

Groupiness at Work with Annie Murphy Paul (Transcript)

Chris Congdon: Thanks for joining us, Annie.

Annie Murphy Paul: Thank you, Chris. I'm happy to be here.

CC: You know you've written about some really diverse topics and I'd love to know more about what made you decide to write *The Extended Mind*.

AMP: Yeah, it was kind of a long and winding road. I wrote a book as you mentioned, in relation to my Ted Talk, that was about the science of prenatal influences, which led me to think about how learning starts before we're born and while fetuses are still in the womb and how pregnant women convey all kinds of messages to their babies-to-be through what they eat and what they feel. That, I will admit, was a lot of "me search" because I was pregnant with my older son and then my younger son when I was working on that book, and then as my kids got older I got very interested in academic learning — in what they were learning and how they were being taught in school and I thought I would write a book about the science of learning. Years later, the book *The Extended Mind* was a result of that.

Along the way, when I was researching the science of learning, I was really on the lookout for a big idea that could pull all these strands that I had been collecting from the research literature and finding so interesting. It wasn't until I came across this idea, in a philosophy journal of all places, this idea of the extended mind. That it all came together for me. So what had started out as a book about the science of learning became more broadly a book about the science of how we think but also, how we learn, how we communicate, how we work and at the center of that is this idea of the extended mind.

CC: I love your term "me search" because that makes me feel better that you know I get drawn to topics that I'm really interested in and always want to spend a little bit more time diving deeper into some of those, so I love that.

And for those of you who are listening, if you haven't read Annie's book yet, first of all, I highly recommend it, but it's organized into three main parts about thinking with our bodies, thinking with our surroundings and then thinking with our relationships. So, I want to start actually kind of in the middle, talking about surroundings and really explore some issues with place. One of the things that we're seeing that is a huge shift in the world of office design — probably the biggest shift in my entire career — is a move from people, workers, having their own assigned desks. Before the pandemic, 88% of people had their own desks, but research we've done with leaders throughout the pandemic are saying that going forward only about 40% of people will have that in the future. So where I get a little worried is when I read your research about people's need for privacy and I'm just wondering if you can tell us some of the things that you've found about how people need privacy at work.

AMP: Yeah, that's a great question, Chris, because I see that change happening too whenever I'm talking to corporate leaders and managers. People are talking about this switch from having a dedicated office, maybe even an enclosed office, not just a cubicle, which now seems like a long ago kind of scenario, to more flexible and open spaces and I think that you know that that can be an opportunity. It can also be, potentially problematic. You mentioned people's need for privacy. There's a lot of research that suggests that when people have a sense of control over their space, when they feel like it's their turf, when they feel that they control who comes in, who comes out, what kind of stimuli is coming in or coming out, people feel more empowered and they work more productively and more creatively in a space that they control.

We all know about the dangers and the irritations of distraction and so that can be another problem with with an open kind of office. On the other hand, I think the move towards more flexible spaces is a real positive because we're starting to recognize that people do different kinds of thinking at work. Sometimes you're going to need some deep, protected work, maybe even solitary and isolated kind of thinking, and then other times you really need to be very actively collaborating and communicating with other people. Different kinds of spaces support those two kinds of working. I think we're very much working it out. This is very much a work in progress, but if there are ways that we can take the best of both, allow people to have a space or create a space, even on a temporary basis, that feels like theirs, that reflects something of themselves back to them, perhaps through what researchers call evocative objects — cues and symbols that remind people of their identity, in particular their identity in that space as a worker, or a thinker, or a creator — and then cues of belonging that remind people of valued groups. If you can have those kinds of signs and symbols around you, along with some measure of control and power over your space, a sense that this is your space and you belong there, that's really getting the best of both worlds, if you can also have a space that's more open and that's more welcome to other people coming in and mixing it up with you.

CC: I'm so glad you talked about belonging because I wanted to explore that a little bit with you. We hear a lot more business leaders saying that people need to feel this sense of belonging when they come to work. It's more than just 'I go there because that's where I do my job,' but they're really sensing that people need to feel this deeper sense of connection to their organization.

