The term “creative space” is making its way into the American lexicon as more businesses seek work environments that allow for collaboration among employees. The same type of space in your office can help your medical practice become more innovative and nimble as healthcare continues to evolve.

“Similar to the benefits in a typical commercial office, collaborative workspace in a medical office allows opportunities for sharing knowledge, patient information and diagnoses; increases communication between staff; and offers a greater sense that everyone is in touch with what others in the office are doing,” says Brian Spence, a principal at BAM Architecture Studio in New York City.

Collaboration is one of the key ingredients in speeding communication, creating innovation and delivering information, says Sarah Bader, principal and firm-wide health and wellness leader for Gensler in Chicago. “By creating environments that foster collaboration, we help support these key activities.”

Gensler has identified four components in an effective work environment that play a key role in the ability to support an effective workplace:

*Focus – heads-down work*
*Collaboration – sharing of knowledge*
*Socialization – building trust*
*Learning – understanding the work*

Moreover, collaborative environments can help address many key issues in the development of current medical office space, including controlling costs and creating a better patient experience, says Paula Crowley, CEO of Anchor Health Properties in Wilmington, Del. “Specifically, medical offices are creating ‘team centers,’ which aim to help medical providers share information and encourage collaboration. It’s also a time saver: in a collaborative work space, physicians, physician assistants, nurse practitioners and nurses can meet in one central location rather than waste time running to individual private offices or nurse stations.”
Crowley points out that a team format allows practices to be flexible and grow or contract as needed, since there are fewer, if any, private offices. This ultimately results in more efficient use of space and fewer costs to the medical group.

There is definitely a trend to design shared workspaces for doctors, rather than individual offices, says Spence. “This decision seems based more on the program and the goal or maximizing exam/patient rooms than a need for collaboration between doctors,” he notes. “Having said that, proximity to other doctors is helpful nonetheless.”

Collaborative space also minimizes the amount of time space isn’t being used, Spence points out. “In many clinics, the doctors are on rotation, and thus a private office would be unused for a portion of the time; whereas a shared space can remain in use more frequently. The counterpoint is that without a private office, space must be carved out for consultation rooms to allow for private doctor-patient conversation,” he explains.

Another benefit to collaborative space is that it allows doctors access to support and staff areas without having to go through the public reception and waiting area of the office, Spence says. “Often, this requires two paths for circulation: one for the doctors and staff and the other for patients. Although this means more space is dedicated to circulation, it seems like the doctors feel this is a worthwhile tradeoff.”

**How to create a collaborative workspace**

Crowley recommends creating a “mission-control” space, which acts as a central hub for team members. “Ideally, the space should have the ability to include several different functions, such as counter-height touchdown space, desktop computer stations and areas to make phone calls,” she says. “The team center must be right-sized to allow for all the different functions and users, while providing the proximity that is required for these spaces to encourage collaboration.”

Crowley adds that a centrally located mission-control space can allow patients to see that the team is working together. However, from a design perspective, elements such as glass and privacy walls need to be considered in order to create the appropriate amount of confidentiality while still allowing staff to feel open and visually connected to all exam spaces.

Your collaborative space also needs to support both formal and informal collaboration, says Bader. It should contain areas that allow staff to share knowledge with each other as well as visitors.

Informal collaboration can occur at shared meeting points within the work environment that are still some distance from the focus or heads-down area. One way to add this is to create double-duty space that both respects the realities of real estate requirements and still supports collaboration.

This can consist of wider corridors that allow staff to stop for informal information sharing while allowing others to pass by, or perhaps space that would allow staff to sit for informal conversations away from patients and focus work, says Bader. “These ‘thickened’ corridors can also be used to provide learning opportunities with media and other tools.”

Formal collaboration areas need to support how people collaborate today, she explains. “We know from our current work there has been a 75% increase in virtual communication and that one out of every four meetings includes a virtual participant. How these formal collaboration spaces support these new virtual requirements is crucial to the success of communication. Providing the right technology that is flexible and user friendly is a requirement for effective collaboration.”
According to Spence, a collaborative workspace could be as simple as a long desk with several computers or touch-down stations, a larger room with individual desks arranged in a way to encourage interactions or a conference table the team can gather around. “For instance, arranging the desks so they face each other instead of the walls facilitates conversation. Also, grouping the support functions together – like copy areas, filing and staff lounges – allows a greater likelihood of individuals remaining in contact with others on staff and, therefore, a greater likelihood of positive interactions and chance conversations.”

Another idea is a staff “living room,” which is a space separate from the patient-care area in which physicians and staff can discuss patient cases, referrals and new developments in healthcare before or after their typical office hours, says Bader. “Depending on your geographic location, these living-room spaces may include outdoor areas for breaks and private discussions away from patients, and they tend to be well received.”

**What to avoid in creating a collaborative workspace**

Here’s what the experts say not to do when building an area for collaboration:

**DON’T**

- Place active areas near areas where staff may need to focus on work.
- Forget to include stand-up tables for quick meetings located adjacent to, but away from, the work pace for exchanging information while keeping distractions to a minimum, says Bader.
- Ignore the need to strike a balance between patient privacy and transparent care. Spaces need encourage collaboration, says Crowley, but still have the ability to keep conversations and medical information private to patients and visitors.
- Have private offices, which is a departure from traditional medical office space. “If caregivers are in private offices, they aren’t allowing for collaboration,” says Crowley.
- Neglect to include areas for staff to keep personal belongings. This could be in the form of a personal pedestal file or bookshelf, says Spence.
- Discount the concept of “focus booths” that staff can use for tasks that require uninterrupted focus or for personal phone calls.

**More things to consider**

Keep in mind that there’s no one solution for creating an effective collaborative workspace, says Bader. “The best place to start is with the user – this will help lay the foundation for a space that will support the unique requirements inherent in every project.”

Also, if you are eliminating private offices in order to create collaborative space, you may have a greater need for consultation rooms to allow doctor/patient conversations to occur in private, says Spence. Creating a balance of the private and shared spaces in your office will provide options for numerous types of interactions.