# PANDEMIC-INFORMED PROXEMICS:
## WORKING ENVIRONMENT SHIFTS RESULTING FROM COVID-19

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Abstract: As COVID-19 continues to disrupt our ways of working and living, organizations would do well to consider how spatial relationships (proxemics) will impact communication, formal and informal knowledge networks, and relationship-building in both physical and virtual relationships. Based on novel research from a workplace ethnography conducted in 2019, this paper will outline why the proxemics zones that anthropologist Edward T Hall pioneered in the 1960s are still so important to communication in both physical and in digitally mediated settings today. We will conclude by providing practical guidance on how organizations can put their understanding of the importance of proxemics for facilitating communication into practice in working environments, both virtual and physical, which continue to be impacted by the ongoing effects of the current pandemic.

# Introduction

In the 1960s anthropologist Edward Hall pioneered the field of 'proxemics' (Hall 1966). Proxemics tells us that physical distance and social distance are, in effect, one and the same: we indicate our level of familiarity and comfort with others based on how close we stand to them. Most people are familiar with the term 'personal space;' this comes from Hall's framework:
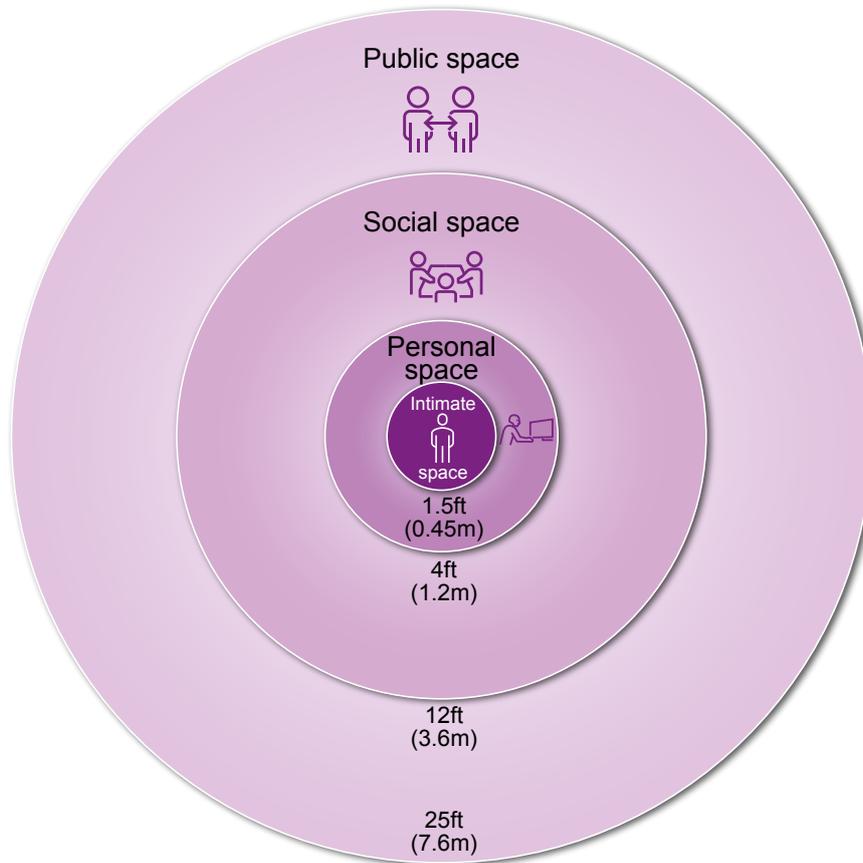


**Figure 1: the four distance zones of proxemics.**

Proxemics continues to inform design principles for a more digitally mediated era than Hall described with his original framework (McArthur 2016; Grønbæk et al 2020). The physical distancing orders which many nations adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic changed the shape of our interpersonal interactions. Drawing on examples from American life in lockdown, Vikas Mehta describes an emergent field of distanced social interaction: 'sociable space' (see box).

"Two trends have emerged. First, many more people walking in the public distance to each other, with more time at hand, intentionally converge to a much friendlier social distance coming closer to each other to socialize within five to eight feet – a kind of pull into a shared space. Second, people have expanded Hall's social distance – the realm of social space – beyond the 12 feet, furthering it to 20–25 feet. Comfortable and prolonged social interactions with acquaintances and neighbours are commonly visible from distances beyond 12 feet – from entrance to sidewalk, porch to sidewalk, front yard to street, sidewalk to street, sidewalk to sidewalk across the street, and more. Both these are changing urban etiquette and people are acknowledging and socially engaging with many more people. In these interesting socio-spatial phenomena people are both expanding social space and contracting public distances to create a more sociable experience . . . . What is on display is at least in many neighbourhoods, is social distancing generating a new *sociable space*. This is the new proxemics." (Mehta 2020)

