

# Fostering the Right WORKSPACE

Strategic Considerations for the Humanitarian Sector





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Strategic Considerations for the Humanitarian Sector ”  
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# Fostering the Right Workspace: Strategic Considerations for the Humanitarian Sector

by

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# INTRODUCTION

As humanitarian organizations increasingly engage with the proliferation of online tools for collaboration, it is important to identify the conditions that allow the humanitarian sector as a whole to be successful in its mission to alleviate suffering in humanitarian crises. These include the rapid development and ongoing maintenance of trust between humanitarians and other stakeholders; timely and meaningful coordination of response efforts; and influence in decision-making processes that impact humanitarian responses, such as resource allocation. It is worthwhile to evaluate how different workspaces can influence humanitarian operations, both during crises and in peace time, to ensure that they maximize the success of humanitarian organizations.

Different workspaces have different benefits, and each is best suited for various aspects of humanitarian work. This report seeks to highlight when physical and social spaces; the online space; and individual spaces are most appropriate for facilitating tasks such as collaboration and data sharing from peace time operations to disaster response. It will present examples of how these spaces are currently being used in the humanitarian sector. Ultimately, humanitarian organizations need to be strategic when designing their workspaces in order to maximize the development of social capital; the establishment of a presence on the ground; and the responsiveness of online tools of communication.

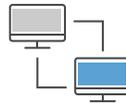


## Physical & Social Spaces

Collaborative physical & social spaces allow humanitarians to develop swift trust and grow their networks. They promote innovation across stakeholders, and increased accountability and follow up on projects through direct communication. Humanitarians who are “on the ground” can connect with partners face to face.



- Crucial for relationship building across organizations
- Lays the groundwork for future collaboration
- Shorter feedback loop, thus accelerated productivity
- Can facilitate data sharing and better product outputs
- Helps humanitarians come to a shared understanding of complex situations and develop synchronized long term plans
- Helps bring in stakeholders such as affected populations and local governments



## Online Collaboration

Online collaboration brings stakeholders together who simply would not communicate otherwise, and has thus made the powerful “digital humanitarianism” movement possible. It allows humanitarians and volunteers to share vast amounts of data and to tap into emerging technologies such as AI.



- Provides the platforms for data and information sharing, and widens the scope of available data in disaster response
- Lowers transaction costs for collaboration
- More flexibility for humanitarians and their organizations, and allows for 24/7 online coverage
- Allows humanitarians to reach a large audience quickly, including remote stakeholders and funders
- Increased division of labour and communication between the field and headquarters



## Individual Workspaces

Traditional, individual workspaces enable focused and independent work. They allow humanitarians to leave chaotic spaces to concentrate on complex materials, or complete familiar tasks quickly. Face to face and online collaboration must be paired with independent work to bring ideas to life.



- Necessary to bring ideas generated collaboratively to fruition
- More realistic for protracted crises than sudden onset emergencies
- Can be done remotely, to provide field staff with quality information
- Staff can organize and prioritize their own tasks
- Staff can work quickly and efficiently on delegated tasks that don't require collaboration
- Greater accountability for tasks delegated to individuals



- Not possible for people collaborating from different locations and remotely
- Increased noise and distraction from a group setting
- Not always feasible in disaster response settings, especially in insecure zones
- Data sharing may still be blocked by institutional barriers or perceived competition
- Decision making can be delayed due to debate or consensus seeking



- More challenging to develop personal relationships
- Feedback can be slow, inhibiting the progress of group tasks
- Work produced remotely still needs to be endorsed by a person in the field for maximum impact on the ground



- Tedious and unglamorous in the age of innovation and collaboration
- Difficult to foster due to the constancy of emails and other pings
- There is not the exchange of ideas between staff with different perspectives, or an ongoing peer-review process

## When should these workspaces be prioritized?

- In sudden-onset emergencies
- In the initial stages of assembling a team, starting a new and complex project, or tackling a new problem
- In the initial stages of a disaster response; when staff turnover is high; and when there are non-standardized tasks

- During protracted crises
- When stakeholders are scattered and in different timezones
- When collaborating with large groups of people
- In the later stages of a disaster response; for routine and streamlined tasks; when humanitarians have clearly defined roles as well as access to the information that they require; and among collaborators who have previously built rapport in person