AMP: Yeah, it turns out that we human beings are very context sensitive. We're really exquisitely sensitive to the context in which we are doing our thinking. In some ways that's obvious and in other ways it goes against the way we're used to thinking of ourselves. We have this very dominant metaphor in our culture of brain as computer. We kind of think of our brains as these information processing machines that can do their job anywhere — it's information in and information out. That is how a computer works, but that's not at all how the human brain evolved to work. We're actually, very sensitive to the the setting in which we're doing our thinking. One of the key things or queues or signs that we're always scanning our environments to see is if we are safe. Part of that is 'do we belong here? Is this a place where people like me are welcome? Where people like me can feel comfortable? Where people like me are valued?' There are all kinds of material signs in the environment that can either give an individual a sense of belonging or, conversely, unfortunately, make them feel that perhaps they don't belong there, that they're not welcome, that their contributions won't be valued. That's something that organizations and individuals really want to think about. Does when I look out at the space in which I'm doing my thinking, which does affect my thinking so deeply, is there a feeling of welcoming and belonging that's coming back at me?

CC: I'm curious if you have any examples of what might be a sign of 'I'm not welcome' or what might be things that you've seen that you'd say are not sending the right cues?

AMP: Well a lot of very old and well-established institutions have a display of a kind that I'm sure you've seen, Chris, which is you come in and there's a row of portraits of past presidents or past leaders or luminaries associated with that organization, and because we're talking about going way back in time, often these are all or largely white men. That is what one confronts when you walk in perhaps a conference room where you're trying to move the organization forward and embrace diversity in a whole host of different voices, and yet the visual cues all around you are saying this company has been led for in some sense, is for, is about, this certain kind of person. I think those kinds of displays often were just kind of not very reflected upon. They were just there. They were kind of a tradition. I think now that we have all this access to research about how much cues of belonging and identity really affect people and their motivation and their sense of commitment to the organization, even their ability to think creatively and productively, I think we can maybe take another look at those traditional displays and say, 'is there a way that we can show on our walls and in our spaces that we're moving forward into a world that's different from the one that has existed in the past?'

CC: Yeah, how do you create an environment that feels more inclusive for everyone?

I want to go back and talk a little bit more about thinking and problem solving. I think this was in your section about thinking with relationships. You've learned so much about how people create or problem solve as a group and I'm just wondering if you can tell us about some of your work in that area?

AMP: Yeah, one of the interesting developments over the past 50 years as we've all shifted to working on these screens — I'm looking at you on a screen right now, Chris, and I'll be working all day later today working on a screen — is that so much of our work is private. It's either in our heads or it's done on this little screen. One of the things that is so challenging about transferring that kind of work to a group setting is that we need to be sign posting and displaying our thinking for other people, but we're not used to doing that because we have such an individual model of thinking, such a brain-bound model of thinking, that it all happens in here, inside our skulls. One thing that's so useful about bringing a group of people together into one space at the same time is that they can start to offload their cognition, get their thoughts and ideas out of their head and out into the space that they share. One of the most effective ways to do that is known as creating shared artifacts, which can be as simple as one of those big flip charts, where you have a big pad of paper and you're just writing things down. Having that kind of visual cue and that visual shared artifact is so useful and it initiates so many processes that help with group cognition. Just to give one example, people start gesturing at shared artifacts. Often shared artifacts can be placed on a wall, maybe in the order in which they were created — so we started over here and now our latest list is on the other side of the room. People start gesturing and they're using space to organize their thinking — old to new goes left to right or whatever it is. We want to get our thoughts and ideas outside of our heads as often as possible both because that helps our own thinking and because then thinking becomes this shared project rather than this individual thing that goes on between us and our computer.

CC: Yeah, it's so interesting, I think back to a meeting where we had kind of an ah ha moment about what you're describing, where the way the room was set up, half the people were able to get up and move around the room — and we love sticky notes and could move around the notes and organize things — and I started realizing that the other half of the room, just simply because the way the room was organized, those people couldn't easily get up and join and participate, so they were kind of sitting and being more passive and I started realizing that there was this physicality to the thinking process that we hadn't maybe recognized or designed intentionally to allow everybody in the room to participate fully.

