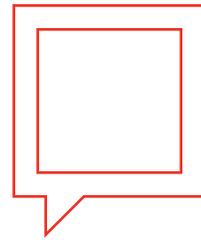
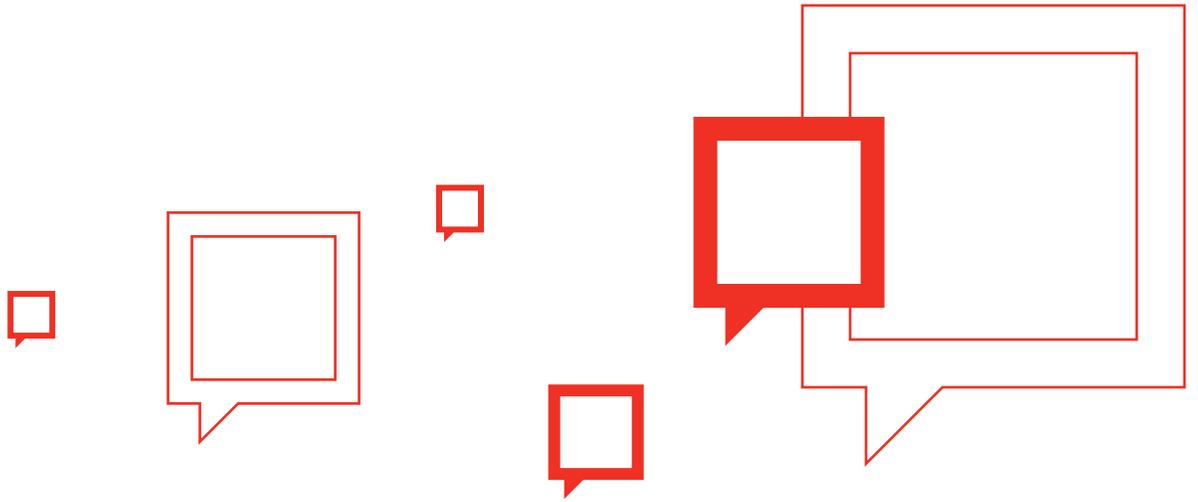


Gensler



**What we've
learned about
focus in the
workplace.**

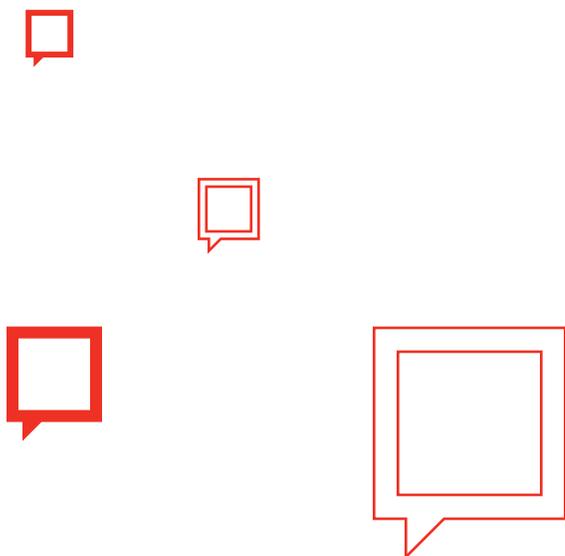
What do
90,000
people say
really drives
productivity
at work?



“It’s not going too far out on a limb to say these findings put us at the beginning of a new era in workplace strategy and design.”

– Diane Hoskins, Executive Director, Gensler

 Read more of Diane's thoughts at gensleron.com/work/2012/1/24/focus-on-focus.html



Early in 2012, a spate of new books and media coverage raised a suddenly pertinent question about modern life: can any of us think straight anymore?

A *New York Times* article, [“The Rise of the New Groupthink”](#) pointed to the lost benefits of concentration and focus in the workplace because of open-plan environments. Along the same lines, *The Atlantic’s* [“Collaborative Workspaces: Not All They’re Cracked Up To Be”](#) touched on individual workstyles and the need for spaces that support the individual worker, whether an introvert, extrovert or somewhere in between. An article on *Time.com*, [“Workplace Woes: The ‘Open’ Office Is a Hotbed of Stress”](#) reported on research showing that open-plan offices sap motivation.

