
Collaboration Requires Proximity - But It Doesn't Have to Be Physical



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Even when colleagues are not in the same office, strong social ties can bridge the gap.

The future of work is **undoubtedly hybrid**. Major corporations from Apple to Zoom now require employees to be in the office two or three days a week, citing the benefits of face-to-face collaboration and culture building. Indeed, **traditional thinking** suggests that being physically close leads to better communication and collaboration.

Our **recent research** reinforces this idea, but also shows that social closeness (strong direct and indirect connections) can offset a lack of physical proximity. Namely, we found that when people are physically close, the need for strong social bonds is less crucial; conversely, strong social connections can compensate for physical distance. In other words, physical proximity and social closeness can substitute for each other.

Putting proximity to the test

In our study, we took advantage of the relocation of a global pharmaceutical company's regional offices to conduct a quasi-natural experiment. The offices, located in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, were moved to new sites in the same cities. The new offices had an open-floor layout and hot desk policy where employees did not have assigned workspaces.

We asked employees to identify their contacts at work, the nature of their relationships with those contacts and their work styles. We also collected data on the location of each employee's desk before and after the relocation.

We examined whether changes in physical distance and social networks before and after the move were associated with changes in collaboration effectiveness. Our findings revealed that both physical and social proximity were positively correlated with collaboration effectiveness.

The value of closeness

The value associated with physical proximity is perhaps not fully appreciated. [Prior research](#) has shown that being close to others makes working together easier by increasing the chances of reaching out to others. It also improves the amount and quality of communication which are needed to solve problems that arise during work.

Beyond reaching out and communicating with others, simply being around other people fosters a sense of closeness and increases trust. It gives people more chances to get to know each other better, which in turn makes them work together better.

In our study, we found that being physically close to colleagues leads to more frequent communication at work. However, the positive effect on collaboration is not just about frequent communication, which can also occur between physically distant co-workers, thanks to communication technologies. It's also influenced by the positive feelings associated with physical proximity, such as familiarity, trust and relational energy – all of which contribute to more effective work relationships.

Importance of social ties

When it comes to social proximity, [research shows](#) that people who have strong social ties are naturally motivated to work well together. They are also willing to put in more time and effort to improve the quality of their communication and interaction.

This positive effect of strong ties (frequent interactions between people who feel close to each other) is even stronger among people who have many contacts in common (known as “dyadic closure” among social network scholars). Common contacts provide a safe space for people to build trust, which is essential for good collaboration. Therefore, having mutual contacts positively impacts how well people work together.

Most surprisingly, we discovered that common contacts were as effective in promoting the development and strengthening of trust, reciprocation and cooperation for individuals who are physically distant as for those who are physically present. Our findings illustrate that physical proximity and social proximity can act as substitutes for each other, implying that individuals can still collaborate effectively even when they are not physically close, provided they have strong social ties and dyadic closure.

Building bridges

With the rise of remote and hybrid work arrangements, businesses are experimenting with new ways to organise their workspaces and teams. This can include assigning desks differently, allowing employees to work from home or other locations, or using a combination of these options. But these changes can affect how employees collaborate.

To ensure effective collaboration, it's crucial to consider both physical proximity and social networks when designing new setups. For instance, companies might create informal interaction areas like cafes and break rooms to encourage employees to build social networks at work.

Geographically dispersed organisations may need to be more intentional in facilitating social networking. Virtual water cooler chats and global collaboration days can bridge divides, while mentorship programmes can offer support for newcomers.

Ultimately, we should not underestimate the potential of physical proximity. Going into the office only to remain locked to your workspace is a wasted opportunity. Organisations should actively organise informal gatherings such as lunches, social events and coffee chats to foster camaraderie, especially if remote working is a possibility later on.

Successful collaboration in a hybrid world requires a multifaceted approach. It involves trying new ideas, leveraging technology and measuring the

impact of our efforts. By encouraging both physical and social connections, we can create thriving work environments where location never becomes a barrier to teamwork and shared success.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/collaboration-requires-proximity-it-doesnt-have-be-physical>

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About the research

[“Close to Me: The Impact of the Interplay of Physical and Social Proximity on Dyadic Collaboration Effectiveness”](#) is a working paper.

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