- Should be available at all stages of disaster response, as different humanitarians will require it in varying degrees
- Once ideas and plans of action have already been established in brainstorming sessions
- For sensemaking work and when simple and familiar tasks need to be completed quickly
- For remote staff who are supporting those on the ground

## PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL SPACES



Figure 1<sup>1</sup>

Being in physical contact with other humanitarians is important to building trust and generating social capital, which fuels critical network building and goodwill among different organizations in the humanitarian sector. Physical and social workspaces can provide the humanitarian sector with innovative ideas developed by a diverse group of partners, along with increased accountability and follow up on group projects. In a disaster response, physical contact also allows for the development of swift trust in a very chaotic situation, and better communication with local government and affected populations. It is also more conducive to data sharing and developing long term crisis response plans.

The feedback loop during in person collaboration is much shorter than for other means of collaboration. When working on group tasks with multiple humanitarians, it is normally much quicker to receive a response in person when collaborative work or feedback is required, as opposed to waiting for online communication. For this reason, it is helpful to get together in person for larger scale and more complex projects, such as “sprints” dedicated towards creating something quickly, from development and design to the implementation of a new service.

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1. OCHA Columbia (August 28, 2018). <https://urlzs.com/dBhC>, accessed May 2019.

Furthermore, when different organizations are working together remotely during peace time (such as through online collaboration), whether or not staff have previously met and worked together in person has implications for how productive they are. This is because the extent to which humanitarians engage, follow up, and complete their contributions to larger projects depends on the level of commitment they feel towards the group. This sense of obligation and accountability that comes from a social network helps get things done. However, there are instances when a prior in person introduction between two humanitarians has not been possible. In these cases, a third party who has met both staff in person can be key in connecting them online and facilitating their effective collaboration. If the third party who is making the introduction is trusted by both staff, this trust is then conferred onto the new collaborators. For example, when a humanitarian seeks to reach out to a new organization to facilitate a partnership, finding a familiar person within that organization can be the difference between establishing a connection and not receiving a response.

Maintaining a physical presence, not just in headquarters but also in regional offices and in the field, increases the likelihood that humanitarian staff will be present at the table when key decisions are being made about acute or protracted crises. This leads to the ability of humanitarian organizations to provide input and influence over decisions, beyond what would be possible remotely. This is especially the case for decisions that are made by local governments.

The following are specific examples that demonstrate how physical and social spaces are currently being leveraged in the humanitarian space.

1 Having a physical space as a “home base” provides many benefits for organizations when it is feasible. For example, the Centre for Humanitarian Data in the Hague, Netherlands, provides a space where staff from within the organization can come together for team meetings and events. This space also allows the Centre to reach out to other organizations whom they wish to partner with. By inviting partners to come to the Centre, other organizations are also able to move out of their regular environments, which can spark creativity and renewed energy. These in person meetings set the groundwork for ongoing collaboration, in person or online.

1.1 The Centre’s new Data Fellows program is an example of an initiative that brought in experts from different areas to troubleshoot complex problems in person. Fellows were able to engage in conversation with the Centre’s team, and with partners, to determine how to best frame humanitarian problems and develop solutions creatively and iteratively.<sup>2</sup>

2 There has been an increase in the number of labs “in the field,” where humanitarians can build partnerships and collaborate face to face, such as the Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX) data labs in Nairobi and Dakar. These data labs arose to get humanitarians more comfortable with the idea of sharing data, and in response to the Ebola outbreak that occurred from 2014-2016 in West Africa. By continuing to develop data infrastructure, the goal is that data sharing will be facilitated more rapidly in a future crisis.

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2. Campo, S. (July 5, 2018) “Part 1: Reflections on the Inaugural Class of Data Fellows: Programme Design,” The Centre for Humanitarian Data. <https://centre.humdata.org/part-i-reflections-on-the-inaugural-class-of-data-fellows-programme-design/>, accessed August 2018.

2.1 Although both the Nairobi and Dakar Data Labs are integrated with UN OCHA, they have developed new partnerships with NGOs and other organizations, and continue to establish the good will and trust necessary for data sharing.

2.2 An additional benefit to having a physical space for these labs is the value that comes from hiring local experts in the region who understand the cultural context and priorities of local NGOs, which can bridge the gap for more meaningful collaboration.