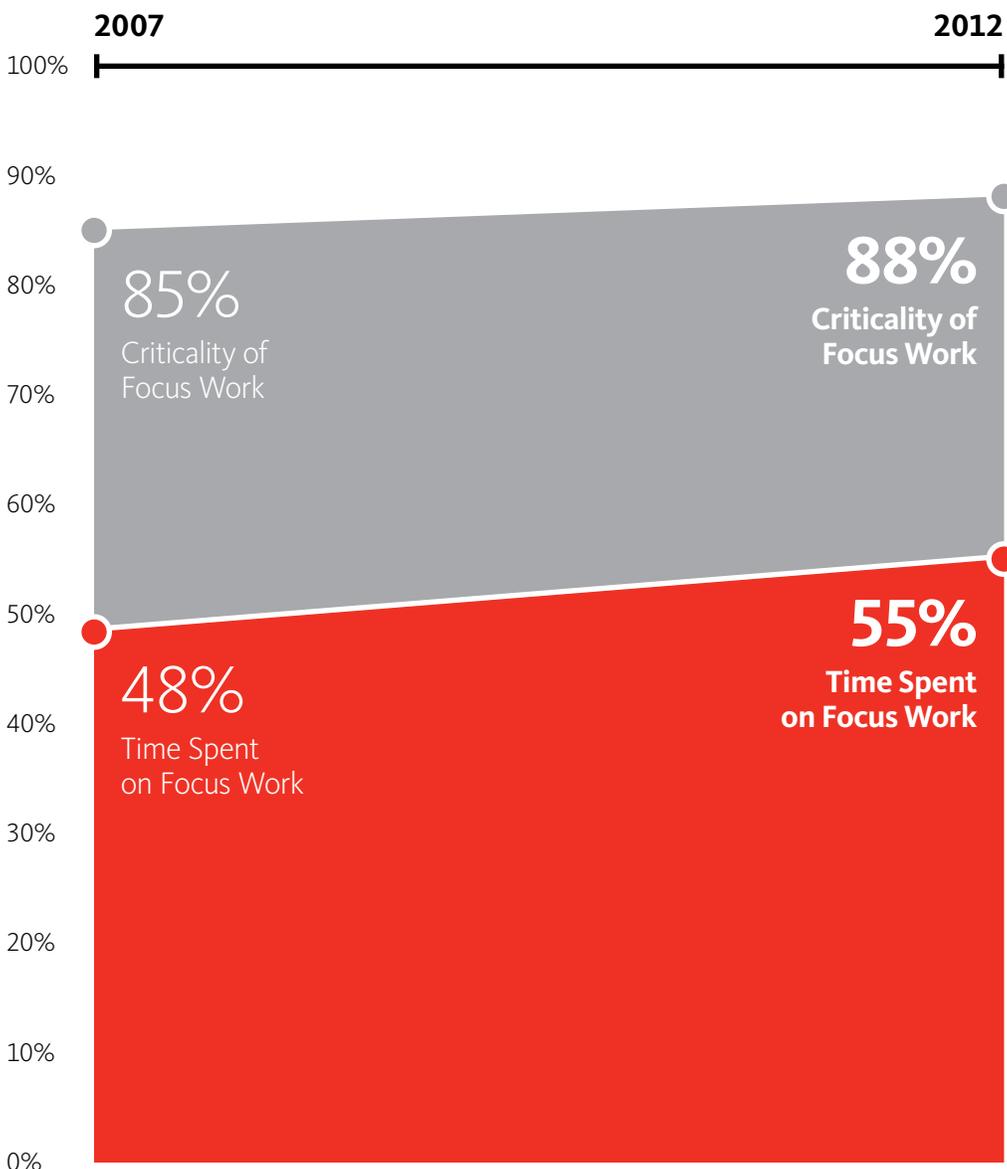
These articles captured the spirit and substance of compelling questions that Gensler has been asking since a series of workplace research efforts in the mid-2000s solidified our conviction that knowledge work is composed of four work modes: focus, collaboration, learning and socializing. Has the move away from individual space gone too far? Have we pursued collaboration at the cost of concentration? Have we underestimated the importance of time for individual thought in an organization’s competitive competency?

