

# vitra.



As where and how we work changes, it is Vitra's intention to provide you with the latest insights and learnings to help guide you through this process. We draw on the knowledge of our network of thought leaders, experts, scientists, designers, architects and customers – and on our own findings gained from the implementation of projects with our partners and clients, in our showrooms and workplaces and on the Vitra Campus. Our e-papers about the future of homes, offices and public spaces present the most recent findings. You can find all issues at [vitra.com/office](https://vitra.com/office)

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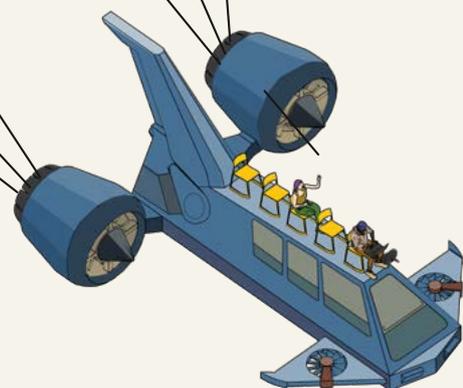
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Concept, art direction and design: Studio AKFB  
Illustrations: Atelier CTJM

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Klünenfeldstrasse 22  
CH-4127 Birsfelden



Over the last two years, the Vitra e-papers have covered the world of work during and after the pandemic. Having moved beyond the crisis, we continue to study interiors – homes, offices and public spaces – and share our observations with you. In this ninth e-paper, we explore a way of working that will sound familiar to many readers, but has been neglected with the spotlight on agile, dynamic and hybrid work methods: communal working.

In 2021 Vitra built its Club Office in Switzerland, which many of you have since visited, and some of you have even gone on to build your own Clubs. The Club Office concept includes three different areas and many different ways of working. The public area of the Club is a busy, noisy place for informal collaboration. This is where days at the office start and end. It's a social place for everyone. The semi-public area of the Club takes collaboration one step further and was covered a year ago in the e-paper titled 'Dynamic Spaces'. It is here that a project team working against a tight deadline might book a dynamic space for a few weeks, using and adapting it according to their needs. This e-paper, on the other hand, looks at the private area of the Club, where members focus on individual tasks and teams engage in communal working.

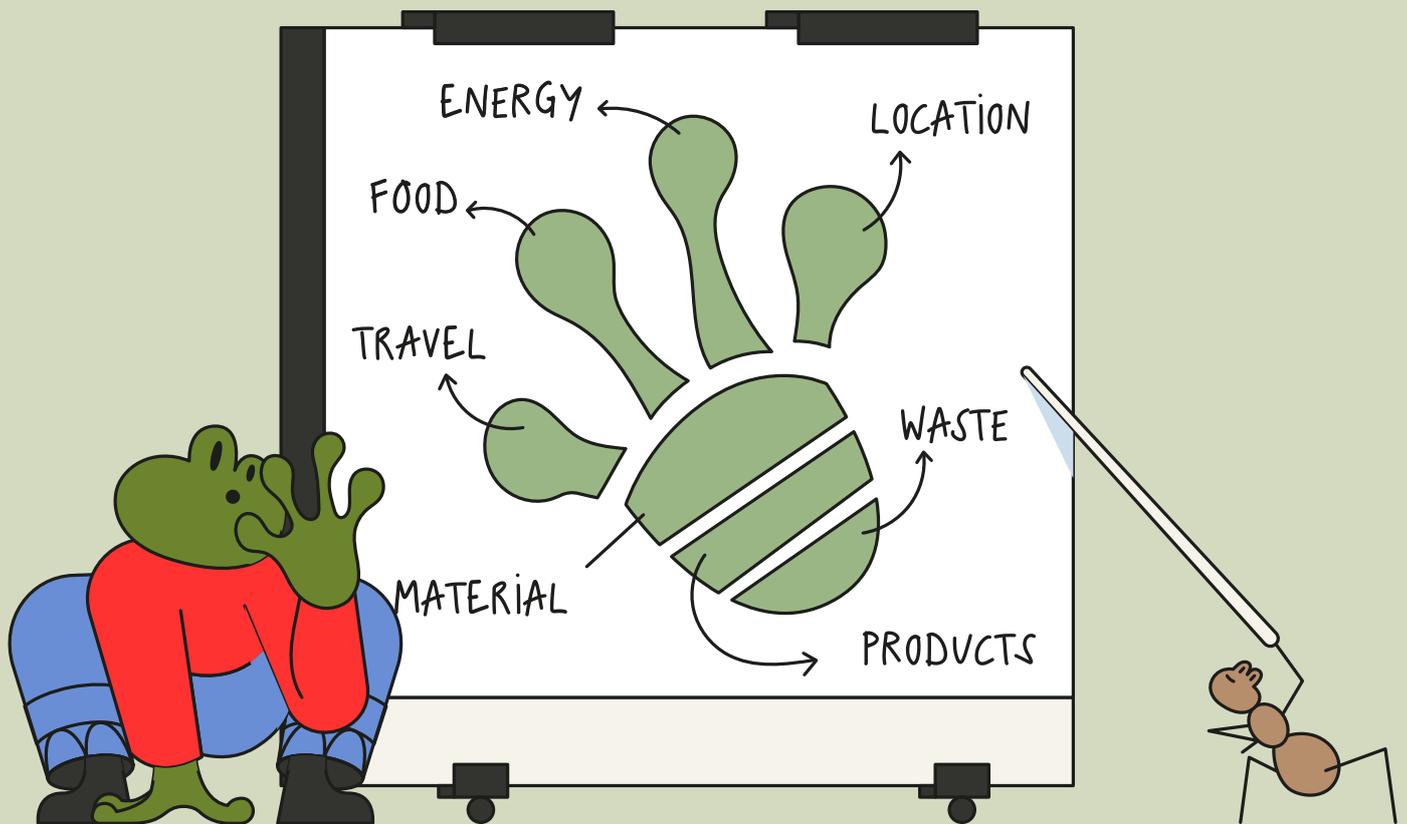
While most members of the Club float naturally from one part to the next and shift from one working mode to another, some are closely tied to their team and its physical neighbourhood in the office. Often these teams are deeply engaged with the daily operations of a company, rather than with project work or management. At Vitra, our Customer Support is a good example. Hear what members of this team have to say on page 12. In this e-paper, we are also covering the history of the shared workspace in an essay by Libby Sellers. We are learning from Mikael Krogerus and Roman Tschäppeler about why trivial office chatter may be the glue that holds a team together. And of course, we are introducing new products that encourage communal working, such as Abalon (a campfire sofa) and Joyn 2 (the original platform table turns twenty and is better today than ever). Finally, we are inviting you to the new On Labs where some of these products are already in use. All the product solutions featured in this e-paper are currently in production and available for order.

