time. Process rooms are really backstage interactions that can occur in safe places to share private information for the team. These on-line rooms can be used for both real-time meetings as well as ongoing asynchronous storage, recall, and reuse of shared information. The room grows from an empty space at the start of a team's life to become progressively more organized and customized by the actions of the team itself as it molds the space to its particular needs. Teams typically spend time in places structured by length, width, and depth. Virtual teams spend "time" or disconnected time in cyberspaces structured by people, purpose, and links.

## DOES PROXIMITY DETERMINE COLLABORATION?

What comes to mind first when you think of a team? A group of people working side by side, in close proximity to one another—a basketball or soccer team, perhaps? From a personal perspective, the important distances are the very short ones. How close people prefer to be for interpersonal interactions varies by culture—from inches to feet.

How far away do people have to be before they need to worry about compensating for distance? Or, put another way: How close do you have to be to get the advantage of being in the same place? That is, what is the "radius of collaborative co-location?" In the world before the web, collaboration falls apart at a fairly short distance.

MIT Professor Tom Allen tells us that, based on his research, people are not likely to collaborate very often if they are more than 50 feet apart.[1] The probability of communicating or collaborating more than once a week drops off dramatically if people are more than the width of a basketball court apart. To get the benefit of working in the same place, people need to be quite close together.

Globally, the farther apart people are physically, the more time zones they must cross to communicate. Thus, time becomes a problem when people who are not in the same place need some of their activities to be in sync. The window for routine same-time (synchronous) work shrinks as more time zones are crossed, closing to effectively zero when people are on oppo-

FIGURE 12-1
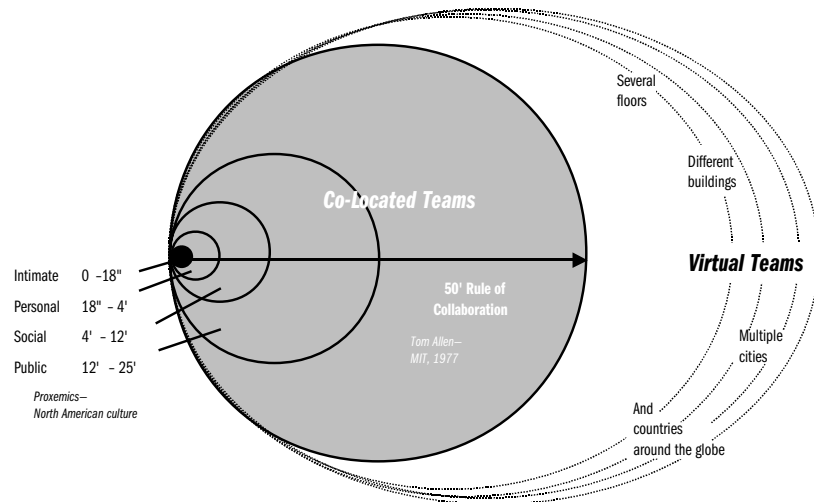
site sides of the globe. But even people who work together in the same place can have problems being in the same place at the same time, such as those in sales or consulting who rarely occupy their offices at the same time. Even apparently co-located teams often cross time boundaries and need to think virtually.

WHY SHOULD DESIGN FIRMS USE VIRTUAL TEAMS?

As Gary Wheeler mentioned earlier, the design industry is extraordinarily collaborative. It can be no other way, given the degrees of sophistication and complexity that surround it and influence it. Gathering needed experts into "process rooms" on-line is not only time-efficient, but significantly reduces travel and meeting time costs.

Although Shell Oil Company, a leader in virtual teaming efforts, is not a design firm, their virtual team benefits may be applicable to any industry, including the interior design fields:

• **Reduce costs** *by cutting travel costs and time, creating new "e-economies" of scale, and designing better, digitally enhanced processes.*