The Power of Designing a More Collaborative Conference Room

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Conference rooms are where we hash out ideas, tack up notes, strengthen relationships, impress clients, roll up our sleeves, and, above all, get to work.

If you want your business to thrive, your conference room should be one of the most creative, functional, and inspiring spaces in your office. Keep reading to learn why upgrading your meeting space might be the most important business move you make this year.

From famous ad campaigns to bold new sales strategies, some of the best and brightest business ideas begin in conference rooms.

Table: Contemporary Collection, NBF Signature Series

Chairs: Office Star

7 ways conference rooms help your business and employees succeed

A well-designed conference room can improve your organization's productivity, creativity, and efficiency.

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1. In-person meetings are more productive, collaborative, and beneficial to business.
Employees agree: in-person meetings are more productive than online calls. Around 59% of workers believe face-to-face meetings bolster productivity. Only 25% believe that virtual meetings are more effective.

Research supports what workers already know to be true: according to data collected by MIT's Human Dynamics Lab and reported by The Washington Post, face-to-face requests are 34 times more effective than requests sent via email, and that a handshake is more likely to promote cooperation.

Why exactly are conference room meetings so much more potent? For one, they invite greater attendance and participation—not only are people more likely to show up to in-person meetings than a virtual get-together, but they're also less likely to engage in distracting behaviors when they meet. Physical conference rooms aren't susceptible to interruptions the way that video conferences are, nor can participants simply tune each other out during important conversations.

2. In-person meetings improve employee satisfaction and teambuilding.
Workers are clamoring for more social interaction in their day-to-day experiences. A majority of Gen Z, Baby Boomers, and Gen X prefer to interact with coworkers face-to-face. Companies are rising to meet that challenge. According to a 2023 report, 81% of respondents are organizing more face-to-face in-person events than they did in the previous 12 months.

Additionally, 88% of employers have now returned to hybrid or fully in-person events and team meetings—meaning, if your organization is still working remotely, it may be time to consider a return to the conference room for the benefit of productivity and collaboration.

Table: Metropolitan Collection, NBF Signature Series

Chairs: Sleek Collection, NBF Signature Series

3. Conference rooms help people make better decisions.

Conference rooms are essential places to conduct high-stakes meetings with direct reports, colleagues, clients, and stakeholders. In Visual Leaders: New Tools for Visioning, Management and Organizational Change, David Sibbett explains how the most important meetings should, if possible, only be conducted in well-designed conference spaces, or—as Sibbett calls them—"decision rooms."

With a space designed for collaboration and a well-thought out agenda, it is possible to foster engagement and alignment for the most difficult decisions.

Consider Sibbett's example of a New York financial institution that had to make multi-million dollar budget cuts.

A VP gathered all the decision-makers in one room and conducted a sticky note exercise that allowed each manager to see every business area and every spending scenario. The group agreed on which cuts would best support the company as a whole, and individual team members were able to let go of their ingrained "turf protection" mentality.

"It was a very painful meeting, but the VP achieved his purpose and came out with an agreement that everyone understood and was willing to support. Without a decision room environment, he would have had to dictate the cuts or work them out with just a couple of his direct reports," Sibbett said.

4. Collaboration with third parties is easier—and more impressive—face-to-face.

When it comes to connecting with crucial third parties like clients and vendors, you don't want to misconstrue the intent of any meeting, pitch, presentation, or interaction. Without a well-designed conference room, you run the risk of technical hangups, poor internet connections, and distracting interruptions hampering an otherwise productive get-together.

On the other hand, a conference room built with comfortable furniture, high-grade tech and ample amenities ensures you'll both communicate your message clearly and impress any third parties you conduct business with. Modern conference rooms can also be outfitted to provide accommodations for any meeting participants who can't attend in-person, creating a seamless hybrid meeting experience for employers who work with remote or long-distance groups.

5. Internal meetings are more productive and streamlined.

In addition to third-party gatherings, internal meetings between various departments are key to your organization's success—and they're much easier to conduct in physical conference spaces. Rather than inviting your entire sales and marketing teams onto a wide-scale video call, a well-designed conference room allows you to pull key members from each team into a small, focused meeting where ideas and initiatives can be agreed upon before being disseminated among other workers.

Table: Contemporary Collection, NBF Signature Series
Chairs: Perspective Collection, NBF Signature Series

6. Conference rooms improve networking and socialization.

From work socials to client outings to internal presentations, conference rooms are great hubs for networking, socialization, and business planning. Offering employees and clients a great space to learn more about each other is an important way to ensure your talent feels supported and connected throughout their time at your organization.