Nora Fehlbaum  
CEO, Vitra

# Contents



<b>06</b>	<b>Club Office</b>		
08	Welcome to the Club Office		
10	The communal workspace		
12	Communal working at Vitra		
14	'A history of communal work'		
	An essay by Libby Sellers		
<b>16</b>	<b>Product solutions for communal workspaces</b>		
18	Joyn 2		
22	'20 years of Joyn'		
	An interview with Erwan Bouroullec		
24	'Running together'		
	A conversation with John Kuilman		
28	Abalon		
29	'Sitting circles'		
	A reflection by Anniina Koivu		
30	Alcove		
32	Talky x Vitra		
34	'The Law of Triviality'		
	A contribution by Roman Tschäppeler and Mikael Krogerus		



**How does Vitra measure its carbon footprint?**

Find out more in Vitra's glossary at [vitra.com/sustainability](http://vitra.com/sustainability)





ZOOOOM!

WOW!

POW!

YES!

# Welcome to the Club Office

As companies and their teams are now working in a hybrid set-up, certain questions have to be addressed: Who works from the office? What for? Is the former work environment still suitable? What does the office now have to offer? In response to these questions Vitra developed the 'Club Office' in 2021. The physical act of going back to the workplace has become a conscious choice for many – one that is guided by the tasks that lie ahead, the required level of interaction and the need for direct access to human and physical resources. The physical workspaces that we now build should complement the home office and provide added value for both the company and users. Acknowledging the hybrid nature of contemporary work, the Club Office is divided into three areas – public, semi-public and private.



## Public area

The public section provides members with a welcoming space for spontaneous meetings, a forum for discussion, informal collaboration, debate and mutual learning. Comfortable, inviting furniture such as the sofa systems Soft Work and Alcove Plus are used here.



### Semi-public area

The second, semi-public area is dedicated to more formal collaboration. Members come together on a planned basis in spaces that can be reserved, for example, for project work – often over a period of days and weeks. Yet agility is still required, and thanks to flexible furnishings like Dancing Wall, Stool-Tool and Tip Ton, collaborative spaces can be quickly and easily adapted and rearranged – even multiple times a day if needed. This environment is designed for workshops and productive teamwork. With the help of Comma, an office system consisting of just a few individual elements supplied in a kit of parts, Club members can construct their own surroundings to solve the problem of the day, week or month.



### Private area

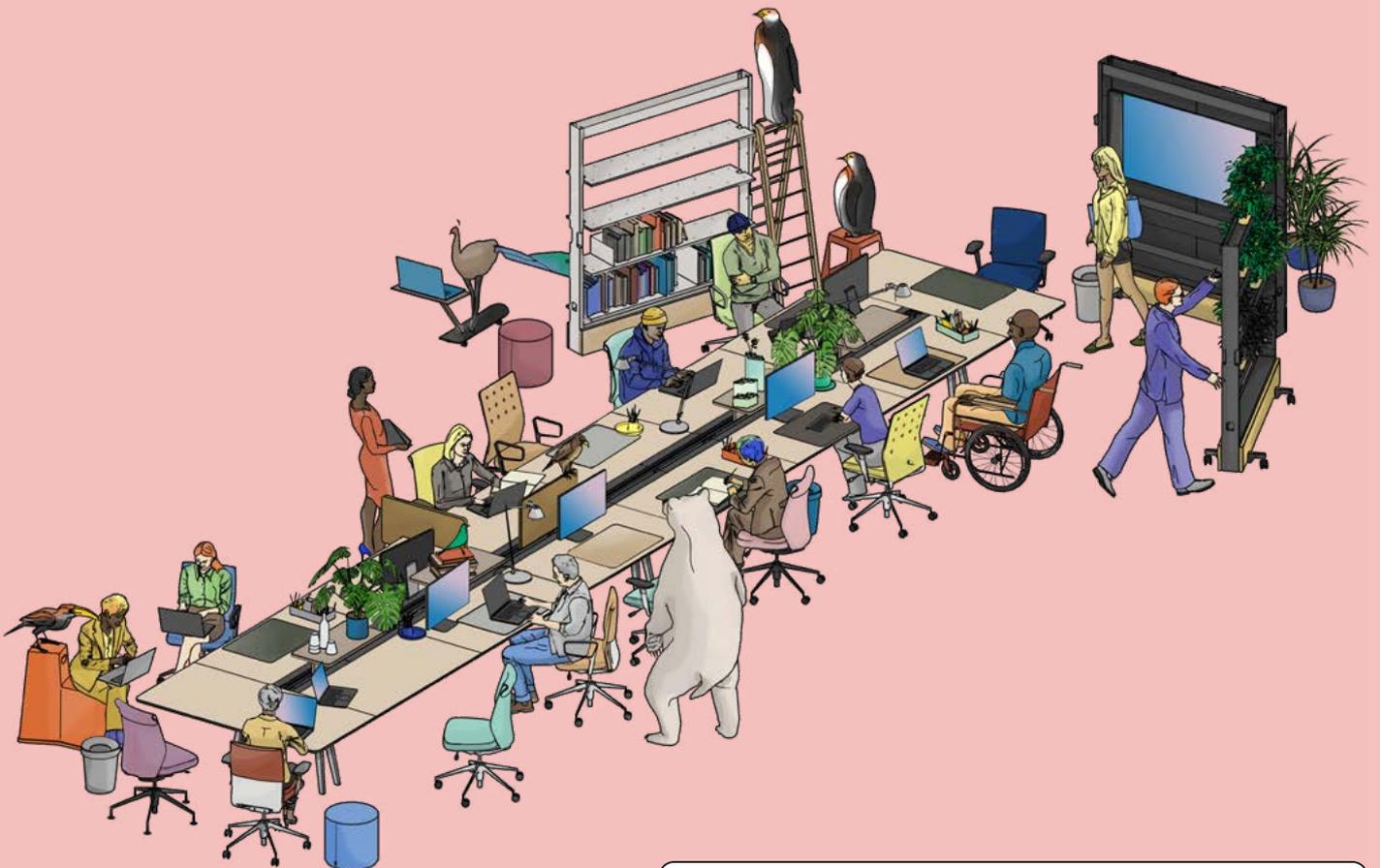
The private area of the Club Office provides a space that is sheltered from intrusion. It allows members to focus on individual tasks and offers an environment for communal working in teams. This zone also extends into the home office, which has proven particularly suitable for concentrated individual tasks. Remote working and a well-equipped home office are therefore an integral element of the Club Office.

Join me in the communal workspace!