3 Investing in physical spaces is a critical component of fostering innovation. Below are a few examples of this in action.

3.1 The Global Humanitarian Lab (GHL) has partnered with the Fab Foundation and now provides humanitarian staff with access to over 1,135 fabrication labs in over 80 countries. These “fab labs” are spaces where humanitarian challenges can be crowdsourced to “passionate grassroots innovators.”<sup>3</sup> For example, in 2017 GHL partnered with Terre des hommes (Tdh) to set up a fab lab within a Greek community center. Because this space was catered to unaccompanied migrant teenagers, it helped connect Tdh with this population.

3.2 iHub is an organization in Kenya that provides creative work spaces and meeting rooms to connect different organizations in the tech sector.<sup>4</sup> This provides a neutral space for the HDX data lab in Nairobi to meet with partners in the community. For example, roundtable meetings between the lab and local partners have allowed them to flesh out what challenges and barriers were preventing them from sharing data. Barriers that were identified included the financial expense and the lack of capacity required to clean data to a “shareable” standard, as well as the lack of an organization-wide data sharing policy. The data lab was then able to develop a checklist specific to the region that will guide partners in mitigating risk related to data sharing.

3.3 UN Global Pulse Labs are also an example of physical spaces that bring together the UN, government experts, academia, and the private sector to develop new ways of using big data to tackle global problems. Pulse Labs are located in New York, Jakarta, and Kampala.<sup>5</sup>

*“A lab environment provides a space for technologies and analysis techniques to be tried rapidly and iteratively, where teams can learn from each other and from other labs, and contribute knowledge to a larger ecosystem.”- Interviewee*

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3. “Innovation,” Global Humanitarian Lab. <https://globalhumanitarianlab.org/innovation/#partnership>, accessed July 2018.

4. “Hello, We are iHub,” iHub. <https://ihub.co.ke/>, accessed July 2018.

5. “Pulse Labs,” United Nations Pulse Labs. <https://www.unglobalpulse.org/pulse-labs>, accessed July 2018.

## Considerations specific to disaster response coordination



The structural nature of “temporary groups” can be applied to humanitarian organizations responding to emergencies, as they fit Meyerson et al.’s definition: “They have a finite life span, form around a shared and relatively clear goal or purpose, and their success depends on a tight and coordinated coupling of activity.”<sup>6</sup> Since then, other terms for temporary groups have been developed, such as “Hastily Formed Networks” or HFNs. Meyerson et. al also coined the term “swift trust” to refer to the trust that must quickly develop among temporary groups, when they do not have the luxury of engaging in the “confidence-building activities” of longer term, traditional groups. Temporary groups work on complex tasks but rely on informal structures of coordination and control, and they have limited time to decipher which group members have what skills and expertise. Meyerson et al. noted that the tasks these groups work on “entail high-risk and high-stake outcomes, yet they seem to lack the normative structures and institutional safeguards that minimize the likelihood of things going wrong.”

### Relationship Building

Because the humanitarian sector must foster swift trust within temporary groups in an emergency, care should be taken to facilitate relationship building whenever possible. Face to face meetings are still critical, as they help establish rapid networks among people who are coming from all around the world in a disaster response setting. Because many of these responders are unfamiliar to each other and each disaster response is unique and dynamic, there is a need to meet personally to establish swift trust and relationships. Even if partners know where other humanitarian organizations are located in the field but are not invited to sit down for a meeting or a briefing, this will decrease the level of collaboration.

*“Every meeting becomes an opportunity to establish a relationship; the meetings themselves are not necessarily the most important part.”- Interviewee*

However, opportunities for relationship building can and should move beyond scheduled meetings. For example, humanitarians can transition from structured spaces designed for meetings to flexible spaces designed for coworking and mingling. But as many humanitarians have noted, the ability to create a physical and social space in a disaster response is constrained in many situations, as space can be very sought after and scarce. For example, organizations may have “disaster rooms” at their disposal, but these are typically smaller spaces oriented around a computer screen, not collaborative spaces that are used to their full potential. On the other hand, securing a coworking space in a disaster response can be a cost effective and efficient use of space.

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6. Meyerson, D., Weick, K. E., & Kramer, R. M. (1996). “Swift trust and temporary groups”. In R. M. Kramer & T. R. Tyler (Eds.), *Trust in organizations: Frontiers of theory and research* (pp. 166-195). Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: Sage Publications, Inc., accessed July 2018.