AMP: Yeah, you created a controlled experiment there, Christine.

CC: Yeah, exactly. But now we have kind of a new challenge and I'm curious, because you did talk about screens and more collaboration is happening online. Our research is saying that 56% of all meetings are going to be virtual now. That feels even higher to me honestly. I'm just wondering when we're talking about trying to create these you know inclusive experiences or trying to create environments where people can do their best thinking — what might be some things that we might be missing if we're in a 2D experience instead of a 3D experience?

AMP: Yeah, I agree with you. Certainly my proportion of online meetings is a lot higher than 56%. But, research is beginning to produce evidence in terms of what we lose or what we miss out on when we meet online. As convenient as it is, and as surprisingly productive as it can be, I think a lot of people have been surprised by how much we can get done by meeting online. At the same time, there's a couple things that seem to really suffer when we meet exclusively online or mostly online instead of in person. One is that we still have rich and frequent communications with our immediate collaborators. We need to be doing that to get our work done, but it's those unexpected or serendipitous encounters with people who are outside of our usual work group, which can be so productive and so generative, but those just don't seem to happen as much when we're meeting online and not wandering around the office in person.

The other thing interestingly that seems to suffer when people are meeting mostly online is trust. The trust that you build just from those casual encounters — seeing someone in the coffee room or having a little chat with them in the elevator — those really build trust in a way that I think we might not have. I think that the pandemic and our isolation from each other has really revealed a lot of things about what we took for granted when we all work together in offices. At the same time, it's clear that remote working, or at least hybrid working, is here to stay. I think it's important that we address those shortfalls and think very consciously and deliberately about how to compensate for those while keeping all the advantages of remote work.

CC: Yeah, I think you're absolutely right that hybrid work is here to stay and our data is saying somewhere in over 70% of organizations are going to embrace some form of hybrid work. I'm curious what you have seen in terms of what we've learned from working at home that we could export, into our workplaces. What are those things that have been good about that home experience that we should be doing more of in offices?

AMP: Yeah, that's a great question because I think a lot of us have discovered, or been reaffirmed in our sense that actually we can work quite well at home. One thing I would not recommend is bringing in your washing machine or your full size refrigerator, or your TV - all those things at home that do distract us. But the good things about working at home include things like quiet, privacy, control over your own environment, the ability to fill your space with these evocative objects that we were talking about earlier, and I've wondered if given that research suggests that the most effective way to work is a kind of alternation or oscillation between that quiet protected deep work that we were talking about earlier and then the more convivial and collaborative and social ways of interacting with other people. If we couldn't designate home as the place where that quiet, private work happens, and structure the workplace in a way that it becomes a hub for collaboration, that seems to me like it could be a very resourceful and ingenious way of capturing the best of these two spaces that we've now been relegated to, that we now divide our time between.

CC: Yeah, I want to just hit on this a little bit because we get so many questions and so many organizations are trying to figure it out, as you mentioned before. I do think we're in a fluid period where there's ideally, going to be some experimentation and learning going on and that we're not just going to expect that everybody and everything goes back to the way it was before. We do hear a lot of leaders kind of expressing some angst to us that they're worried about the impact of having people work remotely too much now. I don't know what too much is for everybody, that might vary, but there's kind of this feeling of 'oh are we getting it right? Has the pendulum swung too far?' and I'm just wondering, do you think they're right to worry about some of that?

AMP: Yeah I think it's a legitimate concern. I have given my reading of the research I have a real bias in favor of in-person communication. I write in the book about how how a sense of groupiness gets created, and believe it or not, that is actually a scientific term. How does a collection of individuals come to feel like one entity, like a group? It turns out that most of the ways that we create a sense of groupiness have to do with doing the same thing, in the same place, at the same time with a group of other people. So that might mean learning and training together rather than separately. It might mean having meaningful or even emotional experiences together as a group. It might mean engaging in rituals together, which could be something as simple as sharing a meal together, but without those kinds of almost physical bonding experiences, it can be hard for a group to really cohere.

