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Meet your new team member - the room

Digital assistants and smart rooms with environmental systems will soon be so sensitive to our workplace needs that they will feel like conscientious colleagues eager to meet our every command.

Isla Galloway-Gaul, Managing Director of Inspiration Office, an Africa-wide office space and furniture consultancy said “It’s time to start thinking of your office space as a team member because of how it will interact with you and your colleagues.

“We expect the development of environmental systems that operate like friendly, artificial intelligence platforms that, while not sentient and emotionally developed in a human sense, can detect our moods and impulses with facial-and-speech-recognition software and brain-reading devices.”

She said the systems could for example sense when we’re drifting off in a meeting, and could nudge us to get a drink to refresh ourselves.

Said Galloway-Gaul: “In the immediate future, we see the growing popularity of digital personal assistants, such as Cortana and Google Assistant, and intelligent furnishings, in the workplace.”

For example a conference table equipped with microphones and speech-processing software could understand and summarise conversations happening around it. Through such integrated, intelligent systems linked

to the cloud, a room will be able to anticipate the needs of the team within it - bringing up past documents or project logs - or encouraging participation by nudging quiet team members to share their opinions.

With this new level of detection and analysis, environments hold the potential to enhance human performance by getting to know us personally.

“Rooms will become personalised to our software habits and preferences, knowing which platforms, news feeds and applications we gravitate toward. In the same way a smartwatch tells us how many calories we’ve burned and hours we’ve slept, augmented rooms and surfaces will track our behaviours through data pulled from our devices and bio-informed sensors—adjusting lighting, visual privacy, acoustics and temperature with algorithms sensitive to our personal preferences,” Galloway-Gaul added.

Over time, the design of intelligent rooms and user inter-faces will become more humanistic and intuitive, articulated in architecture and furnishings reflecting a range of postures, work modes, light levels and acoustic qualities.

The introvert may find she does her best work in a private, solitary room encased in soundproof glass. The extrovert may prefer to prepare to do his year-end report in a busy café, while listening to loud music. “Both will come to see spaces as a partner in the work process,” said Galloway-Gaul.

Privacy is a concern however as these systems will get to know us very well.

“As rooms begin to listen to us and data becomes easier to harvest, the security and privacy of employee information will become the concern of every organisation.”

Galloway-Gaul noted that Europe has recently taken the lead in digital privacy by establishing the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which lays out sweeping individual rights over your personal data.

“Controlling digital stimulation and the data it gathers will be increasingly important as systems become ever more sophisticated,” Galloway-Gaul concluded.

