

The Breakout Zone

The term 'breakout zone' has become a common everyday phrase – breakout areas are now seen as a standard part of modern workplace design. However, in the historical evolution of the 'the office', the concept is still relatively new and the real estate profession is still learning how to use breakout zones optimally. Herman Miller and forward thinking inc. set about identifying the common pitfalls that make breakout zones less effective than they should be, and recommend 10 tips for successful design.

What classifies as a breakout zone?



The definition of a breakout zone depends largely upon the design and intended use of the space. In the scope of this project they are defined as:

- spaces with communal ownership
- not bookable meeting rooms
- somewhere to get away from the workstation

The research

- Often breakout zones do not represent an efficient use of space
- Our hypothesis is that they are not subject to the same scrutiny as more traditional workspaces when it comes to delivering value to the business
- Thus, our research set out to identify common pitfalls in breakout zone design and set guidelines to help companies avoid these mistakes
- fti analysed findings from 15 in-depth engagement programmes that they undertook, including space utilisation studies, surveys and employee workshops
- This was supplemented with 40 interviews with real estate professionals from around the world

The findings: Three general observations



1 Compulsory inclusion

- Breakout zones seen as an essential part of any workplace design - no longer an 'alternative worksetting'
- This is often formalised in standardised ratios (which do not necessarily reflect demand)

2 Low utilisation

- Breakout zone utilisation ranged from <1% to 63%
- On average utilisation was 11%, where >25% would be effective
- Breakout zones misused for storage or displays
- High utilisation was often a result of supply constraints on meeting rooms; breakout space was being used primarily as overflow space

3 Varied functions

- Organisations used breakout zones for a wide variety of functions:
 - *Primary functions* were spontaneous collaboration, relaxation and refreshment
 - *Secondary functions* were energy/atmosphere creation, brand communication and individual work space

7 Common Pitfalls

And how to avoid them...

1 Style over function

- Breakout zones offer an opportunity for design creativity, but they must also play a functional role for the workforce
- Employees' operational needs can be overshadowed by the brand communication agenda or designers' expression



- Use pre-design engagement to really understand the organisation's working model, including brand positioning and culture
- Hold the design team to account – deliver on communication and functionality simultaneously

2 Clarity of function

- Large, centralised breakout areas with catering perform multiple functions well
- However, many poorly utilised breakout zones suffer through having no clear function
- Design gives mixed messages, for example a library area with group tables located next to a kitchen
- Employees either avoid using the space or 'misuse' it, disrupting others



- Design for an intended use / uses
- Provide visual cues for employees
- Make breakout areas distinctive from one another
- Communicate intended uses to employees
- Consider protocols if needed, e.g. time limits

3 Furniture and tools

- Aiming to design maximum flexibility can result in bland, poorly supported spaces
- Furniture and tools should support intended use, e.g. plug points, white-boards



- Understand working model and match design to function, e.g. what *types* of spontaneous collaboration / individual work will be undertaken

4 Cultural acceptance

- Behavioural change is generally slower than physical design evolution
- There is still an implicit perception in many companies that the workstation is the place where an employee works – by implication breakout zones are seen as spaces for relaxation, or less productive working



- Leadership can set a behavioural example
- Communicate intended uses to employees

5 Disruptive noise

- Poor choice of location means nearby employees are disrupted at their workstation and / or employees are inhibited from using breakout zone
- Potential 'illusions of privacy' worsen the impact and confidentiality can be compromised



- Use engagement to understand the prevailing culture – *do* employees want to move away from the workstation area when they...
- ...need to be quiet and concentrate?
- ... need to be interactive and noisy?

6 Individual breakouts

- Breakout spaces are primarily designed for collaboration, but individuals need breakout space too
- Where provided, individual breakout spaces are often designed as phone booths - often small, dark and uncomfortable



- Design-in creative individual breakout zones
- Individual space needn't mean an individual room for one person – larger, more open spaces can still cater for individual quiet work, e.g. library environment

7 common pitfalls

7 Community hub

- Many companies invest in a large central breakout area but location and design can mean that rather than acting as a community hub...
 - Ownership is not equal
 - It becomes an extended waiting room
 - Employees do not see a reason to go there

The Breakout Zone Checklist

A good workplace has a mix of breakout zones which...

- Are selected to support the specific working model of the workforce
- Support both collaborative and individual needs for breakout space
- Offer a variety of distinctive workspaces which are intuitively understood by employees and used optimally
- Are supported by a culture of implicit permission
- A good breakout zone should...
- Be designed with a clear function / set of functions in mind which are clear to the employee
- Provide furniture and tools which functionally support the specific intended uses
- Fit with the culture and character of the company
- Avoid negatively impacting the effectiveness of other workspaces

Where to start?

Answer the following questions about your workplace...

- *How* are breakout zones utilised?
- How regularly are breakout zones utilised?
- What are the barriers / incentives to using certain breakout zones?
- How do breakout zones impact adjacent areas?

And how to avoid them...



- Locate central breakout area to allow equal accessibility throughout the building
- Provide a reason to be there – dining, TV and magazines
- Leadership use space for community meetings – establish communal ownership

The Workplace Intelligence Unit was founded by forward thinking inc. and Herman Miller

www.workplaceintelligence.co.uk
