



## **Social Space as an Essential Element of an Effective Online Work Environment**

Valerie Bock  
Collaboration Architects

### ***Introduction***

The proliferation of communication tools on the PC desktop has created something of a crisis for the modern organization. Between E-mail, Web-based conferencing, and Instant Messaging, just when is anyone supposed to get any work done?

A common response to this pressure is to structure online workspaces to tightly focus on the task at hand. Site designers reason that there is so much distraction elsewhere, and people are so busy, that it's best to avoid occasions for "idle chit-chat"

Experienced facilitators of such spaces, however, see things differently. Just as the coffee room and the water cooler provide important social affordances which facilitate the creation of an effective work environment, so too do their online equivalents.

The creation of a "coffee shop" space for casual conversation, or a more focused area for discussing something as non-business related as pets, or favorite movies, provides several essential functions:

### ***Social space creates a "safe zone" in which to practice communicating online***

Many people find it stressful at first to do business online. To all the usual stress associated with performing well, we add the need to learn new tools. A place where people can just converse without worrying so much about what they say frees up their resources to learn how to say it in this new environment. Time spent learning how to converse online about a favorite movie can be a crucial investment in being able to respond effectively when working online on a project team.

### ***Social space facilitates the development of positive associations with communicating online***

Most people find casual conversation an enjoyable part of their lives. Just as the sharing of a joke or a humorous observation is what "breaks the ice" in our face-to-face encounters, so it works online. In that all cognition is emotionally mediated, a positive outlook towards time spent in an online workspace can tremendously improve the effectiveness of the time spent learning and working in that same environment.

### ***Social space helps people develop positive working relationships with each other***

Anyone who has ever been to a business conference knows that some of the most valuable conversations are those which occur in the hallways between sessions, and at the hotel's lobby bar among people who would not have encountered each other any other way. When we take great pains to bring geographically far-flung individuals together



online, we are wise to leverage that proximity by providing similar space for casual conversation.

### ***Conclusion***

At Collaboration Architects, we believe people learn and work best where they feel both comfortable and competent. Providing social space is a key part of our strategy to create online environments where people work together effectively.