

## Three New Designs for Optimizing Collaboration

By Jane Hodges

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The nature of work has changed considerably since designer Bob Propst introduced the first office cubicle in 1968. Strict job descriptions carried out in cube-farm isolation have given way to flexible teams that meet spontaneously to move projects forward. Today's office environment needs to be as adaptable and collaborative as the people inside it. That means lowering cubicle walls to foster communication, delivering the "coffee shop" feel modern workers associate with productivity, and using materials that allow a workspace to be perpetually reconfigured. Here's how Microsoft and other large companies have reconfigured their offices for the way people work now.

### Jones Lang LaSalle: Miracle Makeover

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At real estate firm Jones Lang LaSalle, lower cubicle walls allow employees to collaborate more easily.

*Image by Christopher Barrett/Hedrich Blessing*

The Chicago-based real estate, money management, and services firm with more than 28,000 employees worldwide used a lease renewal in 2005 as an opportunity to rethink its space. The company's main goal, according to Chuck Kelly, senior vice president of operations, was to increase collaboration. Its antiquated space was hindering communication and preventing employees from

servicing clients better. Working with office design firm Interior Architects, Jones Lang LaSalle focused on creating more shared and social spaces for spontaneous collaboration. Cube sizes shrank. Private offices mostly vanished. Kitchen areas got plusher chairs and couches that double as informal meeting spots. To create more light while preserving privacy, cubicle walls were lowered to four feet and topped with eight inches of clear material. Ultimately, the redesign prevented the need to lease two additional floors — which would have cost \$22.4 million in the course of a decade. Other key features include:

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**Cul de sacs:**

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Shared open spaces for planned or impromptu meetings at the end of each corridor are available on a nonreserved basis.

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**Teaming rooms:**

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Each floor has meeting spaces for groups of between three and eight people.

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**Iso pods:**

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Small, enclosed “isolation” spaces accommodate one or two people for private or proprietary-information work.

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**Visitor stations:**

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Designated areas offer wide-angle, “120-degree” desks for visiting staff to spread out. They include full voice/data connectivity as well as printing, copying, and scanning capability.

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<b>Before</b>	<b>After</b>
481 employee capacity	634 employee capacity
274 square feet per person	208 square feet per person
No visitor stations	39 visitor stations
No growth ability	Capacity for 724 employees

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For more pictures of Jones Lang LaSalle's redesign, see our Image Gallery [“Best and Worst Workplace Design.”](#)

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## Microsoft: Building 99 Sets a New Standard

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In Microsoft's recently opened Building 99, a central atrium brings natural light to all floors and provides a gathering space for informal meetings.

*Image by Lou Gellos/Microsoft Corporation*

Two years ago, software giant Microsoft announced it would spend \$1 billion to expand its massive campus in Redmond, Wash., by nearly one-third by June 2009 — and that's only half of what the company plans to do in the next 20 years. Part of the reason Microsoft could move so swiftly was a “kit of parts” created by in-house design guru Martha Clarkson. Working with feedback from Microsoft employees, Clarkson developed a series of modular office spaces that can be reconfigured to suit different teams' needs. Components include sliding glass doors, write-on/wipe-off walls, glass screens, standing meeting rooms (where the absence of chairs produces shorter meetings), open workplace dividers with built-in shelving and glass windows, and in-floor electrical outlets that allow for the easy reconfiguration of space.

Here's a peek at key redesign elements of Building 99, the first roll-out of the expansion. It opened in November 2007 with five floors and some 250,000 square feet of space for nearly 600 employees.

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### **Atrium entry:**

An open atrium lobby with a glass roof lets light in on every floor. All 600 employees in the research division can now assemble for all-hands meetings by gathering in the lobby or along balcony edges.

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### **Offices with sliding doors:**

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Textured glass doors provide privacy for workers but also let light circulate. Sliding doors don't require the same swinging footprint as a regular door. Glass surfaces may be written on with write-on/wipe-off markers for instant brainstorming.

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**“Mixer” coffee stations:**

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Rather than housing the coffee machine and refrigerator in an enclosed room, open “mixing” areas provide counter seating and allow employees and visitors to rub elbows while pouring a cup of joe or waiting for a meeting to start.

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**Situation rooms:**

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Many teams involved on high-priority projects need near-constant interaction. In Building 99, “situation rooms” can be created to fit a team of any size using moveable floor-to-ceiling glass walls. The rooms house a combination of collaborative workspaces and individual workstations, as well as write-on/wipe-off walls, mobile storage, sofas, and “common tables” for team huddles.

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## Group Health: Lean and Green

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Group Health’s redesign links two buildings with a sky bridge, bringing staff members into greater contact with each other.

*Image by Chris Eden and Callison*

The Washington-based insurer with 10,000 employees used an office relocation to address a laundry list of concerns, starting with the clash between the company’s increasingly collaborative work style and its hard-walled office building. William Biggs, executive director of administrative services, says the outdated space put too much emphasis on cubicles and lacked conference space and “touch-down” areas for mobile workers who come and go from office branches.

In fall 2007, Group Health moved into new office space on the south end of Seattle’s Lake Union, an area home to an increasing number of biotech firms and startups. The space is not only

environmentally friendly and LEED Gold-certified, it allows Group Health to use a similar footprint in new ways that have solved company problems. The firm doubled conference space in the facility and moved executive offices to the interior of the building. In the past, executive offices with window real estate hogged all the natural light. Now, all workers benefit from exposure to the windows and views of Lake Union. Other important elements of the redesign include:

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**Smaller cubicles:**

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With workers increasingly spending time away from their desks, cubicles got smaller, and more floor space went to common meeting areas.

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**Shorter cubicle walls:**

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Cubicle walls were lowered from six feet to four feet because studies show that passersby will speak more quietly if they make eye contact with employees in cubicles.

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**Sound-attenuating ceilings:**

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To compensate those working in smaller spaces, Group Health uses sound-baffling materials to maintain quiet.

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**More light:**

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By lowering cube walls and moving hard-wall or private offices to building interiors, Group Health gives workers a better physical environment, and it also lowers its heating and cooling costs.

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