Even if organizations need to pay a small usage fee, combining resources to share a space would remove the need for each organization's administrative team to compete and bid on different buildings, which can lead to a distorted real estate bubble.

Whenever possible, a pleasant and welcoming shared workspace can be extremely helpful, as is the case in any sector. This could include amenities such as food and coffee for exhausted humanitarians, free WiFi, and a charge station to power up devices. Features that bring humanitarians together to socialize are most necessary when the interpersonal links between humanitarians are the least consolidated, such as in sudden onset emergencies and the initial time frame when responders have just flown in; when there is a high turnover of staff; and when there are mainly non-standardized tasks. Non-work related social interactions help build social capital between individuals: we are all human, and sharing information such as stories about our families back home help us bond and develop trust.

Relationship building with stakeholders beyond fellow humanitarians is also crucial. When interacting with local government officials during a disaster response, face to face interactions two to three times per day is considered ideal. The local government must be integrated as part and parcel of the response and in each disaster this will look differently, depending on how overburdened and under resourced they are. Frequent meetings are also important so that the humanitarian response does not overwhelm the country and create more confusion for local responders. Finally, the way that humanitarians interact with affected populations is also central to disaster response, and is discussed further below.

## Collaboration

*“Face to face interaction drastically reduces the risk of misunderstandings, which can have far-reaching consequences in terms of how an assessment methodology is implemented; how questions are asked of respondents; how a work plan is implemented in the field; how a code of conduct is followed; how committed team members feel to the overall objectives of the assessment; how safe and secure team members feel; etc.”- Interviewee*

The benefits of face to face interactions for long term cohesion can be fostered even before a disaster hits, through the training of humanitarian staff. For example, the UNDAC On-Site Operations Coordination Centre's (OSOCC) concepts and methodologies that were designed for sudden onset emergencies work well because staff that haven't necessarily worked together before are operating on an agreed upon set of guidelines and procedures. Although this can be accessed online, training should be conducted in person whenever possible, as this will ensure that humanitarians are clear and have understood the training materials and how to apply them in a consistent manner.

*“Organizations should get more out of these spaces than they put into them.”- Interviewee*

A social space that is available for people to spend time in even when they do not have a scheduled meeting can provide a crucial space for local NGOs to interact with international organizations and contribute their expertise. To achieve this, the space should remain neutral: the intention of

whoever is hosting the space is very important and will affect whether partners show up, especially in highly politicized disasters. If a UN agency such as OCHA is hosting this space, minimizing the UN branding to a more neutral banner is helpful. The space should also be as accessible as possible to all humanitarians who wish to join. For example, requiring people to go through security to enter a United Nations compound will deter local partners. Physical and institutional barriers should be minimized and practical considerations taken into account, such as not having the meeting space in enemy territory and making sure to inform partners of the location of the space, so that their presence is made a priority.

Organizations should communicate their functions and roles within the overall disaster response clearly and transparently within these spaces, and reach out to local partners to invite their input. This will signal to other partners what they can gain and contribute through collaboration; for smaller organizations to attend and participate, they need to see benefits in the medium and long term. They should be integrated into decision making processes and provided with technical support so they can increase the quality of their own products and services, and well as contribute to the overall disaster response.

## Data Sharing

*“Coffee, chairs, and information will bring people in.”- Interviewee*

In a disaster response, having a physical shared working space can help facilitate data sharing between organizations. This would be very helpful to different stakeholders and would be a strong incentive for them to spend time in these collaborative spaces. For this to happen, organizations must move beyond simply sharing situational reports. “Sitreps” are typically shared more freely than other forms of data, as they are final products that reflect what organizations have already achieved and help make the case for why they need more funding. However, organizations should also strive to share the data that underpin the sitreps. Physical spaces should serve as a setting for organizations to share their work in open data briefings; their outputs of daily work; and to provide others with access to data that can improve their internal decision making (such as GIS data).

However, even with physical shared working spaces, there are often organizational and cultural barriers to open data sharing that arise for different reasons. For example, information that is deemed too sensitive to share widely because it risks putting beneficiaries in harm’s way may only be shared internally within an organization. Humanitarian organizations may also be unwilling to share data that they view as something they have invested a lot of time in and that confers a comparative advantage over other organizations, because of the competitive nature of the humanitarian funding process. Finally, due to the hierarchical nature of humanitarian organizations, humanitarians may be simply unauthorized to share data and instead may only be able to pass the request for data to more senior staff. Therefore, in certain situations, the social network of humanitarian peers will be insufficient in facilitating data sharing.

