The innovation: Tom Allen’s research in workplace architecture has had a world-changing impact on the corporate environment.

The research: The theory behind common areas and flexible team workspaces all began at MIT Sloan in the late 1970s. Tom Allen undertook a project to determine how the distance between engineers’ offices coincided with the level of regular technical communication between them. The results of that research, now known as the Allen Curve, revealed a distinct correlation between distance and frequency of communication (i.e. the more distance there is between people — 50 meters or more to be exact — the less they will communicate).

This principle has been incorporated into forward-thinking commercial design ever since. The Decker Engineering Building in New York, the Steelcase Corporate Development Center in Michigan, BMW’s Research Center in Germany, and a host of other well-known buildings owe their award-winning designs to MIT Sloan.

Allen’s interdisciplinary work on communication patterns in the workplace continues to blaze new territory in architecture, organizational psychology, and information technology. He is now collaborating with students and faculty at the MIT Media Lab and with local architects on new systems using web tools and “smart” badges to analyze how information travels through a company.

As a result of Allen’s research, architects and space planners will be able to create 21st century workspaces that are more conducive to collaboration and productivity.


Learn more about Thomas Allen’s research at