



# THE UPSIDE OF SHARING SPACE

How office co-location can enhance productivity

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e've all seen sitcoms where characters divide their room or workspace down the middle to section off their "territory." Whether it's Marsha and Jan on *The Brady Bunch*, the Skipper and Gilligan on *Gilligan's Island*, or Stephanie and DJ on *Full House*, the division was always designed to defuse some conflict resulting from a real or perceived violation of personal space. Although lines were drawn and chaos often ensued, the characters typically ended up learning how to share the space, disagree effectively, and collaborate to find the best outcome.

At a basic level, these comic episodes illustrate the pros and cons of co-location—which is really just about sharing space. However, it is much the same when considering co-locating in a business relationship.



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responsible for their own group. Our team members were encouraged to interact directly with those leads, which helped reduce time spent getting answers and precipitated a more hands-on, collaborative approach to project execution.

The project manager said the team was so well integrated that, from the outside, it was difficult to differentiate who was the client and who was the service provider. Project staff saw the top benefits of co-location as:

- Increased efficiency due to direct communication with functional leads.
- Access to all team members in one room when needed.
- Better/faster problem-solving.
- Reduced coordination time.
- Fewer requests for information due to more immediate information sharing.

In this Eversource example, functional groups were located together on the same floor. But there are several other co-location scenarios where teams are working in the same building:

**Co-located on separate floors.**  
In this scenario, the client and contractor work in the same building but on different floors with different entrances. The teams are in a sense “co-located.” There may be some informal communication, however, the teams are not regularly collaborating on project issues, presenting difficulties in getting a team to really gel.

**Co-located but separated by company.**  
In this situation, both client and contractor teams are on the same floor, but are segregated into their company groups. They might have a common break room and entrance, which would encourage more casual conversations and reduce reliance on email, but

### TYPES OF CO-LOCATION

Co-location can be an effective way to bring a project team together if it’s done strategically. There are two primary types of co-location:

#### 1. OFF-SITE

This is an office that will be occupied by the client and/or the contractor only for the duration of the project. These are typically opened in a central location for a long, linear project such as a new electrical transmission line. A central location provides a convenient home base and enables right of way agents, public involvement specialists and other members of the team to easily meet with landowners when necessary. Although it’s rare for the client to work out of this office, in some cases a project manager may be stationed there to oversee daily operations. Establishing a separate project office can provide a clear identity and sense of purpose for the project team.

#### 2. ON-SITE

This is probably the most common scenario and is either utilized for teaming on a specific project, or when the client needs to augment their staff on one or more projects. This scenario offers the client the most control over staff and resources, which could be a pro or a con depending on the desired outcome.

### REAPING THE BENEFITS

So why would it be beneficial to co-locate teams? Let’s face it. Technology has changed the way we interact with one another, particularly at work. It is increasingly rare for people to actually talk face-to-face. In many cases, we opt to text someone even when that person is sitting right down the hall. Even in face-to-face meetings, people are either looking at their laptop or phone screens. With that in mind, physical co-location can matter a great deal. Take this project for example:

Burns & McDonnell served as the Program Manager for Eversource Energy’s Middletown-Norwalk transmission upgrade project in Connecticut. Our scope was to provide a range of engineering, construction management and related project management services on the bulk of a \$1.4 billion program. At the time, it was the largest transmission capital project in the country.

We had about 50 team members during peak project activity who shared a dedicated project office with seven Eversource leads in the areas of engineering, construction, real estate, environmental and other roles. The client’s functional leads served as the primary contacts for each work group and were empowered to be wholly

again, it doesn't really facilitate the best interaction or sense of unity.

### **Co-located by function.**

This was the scenario on the Middletown-Norwalk project. With engineering, construction, real estate and other like-functions each sitting together, cohesive client/contractor teams were formed. But the benefits go far beyond having similar teams working together and reducing the need for email and texting. When folks work together and collaborate to resolve issues, they build trust and become a stronger team. They are no longer identified as "client" or "contractor." They are building unique relationships based on personal interactions in a way that is not possible when working on opposite sides of town or separate areas of the same building. The client sees the contractor working hard on their project, and the relationship evolves beyond just fulfilling a contract. Needless to say, building positive relationships with your client establishes trust that can give the contractor a greater likelihood of earning more future work. Ultimately, we all want to do business with people we know and trust.

### **CONSIDERATIONS FOR CO-LOCATION**

Once you've decided to co-locate teams for an upcoming project, it's important to be aware of the crucial details. More importantly, begin planning discussions well before the contract is finalized. There are many things to think about to ensure a smooth transition for the project teams.

The first consideration is the corporate culture. If the contractor is working in the client's office, the client's rules and culture usually prevail. If there are fundamental culture differences, it's important that management from both groups have a discussion about what rules are the same, which are different, and what rules prevail.

Be wary of creating an environment where the client and contractor staff feel cut off from their parent organizations. Corporate loyalty and a sense of belonging is one of the primary contributors to work satisfaction. Feeling isolated can result in negative perceptions and poor performance. Working only part time at the client or project office can help avoid this potentially negative situation. Be sure to establish the office hours. Is there flex time? Do you both close the office on the same holidays? What is the dress code? Will there be regular team meetings?

Technology is another key consideration. Let's say you're the client and you're bringing in the contractor team to work with you. Do they need security badges to get in the door? Do they need access to your server for project-related information? Or is it necessary to set up "project only" equipment for this specific project team to use?

Protecting proprietary information is vital. If you're a contractor working in the client's office, it goes without saying that you should not work on unrelated projects while physically present in their space. If you are not working full-time for your client, it may be beneficial to arrange for part-time use of the office. Guard against intermingling projects. The last thing you want is for confidential information about one project to get overheard by staff working on another.

There are certainly times when private conversations are necessary even on the project everyone is working on. For example, when the contractor needs to brainstorm about solutions to a project issue, you don't necessarily want the client privy to all those iterations. Conversations about various solutions can get messy. You'll want to present the client with your best solutions, not the details of how you got there.

### **ENSURING A SUCCESSFUL OUTCOME**

If you're still considering office co-location, here are some guidelines to ensure the experience is positive and successful:

- Determine the length of time that the client and contractor need to share space.
- Clearly define who is paying for the office and all equipment needed.
- Take steps to gel the team by holding regular team meetings.
- Measure progress and action items daily.
- Hold weekly lessons-learned sessions for all members of the team.
- Use technology that fits the needs of the entire team.
- Offer mentoring and training opportunities.

The best approach is to start thinking about all the considerations of co-location early. Having conversations with decision-makers about whether co-location (and what kind of co-location) is appropriate for your situation can go a long way in ensuring the success of your project. ★



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