## Sensemaking and planning

As the aftermath of a disaster moves through different stages, people who arrive on the ground at different times each take in a unique snapshot of the situation that becomes their roadmap for disaster response planning. Humanitarians can become locked into their initial assessments of the situation: because the reality of a disaster can change dramatically over a two week period, this can make it difficult for people who arrive at different times to work together. Continuously interacting in formal meetings and in informal social spaces helps humanitarians frame the problems at hand in a unified way, evolve their understanding of the disaster, and develop an overall narrative to help guide a coherent disaster response.

In a sudden onset emergency, continuous in person meetings are critical in building a roadmap for the disaster response, such as forecasting the most likely scenarios over the next few months and how various challenges should be approached. For example, the 2014 outbreak of Ebola in West Africa could have been framed as a public health emergency; a security threat; a threat to food insecurity (resulting from the shut down of public spaces such as markets); or the result of cultural idiosyncrasies, such as burial practices. If humanitarians are not conceiving of an emergency in the same way, this can lead to a fragmented response and potential gaps in aid or assistance. Social spaces allow humanitarians to “sit around the campfire” and reproduce the narrative until everyone is on the same page. When coordination happens online, it can be difficult to determine whether people are attempting to answer different questions and speaking past each other.

## Interpersonal considerations

Of course, the extent to which humanitarians work together effectively often comes down to individual factors such as personalities; social skills; and emotional intelligence. For example, the manner in which meetings in physical and social spaces are conducted matters. The efficacy of the meeting coordinator is important, and depends on factors ranging from his or her attitude and social skills, to how clear and well organized the meeting is (there should always be a clear agenda with articulated desired outcomes). The ability of key figures such as intercluster coordinators to facilitate open participation and dialogue both inside and outside of meetings set the tone for how well humanitarian staff work together. Whenever possible, humanitarians should actively assist and amplify each other’s work to establish goodwill. For example, connecting with even just one “data champion” (humanitarians with expertise in how to manage and use data effectively) can help improve the overall disaster response.

The interpersonal skills of humanitarians in leadership positions are also critical in establishing trust with the affected population, an already difficult task in sudden onset disasters when responders are abruptly “parachuting in” to a region in chaos. The development of trust is an area that does not always play out in practice the way organizations may claim, and it often comes down to often comes down to the judgement of individual staff. For example, interacting with affected populations with technology that might be foreign or not widely accessible can create distance and highlight power imbalances: collecting data in the field using an iPad in comparison with a pen and paper can be interpreted very differently.

# ONLINE COLLABORATION



Figure 2<sup>7</sup>

Technology is a powerful enabler, but it raises questions regarding how it should be balanced with in person collaboration and distraction-free work spaces in a way that is most effective for the humanitarian sector. For example, there has been an increase of “digital humanitarianism” in recent years, which mobilizes volunteers and professionals and leverages big data and artificial intelligence to provide support in a disaster response.<sup>8</sup> In many ways, this generation and exchange of information online has greatly expanded the scope of data that humanitarian organizations have access to in the short amount of time following a disaster. Technological tools have also increased the sophistication of these resources, such as the rapid creation of interactive maps and infographics. Online services specific to the humanitarian sector such as virtual OSOCC, Humanitarian ID, and ReliefWeb all facilitate online access to data and information. Technology also facilitates collaboration between humanitarians who simply wouldn’t collaborate otherwise, although studies have found that it is more challenging to develop personal relationships through

7. University of Michigan School for Environment and Sustainability (January 13, 2012) <https://urlzs.com/yNsf>, accessed May 2019.

8. Meier, P. (February 19, 2015) “Digital humanitarians, big data and disaster response” Brookings Institute <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2015/02/19/digital-humanitarians-big-data-and-disaster-response/>, accessed July 2018.

“computer-mediated communications.”<sup>9</sup> In the humanitarian sector where social networks are so important, using technology in a way that maximizes benefits and minimizes drawbacks will become increasingly important.