But will sociable space become a lasting part of our spatial vocabulary? In August 2020, many countries are emerging from physical distancing orders (and some are entering new lockdowns). One of the ways we are signaling the changes in our social interactions through responses to updated distancing orders is through fluctuations in our use of space. As of late June, the UK relaxed its 2 meter distancing rule to 1 meter with "risk mitigation" (UK Cabinet Office 2020), yet 1 meter is within ordinary 'social space' distance. "So reducing it [the guidance] to 1 meter is akin to removing any restrictions from distancing, and hence functions as another signal of back to normal" (Reicher 2020). As we consider a future of changing spatial signals in our personal lives and our working lives due to the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, proxemics can both observe and guide how we think about communicative possibilities in shared space, whether co-located or digitally mediated. Proxemics is already getting automated in the form of a video observation and image classification system by that name from Amazon, who have implemented this system and other similar visual monitoring tools in their facilities to detect social distancing violations (Simonite 2020). Delving into the ethical considerations of systems like these deserves deeper consideration than a few words here will allow. Whether such tools are perceived as helpful guidance to enhance employee safety or as punitive intrusions on worker behaviour, technologies like these are likely to become more common in working environments where the physical location of the worker is a necessary aspect of their work. The remainder of this paper is more relevant to the possibilities of proxemics for information workers, whose work does not require them to be in a specific physical location.

In December 2019, the Leading Edge Forum published the results of our year-long ethnographic study, *Reconfiguring the Collaborative Workspace: Making the Most of Time, Space & Attitude* (McDonald, Ward, and Cook 2019). The study comprised both virtual and in-person ethnographic fieldwork with five industry-leading global corporations, with over 2,000 mobile ethnography datapoints, including 300 participant-submitted photos, sketches and videos. We also conducted 50 interviews with subject matter experts from various fields ranging from the strategic space demand manager at the Palace of Westminster, who spoke about the challenges of bringing the UK Houses of Parliament up to speed with the advances in communications technology while retaining the iconic fabric of the buildings, to an architect who focused on the importance of designing spaces for chance encounters whether physical or virtual, to a security operations infrastructure engineer who at the time of the interview was taking a trans-continental motorcycle trip across the United States, telling us about the challenges

of balancing connectivity with robust security measures to protect client data while on the move.

One of our core arguments in *Reconfiguring the Collaborative Workspace* is that collaborative technologies like videoconferencing and real-time shared document editing are not particularly novel technologies at this point, but their increasing ubiquity and reliability is changing the physical environments where we work. In particular, large organizations – typically slow to adjust to novelty and adapt to changing conditions – are becoming increasingly comfortable with rolling these tools out as standard parts of their collaborative toolkit. As a result, it's easier than ever for big chunks of the population to work more flexibly than ever before. At the time of publication, we could not have predicted the rapid acceleration to come for this trend as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the first time, organizations' crisis management can now include precautionary measures like closing offices or encouraging working from home even for employees not (yet) directly affected by the virus, with minimal disruption to the flow of information across the organization. Some will be better equipped to handle this than others, of course: groups that are already at least partially familiar with the challenges and rewards of remote working will adjust more easily, while others may struggle with the behavioral and cultural changes necessary to support effective working at a distance.

The communicative aspects of proxemics are very important as we consider the ongoing disruptions to working and living as a result of the pandemic. In particular, organizations and teams could facilitate communication more effectively by becoming more intentional in replicating a sense of Hall's different proxemics zones when communicating virtually. As well as considering the ramifications of digital proxemics, as we begin returning to offices which will necessarily be very different spaces than the ones we left, organizations must consider the implications of physical distancing on communication, formal and informal knowledge networks, and relationship-building.

In this paper we will outline why these proxemics zones are so important to communication in both physical and digitally mediated settings. We will conclude by providing practical guidance on how organizations can put their understanding of the importance of proxemics for facilitating communication into practice in virtual environments.

# Mixed Signals: Challenges Arising from Digitally Mediated Communications

In person, there are affordances which allow us to communicate much more rapidly and fluently than through any other medium hitherto tried. These include being able to point at a shared third object, or to literally share a viewpoint or perspective: how many times have you tried to talk someone through doing something on the phone which was much faster to explain when you were there physically? The simple act of being able to point or indicate, and to see from the same viewpoint as another, to look through their eyes, opens bandwidths of communication that are achieved much more fluidly nonverbally than verbally (Ladner 2014).

Another is observing where someone's attention is, or when they want to interrupt or interject: these physical signals are typically very readable (if unconsciously) in person, and harder to experience online even in a video call because the information we have is more limited. When we're only looking at a person on a screen, we miss many of the contextual cues which are there when we have a shared spatial context. We don't know whether the sound of their voice getting softer, or a pause before they respond to something we've said, is because they're having a moment of reflection or because the wifi has just gone funny. We can't trust communication signals through digital media as much as we can in person.

Shared physical space is also very important for assessing the power dynamics in a group: when we walk into a room, we can usually tell who the leader is, and whether that leadership is explicit or implicit, based on who is standing, who is sitting, the relative position of their desks or chairs, where everyone is looking, and so on. We can use our presence, and our proximity, to subtly signal and assess aspects of our identity like affiliation and hierarchy. Power dynamics don't go away in digital spaces but they show up differently, and we don't yet have a shared sense of what those signals are.

