

RESEARCH SERIES

BY
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THE WHERE FACTOR
NEW ENVIRONMENTS FOR INNOVATIVE THINKING

The room has white, curved walls, spotlighted with pink hues. Pastel-colored globes hang from the ceiling. If the members of the group in the room aren't drawing sketches on the walls, they may be playing with puppets or Lego logs. The energy in the room is palpable. When playtime is over, the action calms down, although the electricity is still soaring. During this quiet time, the group members sink into plush zebra-striped chairs and translate their thoughts into words via laptop computers. Where in the world are we? We are in the future, in the meeting space of the 21st century.

The future is now in the United Kingdom, where more than a dozen Innovation Labs (or iLabs) have taken the region by storm. Innovation Labs are the next wave of meeting space, melding the concepts of face-to-face communication with play, creative thinking and technology. All of these elements are placed in a setting far removed from any current-day concept of meeting space.

DOES WHERE YOU THINK AFFECT HOW YOU THINK?

When it comes to generating ideas, a great deal of attention is paid to who is doing the thinking. But often, the quality of ideas generated is the result of *where* the thinking is done.

Where people think does make a difference. It has been proven that place governs people's beliefs, behaviors and their ability to be creative and innovative in their thinking. People take cues from their environment in all sorts of subconscious ways. For example, in a study conducted in the late 1990s, it was discovered that people behaved differently depending on the specific site of a meeting, be it a boardroom, a standard meeting room, a hotel, or a training room. Across the board, people showed varying "learned behaviors" in each environment. These behaviors impacted the way they were acting and thinking, and, subsequently, the ideas that they were generating.

For example, in a boardroom setting, people were quiet and spoke in hushed tones. They waited for others to finish before speaking and ideas tended to be very conservative. In company meeting rooms, corporate hierarchies affected the brainstorming process. Those higher on the corporate ladder had more say; junior employees less so. Overall, the study showed that there appears to be a set of unwritten rules subconsciously applied when people get together in traditional meeting spaces, rules that can potentially hinder brainstorming and decision-making processes.

According to Howard Wright, principal of Insight2Foresight, a business futures consultancy firm, if new ways of thinking are to be pursued, it is necessary to break with the past. He says that by creating meeting spaces that in no way resemble traditional places, people will have no environmental cues from which to draw. This could well lead to the development of new processes of thinking, innovating and making decisions.

ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS

- **Innovation Labs (iLabs) are the next wave of meeting space.**
- **iLabs use play, creative thinking and technology to achieve innovative business results.**
- **iLabs also provide new environments for learning.**
- **Virtual iLabs are the future with online collaboration.**

PUTTING A STAMP ON MEETING SPACE

In the mid-1990s, the United Kingdom's Post Office (now the Royal Mail) wanted to put its own stamp on meeting space. Maureen Gardiner, Director of Futures and Innovation for the organization, was charged with looking for ways to make meetings more productive. She and her colleagues realized that the basis for change had to start with developing new processes for decision-making. Out of this general concept came the idea of an Innovation Lab, a place where ideas could be developed, captured and channeled into results in a creative way.

It is important to recall that in the mid-1990s, the Internet had not yet approached its tipping point. But the Post Office knew that that day was coming, and when it did, business would be transformed in a significant way. Therefore, in order to start building on the future, the plan was to educate constituents (employees, business colleagues and customers) on the importance of using technology in business. The concept was to create some sort of immersive environment where people could learn about cutting edge technology and how it could be applied to everyday decision-making and business processes.

Thus was borne the Innovation Lab, designed to showcase new tools of communication and technology for the 21st century. A pilot Innovation Lab, designed by Wright, was split into four primary areas. The Technology Showcase was a dark and atmospheric space (set builders from the movie *Alien* worked on it).

The Creativity Lab had a totally different feel. The approach for the design was to create a comfortable womb with a view toward new ways of thinking. The space had soft pink lighting and curved walls that could double as floor-to-ceiling write-on white boards. Unexpected accoutrements, such as toys and palm trees, were scattered around the room. Portable computers, equipped with special brainstorming software, were placed throughout the room.

The other two components of the space were the Development Centre, where ideas based on Web technology could be turned into reality, and an Office of the Future.

During the incubation period, thousands of people visited the facility. Initially, most of the visitors were senior managers from the Post Office and its subsidiaries. As time went on, people started coming from all sorts of other organizations, from national and local governments to regional businesses and international companies. Students, ranging in age from 6 to 26, also visited. While the primary idea in 1997 was to introduce people to the wonders of the Internet (at the time, the fastest Internet connection in the UK was 9.6k dial-up), as time went on the fascination with the Internet decreased and interest in the Creativity Lab aspect of the project increased.

According to Gardiner, the concept rapidly evolved from a place where groups would think through the implications of a technology-enabled future into “intensive work spaces for teams

InnovationWorks@Reading, University of Reading

“Innovation Labs are the next wave of meeting space, melding the concepts of face-to-face communication with play, creative thinking and technology.”