There has also been an increase in online collaboration tools used by humanitarians, such as Google Drive, Dropbox, Skype, Trello, Slack, and Flowdock, and communication services such as WhatsApp and Webex. Without even considering email, humanitarians can now be “pinged” on a variety of platforms and find their attention being pulled in different directions, requiring them to spend more time prioritizing different items before getting to their work. It can even lead to overlooked items, or wasted time searching across platforms for where something important has been shared. As these tools likely won’t be going anywhere and their use will only increase, this section looks at when they are the most helpful and when distractions should be removed entirely.

## Benefits to online collaboration

There are lower transaction costs to collaborating online than in person, and this also provides humanitarians with much greater flexibility to work remotely. For example, organizing a videoconference is much cheaper than bringing people into the same room together (which may not be feasible at all). Meetings that happen online can also be easier to organize than in person meetings. For example, on platforms such as Webex where you can easily upload and share documentation, agendas and other meeting items are readily available for everyone to consult.

On the other hand, in person meetings don’t always have important documents printed and ready for all participants. In either case, meetings are more effective when they are of a manageable size, although online groups tend to grow rapidly due to the ease of sending virtual invitations en masse. Collaborating online may also remove the necessity of coordinating set meetings, because of the continuous flow of interaction that occurs on platforms such as Skype and WhatsApp (for example, humanitarians can post questions online and receive a quick and informal response instead of requesting a meeting).

For organizations whose in-house staff work in different locations, online collaboration tools allow these teams to function and operate globally. One benefit of this organizational structure is that a team can respond to inquiries or communication at any time of day thanks to staff who operate in most, if not all, time zones. Online collaboration tools also allow staff to work more flexibly and adjust their working hours when necessary, such as taking calls outside of working hours with a client or partner in another time zone. In a broader sense, technology has allowed the humanitarian sector to tap into the telecommuting workforce. Humanitarians who work remotely, either full time or part time (such as consultants) can contribute their expertise to organizations and ease the workload for in-house staff.

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9. Kanawattanachai, P. & Yoo, Y. (2002) “Dynamic Nature of Trust in Virtual Teams” [http://www.communicationcache.com/uploads/1/0/8/8/10887248/dynamic\\_nature\\_of\\_trust\\_in\\_virtual\\_teams.pdf](http://www.communicationcache.com/uploads/1/0/8/8/10887248/dynamic_nature_of_trust_in_virtual_teams.pdf), accessed August 2018.

## Considerations specific to disaster response coordination



Online collaboration tools such as Skype can be very helpful in a disaster response. There are instances when such tools are indispensable, such as connecting staff in different countries, or facilitating rapid communication between a large amount of people at once on one particular issue (as massive online group chats allow). The ability of a humanitarian to consult with an expert over Skype who otherwise would not be accessible provides a huge value added to the sector. Technology also enables humanitarians to rapidly activate their networks of partners who are interested in supporting the disaster response. For example, humanitarians can connect with allies in the private sector and have access to specialized resources such as data processing software.

Online collaboration can be more effective for humanitarians engaging in routine tasks, such as responding to a protracted crisis as opposed to a sudden onset emergency. In addition to this, when humanitarians have more clearly defined roles; when they have access to the data and information they need; and when humanitarians from different organizations already know each other and have built rapport, online collaboration is very effective.

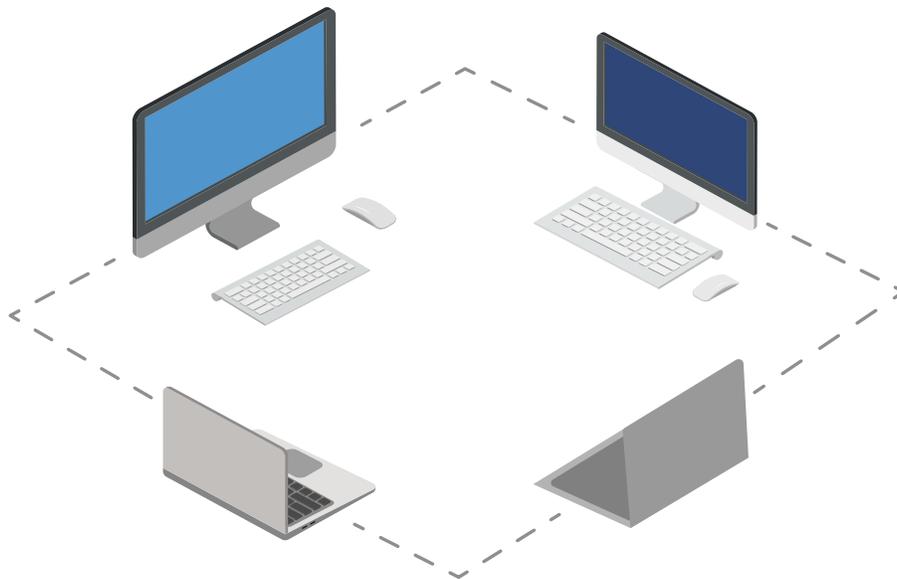
*“To make sure we still get a clear enough idea about what is going on, as experienced by people in those areas, we often rely on phone or Internet to contact them.”- Interviewee*