# The communal workspace

While most members of the Club float naturally from one part of the Club to the next and shift from one working mode to another, some are closely tied to their team and its physical neighbourhood in an office. Often these teams are deeply engaged with the daily operations of a company, rather than with project work or management. A communal working environment offers a space for teams to work individually while still being connected to what is happening in the company. Specific product typologies that facilitate active communal working – such as the communal table – play a central role in this setting.



## Communal table

The communal table is central to communal work. It provides a platform that encourages close collaboration where employees exchange best-practices, break bread and connect on an informal level. Shared tables help build a community without hierarchy, not just through verbal interaction but also by establishing a place to work alongside like-minded people while everyone focuses on their own task.

→ [More on Joyn 2 Platform](#)



### Sitting circle

Abalon forms a sitting circle, encouraging informal exchange and supporting team rituals such as morning coffee.

→ [More on Abalon](#)

### Team huddle

The morning huddle takes place at a shared high table, while Talky offers a space for individual retreat, phone calls or short bilateral communication.

→ [More on Joyn 2 Meet & Touchdown](#)

→ [More on Talky](#)



### Meet & retreat

Especially when equipped with low side and back panels, Alcove Fauteuil and Alcove Sofas provide an ideal space to meet and retreat while still being connected to what happens in the surrounding workspace.

→ [More on Alcove](#)

# Communal working at Vitra

Silvano Nardone, Global Head of Customer Service

**'I deliberately use the communal tables in our offices to signal to the people around me that I am open to an exchange or questions. At the same time, I get to hear a lot at the table, can sense the mood in the team and, if necessary, can get directly involved in or support various topics.'**

Boris Hüglin, Customer Service, Vitra

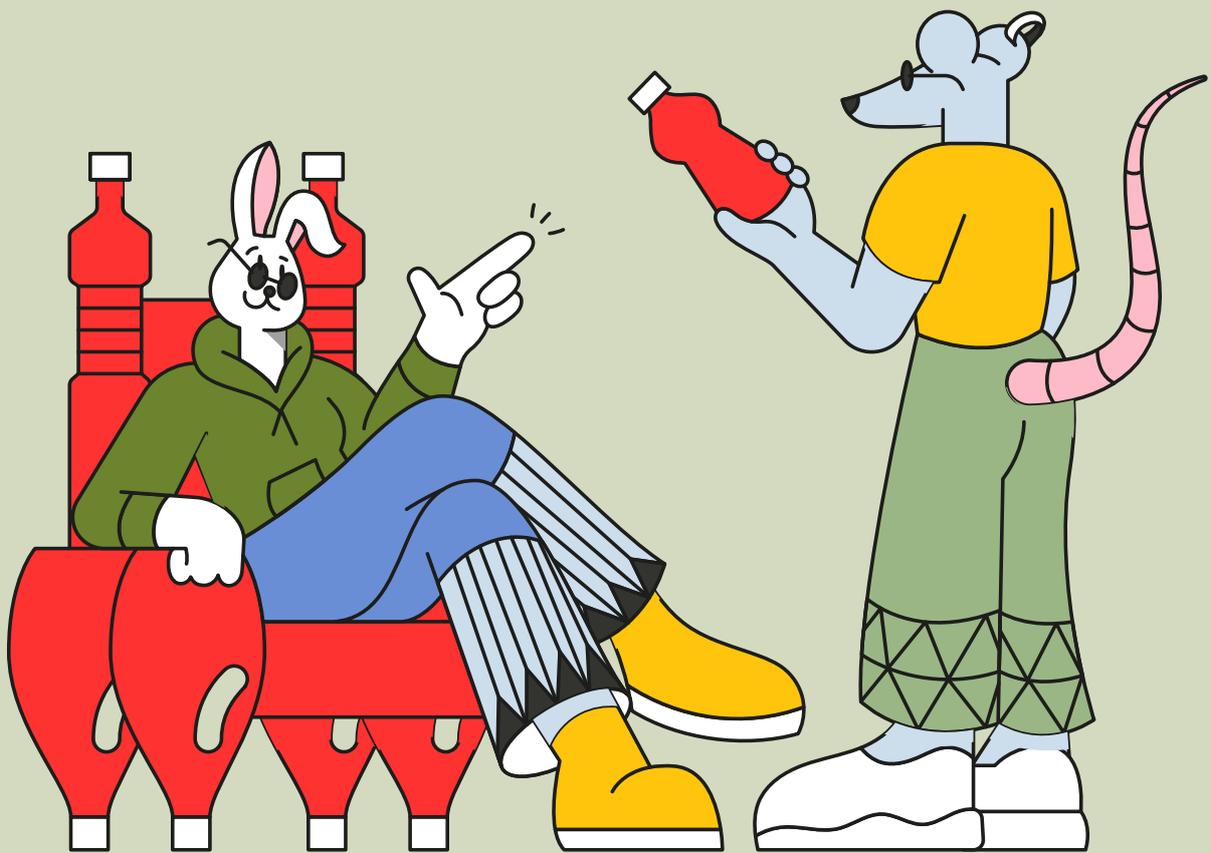
**'I am always looking forward to meeting my colleagues at the Joyn Platform in the office. By working together on the platform, it reinforces teamwork. We all work together, we support each other. It feels more like being at the kitchen table than in the office.'**



**'What I enjoy most about working at the communal table is the constant sharing of information. When I started at Vitra, the more senior colleagues at the table shared good tips and practical advice with me. After five years, I am now sharing my expertise and knowledge with the junior team members. Thanks to the communal table, we not only know what our colleagues are currently working on, but the experiences of the whole team are shared around the table.'**

Sina Leonhard, Customer Service, Vitra

At Vitra, our Customer Support team, based in the Studio Office at the Vitra Center in Birsfelden, is a good example of such a community. They work closely together, act in unison and replace each other during absences. They cover long days and sometimes different time zones. They are available for customer enquiries and work in the same IT system all day. They solve problems quickly and on a daily basis, and keep the company going. The members of these teams are highly loyal, as exhibited by their long tenures. They like consistency and routine. A communal working environment encourages this way of working.



**Which Vitra chairs are made out of recycled materials?**

Find out more in Vitra's glossary at [vitra.com/sustainability](https://vitra.com/sustainability)

# A history of communal work

An essay by Libby Sellers

How do we work together, what are the spaces that connect us and what does the future of communal work hold? This essay by Libby Sellers takes a closer look at the history of communal workspaces.



