

# Proportional Planning for the Adaptable Workplace

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## The Idea of Proportional Planning

The open plan environment is going through a transformation. New expectations and needs are changing planning approaches to open environments, most noticeably through the embrace of “low horizons” – workstation heights low enough to provide occupants visual access to daylight and other employees within the larger workplace.

However, the implementation of low horizons is just one means of achieving organizational desire for a more dynamic work environment. As the facets of office work expand, the workplace must support diverse work styles and fluid movement from activity to activity through the day—a variety of needs requiring a variety of settings. As a result, traditional “one size fits all” planning standards are evolving to incorporate a series of settings within the office. Forward-thinking organizations are embracing the notion of “proportional planning,” a model that links planning to the predominance of particular work styles within the workspace. This approach also addresses major social and technological trends influencing office environments.

## Macro Drivers Impacting the Need for Change

Today, there are three major trends impacting the workplace, influenced heavily by fast-paced economic and technological changes.



### One size doesn't fit all

*The increasing diversity of the North American workforce also increases the expectations on planning solutions tailored to the individual.*

### 1. Demographic diversity is shifting expectations

Over the past few decades, the modern workplace has been transformed by the “three G’s”: gender, geography, and generation:

- + **Women now comprise the majority of working adults in the United States for the first time in history.** Moreover, they receive the majority of American undergraduate degrees, and are now the majority or near majority in many graduate schools, including business and law.
- + **North American organizations are becoming more culturally complex.** Local and distributed work teams reflect an increasingly wide range of cultures and nationalities.
- + **Four generations are at work simultaneously, another first for the North American workplace.** Two smaller generations (Silent Generation and Generation X) are out-numbered by the two largest generations in North American history, Baby Boomers and Generation Y, each with their own ideas on how the workplace should function.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For the last three decades, Baby Boomers have shaped the workplace, much as they have so many other aspects of North American life. Boomers tend to view the office as the place to work, and rely on its formal structure as a source of status and individual identity within the organization. In contrast, Generation Y workers seamlessly blends personal and work life, and view the workplace as an opportunity to be emotionally engaged and connected with others. Despite their differences, Baby Boomers and Generation Y share a common desire for flexibility. Generation Y has grown up understanding that their surroundings and experiences can be tailored to their needs. In late career, many Boomers are seeking to extend their work years beyond retirement age, but do so increasingly on their own terms, also driving the need for choice and flexibility.

## 2. Collaboration is seen as the key to innovation

For decades, the individual employee was the unit of work which occurred in a static location, often within a private office. Today, organizations seek to balance individual work with a greater emphasis on group efforts. Why the shift?:

- + **Businesses are abandoning the classic “command and control,” top-down decision making process.** In a quest to improve the speed to market and decision making process, leaders are flattening their organizations. With a decentralized structure, swift communication and fluid movement among employees is paramount.
- + **Generation Y has been shaped by educational emphasis on team work and online communities.** That generation’s embrace of social networks easily translates to corporate intranet sites and informal value networks in the workplace.
- + **Corporate leaders view innovation as the path to enhanced profitability.** And with the complexity of projects and processes, that innovation depends on an increasingly broad team of workers. By tapping the power of the group, the enterprise succeeds.

## 3. The office is a preferred, not a required destination

Traditionally, work generally needed to be done *at work*; daily attendance equaled productivity. Now, miniaturized and wireless technologies have radically changed how and where work is conducted. Today, employees can work anywhere, any time, any way they prefer. Particularly for Generation Y, those preferences are often outside of their primary workstation. Untethered by technology, the entire workplace is now the individual’s workspace. And with increasing frequency, work occurs outside of the formal workplace, in the environment most appropriate for the work at hand.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, the contemporary workplace is less about connecting employees with *technology* and more about connecting employees with *one another* and their project teams. Business leaders are leveraging the social and cultural values of their workplaces, viewing the office as a strategic tool to impart organizational values, foster collaboration, and develop camaraderie within an increasingly far-flung distributed and diverse workforce.



