

Companies are trying to connect remote workers with 'virtual water coolers'—but it's harder than it sounds

23 September 2020, by Paul Levy



Spontaneous conversation between colleagues was easier in pre-COVID times. Credit: [wavebreakmedia / Shutterstock.com](https://www.wavebreakmedia.com)

Not all donuts are bad for you. One in particular claims to be good for communication within organizations. An app that plugs into the collaboration platform [Slack](#), [Donut](#) creates random virtual meetings between colleagues to foster connection and community. Other apps such as [Watercooler](#) offer similar features and in my own university we have a group on Microsoft Teams called "Virtual Canteen", nostalgically referring to the real canteen we can't enjoy since COVID-19 closed it.

For as long as there has been remote working, companies have sought ways to replicate the serendipitous conversations we have in a physical work space. But turning to algorithms to achieve this may not have the desired effect.

[Lots of](#) research documents the importance of the informal conversations that take place around the office photocopier, coffee machine or water cooler.

These in-between spaces that can result in awkward conversation with someone you don't know very well play an important role in building community between colleagues, which fosters commitment to a company.

These spaces also play an important role in the sharing of work-related information—sometimes referred to as "[water-cooler learning](#)". Spaces like the coffee area are knowingly created by companies, because people share knowledge, stories of their experiences and talk about the problems they are facing in these spaces.

In the [health sector](#), [researchers have identified](#) how corridor conversations are an important way to deal with crises and complexity. These impromptu encounters can often result in colleagues (often unknowingly) working out how to fix problems, deal with crises, de-stress, and avoid reinventing the wheel.

These are "[liminal spaces](#)" that are beyond formal definition. As soon as we try to design them too tightly, they tend to flee elsewhere—the stairwell, the bus stop, the dead space at the back of the building. We like them because no one is in particular control of what goes on there or what we say to each other. They are thresholds, places of transition. And because we are passing through, there's a potential spontaneity in what we may think, say and even do.

So, what about in the digital world? The online water coolers and corridors can be found in sidebar conversations in the one-on-one chats in Zoom meetings. You'll find people creating informal Whatsapp groups for out-of-earshot commenting, alongside the more formal channels of online conferences.

Smaller businesses in the tech space who work primarily online set up virtual water coolers years ago. They take the form of [virtual meetings](#) rooms that are left open indefinitely. Anyone can go in at any time and meet up with anyone. And the best ones are truly private, encrypted and out of the snooping range of over-interested managers. They are liminal because anyone can pass through or stick around, anyone can say whatever they want, and no one really knows where anything is leading. Because of that, we can sometimes think up and share our most crazy, create and innovative thoughts.

Can you design spontaneity?

Donut offers itself as something that "regularly introduces team members who don't know each other well to spread trust and collaboration across your organization." It randomly pairs co-workers through Slack and encourages them to have coffee together over a video call.

Apps like this certainly have positive benefits. They serve as connectors in a complex working environment, offering fast and smart connection. They offer the chance to pair up colleagues and trigger all kinds of interesting conversations and exchanges. And they also invite us to meet people we wouldn't usually bump into, people we might get to like and to share valuable thoughts with.

But a more fundamental question being debated in the world of artificial intelligence is: can you turn serendipity into an algorithm, or at least convincingly fake it? And potentially undermining the efforts of these algorithms is the fact that if we think our bosses are forcing these kinds of meetings or that we are being manipulated into bumping into each other, will we just take our coffee breaks elsewhere?

It's more likely that the real virtual water cooler will pop up outside of the official channels. And that is because, in highly planned organizations, chance and the sudden surprises become valuable—a kind of cultural good—for the very reason that no one from higher up designed or planned them. Spontaneous, informal communication is clearly valuable for business, [but it takes place in liminal](#)

[spaces](#).

If you want to rediscover in a virtual world the benefits of what the water cooler has been achieving in the physical workplace for decades, then control is the enemy for the simple reason you can't push this on people. They'll be too busy looking over their shoulder to see who is pushing them.

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