

Workplace PROJECTS

Senior Leadership Space

GSA Regional Office, Auburn, Washington



The Senior Leadership Space is a design experiment and a social experiment. It is a “living laboratory” that aims to change ways of working as well as ways of thinking. The Leadership Space is intended to provide a new vision of government work that is interactive, egalitarian, spontaneous and innovative.

Post Occupancy Report, 2002
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Background

As the support organization for the US Federal Government, GSA is organized into three separate branches, or “Services:” the Federal Technology Service (FTS), the Federal Supply Service (FSS), and the Public Buildings Service (PBS). These Services, have, by tradition, operated mostly independently of one another. In the Region 10 office in Auburn, Washington, this independence was reinforced by the Services being located in different parts of the building, resulting in rare interactions except at formal meetings. (Note: In 2005, FSS and FTS merged to form a new organization called the Federal Acquisition Service –FAS).

The Challenge and Drivers for Change

In the late 1990’s the GSA regional leadership grew increasingly concerned with their ability to compete successfully with the private sector in meeting the needs of Federal clients. This concern led to a discussion of ways to change the existing business model and ways of working. In particular, the Regional leadership wanted to explore ways to support the “One GSA” initiative proposed by the Central Office in Washington DC. The initiative was intended to provide a unified approach to customers, rather than the segmented model currently used. At the same time, the emergence of new mobile and Internet based technologies were changing the face of work itself and GSA wanted to explore the implications for their business.

Business Goals & Strategies for the Project

GSA’s overall business goal was to provide more effective and efficient support for current and future Federal clients. To reach this goal, the Regional leadership focused on two strategies:

- Improve knowledge of the changing nature of work by experimenting with new workplace concepts and technological supports.
- Improve cross-Service collaboration and communication to enable a more integrated approach to customers.

The key decision that emerged from an organizational and cultural analysis was to co-locate the leadership groups from each of the three Services to a central area intentionally designed to improve communication, collaboration, and strategic focus. The space was intended from the start to be a living laboratory to explore the links between business needs, the nature of work, and the physical setting.

Project Facts

SF/person – range (pre)	180-500 sq ft
SF/person (post)	80 sq ft
Overall space (Pre)	12,000 sq ft
Overall space (Post)	9,000 sq f

Completion:	2000
Preliminary Evaluation:	2002
Occupant Survey:	2005

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Design Solution

Key elements of the Leadership Space are open plan workstations, a variety of enclosed conference rooms, a “village green” for informal meetings, and small enclosed focus booths for confidential phone calls or quiet work. These spaces are color coded in the figure below.

- Individual work areas
- Open meeting space
- Enclosed meeting space
- Cafeteria



Personal Work Area. The personal workspace area consists of a series of 80 SF open plan workstations. The leadership group was previously housed in private offices ranging in size from 180 to 500 sq ft. Although the individual workstation size in the new space was set at 80 sq ft, the leadership group was provided with several choices for the actual layout of their personal space. All furniture used within the confines of the partitions is freestanding, and all of the components are on wheels. This supports a certain degree of “user controlled” reconfiguration on an as-need basis. The personal work areas are separated from the open group spaces by enclosed conference rooms.



Meeting Spaces. The office includes both open and enclosed meeting spaces. The Village Green shown in the photo is centrally located, has comfortable chairs and tables, and is intended for informal, spontaneous meetings as well as for group functions. Conference rooms of different sizes and with different types of furnishings surround the open space and are outlined in blue in the above figure. A large video conferencing center houses state of the art equipment for use with dispersed groups.

Quiet rooms. In addition to the group meeting areas, the workplace provides several small enclosed rooms for individual concentration and private conversations.