SC Johnson Wax Headquarters (1939) designed by Frank Lloyd Wright (© 2023, ProLitteris, Zurich)

In 'Playtime', Jacques Tati's 1976 satire about the absurdities of modern life, his alter ego Monsieur Hulot strides through a fictional office on his way to an appointment. Lost in a maze of metal cubes and glass, Hulot tries in vain to navigate an incomprehensible space governed by order and optimisation. Chaos ensues and the bureaucratic parody escalates. Yet like many of Tati's visual elements, the work cubes and technocratic planning that baffled Hulot had only a decade earlier been hailed as the solution to office life. Their descent from design remedy to derision seems to follow the general pattern of communal workspaces. Much like the revolving doors that kept Hulot in perpetual spin, office design too has gone round in circles.

From field to factory, the history of work has centred around communal effort, though the origins of modern offices are inextricably linked to the beginning of paperwork itself. Since the invention of writing and keeping of systematic records, there have been office-like spaces to produce and house them. Florence's Uffizi Gallery originally served as the 16th-century bookkeeping offices of the Medici family. Both a workplace and statement of power and prestige, it was one of the first corporate offices. As other service professions grew in prominence, so too did the administrative spaces needed to sustain them. By the mid-1800s, clerks and counting houses began to appear across cities and in literature. Charles Dickens describes them countless times in his works, while

period illustrations portray vast halls of men hunched over rows of long wooden desks. Less salubrious accounts depict clerks disappearing 'mysteriously down passages or into doorways that lead to narrow staircases, some doubtless to "little tanks"...others into dingy warehouses that look as dreary as prisons.' Salvation came when architect Frank Lloyd Wright swapped Dickensian gloom for shiny glass and metal. Cited as the first modern office, his Larkin Company Administration Building in Buffalo, New York (1906) emphasised proficiency and congeniality with skylights and an early form of air conditioning, along with a communal dining facility, classrooms and lounge area with fireplace. His later office building for SC Johnson Wax (1939) – with its harmonised colours and uniform modular furnishings – went even further in creating a positive, open-plan environment. Productivity and efficiency became buzzwords and workspaces changed to capitalise on these goals. As land prices escalated, the construction industry embraced steel frames and elevators and skyscrapers shoehorned vast workforces into ever smaller footprints. Like their Victorian counterparts, workers sat in regimented rows while managers supervised from surrounding offices. Air conditioning and fluorescent light reduced the need for natural ventilation and light, cutting workers off from the outside world. The revolving doors spun again in the 1960s when a new 'socially democratic' workplace was ushered in by unions championing healthier working conditions. The regimented approach was replaced with the development of the 'Bürolandschaft', or office landscaping. With the goal of reviving communication and cooperation, solid barriers were removed, and staff were staggered in organic patterns, loosely divided by plants and furniture. Seemingly random, the patterns and clusters had been calculated around work paths and roles within the company. Round and round it went between closed and open spaces, mobile or static furnishings and staff. In the late 1960s Herman Miller's Action Office series of 'systems furniture' allowed for privacy and personalisation amid the hubbub of the generic office. The semi-enclosed Action Office cubicle and its many imitations became the foundation for the global

office, holding sway for decades to come. Yet even its inventor, Robert Probst, would later decry their omnipresence, and the way these 'little tanks' were obsessively imposed on workers.

The 1980s brought 'hot-desking', borrowed from 'hot bunking' where submariners had no designated bed. With the PC, mobile phone, then online connectivity, the next cycle introduced the idea of the 'office hotel' or 'multi-spaces', in which a wider range of pre-determined environments were offered to suit the task at hand. With the pandemic came enforced distancing, the return of desk dividers and the great WFH movement. For all the benefits this brought amidst the turmoil, studies now highlight how this too has resulted in alienation and demotivation, prompting new buzzwords like 'quiet quitting' and 'the great resignation'.

As employers try to get employees back to the office, they are presented with a unique opportunity to rethink the status quo through group- or system-wide transitions offering a flexible balance between virtual and real, remote and on-site.



Action Office by Herman Miller (1964)  
(Courtesy Herman Miller Archives)

Hybrid scenarios oscillate between home, third space and office for concentrated tasks, teamwork and face-to-face communication as required. Perhaps the real lesson here is the need for hybrid thinking – a flexible and agile approach to office space that activates all the same benefits and liberties of remote working while acknowledging that everyone's needs are equally hybrid and diverse.

# Product solutions for communal workspaces

For decades, Vitra has responded to transformations in the workplace by developing products for changing work conditions – guided by its own research in this field. As a result, many products suited for communal workspaces already existed in the Vitra portfolio, while others were specially conceived to meet new requirements. The product innovations all satisfy the demand for flexibility and high quality, allowing the hybrid office to adapt to shifting needs while signalling value and appreciation to its users. The further refinement and enhancement of products is a central pillar of Vitra’s sustainable product strategy, which avoids trends and instead seeks to build on and continually improve the tried-and-tested.



**Joyn 2** p.18



**Abalon** p.28



**Talky** p.32



**Alcove** p.30

# Joyn 2

Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec, 2023

Inspired by the family table at the heart of their childhood home in Brittany, designers Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec developed the office table system Joyn together with Vitra in 2002. Introducing a range of oversized shared tables, Joyn originated a new office typology that promotes dynamic and spontaneous collaboration, laying the foundation for communal work as we know it today. Twenty years later, this approach has been firmly established in many companies. The updated version Joyn 2 enhances the iconic radicalism of the original design through the added dynamic functionality of a modern office table system geared to the future, where employees share open workstations for collaborative tasks.



**Joyn 2 Platform** in Vitra's Amsterdam showroom

As a large communal desk with integrated electrification, the characteristic Joyn 2 Platform is the central element of the communal workspace, allowing users to work there for longer periods of time and to instinctively take a seat at the table in a natural flow of people in changing constellations all day long. Joyn 2 also welcomes the Meet and Touchdown versions, making it a versatile family for all needs.

## Joyn 2 Platform – A communal table with maximum span width



The **Joyn 2 Platform** serves as a basis for teamwork, and despite just four legs allows table lengths of up to 6.4 metres for 8 to 10 regular workspaces – with maximum legroom, easily accessible power and data options and diverse accessories for personalisation. The platforms emphasise the horizontal – only the accessories rise above the table surface. Joyn 2 Platform is modular in design and easy to reconfigure in diverse formats. The table tops are available in three versions: as one-piece tops, as tops with a gap in the middle for easy access to power and data connections, and as a version with a technical rail – in the latter two versions, accessories can be fitted individually and repositioned as required.

‘Joyn is more than a piece of office furniture. Rather, it is a management tool in a time of cultural change that spontaneously adapts to changing demands and technologies, and initiates new, productive forms of work based on communication and cooperation.’

**Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec, 2006**

## Joyn 2 Meet – A flexible solution for team huddles and meetings



**Joyn 2 Meet** offers a space for meetings with tables ranging from 120 × 80 cm to 900 × 180 cm for 2 to 10 people. The base can be configured in diverse shapes and sizes for sitting or standing-height tables – on either glides or castors. Furniture on castors promotes dynamic work methods in the office, while variants with glides enable electrification cables to be concealed in the table legs.

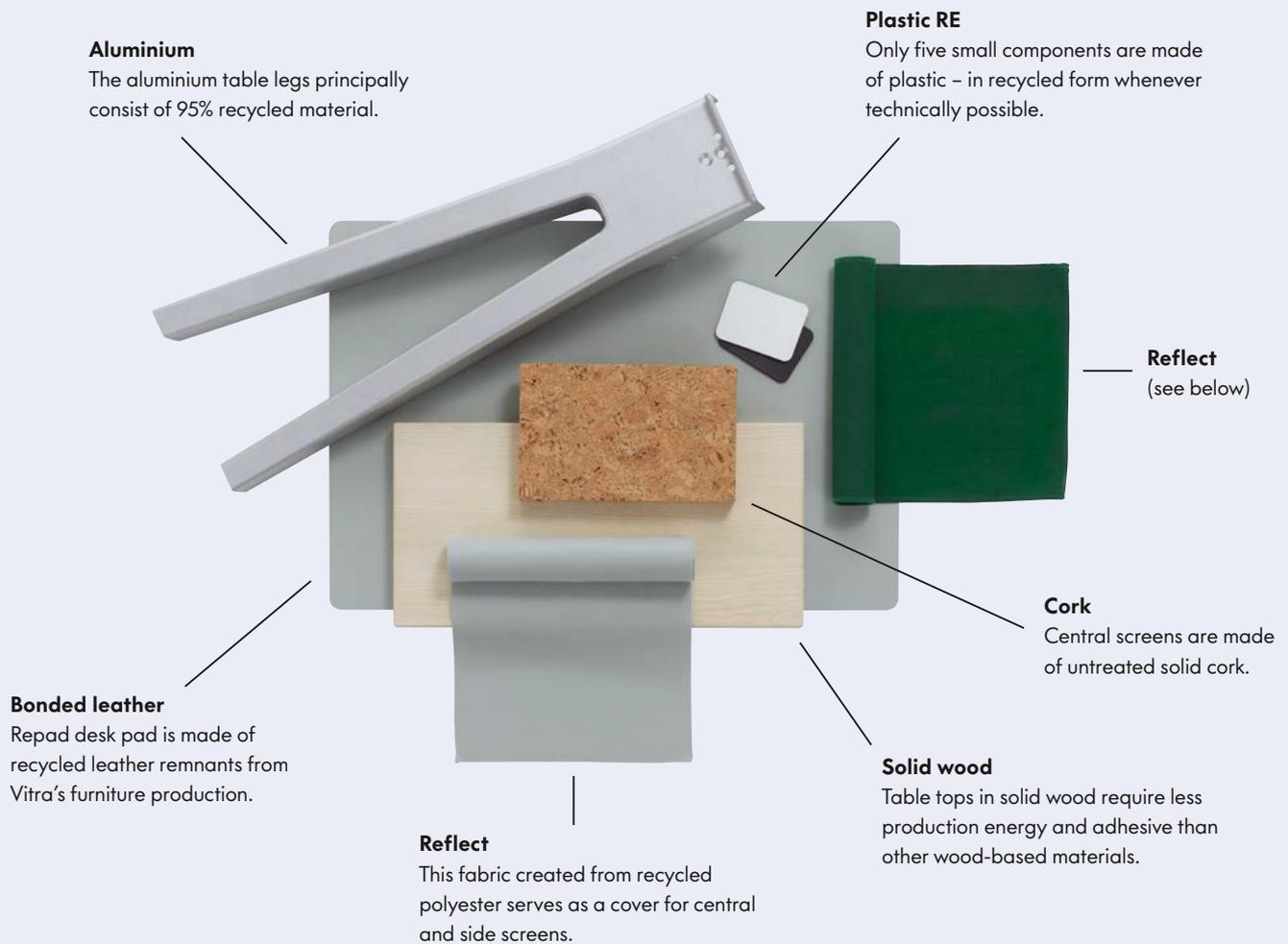
## Joyn 2 Touchdown – The ideal solution for temporary work



**Joyn 2 Touchdown** tables are designed for temporary use: the user has quick and easy access to power and data options, while screens provide acoustic and visual privacy for focused tasks. Joyn 2 Touchdown can be configured with table top lengths from 200 to 900 cm (in one-metre increments), in sitting or standing-height variants, on glides or on castors. Furniture with castors promotes dynamic work methods in the office, while variants with glides ensure that electrification cables can be concealed in the table legs.

## A sustainable concept with a contemporary look

Joyn 2 is a simple, adaptable design made of durable and recycled materials. The system features table tops in solid wood, screens made of cork and desk pads using recycled leather remnants from Vitra's furniture production, as well as bases made of untreated aluminium.



Designed with a selection of new finishes and in a colour scheme that matches its use of sustainable materials, Joyn 2 is suited as much for workshop-style offices as for elegant corporate environments.

# 20 years of Joyn

An interview with Erwan Bouroullec

What does 'living an office' actually mean? This was the question Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec posed themselves in the early 2000s, while rethinking the office landscape for Vitra. Their questioning led them to develop a collection of office furniture that counts among the most significant design innovations for the workplace to have emerged over the last two decades. Designs include Alcove, a high-backed sofa that creates a more intimate meeting space, and Workbays, a modular system for office space configuration. There is an office chair, along with Joyn and Tyde as well as the Abalon Sofa. The backbone of their office space concept, Joyn is a large platform-like table used for communication and teamwork. Or, as the brothers like to say, Joyn is 'just' a large table.

**Erwan Bouroullec** Remember images of the old days, when everything happened around one large wooden table, which was the heart of a farmhouse? At the table, someone would be sitting, reading the newspaper, another was peeling potatoes. At the other end was someone mending their watch, while a fourth was doing the monthly accounts, and kids were playing cards. Then, at lunch, everyone sat together and chatted. Quickly afterwards the table was cleaned. Empty again and people carried on with their doings. That was everyday life in our grandparents' kitchen.

So, rather than asking 'What happens when people spend their entire workday together in one space?' you started questioning how people live together, and how they share that space.

**EB** Yes. We were looking for a communal table for people to come together, be next to each other, without necessarily working together all the time. The table is not for just one kind of person, but for everyone. We tried to free the table as much as possible of specific tasks or calcified hierarchies. We looked for the opposite of a table that denotes status. We thought of a table that is able to encompass all the different roles and necessities of an office. After all, convivial life in the office is a big part of every day.