Our research team subsequently sought to understand the connection between workplace design and the effectiveness of work in the four work modes. Over the past five years, Gensler has surveyed individuals from the world’s top companies to understand their work patterns and work environments through our Workplace Performance Index® (WPI) tool. The resulting database of more than 90,000 people from 155 companies across 10 industries (as of September 2012) represents tens of thousands of data points on how people work today and how workplace environments do—and don’t—support them.

Gensler’s WPI database is giving us the collective wisdom of 90,000 people speaking to what an organization needs to do with its workplace so that it works *for* people, not against them. As we’ve analyzed its data, we’ve found something unexpected with the potential to rock long-standing trends in workplace design.

The WPI’s unexpected revelation is that the most significant factor in workplace effectiveness is not collaboration, it’s individual focus work. And we also found that focus is also the workplace environment’s least effectively supported activity.

In 2007, Gensler launched a large-scale survey looking at how people work in the knowledge workplace. We found that focus work occupied the most time in the work day and was the activity people considered most critical to doing their job. Since then, our WPI database has confirmed those findings and indicates that the criticality and time spent on focus have increased. These increases seem surprising given the emphasis on collaboration by many businesses, but when you look at work factors that have changed since 2007, less space, less privacy, more time at work and more distractions are making focus work more important and time-consuming.



WHAT'S CHANGED AT WORK SINCE 2007?



NEW DISTRACTIONS

Tablets, smartphones, Twitter and Facebook—these new tools and media certainly help productivity in some ways and have also introduced numerous distractions to the workplace.



LESS SPACE

A CoreNet survey shows that from 2010 to 2012, the average square feet per person has gone from 225 to 176. This number is predicted to drop to as low as 100 sf/person by 2017.



LESS PRIVACY

Driven by cost effectiveness and an intent to build collaboration, open office plans have steadily gained momentum, becoming the corporate office rule rather than the exception.



LONGER DAYS

A lingering effect of the recession: people are spending more time at work than they did before the recession.

towerswatson.com/united-states/press/5600

THERE IS AN “I” IN COLLABORATION

WPI respondents rate focus—without exception—their most critical work activity and the one that occupies the largest portion of the workday. And even with technologies and policies that let people work easily outside of the office, they still fully expect to be able to engage in focus work in their organization’s place of business.

In deeper analysis of our WPI data, we have seen that the work modes are not four independent variables in knowledge work. Instead, the work modes are highly interconnected, with focus as the primary component and the key predictor of all other work modes effectiveness. So a workplace that scores well for effective focus scores well for collaboration, learning and socializing. The inverse is true, as well: miss the mark on individual focus work, and all other work modes suffer. The relationship with collaboration is especially pronounced. When focus effectiveness decreases, collaboration effectiveness decreases.

The critical insight: Workplace strategies that sacrifice individual focus in pursuit of collaboration will result in decreased effectiveness for both.

It’s not difficult to guess why this is the case. When people’s most important reported work activity is the one least supported by the workplace, the result is frustration, with

a domino effect on the other work modes. A frustrated person is highly unlikely to spin his chair around and happily collaborate or socialize; a frustrated mind is unlikely to learn; a frustrated employee is unlikely to be engaged or productive.

