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EXPLORING IDEAS THAT SHAPE THE PLACES WE
WORK.

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THE 100% UNASSIGNED WORKPLACE: IS IT GOOD OR BAD?

*Have you been wondering how 100 percent unassigned workplaces affect processes, efficiency, and density concerns? Us too. As a follow-up to his recent webinar(<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/webinar-100-unassigned-good-or-bad-tickets-17048031120?aff=erellivorg>), **Brady Mick**, a design strategist, architect, and client leader for **BHDP Architecture**(<http://www.bhdp.com/>) unpacks the question further, below.*



Image via [Death to the Stock Photo](http://deathtothestockphoto.com/)(<http://deathtothestockphoto.com/>).

There are so many questions around taking the plunge to a 100 percent unassigned workplace, and for good reason: research in this area is lacking, in large part due to the fact that most organizations do not want to share their experiments openly. On top of that, many design firms have NDAs with organizations that have made the change, which means conversation in the industry isn't really flowing, either.

Stories *are* shared at conferences like **CoreNet Global**(<https://www.corenetglobal.org/>) and **WORKTECH**(<http://www.unwired.eu.com/events.php>), and touring an existing workplace is a good avenue for open data gathering. But if you want to get to the bottom of the difference between “alternative workplace strategy” and “hoteling”; if you want the lessons learned from another company that has tried a 100 percent unassigned workplace and it has failed; or if you want to know how an unassigned space will affect collaboration, quantity, and density, where do you turn? Broad-based public data to answer these questions currently lies in deep consideration between strategic design firms and their workplace customers.

Hoteling, for its part, is an older term coined in the '90s. By [definition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hoteling_%28office%29)(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hoteling_%28office%29), it refers to

unassigned, reservable office space that's indistinguishable from the cube farm environments full of assigned seats. It has become a less favorable term in recent years because of the lack of identity associated with it. Like a hotel that people prefer to not call a home, a hotel desk is utilitarian, and doesn't promote a personal connection to either the place or the people for the worker. Hoteling environments do not function well without the additional service of a concierge to manage the reservable function, as well as the equipment needed (stealing of cords is common), the hook up lessons, log on training, etc. Most companies prefer not to create this infrastructure.

Hot desking is different in that it does not have the reservable function and is used on a first-come, first-served basis. A few years ago, a Louisville-based client of mine created a 100 percent unassigned space. They furnished and equipped it with high degrees of different activity settings intended to allow for choice and user control. Then they set the IT group free in the space to self-regulate themselves into the new space. An interesting phenomenon began when some team members began to arrive earlier in the mornings to "claim" their seat, and no surprise these individuals went for the same seat each day. Since the strategy was to let the team facilitate their own use of the space, squatting, and other behaviors for "dedicated" space became something of a common occurrence, and a source of humor within the team.

Alternative workplace strategy (or AWS) is a much broader idea that expands definable work zones beyond the individual assigned or unassigned workspace (cubes and offices), creating a combination of elements like cubes, benches, open collaboration, closed collaboration (huddle or conference rooms), and so on. All of it contributes to the final tally of seats where people can work in the space.

For example, instead of counting 80 cubes and 20 offices for 100 people (traditional conference room-type seats not included), AWS may count 50 work stations, 10 offices, 20 open collaboration seats, and 20 closed collaboration seats for the same 100 people. Half of the work stations and all of the offices are often assigned. The remaining half of unassigned work stations are considered agile.

AWS can be 100 percent unassigned, but in a sense it is not the key consideration. The core value of a workplace strategy delivered as AWS is to create a workplace that is a stronger tool for people to create business results.

Designing such an environment into smaller social units by differentiating the furniture, technology, and behavioral clues (*i.e.*, team identity, branding, flexibility, and activity levels) provides important behavioral clues for people to choose their best suited work environment. The belief is that such variation may create stronger social groups capable of producing greater business results.

Microsoft is leading the field in aligning space as a tool for their people to create results, which is well-illustrated in this video:

At the end of the day, moving to a 100 percent unassigned space is a very complicated idea that remains in testing. Such understanding as human motivational psychology, social dynamics, virtual connectivity, gaming, and outdated design planning all drive or impede a degree of change that is required for the workplace to align with people at work.

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