### From me to we

*Organizational leaders are increasingly harnessing the power of the group to tackle complex business issues. Planning needs to foster that collaboration in the workplace.*

*“The ideas do not only happen in the workstation”*

*— Partner, A&D Firm*



### Do you know where your employees are?

*With the ability to work anywhere, employees are working with greater frequency away from their primary desks. Good workplace planning supports employees as they move throughout the facility.*

<sup>2</sup> In recent interviews with facility leaders, Knoll found that almost one-half of work occurs outside of an individual’s primary workspace, and, of that, one-half is outside the employer’s building or campus (O’Neill and Wymer, 2010).

# The Emergence of Proportional Planning

## The Integrated Workplace

In an increasingly dynamic workplace, the contemporary worker moves through various modes of individual and group work throughout the course of a calendar or project timeline. Those work styles must be supported in a comprehensive plan for the open work space:

**Focus** – Individually-oriented work that occurs within a primary workspace and requires concentration and control over interruptions.

**Share** – Collaboration that occurs in individual or group spaces, and centers on the casual exchange of ideas with a small number of colleagues.

**Team** – Group efforts applied to specific work goals, occurring in both formal and informal meeting spaces.

*“Workplaces need to adopt the adaptive.”*  
— Leading Workplace Researcher, Manufacturing Corporation



### The model of Integrated Work has three work modes and a social component

*In good Integrated Workspace design, the furnishings, layout, technology and work policies support the seamless flow of work and people between the work modes.*

Additionally, employees engage in **social activity**, an integral part of all work modes and workspaces. As the term implies, social activity provides impromptu connection, linking workers to their colleagues and organization.<sup>3</sup>

Individuals spend almost half of their time away from their primary workspace (typically a workstation). So how can the open plan help keep facilities fluid and agile in supporting mobility and the flow of information through an organization? Well-integrated space allows the worker to seamlessly shift among all the work modes, encouraging both casual and formal exchange of ideas and offering efficiencies of space and time. Yet, a Knoll study of workplace alignment across eight industries revealed an important disconnect. On a whole, surveyed facility leaders underscored the importance of collaboration to their organizational performance; however, their facilities were not optimized to support that group work.

### Aligning the Plan to the Work

Over the last four decades, open plan work environments have often relied on a monolithic planning solution that duplicates clusters of workstations with repetitive predictability. While appropriate for some types of organizations, this one dimensional approach ignores the complexities of most contemporary workplaces. Across industries, the real estate equation is changing from that static solution to a more adaptable model that recognizes a variety of work styles—what people actually do in the workplace. Flexibility is expressed through the notion of

<sup>3</sup>For more information on work modes and activity behaviors, see Design for Integrated Work, Knoll research white paper, 2009

**proportional planning:** understanding the predominant work style or styles—focus, share, team and activity—and planning the facility in parallel to those needs.

The proportion of work styles may shift among various lines of business, but a well selected series of product **elements** can support a broad range of work modes. These elements often begin with the simple desk, then expand to include personal storage and seating. The specifics are further defined through a thorough understanding of work styles and organizational needs. By reconfiguring those individual elements, organizations can proportionally support individual lines of business based on their predominant work modes, thereby providing diverse solutions from a relatively narrow range of products

### Macro Standards; Micro Adaptability

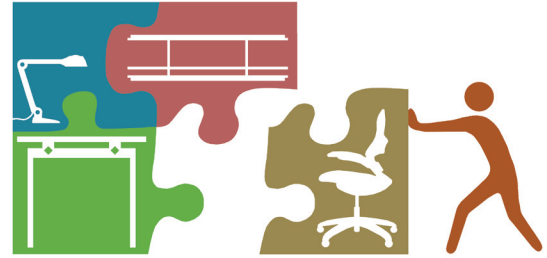
Proportional planning needs to be holistic in nature, envisioning the necessary mix, flow, and infrastructure of the overall space while also defining attributes that will allow it to flex to individual needs. This approach delineates constants and variables. A constant, or macro standard, anchors the plan while micro planning provides adaptable variables that allow the workplace to meet the needs of a particular worker.