In the early 2000s, Rolf Fehlbaum – today Chairman Emeritus of Vitra – gave you carte blanche to rethink the office landscape.

**EB** It was an incredible opportunity. Actually, Rolf told us to take advantage of our young age: 'You are young and have no experience. Take advantage of it! Don't imagine what people need. Do something that you need yourself. Hopefully, your own landscape will have a more powerful universal value.'

**What made Joyn and the landscape you envisioned so powerful?**

**EB** We were addressing issues that were relevant in the 1960s, as they were in the 2000s, as they are today. But we were doing it by giving the employees the furniture to choose where and how to work. I like to think we gave them back some freedom. Designers shouldn't impose ways of work on anyone. We have to remember that a designed object has great influence on a space. But not only on the space. An object also triggers change in how we use the space, and subsequently how we work.

**In one drawing after the next, the communal table slowly emerged. A table that provided the possibility for individual work, as much as for teamwork. You reimagined the classical office desk as a flexible platform, meant to be shared.**

**EB** We were designing right at the time when desktop computers and stacks of paper were making way for the laptop. Individual cubicles and 'sitting machines' were replaced by more flexible solutions. The ergonomics of design gave way to the ergonomics of space. We wanted people to use the table in many different ways. We wanted them to move around the table and the office.

**In fact, the majority of people pace around, while speaking on the phone. Studies have shown that this helps with concentration and clear-headedness, as emotions are channeled into movement. So, getting back to the office: the increase of freedom and flexibility asks for great rethinking on the part of companies, too.**

**EB** Our office landscape invites the user to take charge, without obliging him or her to follow a written manual of predefined rules and behaviours. This way of working asks people to be more independent and to take autonomous decisions. This asks, in turn, for great trust on the part of companies. But the rewards are self-evident, especially when you see how people

use the office design to work better, both individually and together.

**Now, almost 20 years later, Joyn 2 has arrived – along with a thorough ecologically-minded update. New materials such as cork, recycled leather and recycled plastic have replaced the original ones.**

**EB** Actually, Joyn is exactly what it used to be. But after twenty years living with Joyn, our experience allowed us to improve production of the table. We rethought its materials. We reconsidered its size. There are fewer legs; there is better cable management. We made it easier to assemble and disassemble. Joyn has always been solution-based, as it adapts to a space and client. We rendered the entire table system easier to understand and handle, ultimately providing better solutions for each context. One of the best parts of Joyn is that it continues to be undefined. The table does not give directions, or make demands. You can't tell if it is for a manager or a secretary. It is not exclusive to executives nor to large group meetings. It is not even only specific to the office, but exists in schools, libraries and laboratories. It is just one vast, infinite landscape, where creative things take place. So, this anniversary of Joyn is not merely a reedition of the same table. Joyn continues to reflect its times.

# Running together

A conversation with John Kuilman

‘It is very clear to us,’ says John Kuilman, workplace design lead at Swiss sportswear brand On, ‘that no one is going to the office anymore just to work.’



On headquarters in Zurich

On the surface of things, this seems a surprising statement. Kuilman is, after all, speaking from the heart of On Labs, a new 1000-person creative campus that On opened in West Zurich in the summer of 2022. Spread over seventeen floors in a converted tower block designed by architects Spillmann Echsle and Specific Generic, the space has been designed such that movement up through its storeys mimics a mountain ascent – a nod to the company’s sporting origins in the Swiss Alps. For a company which acknowledges that offices are no longer many

people’s primary places of work, On has invested heavily in its own workspaces. According to Kuilman, the key to unravelling this seeming contradiction is to appreciate the shift that offices have undergone as a typology, and to recognise that workspaces – in spite of their name – have considerable value outside of being simple sites of work. ‘The pandemic has taught us that we can work anywhere,’ Kuilman explains, ‘but what can’t be recreated at home or online is the personal experience; the platform for exchanging ideas;

and the social collisions.’ As the world’s fastest growing running brand, On has established a working culture based around creativity and a willingness to break with the norm. ‘On really benefits from a communal working environment as it helps us share ideas in a more informal way,’ Kuilman acknowledges. ‘That’s where innovation starts, which stands at the core of On.’

The company’s new headquarters has been built with this emphasis on community at the forefront of its design. The company’s workforce, for instance, do not have fixed desks, but are instead assigned to different ‘neighbourhoods’, each of which includes some 250 employees and extends over three floors – a means of encouraging spontaneous meetings and interactions. ‘Within each neighbourhood, we have different types of working,’ says Kuilman, ‘but the middle floor is always very much dedicated to communal work.’ On also encourages staff to venture beyond their own community, moving between floors to facilitate chance encounters and creative serendipity. This internal structure is coupled with communal spaces such as shared kitchens and sports facilities, alongside a coffee shop and vegan restaurant. ‘One of the key elements is being able to connect in an informal way,’ says Kuilman, ‘We think it’s very important to have a

critical mass of people in the workplace, which is where friction starts and creativity begins.’

To enable this kind of creative interplay, On needed furnishings that offer a multifunctional and adaptable environment. Their long-term partner Vitra had precisely the right blend of products for every space and situation. Communal areas requiring structure and spontaneity were outfitted with Vitra’s established table system Joyn, which was already used in On’s previous offices. Designed by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec in 2002, Joyn provides large communal desks that bring people together, serving as a broad canvas on which new ideas, interactions and connections can take form. ‘To us, communal work is very much the idea that we work together in one area,’ Kuilman explains. ‘Everyone taking a place at the same table is a very democratic way of working.’ Joyn platforms emphasise this collegial interaction, while also ensuring that the space offers privacy options for individuals when required. ‘Besides the fact that Joyn creates an inviting environment,’ Kuilman summarises, ‘it’s one of the core elements that creates a place where ideas can be exchanged, but also a space where someone can focus on their own work.’ Joyn 2 – the successor to Vitra’s original design – builds upon the successes of the original





design and retains its distinctive focus on communal work, while also introducing a range of technical and sustainability innovations. 'For us, Joyn 2 is a huge improvement,' Kuilman explains, referencing its large dimensions as a crucial element of the design's success. 'Being able to have an even more flexible configuration than with our current platform is tremendous,' he says. 'We can fit even more people at the same table.' Another part of Joyn 2's appeal is its focus on sustainability – an ethos shared by Vitra and On. While the latter reduces the carbon footprint of its shoes through innovative technologies, Vitra has produced Joyn 2 with durable materials such as solid wood and cork to ensure the design is as

environmentally friendly and long-lasting as possible. This spirit of innovation is the secret of On's success. While offices may no longer be the only places in which people choose to work, they remain an invaluable communal space for the creation of new ideas. 'Communal work will always exist,' says Kuilman, adding that systems such as Joyn 2 are invaluable for creating the social environment that lies at the heart of On Labs. Even if offices may have changed and become more flexible, he notes, 'the desk is not dead – it is an important tool to exchange ideas, meet up with different people, and work as a team. Communal work won't go away – it's something we've been doing at On since before we could walk.'