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tackling a huge range of challenges, both tactical and strategic. Quite simply, the focus became creating a place for sustained creative thinking and planning. People would have fun working in an iLab, but they would also deliver serious, sustainable solutions."

The evolution of the concept, says Wright, was due in large part to the unexpected benefits of the groupware used in the Pilot Lab. "People experienced ideas pouring out of them during visits. A typical session with eight to ten people would generate up to 300 ideas in 15 minutes." Using software that allowed participants to bring up their ideas anonymously led to a new level of freedom of thought. No one was intimidated by authority; seemingly crazy ideas could be tossed into the ring without negative repercussions; and the playing field was flattened. In other words, everyone in the room had an equal opportunity to participate, from the lowest man or woman on the totem pole to the company CEO. And the CEO was impressed. In 1999, near the end of the pilot, the head of the Post Office pointed out that using the room and the meetings software allowed three days of work to be done in less than an hour and a half.

University of Essex Southend

Although the Pilot Innovation Lab consisted of four components, after the three-year trial period ended, it was obvious that the Creativity Lab was the true centerpiece of the project. Honing that space and its technology would be the focus of the development of future Innovation Labs.

CYBERSPACE AND CREATIVE SPACE

The next step was to build a fully functioning Innovation Lab. It opened in 2000, at what would soon become the Royal Mail's Coton House Learning and Development Centre in Rugby, England. Efforts were focused very specifically on designing a new environment for thinking. Three elements were vital: people, tools and space. Like the prototype, the new Innovation Lab was built to inspire creative thinking. Brainstorming rooms were themed around game playing and puzzles, a strategic planning forum was built with floor-to-ceiling white write-on walls, and furnishing and lighting fixtures were carefully selected. In sum, the entire area was designed to get people thinking creatively and without restriction.

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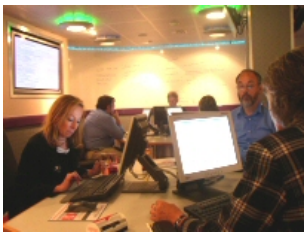
One of the most important changes from the pilot was the addition of new web-based meeting software that enhanced the process of creative brainstorming. According to Wright, the main benefits of the new web meeting software provided by Facilitate.com (www.facilitate.com) were the anonymity component and "the speed it allowed in generating, categorizing and prioritizing ideas." Given the simplicity of the interface, it was easy for both participants and the facilitator to use.

Leadership facilitation was considered the other key to unlocking creativity. Leaders would be needed to engage people to think differently, to get them to resolve complex problems, and to get groups to move through the process quickly and seamlessly.

FacilitatePro™ web meeting software allows for people power to rule. According to Julia Young, Vice President of Facilitate.com, the software allows for contemplative brainstorming. Instead of everyone trying to shout out ideas at the same time, cyber-brainstorming leads to non-competitive, yet collaborative, thinking. As a result, the quality and quantity of ideas increase.



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HOW DECISIONS GET MADE

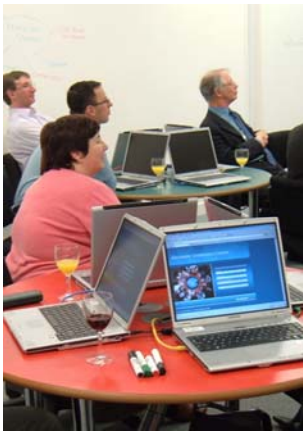
How does it work? A facilitator may start a session by throwing out an idea, such as "How can we improve our profitability?" Participants then sit at their computers and type in their thoughts. These thoughts are "recorded" on an electronic flipchart in real time. The software lets people see and com-

ment on others' ideas. As the ideas come in, they can be sorted by category (i.e., ways to improve the product; ways to cut costs; ways to add new customers) and then prioritized. At the end of the meeting, the facilitator might ask participants to vote electronically on the viability of each idea. The votes are tallied, the ideas get ranked and a plan of action is laid out.

According to Young, this ability to prioritize, along with the collaborative brainstorming, is what distinguishes the web meeting software for web conferencing tools. "FacilitatePro allows a group to capture ideas efficiently, to prioritize ideas quickly and to come to decisions objectively. It does the administrative work so that people can spend more time exploring new ideas and building alternative solutions."

Another benefit of the software, Wright points out, is its versatility. "With FacilitatePro being a web-based tool, there are opportunities for remote access and participation, and the ability to continue the experience after the face-to-face session has ended." In other words, thanks to the software, collaboration can begin before getting to the iLab and it can last well after an iLab session is over.