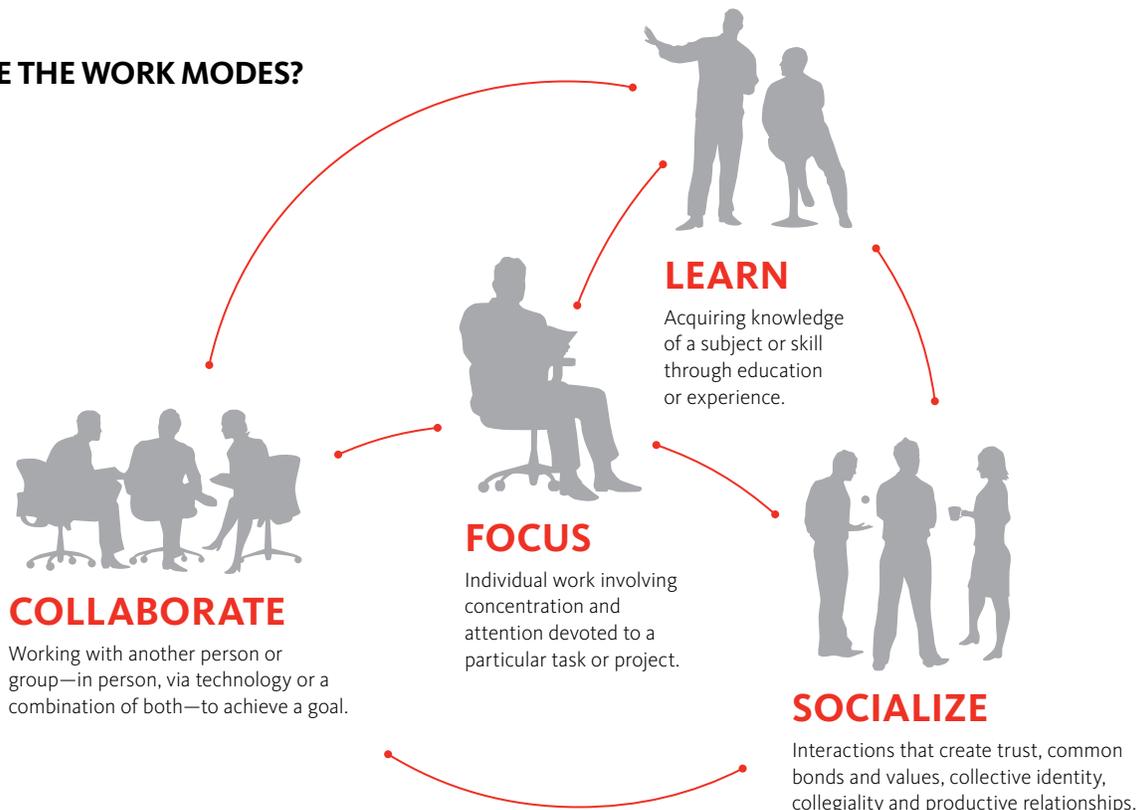
These findings are not a repudiation of collaboration, but rather an embrace of focus. When it can be achieved, good things happen.

CONCENTRATING IS COMPLICATED

We can socialize and collaborate on a dime, but concentration takes significant effort. To engage in deep, rich, productive thought, we need an undivided mind. Even when alone, focus can be difficult, but the challenge is increased exponentially by the distractions inherent to the widely implemented open-office environment. Co-worker interruptions, auditory and visual distractions all combine to make focus work the modern office’s most compromised work mode.

Adding to the complexity, collaboration, learning and even socializing are increasingly virtual work modes, taking place on the computer or on the telephone. Virtual work is, at its essence, the equivalent of focus work in terms of how it is supported by place. As anyone who has tried to pay attention on a long conference call knows, it’s not for the weak of focus. Quiet becomes not a nicety, but a necessity.

WHAT ARE THE WORK MODES?





Fallon Worldwide, Minneapolis, Minnesota

ALL WORK MODES ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL

Another critical WPI finding is that the threshold for effective collaboration space is relatively low; people collaborate in a wide variety of space types and find those spaces by and large effective. People also adapt easily to changes in collaboration space. This is likely due to the fact that the most critical factor in collaboration is who you're collaborating with, not where. Space plays a role, but a secondary one.

This isn't true of focus. The most important element in effective focus work is place. The WPI shows that focus work is much more limited in where it happens and that the workplace environment is consistently poor at supporting it.