**vitra.**



**Introducing Joyn 2**  
Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec  
2023

# Abalon

Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec, 2022



The **Abalon Sofa** can be complemented with **Abalon Platform** and **Abalon Table**.

Taking its name from the shell of a sea snail, Abalon forms its own architecture for sitting circles. Especially when two sofas are positioned face to face, Abalon evokes a circle to which people feel drawn. Its organically curved shape encourages equal participation and inclusiveness, promoting a sense of community among employees – an ideal choice for communal working environments. Abalon’s soft and inviting appearance provides a welcoming and relaxed atmosphere, perfect for informal meetings and brainstorming sessions. By supporting an upright sitting position while still offering comfort, the lounge-like seating encourages a less formal approach to work, fostering creativity and open communication. At the same time, the expansive backrest shields sitters who are engaged in a private conversation and affords a sense of protection to those seeking retreat within an open environment.

# Sitting circles

A reflection by Anniina Koivu

Rolf Fehlbaum, Vitra's Chairman Emeritus, and Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec began their creative partnership over two decades ago with the development of Joyn. This year saw the launch of the Abalon Sofa, which similarly had its roots in an encounter with Rolf Fehlbaum – he gifted the brothers a copy of Christopher Alexander's 'Pattern Language', which describes the various patterns of the spaces we inhabit. The following is a reflection on Alexander's theories and the idea of 'sitting circles' – a key element in the design concept of Abalon.

When people meet, they nearly always form some sort of circle: colleagues standing in the office; a streetside encounter over lunch; a women's knitting circle. The pioneering Italian educator Maria Montessori was an early advocate of sitting circles and in indigenous cultures around the world, the sitting circle goes back thousands of years.

The benefits of the sitting circle are numerous: creating a sense of community and belonging, promoting collaboration and interaction. What's good for human interaction must be good for the office, right?

The British-American architect and theorist Christopher Alexander was among the first to link the traditional practice of sitting circles to architecture and more specifically to office design. Investigating structures that facilitate positive social interactions and environments, he published his findings in 'A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction' (1977). A 1171-page totem of architectural theory, the publication details 253 patterns that can serve as guiding principles for design.

Pattern 185 is dedicated to the 'Sitting Circle': 'Place each sitting space in a position which is protected, not cut by paths or movement, roughly circular, made so that the room itself helps to suggest the circle – not too strongly – with paths and activities around it, so that people naturally gravitate toward the chairs when they get into the mood to sit.'

Following these simple guidelines, a sitting circle can positively influence office design by creating spaces that promote social interaction, reduce stress and

foster community. Alexander is careful to point out that not just any kind of seating arrangement will do. Some are so sterile so that people will avoid them, while others create a hubbub of life around them. The question is then: 'What is the difference between the two?'

His answer is three-fold: position, shape and informality. The area should be central to the infrastructure of an office so that people naturally pass by it. A circular form is the most natural. When people sit down to talk, they try to arrange themselves roughly in a circle. An informal arrangement with multiple seating options is best.

Though written about in 1977, this pattern is perhaps more valid today than ever. In a new, often hybrid world of work in which finding and retaining staff is a challenge for most companies, strong team cohesion can be the answer. The spaces in which we interact can be designed to create communal environments that facilitate interpersonal exchange, collaboration and bring corporate culture to life.

When even casual interactions tend to be scheduled, we need areas where people can bypass their calendars and come together on a spontaneous, informal basis. Alexander compares these chance encounters with unforeseen opportunities. He argues that these serendipitous moments are crucial for fostering creativity and innovation, and that offices should be designed to encourage them, including pockets for sitting circles with colleagues – whenever and with whomever.

# Alcove

Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec, 2006/2021

Originally developed as a 'room in a room' concept, the archetypal Alcove Sofa with its high back and side panels has been synonymous with modern and inviting office environments since its introduction in 2006. Often copied but never equalled in terms of style and enduring quality, Alcove was one of the first examples of micro-architectural sofas to provide secluded niches or meeting spaces within open-plan offices. Last updated in 2021, today's Alcove range comprises two product groups: Alcove and Alcove Plus. While the fundamental concept behind the Alcove product line – creating places of shelter and seclusion – is especially evident in the Alcove Highback Sofa and Alcove Plus, where sitters are shielded both visually and acoustically from the surrounding environment, variants are also available with lower panels to facilitate communication and with castors for added agility – providing the ideal setting for the communal workspace.



## Room-in-room solution

Alcove's product features extend beyond the properties of a simple piece of furniture: with side and back panels in two heights, Alcove units form rooms within a room, creating ideal spaces for concentrated work or for small meetings.

## Meet & retreat – Alcove Lowback for interaction

**Alcove Fauteuil Lowback** provides employees with a sheltered space to meet and retreat within the communal workspace. Compared to the highback version, it shields the user slightly less and therefore invites communicative interaction with the surroundings. By grouping several Alcove Fauteuil together, these are easily transformed into a meeting configuration or – when equipped with castors – offer the perfect setting for a flexible workshop. Similarly, the comfortable Alcove Sofa with lower panels is an inviting spot for open, animated conversation.



## Alcove Plus – From individual work to collaboration



Thanks to portable partition screens that can be attached or removed from the side panels of **Alcove Plus**, the configuration can be spontaneously transformed in minutes, going from individual tasks to collaborative teamwork – and vice versa. Users can employ Alcove Plus to signal openness to outside interaction or a desire for solitude and concentration.

# Talky x Vitra

Stephan Hürlemann, 2023

A well-designed open office environment includes options for quiet retreat – for phone calls, focused tasks, confidential conversations or to simply contemplate ideas. Talky, a soundproof pod developed for Erich Keller AG by designer and architect Stephan Hürlemann and distributed by Vitra in an adapted range of materials and colours, fulfils this very purpose. Vitra chose to collaborate with Erich Keller AG on Talky as the Swiss company is an expert in the field of acoustic solutions, a key aspect of Talky's design.