I will say that I think something that I see emerging in terms of managing this hybrid working situation is that we're realizing that different kinds of work can be done better remotely and other kinds of work really need to have that in-person component. I'll just mention two things here — one is that young people who are just beginning in their careers and need to absorb so much of that tacit, implicit knowledge that just comes from being around people who do what they're learning to do. It's very hard to pick up on those kinds of subtle implicit cues when all you're doing is looking at someone straight on in a Zoom meeting for hours a day. Young people at the beginning of their careers are especially benefited by in-person settings. There are kinds of work that, as we've been saying, require this kind of focus and lack of distraction and some of those kinds of jobs I think could be entirely remote without any detriment to the quality of the work. But there are other kinds of work, especially those that require collaboration and communication with other people that are really going to suffer if they happen entirely remotely. So, I think one thing I see emerging is that there's not this one-size-fits-all. It really depends on the stage of the person's development as a professional and a worker and also the kind of work that's being done.

CC: Yeah, and that creates kind of a continuum of different kinds of experiences that I think organizations need to be thinking about for people and maybe in our past it was a lot easier to go for super equality like everybody has the same experience, everybody has the same desk, everybody has the same thing. It feels like we're entering a time now where we have to be a lot more flexible and fluid to be able to get the best results.

AMP: Agreed and also recognize that people have different preferences around this issue. It may be that it becomes a self sorting kind of situation where people who prefer remote work will gravitate towards the kind of work that can be done well remotely and then other people are going to say, 'you know what? I'm going to be drawn to that company that has an in-person office policy because that's what I want!' But just to recognize that there is quite a diversity of views and preferences on that point.

CC: Well Annie this has been such a great conversation. I really appreciate you joining us. So thanks for being here with us today.

AMP: Thank you, Chris. It's really been a pleasure.

CC: I really enjoyed talking with Annie Murphy Paul today and I know I'm going to enjoy this conversation too with two of my colleagues at Steelcase who have been listening along with me. Welcome to Patricia Kammer and Patricia Wang who are both researchers with our Workspace Futures team. That's a global team of people here at Steelcase who study how work is changing and how people do their best work. Thanks for joining me, both of you.

Patricia Kammer: Our pleasure!

CC: Well, what I've been dying to talk with you about is some of the things that we're seeing in terms of this shift toward employees wanting more flexibility. I was hoping you can help us apply some of the things I talked about with Annie to the things you're seeing in the workplace today in your research. So she talked about this idea of control, that people in this era of flexibility want a lot more control. You've done some research recently and I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about that.

Patricia Wang: Yeah! Thank you so much again so much for inviting us today. We were lucky enough to interview some of the first hybrid workers who were coming back into the office

CC: That's so cool.

PW: Roughly about 30 people across different industries, everybody from maybe an individual contributor to a manager and we actually found that there's three different types of hybrid workers — so not everybody is the same, everybody has different preferences and they exert the flexibility in different ways. We have the first one who is an anchored worker — they may be an engineer, they typically have lots of products around them because they're referring to those prototypes and so for them, their place in the open-plan with their things is their workplace and so what they actually struggle with is a sense of audio privacy, visual privacy, maybe spaces for focus even during a meeting because you have people now on Zoom calls all around them

CC: Everywhere!

PW: Everywhere, absolutely. So for them, they like to escape. How do you help them escape and find those quiet places where they can focus? The second type of hybrid worker is the untethered. This one is the one that still has to come in but they don't necessarily have a place to go to specifically. They appreciate reservation services where you can book a room so you know where you're going in advance. In addition, they also appreciate just having a wide plethora of spaces to go to. They do appreciate that enclave where they can focus for long durations of time, but they also appreciate the open plan where they can quickly connect with people and see that maybe my colleague, Patricia Kammer, is available and I can quickly tap on her shoulder for a quick question.

Lastly, we have the destination worker. That worker is the one who specifically comes in for these team meetings. They're trying to create a shared vision with very complex information, and because my perspective may not be your perspective, they want to bring everyone together. That's where artifacts are really helpful, like post-it notes and stickies. It's super helpful for them and to have that team space to go to.