Senior Leadership Space

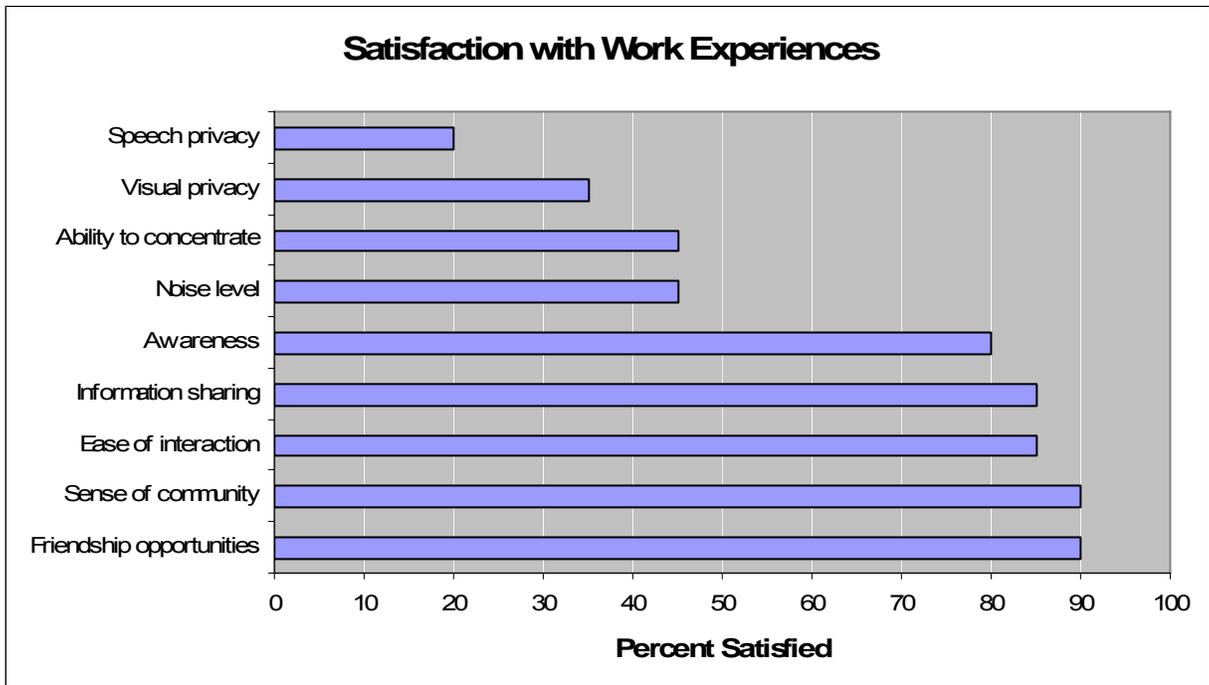
Key Post Occupancy Findings

2001 Research. Interviews and focus groups conducted in 2001 showed that:

- Communications and collaboration increased, but primarily within the Services.
- Cross-service collaboration proved to be more difficult due to organizational barriers including different business models and cultures.
- Informal interaction as well as full group meetings improved cross-Service awareness and knowledge of people, there by laying the foundation for development of future working relationships.
- Key concerns with the new space were increased distractions from others' talking, loss of privacy, and increased interruptions to individual work.
- Mobile work within the office was more difficult than envisioned due to lack of mobile technological supports (phones, wireless access, laptops) as well as to the frequent use of desk-based paper documents.

The interviews also showed that a number of individuals were reluctant participants in the workplace experiment and were highly skeptical of the premise that space could promote collaboration across the Services. Not surprisingly, their comments on the space were the most negative.

2005 Survey. A web-based Environmental Quality survey was administered in spring of 2005 by the Center for the Built Environment at the University of California, Berkeley. Results showed high positive responses to questions concerning the social aspects of work, but continued concern with acoustics and distractions, as shown in the figure below.



Key Lessons Learned from the Senior Leadership Space

Designing for improved communication and collaboration is likely to increase concerns with loss of privacy and increased distraction. Design strategies to improve collaboration and interaction were at odds with the need for withdrawal and enclosure to support focused attention and confidentiality. The provision of small enclosed spaces on an “as needed” basis overcame this difficulty to some extent. However, the lack of mobile technology supports (phones, laptops, PDAs, Internet connections) made it more difficult to change location as needs changed. In addition, many people referred to desk based documents when talking on the phone or with others in the space, making it difficult to move spontaneously to a different space.

Collaboration across units is difficult when units are highly independent. As has been shown in other research studies, work groups that have little history of collaboration are not likely to begin joint undertakings just because of changes in location and physical space. Although the organizational analysis that accompanied the design of the Leadership Space included cultural and work process assessment, little attention was paid to implementing simultaneous changes in organizational policies and structures to support project goals.

Space, by itself, can create modest shifts in behaviors and attitudes, but dramatic changes in the nature of work require additional supports. The Senior Leadership Space represented a dramatic shift in workspace allocation and expectations about how leaders should work in the future. The physical environment alone cannot be expected to carry the burden of change. In projects such as this, experts in organizational effectiveness and change management should be engaged to help build internal support structures that reward, model, and encourage changes in behaviors, values, and relationships. Organizational and change management support was not included in the development of and adaptation to the Senior Leadership Space. As a result adaptation to the space was difficult for many in the early transition period. Furthermore, the adjustment was most difficult for those who did not concur with the overall goals and objectives for the space.

Moving from an entitlement based system of space allocation to a functionally based system raises many concerns that need to be considered during project planning and design. For the past several years a debate has been raging in both the public and private sectors about workspace: should it support and reflect rank, status and entitlement? or conversely should workspace be designed primarily to support function, work flow and teamwork? These are not necessarily “either-or” solutions. However, the Senior Leadership Space clearly was designed to de-emphasize rank, entitlement and personal space in favor of function, efficiency and group space. The result has been to elevate the debate over these two philosophical approaches.

Technology, space planning, and work change need to be well integrated if the workplace is to realize goals for flexibility and mobility. Many of the technologies for the Senior Leadership Space did not work as intended. In part this was due to the lack of participation in training efforts. However, the more serious issue was the absence of an integrated plan that assessed current use and future needs for technology, flexibility, and work process support.