**Macro planning** sets the stage, focusing on enterprise-scale capabilities and services:

- + **Space requirements** – Defining densities, neighborhoods and work groups.
- + **Planning modules** – Identifying required work settings and outlining necessary characteristics.
- + **Storage needs** – Anticipating enterprise storage requirements and proximity to primary workstations or offices.
- + **Infrastructure distribution** – Articulating the needs for power and data access in every work setting.

To support the fluid nature of work, good macro planning must be paired with **micro adaptability**, providing individual freedom in the workplace:

- + **Adaptability** – Spaces that can serve multiple functions, typically incorporating freestanding furniture elements that can be shifted and moved in response to the work at hand.



### The building blocks of good workplace planning

*A well selected set of furnishings “elements” provides a nimble tool set to support the organization. These pieces can be combined and recombined in response to shifting needs.*



### Planning both big and small

*Proportional planning requires both macro and micro planning: an understanding of both enterprise-scale needs (the macro) and the needs of the individual worker (the micro).*

- + **High performance seating** – Providing the right scope of seating options, with task seating that intuitively and easily responds to each user, and agile, light-weight chairs that can easily migrate to where they're most needed.
- + **Options for public and private storage** – Balancing personalization of the workstation: accommodating photos, awards and other displays while also providing enclosed cabinets for coats, bags, and briefcases.
- + **Flexible work tools** – Offering pivoting monitor arms, articulating desk lights, and organizational products that can be easily adjusted by the user.
- + **Ready access to power and data** – Ensuring wireless and “plug and play” capabilities are seamlessly available from the individual workspace to the entire facility.

### Implementing a Proportional Planning Model

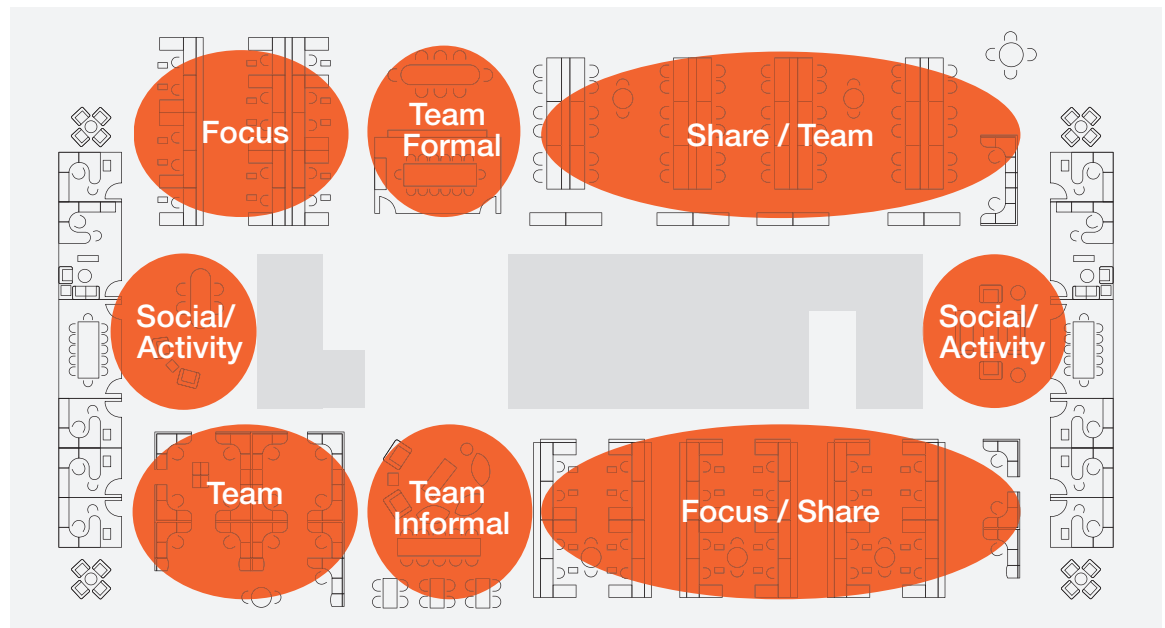
In a significant percentage of organizations, the physical facility has not kept up with how work is actually conducted. The goal of proportional planning is to understand the very nature of that work, examining an organization's workplace dynamics.<sup>4</sup>

