

CAREERS

The Science of Serendipity in the Workplace

To Encourage Interaction and Innovation, Companies Try Smaller Spaces, Games; Trivia Helps Break Awkward Silences

By RACHEL EMMA SILVERMAN

Companies aren't leaving serendipity to chance.

Firms are thinking up new ways to encourage interactions among employees who normally don't work with each other. The hope is that these casual face-to-face chats among people with different skills might spark new ideas, lead to new solutions or at the least, increase workplace camaraderie.

To make those connections happen, some firms are taking a scientific approach—collecting and analyzing data about their teams and mathematically computing the likelihood that employees will meet. In some instances, they are squeezing workers into smaller spaces so they are more likely to bump into each other. In others, they are installing playful prompts, like trivia games, to get workers talking in traditional conversational dead zones, such as elevators.

But despite all the buzz around serendipity—several panels at the popular tech conference South by Southwest Interactive discussed the topic—it is hard to know for sure whether any of these efforts really work. The real challenge, companies and workplace scholars say, isn't merely connecting workers with their colleagues so much as it is connecting them with the right ones.

"The most productive relationships are difficult to engineer," says Jason Owen-Smith, a University of Michigan sociologist who studies employee collaboration.

Designs for Google Inc.'s new headquarters, expected to be completed in 2015, set out to maximize casual employee conversations, which the firm says were responsible for innovations such as Gmail and Street View. "We want it to be easy [for] Googlers to collaborate and



An installation, planned for Salesforce.com's workplace, tabulates workers' responses to 'voting doors.'

bump into each other," says a Google spokeswoman.

Not surprisingly, the plans are driven by Google's obsession with data. One feature: Every worker within the 1.1 million-square-foot, multilevel complex is expected to be within a 2½ minute walk from each other. The firm and its architect, NBBJ, looked at how fast people can walk and measured the diameter of the space from multiple angles. (An "infinity-loop"-shaped pathway slopes through the building, connecting employees to each other.) In addition, the floor plan is narrower than typical offices, keeping teams in sight range of one another.

Studies have found that having colleagues work in close proximity to each other does correlate with increased collaboration. Researchers at the Uni-

versity of Michigan studying 172 research scientists recently found that when the scientists shared the same buildings and overlapped in their daily workplace walking patterns—moving between lab space, office space, and the nearest bathroom and elevator—they were significantly more likely to collaborate: For every 100 feet of "zonal overlap," collaborations increased by up to 20%.

The more frequently you see and bump into a colleague, the more likely you are to eventually strike up a conversation, says Dr. Owen-Smith, the lead author of the study. "If that person knows stuff you don't, that process can lead to information transfer," he says.

Online retailer Zappos is encouraging employee collisions in its new 200,000-square-foot

downtown Las Vegas headquarters, which it expects to occupy this fall. Inspired by dense cities, which allow for more interactions than sprawling suburbs, Zappos will allot workers about 100 square feet per person, instead of the 150 square feet in its current suburban office. Break rooms will be "really small, so people literally collide," says Patrick Olson, Zappos's senior manager of campus development. (The smaller space per person is also a cost-saver, to be sure.)

The headquarters are also designed to put its 1,500 staffers in close contact with the city at large. The company is closing off a skybridge connecting the parking garage to the office building, so workers will have to walk a longer route to get to the office, passing pedestrians along the

way. Zappos is also opening up its lobby as a free co-working space, like a trendy hotel lobby, so that employees can mingle with workers from other companies and visitors. In its elevators it hopes to install digital games, such as trivia challenges, to help break awkward silences, says Mr. Olson.

"Those ground-floor connection points, we see that as magic," says Mr. Olson, who switched from a technology job to a real-estate job after a chance conversation with his current boss and met his fiancée by bumping into her at a work event.

Other firms are trying ice breakers to bring workers closer together. David Rose, a researcher at MIT's Media Lab, has teamed up with the design firm Gensler and exhibit-design firm Tellart to design a series of interactive installations expected to be set up later this year in the Portland and San Francisco offices of tech firm Salesforce.com and eventually in other companies as well.

Among the installations is a "lunch button" kiosk, which matches up employees with common interests to have lunch together that day. And there is a "conversation portal"—a two-way videoconferencing system attached to the end of a long cafe table—to help "spark informal conversation" among diners from offices around the world, Mr. Rose says. Another is a "conversational balance table" where an animated floral display provides instant feedback on whether someone is hogging a conversation.

And workers in Salesforce.com's Portland office may eventually enter and exit through "voting doors," in which a question is displayed such as "Cake or pie?" or "Is your work tapping into your inner genius?" for which staffers must choose a "yes" or "no" door to walk

through. Salesforce.com declined to comment on the plans.

Efforts don't always have to cost a lot of money. In the last two years National Public Radio has held six "Serendipity Days" in which about 50 employees from different departments, including digital, engineering, HR and news, volunteer to come together and think of new ideas and projects over a two-day period. One idea behind the program is to "work with groups you wouldn't ordinarily work with through the course of your week," says Lars Schmidt, NPR's senior director of talent acquisition and innovation, who says in past sessions he has helped develop a new social-media training program for staff.

At Boston marketing agency CTP, employees swap desks and offices each summer. The company started the initiative to encourage more cross-departmental contact between creatives and account executives, who don't normally sit near each other and interact much.

Attempts to engineer serendipity aren't entirely new. Steve Jobs famously designed the Pixar headquarters with central bathrooms so that people from around the company would run into each other. And firms have increasingly adopted open plans and even unassigned seating to get workers mingling more widely. In announcing its recent telecom muting ban, Yahoo Inc. noted in a staff memo that incidental encounters in the hall or around the cafeteria can lead to new insights.

But most companies are "still really primitive at this," says Greg Lindsay, a visiting scholar at New York University who studies interactions in the workplace. "They compress people in the same space, put in a coffee machine and just hope that something good happens."