Although direct, in person engagement between humanitarians and affected populations is normally considered ideal to best understand their situation and immediate needs, there are times when this simply isn't possible due to barriers such as security concerns. In this case, information and communication technology provides enormous benefit. The use of technology also means that humanitarians can gather and corroborate information almost simultaneously from various sources. For example, field staff can use the internet to crowdsource information on damaged buildings in a certain area, and verify it first hand by walking around and speaking with different sources.

Long gone are the days when field staff and headquarters only communicated over fax, resulting in month long spans that field staff went without receiving feedback from headquarters. This communication has now increased to multiple times a day, which at times can lead to an overload of information. In addition to enabling an ongoing flow of feedback, technology has also facilitated a greater division of labour between field staff and headquarters. Not all tasks need to be completed in the field and can be delegated to headquarters, allowing humanitarians to continue operating in unstable contexts for longer than if their work had to be completed entirely locally.

*“Remote collaboration only works if there's a really strong link to the field: a strong anchor. We've seen good remote collaboration spinning around, without outputs to the people on the ground. That communication piece is key.”- Interviewee*

An important caveat is that for work produced remotely to have maximum impact on the ground, it should be tied to the field via a personal connection- to be “hooked in” with field staff. An amazing report or analysis that has been developed remotely and communicated to field staff through email or a website may lead the intended audience to skip over reading it, or question its trustworthiness. On the other hand, if the report is delivered by a staff member on the ground with a personal connection to the authors who can vouch for their work, this gives the report greater legitimacy and increases the likelihood that staff will use it.



## INDIVIDUAL WORKSPACE



Figure 3<sup>10</sup>

*“When we began thinking about designing humanitarian workspaces in 2011, it was all about togetherness and connection. Experience has shown that to make real progress on a response and do our best life saving work, humanitarians need the correct mix of connected collaboration and secluded deep work. The ultimate workspace has a ‘hub and spoke’ model where individual deep focus zones connect to a collaborative space”- Mark Slezak*

Buzz words such as “innovation”; “collaboration”; and “brainstorming” describe one aspect of work that brings people together, and images of colourful whiteboards come to mind. However, there is another component of work that must precede a collaborative session: the more tedious, unglamorous and independent tasks required to execute ideas into action. While physical and social workspaces are important, they should be balanced with individual workspaces, as quiet environments for humanitarians to work are necessary to transition information that has been

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10. Cornock, M. (June 3, 2013) <https://urlzs.com/yyHZ>, accessed May 2019.

drawn out in collaborative settings to something actionable. What Cal Newport has labeled “deep work”<sup>11</sup> is a key component in the humanitarian sector, despite the continuous distraction of online collaboration and communication tools.

In addition to the use of technology, individual workspaces play an important role during protracted crises. Because such disasters are no longer fluctuating rapidly, organizations do not need to collaborate as closely with each other as they do in sudden onset emergencies. Individual work spaces can allow each organization to optimize their productivity. Furthermore, because of the technology-enabled increase in delegation of tasks noted above, work such as the analysis of data is best completed in quiet, individual workspaces, while other humanitarians on the ground can carry out the front-line response. A remote, structured space can provide a huge benefit to the field, such as the speedy production of maps for first responders to use.