Talky in the Citizen Office on the Vitra Campus in Weil am Rhein

Complementing the communal table, Talky provides a private space for employees to make phone calls in communal environments without disrupting the surrounding work areas. The booth's sound-absorbing materials ensure that conversations are kept confidential, while its compact size means it can be easily placed in open plan offices without taking up valuable floor space. As Talky's exterior panels can additionally be equipped with pinboards, whiteboards, flipcharts, shelving, workstations, coat racks and plant trays, it also energises its immediate surroundings. Combined with the mobile Dancing Wall, also designed by Hürlemann, Talky contributes to the dynamic environment of open office landscapes.

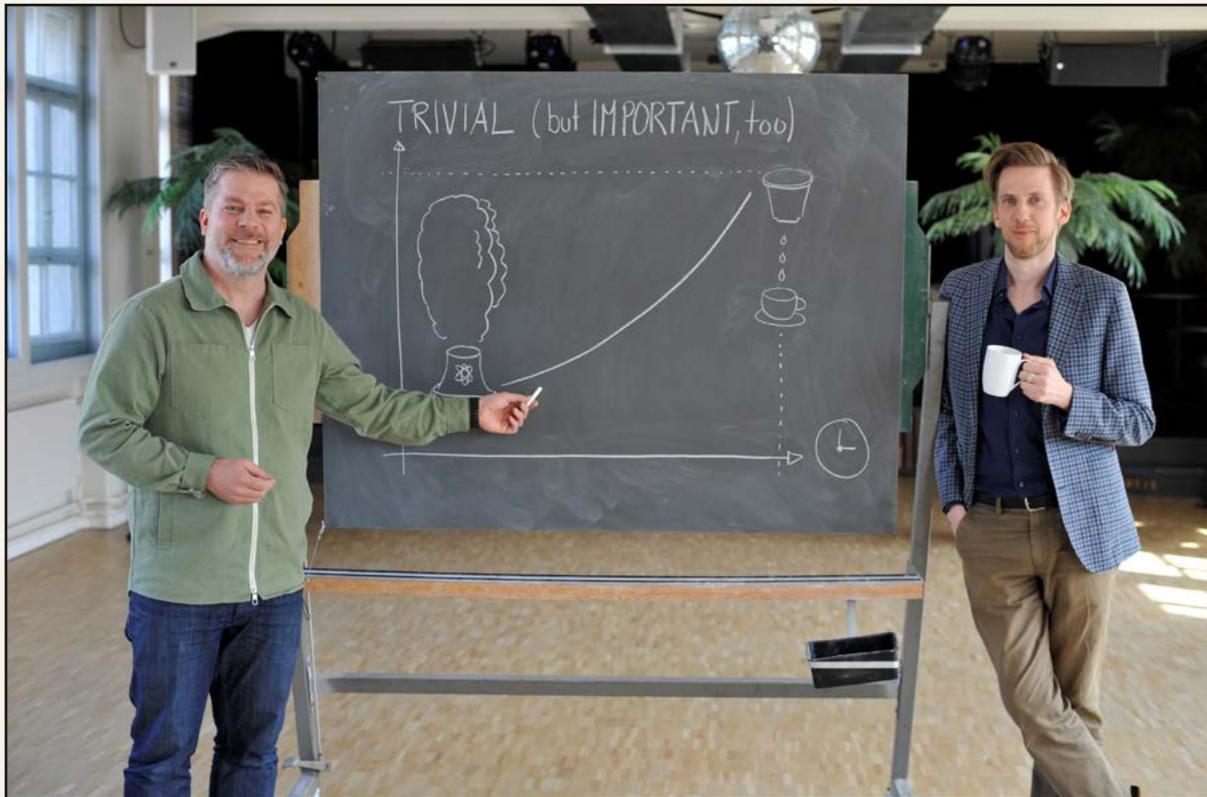
**vitra.**



**ID Cloud**  
Antonio Citterio  
2021

# The Law of Triviality

A contribution by Roman Tschäppeler and Mikael Krogerus



Roman Tschäppeler and Mikael Krogerus in their studio in Biel, Switzerland

In 1957 the historian Cyril Northcote Parkinson set out his famous Law of Triviality: 'The time spent on any item of the agenda will be in inverse proportion to the sum [of money] involved.' Put more simply, the more trivial the topic, the longer we discuss it for. Grappling with this idea, and understanding its effects on office culture, can have a profound impact on successful communal work. Here, Roman Tschäppeler and Mikael Krogerus, best-selling authors of 'The Decision Book', explain why.

If office surveys are to be believed, there's nothing people hate more than meetings. But if we look at surveys conducted during lockdown, there's nothing people missed more than being together with others.

Of course, a weekly catch-up with the sales team is not the same as an evening out with friends – a goal-setting meeting with colleagues does not spark the same magic as a get-together over an apéritif. Yet one of the key lessons learned from lockdown was that while you can solve many things digitally, online systems can't resolve everything. We still need physical interaction to be happy at work and accomplish many core tasks.

In light of this, working life has become hybrid. We meet physically, but much work is now conducted digitally by default. Moments in which everyone is physically present in the same space have become rarer and, therefore, more valuable. We should be careful not to squander them.

This is where the Law of Triviality comes in, as illustrated by an updated version of the famous thought experiment that Parkinson put forward to explain his law.

**Imagine that you're a member of a finance committee. Two items are on the agenda for today's meeting:**



**1 A proposal to build a €10bn nuclear power plant**



**2 A proposal for which coffee capsules to buy for the office**

You start with the first proposal, but quickly realise it's terribly complex. Most of the team know nothing about nuclear power plants, and the one person who does can't figure out how to explain them to everyone

else. As such, the discussion trails off after two and a half minutes.

Off the back of this, the committee turns to the second item on the agenda: coffee. Suddenly, everyone has something to say. The coffee aficionados become embroiled in conversations about structure and crema, while even people who don't drink coffee get in on the discussion. Which capsules are best for the environment? Which system also has tea capsules? As ever, Parkinson's law holds:

**'The more irrelevant the topic, the more time we spend on it.'**

This is a very human impulse, but the risk for contemporary hybrid working is that it wastes precious physical meetings with irrelevant banter. Who needs to talk about coffee when nuclear power plants are on the table?

But let's look at this from another perspective. During lockdown, we grew to miss the things that used to annoy us about work: the banal, the silly, the trivial, the time-wasting. In other words, we missed communal spirit. If you work remotely, then all the chit-chat, the meaningless small talk, the discussions over coffee, suddenly become important.

People are not Excel charts – sometimes we need the meaningless in order to find the meaningful. If we all get together around a table and allow nothing to happen, then communal work can start and team culture begins to grow. When nothing happens, something beautiful can happen.

In a post-pandemic era, the challenge for companies is to accept and balance the trivial that lies at the heart of the communal. So, if you're inviting people to meetings, make sure there's enough time for both the heavy and the light. Without both, creativity and innovation can't take flight.

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Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec  
2022