# Building the Proxemic-Informed Workspace: Virtually or Physically

Many of us will be returning to offices soon; perhaps some of you reading this in August 2020 already have. But these spaces will be different than the ones we left behind. Some of the advantages physical offices previously conferred will be changed by the ongoing necessity of keeping apart. From the diagram of Hall's proxemics zones above, we can see something that we already subconsciously know and experience viscerally: the closer we get to someone physically, the more personal or private the interaction becomes. Sometimes this is what we want, as in leaning closer to someone to share a bit of confidential information or to move into a more proximate collaborative zone (think 'getting our heads together'). Sometimes, when unwanted, this can become an intrusive confrontation as people get closer than we want them to. But this works the other way as well: standing at the border between the 'social zone' and the 'public zone' to communicate something better left to the 'personal zone' will leave the interaction feeling impersonal and exposed. In workspaces that require plenty of empty space to protect people, that sense of closeness which some of us feel is missing in our virtual interactions compared to the offices we remember might not be achievable in the same way it was before. Those conversations which used to happen in the elevator or around the coffee machine are not going generate the spontaneous feelings of connection that they did previously. Conversations that are farther apart physically will feel more formal, possibly more strained, as we work to create that sense of 'being on the same page' without recourse to the usual body language and proximity we typically use to do that. Maintaining our distance physically, for the very good reason of personal safety, will introduce an element of emotional distance that has important ramifications for team cohesion.

# Proxemics into Practice: Building a More Intentional Virtual Workspace

It's vital that we prepare ourselves, and the organizations that we work with, for these changes. While it can be awkward to speak about unconscious forms of communication that are normally left unspoken, without understanding why these changes are impacting us we can't design options to cope with them, either by

adjusting our environments or adjusting our expectations. At Leading Edge Forum, we advise the organizations that work with us to consider not only their team's physical safety, which is of course the paramount consideration to design appropriate spaces in the future, but also their psychological safety. This might require thinking differently about how organizations can make the most of all the spaces they have at their disposal: the digital working environments as well as the physical ones.

We've compiled the following practical guidance for organizations seeking to improve their team cohesion, formal and informal knowledge networks, and relationship-building through virtual collaboration and communication tools.

**Pay attention to your camera's distance and angle on video calls.** If your camera is too close, or at a strange angle, this will make people feel overly exposed to you. You're putting them in the 'intimate space' zone, a space usually only reserved for those who are very emotionally close to you. Conversely, if your camera is so far away that you're a medium-sized dot in a sea of background, you're signalling a degree of formality, much like seating yourself at the end of a long boardroom table. Consider the level of closeness or informality you want to signal in your video calls and set yourself up accordingly. Do recognize we're still at a time when people's choices about this might still be limited: if the only place you can work is sitting on the stairs with your laptop balanced on your knees because every other part of the house is occupied, realistically, that's all you can do right now. But you can at least be intentional and choice-ful about the environment you do have available to you.

**Get your hands in the frame.** So much of our nonverbal communication comes from our posture and our gestures. If all they can see is a talking head, your listeners will find communication a bit sterile. You are probably unconsciously making gestures while you're speaking. Consciously putting those into frame will enrich the communication experience for your listeners.

**Build inclusive digital meetings.** Aspiration Tech has developed a comprehensive list of suggestions and resources for recognizing imbalances in power in your virtual meetings and correcting these imbalances to build spaces that give your whole team a voice (Arellano 2020). Highlights include making appropriate accessibility arrangements, not only for physical disabilities but also for digital literacy and digital access considerations, proactively negotiating power-sharing during meetings, and being extra-mindful about giving people reflective time in advance of a meeting by clearly stating its purpose and scheduling the meeting with plenty of

advance notice. All great tips for creating more inclusive meetings in person, but these are even more critical in a virtual environment due to the heightened challenges of digitally mediated communications as described above.

**Create a shared sense of environment.** Some companies are starting to introduce digitized versions of their offices to provide that shared sense of space (Deighton 2020). But you don't need to introduce a new tool: you can create a simple way of collectively situating everyone through a shared process or habit that gathers everyone together. This can be something playful, like taking turns leading everyone in a brief stretch after a long day of meetings, or a shared one-word or one-sentence question to kick off a meeting. But it doesn't have to be playful: something formal like calling a meeting to order and reviewing the minutes of a previous meeting also serves to create shared context and situate people in the same space, even if that space is metaphorical. It's not only about meetings, either: team or company in-jokes, habits and collective rituals (or in more formal environments, company jargon, guidelines and processes) can create a shared sense of belonging both in real life collaboration zones and in virtual ones.

# Becoming Remotely Human: in the Office and Beyond

As we negotiate the complexities of what the world looks like next we must figure out *how to get people together while keeping them apart*. Organizations may find that the digital tools which currently feel like barriers to collaboration and camaraderie actually become the conduits that allow us to recreate those more personal moments of connection while we must by necessity still keep one another at greater than arm's length.

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