

# What is activity-based working?



By Eric Brown, courtesy of [SBAM Approved Partner ASE](#)

Activity based working (ABW) are work environments that do away with the confines of individual offices and desks. They replace them with the freedom to roam about with a laptop and other essentials only. No more red stapler (Where is that darn thing, anyway?) or family photos on your desk (Sorry, honey).

Instead, areas (or “neighborhoods”) are populated with sofas, easy chairs, diner-style booths, coffee bars and community pods, to name a few. The sizes of the neighborhoods are pre-determined based on the activity and the number of people doing the activity. Some areas allow for quiet focusing, others teamwork, and some for just socializing. In the ABW approach, you can work anywhere in the building where you can plug in.

The work environment not only changes physically, but the mindset changes to a more team-oriented approach. As such, an emphasis on mobility, teamwork and end results prevails.

Which means, of course, that ABW is not for everybody or for every activity. Certain tasks are not inherently improved by teamwork, because they rely on concentration and individual focus. As well, to some degree people react emotionally to their surroundings, and some of them could have a hard time adjusting to what amounts to a sense of “homelessness” within the building.

With ABW, management has to change also. It has to promote a sense of belonging and community in order to combat those feelings. Management also has to learn and put into practice an elevated level of trust. Employees are no longer under foot—which means managers forfeit the convenience of being able to hover over them at any and all times. With so much more freedom to move about, work as a whole cannot be monitored so closely. Management’s job is to provide support, both emotional and functional.

Further, performance appraisals shift to where they must focus more on the end product and much less on the process, because the process is so much less visible than it would be in a traditional office.

Undeniably, ABW translates into the need for much less space per worker—no more bulky desks, enclosed offices and even cubicles—than would be required in a traditional office. CFOs concerned about the cost of real estate will find ABW very attractive. Less space means lower rent. The difference can be spectacular in large offices. Los Angeles-based CBRE , which has gone to the ABW design, houses 250 people in 48,000 square feet. Its leaders calculated that it would have needed more than 72,000 feet in a traditional office.

While Activity Based Working may not be for every organization, those that are comprised of team environments and embrace mobility may find the change beneficial.

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