Leaders in the humanitarian field, whether during a disaster response or in peace time, should allow staff to have large chunks of unscheduled time where they can devote themselves to tasks that require their full attention (such as analyses and sense making work), without being distracted by messages or meetings.<sup>12</sup> Paul Graham has referred to this as the difference between the “maker” (people who create things, such as writers or programmers) and the “manager” schedule: the former prefers long uninterrupted segments of time, and experiences a high opportunity cost when asked to break this up with meetings and other distractions, while the manager is more accustomed to continuous meetings. Of course, most people require a combination of both types of work, but in varying ratios.

*“We need to make more space for deep work before, during and after an emergency.” - Mark Slezak.*

One way to manage the distractions of collaboration tools such as Skype and Slack is through the prioritization of deep work and the availability of individual work spaces. Every humanitarian will have a different ideal ratio of in person interaction and collaboration time with quiet, independent work time to be at their most productive. It is critical that each humanitarian engages in both to some extent: “management work” such as responding to pings and phone calls can take up a vast amount of time, while regular sessions of deep work help really “move the needle” on what humanitarians strive to accomplish. Physical spaces should allow staff to move between these two work states, with seclusion and privacy as available options.

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11. Ibid.

12. Graham, P. (2002) “Maker’s Schedule, Manager’s Schedule” <http://www.paulgraham.com/makersschedule.html>, accessed July 2018.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

**1** Innovative physical lab spaces will continue to increase in the humanitarian sector, as they allow staff with different perspectives to come together and troubleshoot complex problems in a way that is not possible online.

**2** For dynamic and unique disasters such as sudden onset disasters, formal and informal collaboration is critical while humanitarians are still figuring out what the response plan should be. This collaboration requires a physical and social space, and organizations should know what tangible and intangible benefits they will receive from participating in the space. In person meetings and interpersonal relationships will also set the groundwork for future remote collaboration.

A physical and social coworking space can contribute to increased data sharing and a better coordinated overall response. A lack of shared understanding can lead to a response that is prepared for the wrong outcome or scenario, or a disjointed network of humanitarians that have understood the crisis in different ways.

Over time, physical spaces become less critical, as relationships make people more comfortable with sharing their data and effectively collaborating online. The established social capital also means faster responses to online pings and more accountability for follow-up tasks to be completed.

Building a relationship can be facilitated by a third party when it is not feasible for two people to meet in person. Thus humanitarians' social network is very important.

To facilitate this, humanitarians should attend in person meetings and conferences whenever possible, such as the annual Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week (HNPW) which connects a wide range of partners from civil society, academia, and the private sector.<sup>13</sup> Networks also necessarily expand over time, as humanitarians accumulate working experience with different staff in multiple disasters.

**3** Technology should be balanced with in person social networking because it is a multiplier, so it will amplify existing trust or the lack thereof. However, technology's contribution to the humanitarian sector cannot be understated: it has provided opportunities and resources that would not exist otherwise, such as the ability to consult with experts in different locations; reach a wide audience at once; and quickly delegate tasks between the field and headquarters.

■ Collaborating online is best for repetitive and standardized tasks, such as in a protracted crises.

**4** Operations flow from high chaos to moments of shared understanding where the “grunt work” needs to be done. When organizations and humanitarians are in the sense-making stage of the disaster, in person meetings are very important. However, for agreed upon objectives to be translated into actionable steps, there must be a space for focused individual work. For these tasks it is important to minimize the distractions that come with the plethora of online collaboration tools.

13. “Humanitarian Networks and Partnership Week,” UN OCHA. <https://www.unocha.org/humanitarian-networks-and-partnerships-week-hnpw>, accessed May 2019.

## CONCLUSION

As is the case for any sector, different types of workspaces provide various benefits and drawbacks for productivity. It is important for the humanitarian sector to continue to reflect on what conditions are necessary for humanitarians to be the most effective at their work. These conditions are dynamic, depending on factors such as the nature of the humanitarian crisis in question, and are also evolving with the integration of new technological tools in the sector. Humanitarians should continue analyzing the opportunities that different types of workspaces provide, and when they should be considered most useful.

# INTERVIEWS

This report is informed by a review of publicly available resources and semi-structured interviews with professionals and researchers in the field of humanitarianism and security. Thank you very much to all who generously provided their time and expertise.

Winston Chang: INSARAG, UN OCHA

Sarah Telford: Center for Humanitarian Data, UN OCHA

Peter Muller: UNDAC, UN OCHA

Lars Nissen: ACAPS

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