In fact, the growing desire among workers to democratize and socialize conference rooms has led to notable design changes in traditional conference room layouts. Many meeting spaces are getting smaller, with a greater focus on interpersonal interactions spurred by design changes like the incorporation of more oval and square tables, an emphasis on comfortable seating, new tech and more screens rather than a single, front-facing TV display.

7. Conference rooms can accommodate all types of workers and learning styles.

Some workers are visual learners. Others are haptic—they need to touch and feel something to understand how it works. And still others are verbal communicators, requiring ample discussion before committing to a business proposal or campaign strategy.

The beauty of a well-designed conference room is that it supports all learning styles and types. In this way, meeting spaces are one of the most cost-effective ways to ensure you're providing a helpful resource that serves every kind of worker in your organization.

Sibbett speaks of this need for various learning and collaboration styles in another real-world example. When an R&D manager gathered a group of managers to discuss annual budget projections for the next year, she asked each one to create a portfolio of the various projects they oversaw as well as the projected cost of every initiative.

After placing the initiatives up on a screen, it was clear that everyone had forgotten a key variable: the amount of time each project would span. In a moment of quick thinking, the team used dry erase markers and whiteboards to sketch out timelines for every project, seamlessly displaying places in which initiatives started, stopped or overlapped. The resulting diagram helped the team better decide when and where to allocate funds for future product launches.

The team's ability to gather and ideate together likely played a strong role in its ability to find a stronger solution —once again signaling the need for a well-designed, collaborative space.

Table: Contemporary Collection, NBF Signature Series

Chairs: Parquet Collection, NBF Signature Series

How to redesign your meeting space to supercharge collaboration

The conference room of today looks much different than it did 10, 5 or even 3 years ago.

If you're looking to modernize your gathering space, here's how to turn your meeting room into an engaging place that promotes collaboration and communication while also accommodating remote and hybrid employees.

1. Start by designing your conference room around your preferred meeting environment.
What purpose will your conference room serve? Instead of declaring a nondescript corner of your office the new meeting spot, come up with an overarching philosophy that guides your design process.

If you're creating multiple conference spaces—the general rule is to have one conference room for every 10-20 employees—consider the following meeting space uses:

- **Meetings:** A meeting room will feature large tables and communal furniture for collaboration, whiteboards, glass boards, and corkboards for writing and pinning ideas, and enough tech to charge laptops and other communication devices
- **Presentations:** Presentation rooms should have top-tier audiovisual equipment, furniture such as lecterns and speaker stands for delivering speeches, and great branding and aesthetics to impress clients and colleagues
- **Training:** A conference room designed for training will have additional storage space for educational materials, audiovisual equipment for presentations and speakers, and a large layout to teach multiple employees at once. It will also be outfitted with ergonomic chairs that employees can adjust to their comfort during long training sessions.
- **Combination Rooms:** Most meeting rooms will be used for some (or all) of the above functions. If your conference room is a hybrid space, consider your unique organizational needs before committing to a single design philosophy

Table: At Work Collection, NBF Signature Series
Chairs: Nex Collection, NBF Signature Series

Table: Contemporary Collection, NBF Signature Series
Chairs: Harper Collection, NBF Signature Series

2. Incorporate hybrid meeting capabilities.

Statistics show that roughly 11 million video conference meetings are held every day in the United States, with employees spending 15% more time in video meetings each year since 2008. Plus, more than half of all organizations depend on hybrid meeting capabilities to accomplish daily tasks.

To keep your conference room up to date, make sure to incorporate video conferencing capabilities, high-quality audiovisual equipment, strong and reliable internet connectivity, and other digital accommodations to meet the needs of your in-person and remote workforce. One way to prioritize hybrid meeting capabilities involves increasing the number of screens in conference rooms instead of incorporating a single, head-of-room display.

To take advantage of multiple screens and more audiovisual equipment, furniture selection and layout for internal meeting spaces should prioritize multiple tables—instead of a single rectangular table—along with more chairs and lots of storage spaces for technology. Stacking chairs and tables on casters are also a good idea if you're looking for a flexible space that can be rearranged on the fly.