*“Flexibility is not trackable, but is imparted by signals in your culture.”*  
 — Diversity Officer, Leading Technology Company

We suggest a two-pronged approach that starts with a work style analysis, assessing real and desired work styles in an organization. Using this information a conceptual layout can be developed that supports the pattern of work modes and work flow.

#### Building the plan

Once a work style analysis is completed, planners better understand the actual and desired profile of work styles in their facilities. With those insights, planners can create a conceptual layout, defining the variety of spaces necessary to appropriately support the work at hand.



<sup>4</sup> In many cases, employees have already implemented solutions that merely need to be codified in a new facility plan. Privacy is one example. As the individual's primary work setting has evolved from being a private space to simply a more personal space, employees seek privacy elsewhere in the workplace. Aided by mobile technologies, workers are solving for different types of privacy needs by finding a diversity of settings. For example, a short phone call with a physician may require only a quiet corner, but writing a lengthy client report may necessitate a secluded “study carrel” away from visual and audio distractions. A thorough work style analysis should identify these organic workplace behaviors, which are sometimes forced to flow around impediments created by furnishings and architecture.

+ **Work Style Analysis** – In recent research, Knoll has discovered that the bulk of office work falls within the defined work modes—focus, share, team, and activity. Study participants could not think of particular work that did not fit within those defined work modes. Using the work modes as a foundation, a workspace analysis can identify predominant work styles and how various work modes compare in frequency. Data can be gathered expeditiously, even with limited time and resources. For example, an online survey can ask employees within each team or functional area to define their mix of work styles, patterns of movement and work flow, and the level to which the facility supports those needs (often on a 1-5 scale). Informal roundtable discussions and work observations within the workplace can round out the data points. This blend of quantified and qualified data provides a multi-faceted view of the workplace.

*“My job is to keep my company agile.”  
— Leading Workplace Planner*

+ **Conceptual Layout** – With the information collected, facility leaders can craft a top-level plan reflective of the work—defining a variety of spaces aligned with the proportional mix of work styles. This proportional plan can then be accomplished by selecting a tool set of elements within a tightly defined product offering that meets the diversity of workplace needs. Successful programs focus less on implementing strictly defined programs and more on fostering workplace opportunities that connect people, technology and space.

## Planning the Adaptable Workplace

The contemporary workplace is in flux, as organizational needs evolve and employees continually shift between individual and group efforts. Corporate leaders need to define the mix of work styles existing in their facilities and couple that understanding with their longer term vision of how work should occur. Proportional planning integrates that knowledge into the facility planning process, ensuring that the workplace is aligned with work flow realities and goals. A well selected series of furniture “elements” provides a nimble tool set to support those needs. Through intelligent proportional planning and flexible furnishings, leaders can craft a highly adaptable workplace solution that meets immediate and evolving needs of the organization.

*“The workplace needs to encourage co-creation versus simply allowing for it.”  
— Corporate Real Estate Lead, Technology Company*

*Knoll research investigates links between workspace design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the user experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments. To learn more about this topic or other research resources Knoll can provide, visit [www.knoll.com/research/index.jsp](http://www.knoll.com/research/index.jsp)*