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Innovation and 'hanging out'

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By Jeff Patmore (BT) & Anna Mieczkowski (University of Cambridge, BT Fellow)

We were at the London offices of a bright young PR company recently and they proudly showed us their new 'coffee and meeting area', which was modern, bright, friendly and had great coffee and wi-fi. They were justifiably proud and rightly so. To promote and facilitate 'free association' and 'unstructured meetings', they had given over a relatively large area, once a board room, in a building in Holborn where floor space does not come cheap. A brave decision one might think.



So you might be surprised to learn that universities in the UK and United States have long been advocates of this approach. Certainly, at both the University of Cambridge and MIT there are places with great coffee [and tea] and wi-fi that have been situated to make best use of the constant flow of interesting people.

In today's world of modern communications we can work anywhere and for those of us tasked with 'innovation' as part of our professional role, the ability to meet others in an unstructured and ad-hoc way is often the route to serendipity and great new ideas. These are the places, where as my academic friends put it, non-trivial problems are solved.

Strangely perhaps, this type of environment can also allow for quiet contemplation, which is the very fabric of innovation.

Together with our university partners, the University of Cambridge, MIT, Tsinghua University in China and Victoria University in Melbourne, we are currently researching how people's work patterns are changing due to pervasiveness of the modern technologies*.

Getting more flexible

Modern technologies, devices and faster networks are all having an effect on the way we live our lives and how we work. One of the major changes has been brought about by the removal of the 'tether' as through a combination of wi-fi, increasing battery efficiency and a change in the attitude of organisations, people have started to work far more flexibly.

Some organisations have recognised and understood these changes and have been prepared to invest in both their buildings and people and their innovation is now reaping them substantial financial rewards. However, it is worth emphasising that the new flexible ways of working might not be ideal for every organisation. But certainly for those involved in the 'knowledge economy' and for whom innovation is the core of their business, embracing this change is key.

Innovation is something that happens when people meet and communicate, enabling that interaction is not so much a science it is more of an art.

[1] Research Project: Culture, Communication and Change: An investigation of the use and impact of modern media and technology in our lives

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