It would be a mistake to consider the emerging importance of focus work as any kind of step backward. It is often said

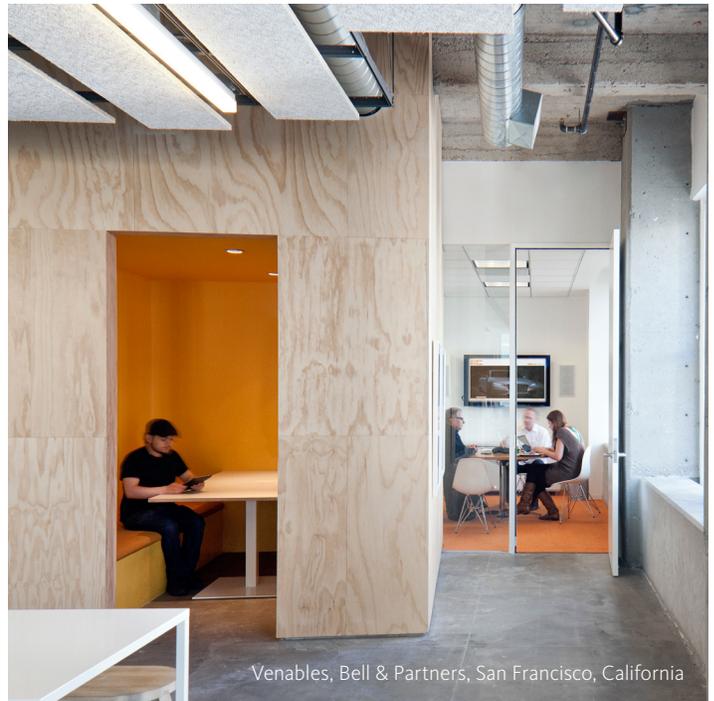
that the workplace hasn't kept pace with the way people work today, usually referring to mobility or collaboration. But in the realm of focus work, the statement takes on real meaning. The workplace in any of its past and current iterations—open office, cubicle farms, warrens of private offices—has never been adept at supporting the delicate balance of intense focus and rich collaboration required by knowledge workers who aim to thrive.

Gensler's WPI findings instead point to a future workplace unlike anything we've seen before. A place that will balance spaces for people to engage in extended periods of uninterrupted focus work with an ability to seamlessly engage in informal, formal and virtual collaboration. Learning in all its forms—formal group, individually directed, and passive observation—will flourish. Socializing will be encouraged and abundant.

Distractions—visual, noise or always-on technology—abound in the contemporary office. Providing ample private spaces to get away and think is one strategy companies use to balance out the negatives of open-office plans.



Venables, Bell & Partners, San Francisco, California



Venables, Bell & Partners, San Francisco, California

HOW DO YOU SOLVE THE FOCUS PROBLEM?

What's next is how to address the spectrum of individual work setting requirements with scalable, efficient solutions that organizations can manage from a cost and operational standpoint. We are beginning to see examples of this kind of solution from some in the technology sector who don't shy away from bold risk-taking in any aspect of their business. They're offering unprecedented levels of freedom for their staff to modify their workspaces according to their own needs—this may be the next trend away from one-size-fits-all solutions for businesses that want to maximize human capability for invention and innovation.

Concentration requires a more individualized set of options than today's standard playbook. To enhance both collaboration and concentration, we are seeking to invent a workplace that provides a spectrum of individual choices of primary workspaces, supported

by places to collaborate, socialize and learn. This new hybrid could unlock untapped value through a more equitable balance of concentration and collaboration in the workplace: a new approach that could create a fresh level of success for organizations.

Redefining focus as an important, valuable and desirable activity in the workplace is a shift for businesses that have rightfully seized on the power of collaboration as a force for productivity and innovative ideas. But it doesn't have to be a U-turn. Rather, it redirects us to explore more fully what we first uncovered: There are four distinct work modes. They all matter and they are all inextricably connected.



ABOUT GENSLER

As the leading design firm for business, Gensler has a unique perspective on the ways that people really work. Through projects with thousands of companies and our annual workplace surveys, we have seen firsthand the revolution of knowledge work, and how individuals and teams create organizational value and drive performance.

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LOCATIONS

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