PK: Chris, it's so great to be here. I really enjoyed that interview. I think one of the things that Annie spoke to that really resonated with me was this notion of extreme flexibility. As Patricia and I were completing this work, one of the things that we talked about was the era of attention versus the era of attendance. Quite frankly, that's really what Annie is articulating, which is this idea that workers will come to the office for very key experiences. I think it's really great, as Patricia pointed out, there are three archetypes of hybrid workers and they all have unique needs and they're all looking to the office to perform some kind of a function. So whether it's having your tools around you to help you perform your best work or whether it's, as Patricia mentioned, coming into the office and having your information arrayed as a destination worker allows you to get on the same page. So fundamentally this notion of extreme flexibility is probably going to stay as workers start to design the experiences that they want and they're leveraging the office as a key resource to accomplish their work.

CC: Yeah, so when you say an era of attendance, those were the days where work happened exclusively in the office — like you if you showed up at work, you are working. This era of attention is really different. This is that extreme flexibility that you're talking about.

PK: Exactly. So if we think about the era of attendance, work was formed by and bound by time and space. In the era of attention, individuals have the degree of flexibility to choose when and where they want to work.

CC: Got it, got it. So the other thing she said that was super interesting was kind of breaking down this analogy that we've used for years about our brains being like computers. She talked about this idea about the brain being context sensitive and it feels like that fits with some of the things that you were seeing in your research.

PW: Yeah, absolutely. I think it's really helpful for employees to also leverage different spaces for the right type of informality that they need to help with that context. So if you have a more traditional space that might not be the best place that you want to bring everybody together to start on a team project and build relationships. You want to specifically be able to use the spaces you have access to to help articulate the right emotions and help fill that sense of camaraderie early in the project. Or to Patricia Kammer's point earlier, that you also might want to use that space to specifically capture all of your thinking and how you transition through a project so you can also refer back to past artifacts as well to make it super easy.

One of the things that I also really appreciated about the interview is that she mentioned groupiness.

CC: I love that word and it's scientific! (group laughter)

PW: I think we're in a moment of time where we need to rethink what it means to create groupiness. In the past it was probably easy to catch a coffee with you if I saw you, but now it's almost like I have to be super deliberate, 'how do I have this event with Chris?' I think we should think about specifically, like events that leaders can do, maybe stacking on top of department meetings to help create that sense of groupiness again that helps all employees tie to the purpose or the mission of the organization. I think it's a really interesting time.

CC: Some of the things I missed so much when we weren't working in the office, was not only getting the coffee, but it was literally being able to put my thoughts into a physical space. I really struggled with creating things when I didn't have my white boards or my sticky notes or those kinds of artifacts.

PK: There's a neuroscience reason for that, Chris.

CC: Oh, really? What is it?

PK: There's a term called grid cells and place cells. When we organize information around us, literally, we're recalling it. That's why context is important for developing that memory and as we've talked about for these teams, especially the destination workers who are coming in primarily to get on the same page, it's this moment of synchronous activity, and then they will break apart to do asynchronous activity. But those are really critical, as our research subjects indicated, for being on the same page, at the same time. And it enables the fluidity and the speed of innovation to happen much faster.

CC: We could talk for hours sitting here. This has been really helpful to start taking some of those ideas to help us start to think about where the office needs to go and what are some of the ways that we can help people work better. Thanks for joining me, Patricia Wang and Patricia Kammer.

PK + PW: Thanks so much.

Thank you for being here with us for this episode of Work Better. If you enjoyed the conversation, please subscribe on your favorite podcast platform and visit us at steelcase.com/subscribe to sign up for weekly updates on research, science and design ideas delivered to your inbox.

Next week – I am absolutely over the moon about our interview with Eric Klinenberg – professor of social science at NYU and author of Palaces for the People. His work on what he calls “social infrastructure” within communities inspired our thinking here at Steelcase about how to apply his research to the workplace and he has some really great insights about how to do that. We’re going to talk about loneliness, lingering and libraries. That’s next week. Please join us.

Thanks again for being here – and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.