Other best practices for creating a flexible space include:

- Designing multiple meeting rooms, from areas that accommodate small group discussions to "virtual conference rooms" designed specifically for video conferencing and e-chatting
- Designating a central meeting room for third-party conferencing and presentations
- Incorporating flexible, adjustable, stackable, and nestable furniture
- Installing movable partitions to split up meeting spaces

3. Consider layout and space requirements.

Make sure you're able to optimize your space accordingly by looking into furniture that fits your requirements. Here's some things to remember as you lay out your meeting area:

- Always prioritize clear sight lines. Without them, your employees won't be able to engage collaboratively when discussing campaigns, projects, and sales strategies
- Make sure storage spaces and counters are provided, but keep them out of the way to avoid clutter and poor movement throughout the room

If your employees can hear their coworkers chatting at their desks just outside the training space, it's probably a sign that your space needs better sound buffering. A training space with poor sound design can lead to:

- Distractions from outside sounds
- Difficulty hearing speakers
- Worsened communication caused by cheap audio gear and sound systems

4. Keep comfort in mind.

While most meetings last anywhere from half an hour to an hour, conference rooms need to be able to support all-day meetings as well. For especially long meetings, make sure to incorporate comfortable furniture that keeps workers engaged and productive. Keep these comfort tips in mind:

- Prioritize chairs and tables that offer proper support and adjustability to meet a wide variety of needs
- To avoid cramped and crowded conditions, invest in tables with enough room to adequately seat workers
- Consider adding auxiliary furniture, such as couches or lounge chairs, for employees to take breaks during extended meetings
- Make presentation screens large enough to prevent eye strain
- Include a refrigerator stocked with cold beverages to offer visitors
- Furnish with a mobile table to easily bring in catered lunches and remove when the meal is finished

5. Leave room for storage.
Storage solutions make for a clean conference room. Don't forget:

- Cabinets, shelves, and credenzas
- Bookcases to house awards and company branding materials
- Filing areas with training materials and tools
- Cable management techniques, such as cable hides and ties
- Laptop and phone cubbies
- Waste receptacles
- Storage carts

6. Implement tech-friendly furniture.
Yes, modern conference rooms live and die by their tech —but obtrusive technology, such as unconcealed outlets, exposed power strips, poorly mounted display screens and furniture that isn't tech-friendly can lead to a cluttered and uncollaborative space.
Avoid tech issues by:

- Investing in tables with built-in HDMI, charging and ethernet ports
- Using a variety of small powered tables and conference room tables with power
- Adding easily accessible power towers and other power sources to your meeting room
- Incorporating chairs with USB outlets

7. Pay attention to acoustics.
Your conference room should prioritize crystal-clear audio. Great acoustics ensure better communication during meetings, presentations, and educational sessions, and they also make it easier for video conferencing participants to contribute to discussions. Some ways to support conference room sound include:

- Including sound-absorbent furniture panels to remove unwanted echoes
- Investing in furniture that encourages better communication, like communal tables and benches
- Paying attention to speaker placement to prevent crackling and feedback

8. Create a collaborative environment.
More than just a place to convene, meetings rooms should serve as idea hubs and conversation centers. To make your conference space as collaborative as possible, be sure to offer brainstorming tools such as sticky notes, dry erase markers, boards, and more.

Table: Contemporary Collection, NBF Signature Series

Chairs: Harper Collection, NBF Signature Series

If your space supports multiple tables, incorporating elements like collaboration tables for breakout meetings, standups, and brainstorming sessions is a good way to encourage further ideation without interrupting larger team gatherings. For smaller spaces, the addition of design elements like coffee tables and multiple-seater chairs and couches can improve collaboration among workers.

9. Make your space accessible to all.
Be sure to include the following in your conference room:

- Storage carts, lockers, and cubbies that can be used to house hearing-assistance devices for individuals with impairments and audio translation tools for ESL employees
- Knee-sit chairs, rolling chairs, and chairs with built-in lumbar support
- Height-adjustable tables, chairs, and screens

10. Get user feedback.
While your conference room should always reflect your needs as a company, ultimately, those needs depend on your employee roster. By polling employees about their preferences, needs, and requirements, you'll avoid headaches associated with designing a conference space that's not conducive to collaboration and communication.

Take your conference room to the next level

In many ways, conference rooms are the "brain" of your office space:

They serve as critical areas for employees to think, create, innovate, negotiate, reason, plan, and execute. When designed correctly, optimized meeting spaces ensure your workers can perform effectively, contributing to a vibrant office culture and better company prospects.

Need help planning your next conference room?

We've got you covered. Talk to our design experts today about what to keep in mind when modernizing your meeting space—or take matters into your own hands by browsing our catalogue of essential conferencing furniture.

Learn more

https://www.nationalbusinessfurniture.com/conference-room