The triad of components, people, tools and space, adds up to a sum of more than three, according to Kate Pitts, Project Manager of the InnovationWorks@Reading iLab. "My view of why it works is that it creates a distinct change from a "normal" environment. It is different without being threatening. It gives participants the confidence and permission to try new things and to think in alternative ways." When she previously worked with the iLab at the Royal Mail, "I ran a large number of business development sessions with major accounts, using the lab to get customers to open up about their future direction, sharing The Royal Mail's direction with them and identifying areas of synergy. The most successful of these meeting netted 10 million pounds of new business in a four-hour session. I also ran creative problem solving and team building sessions that were extremely successful in the iLab. I think the reason for this is the combination of the different space and the nature of the software. The FacilitatePro breaks down the hierarchy and eliminates the usual brainstorm thing where ideas are often edited or rejected by the person in charge."



Bridges Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), University of Bedfordshire

"With FacilitatePro being a web-based tool, there are opportunities for remote access, and the ability to continue the experience after the face-to-face session has ended."

THE ILAB GRADUATES TO EDUCATION

The Royal Mail's Innovation Lab is still thriving. The lab is currently used to help companies think outside the box, test alternative futures, develop new products, creatively problem solve, generate research bids, develop plans and future business strategy, and promote team building.

Due to the success of the Royal Mail iLab, the concept is rapidly catching on throughout the United Kingdom. There are now eleven iLabs located on university campuses. The universities are using the labs for several purposes. First, there are internal uses. The rooms are used to come up with ideas on how to manage the universities better and how to create new courses. Second, universities use the iLabs as links to the local community, allowing the transference of university expertise, knowledge and skill to local businesses. Classes are taught in the iLabs as well.

According to Mark Atlay, Director of the University of Bedfordshire's Bridges Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, using the iLab as a classroom creates greater student participation in the learning process. "The creative group activities provide a stimulating and challenging learning environment. Then the FacilitatePro software, which allows for confidentiality, is the key to enabling every student to contribute ideas confidently and democratically."

The Creativity Lab at Coventry University Enterprises Techno-Centre

In the meantime, says Atlay, the iLab encourages instructors "to think differently about *where* they teach – encouraging them to think about the sort of spaces they would like to have to develop the skills, understanding and abilities appropriate to their curriculum. It also encourages them to think differently about *what* they teach – not just the transmission of knowledge – but creativity, problem solving, reflective practice and so forth. And the iLab encourages staff to think in new ways about *how* they teach."

Pitts adds, "One of the problems with education is the extent to which it develops critical thinking at the expense of creativity. In universities, I see the iLab being used successfully to develop and enhance creative thinking. The FacilitatePro software provides a nice structured tool for doing that."

The iLab concept is now trickling down to middle schools and high schools. Hassenbrook School, located in Stanford-le-Hope, Essex, is the home of the first iLab at a secondary school. It opened in 2005. Although the look and feel of the school's iLab is similar to its counterparts, its purpose is different. According to Rowena Rees, Assistant Head Teacher, "We are looking at the impact it has on the way pupils learn and are building up an evidence base to try to measure this impact on the achievement of our pupils. This differs from the team building, problem solving, forward planning and 'blue skies' thinking approach in other iLabs because we know what our outcomes should be. We are working to improve learning and therefore achievement in order to reach or exceed these outcomes." Rees says that the iLab has allowed for greater confidence and freedom of thought among students and teachers alike. The testimonials she has received from her staff emphasize the point. One teacher noted that in just one iLab session, "the pupils remained focused and on task throughout and they achieved as much as they would have after four weeks in a classroom." Lessons have been observed by the United Kingdom's Office for Standards in Education inspectors. They have concluded that learning is greater in the iLab than that ob-

Hassenbrook School Specialist Technology College

"In just one iLab session, the pupils remained focused and on task throughout and they achieved as much as they would have after four weeks in a classroom."

THE iLAB OF THE FUTURE

In the future, a meeting of the minds may not require a physical meeting space. In fact, meetings may be able to jump across the space-time continuum. Without getting too Einsteinian about it, the fact is, software like FacilitatePro enables people to meet without being in the same place, nor working at the same time. As Young points out, "while it is true that there will always be a need for in-person meetings, which provide valuable stimulation by bringing people together, the opportunity for virtual collaboration has arrived." In the future, iLabs may be used as hubs, where small groups of people "meet" with other small groups of people across time zones and cultures.

Reading's Kate Pitts says she can see "the benefit of virtual iLabs from the viewpoint of joint creativity/working sessions with researchers at different universities developing ideas for collaborative working." Using the iLab in distance learning programs could give universities new audiences for education. And the iLabs could continue to serve as a tool to unite the resources of universities and global corporations regardless of time, distance or language differences.

Howard Wright takes the concept a step further. He foresees the day when software could be developed that could enable people working in their own spaces to create their own virtual reality iLabs, dispensing of the need for physical space. However, that is a concept that remains far down the road. In terms of the immediate future, the current incarnation of the Innovation Lab, as seen in the United Kingdom, could well become the meeting room model that will become ubiquitous throughout the world during the next ten years.

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