How to Decide on Meeting Room Design

Theater? Classroom? Banquet? Conference? U-Shape? Which type of meeting room setup should you use? The answer depends on the objectives of the individual function. Use the information below to help you decide which of the seven major meeting room designs will work best for each of your events.

Theater Style

Overview: Chairs are lined up in rows facing the speaker. The rows can be straight, semi-circular, or herringbone (angled toward the front of the room). If space isn't an issue, it's best to offset each row so that delegates are not sitting directly behind one another.

Best usage: When attendees take on the characteristics of an audience (i.e., listening to a speaker or watching a slide presentation), theater-style is the most efficient setup. This design is also used to maximize the seating capacity of meeting rooms or allow the audience to be as close to the speaker as possible. It is not recommended for taking notes, referring to material in binders, or any event at which food is served.

Classroom Style

Overview: Long, narrow tables are positioned in front of rows of chairs facing the speaker. The tables usually abut one another, although tables that extend beyond the stage ideally should be angled toward the speaker in order to provide better viewing. Water pitchers and glasses are typically placed on the tables.

Best usage: Classroom-style is the best setup for situations in which the presenter is expected to do most of the talking and/or delegates must take notes, refer to material in binders, or work on computer equipment. It's also the most comfortable design for very long sessions. It is not the preferred setup for encouraging conversation among attendees.

Banquet Style

Overview: Guests are seated at round tables — usually 60", 66", or 72" in diameter.

Best usage: Banquet-style is the setup of choice for most meal functions. In addition, it's appropriate for small committee meetings and small breakout or study groups involving group interaction and/or note taking.

Crescent Style

Overview: Attendees are seated at round tables — usually 60", 66", or 72" in diameter. The two or three chairs in which delegates would have their backs to the speaker are removed, thus forming a "crescent" of seating facing the speaker.

Best usage: This design works well when you need to use a room for meals and for an educational session that immediately follows. It's also appropriate for general sessions where attendees break into small discussion groups in the same room.

Conference Style

Overview: Delegates are seated on all four sides of a table. For smaller groups (16 people or less), a single conference table is typically used. For larger groups, several 6' x 30" or 8' x 30" tables are often combined to create a solid rectangular table.

Best usage: The conference-style setup is often used for board meetings, committee meetings, and other smaller functions at which interaction between participants is expected. This design also can be used for high-level food and beverage functions with a small number of guests.

U-Shape

Overview: Rectangular tables are positioned to form a "U." Seating is usually on the outside of the U, but it's possible to seat delegates on both inside legs of the U.

Best usage: The U-shape setup is often used for board of directors meetings, committee meetings, and breakout sessions involving audio-visual presentations because all attendees can see the AV when the screen is placed at the open end of the U. It also can be used for banquets, with seating on all sides of the U.

Hollow Rectangle

Overview: 30" wide classroom tables are arranged in a square or other multi-sided design in which the center of the design is empty.

Best usage: Larger committee or board meetings of 17 to 30 people, at which interaction among attendees is important, can benefit from the hollow rectangle design. (Note: Avoid long straight sections of tables over 12 feet long. Octagons and hexagons work well to improve sight lines among attendees.)

Calculating the Capacity of Function Rooms

By David Lutz, CMP

If you've ever stood in a breakout room with the hotel's meeting space capacity chart in hand and thought, "There's no way 125 people can fit in here theater-style," you know how important it is to be able to independently determine the number of attendees that can be seated *comfortably* in any given function room. Fortunately, it's relatively easy to do just that. All you need to do is follow a few simple, step-by-step formulas.

First, you need to calculate how much space you actually have to work with after taking columns and other obstructions into consideration. Here's how: Measure the room to determine the shortest distances that form the room's length and width. For example, the hotel may show the dimensions of a room to be 130' x 60'. But if you factor in the columns along the back wall of the room and the storage areas along the sides of the room, the "clear meeting area" may be significantly less.

Once you've determined the clear meeting area, you can use the following formulas to figure out the true capacity of the room for the three most common types of seating — theater-style, classroom-style, and banquet-style. The objective of all three formulas is to ensure that every attendee has an unobstructed view of the screen or speaker, easy access to his or her seat, and sufficient elbow room. Note: To maximize capacity, arrange for the front of the room to be on the narrow wall.

Theater-Style Formula

Most hotels and convention centers offer meeting room chairs that are 20" front to back and between 17.5" and 18.5" wide. The standard used by the majority of facilities is to place the chairs immediately adjacent to each other and to use one chair's length as a measuring stick between rows. When these standards are used, it's very difficult to fully utilize the seating area since attendees typically do not want to climb over each other to reach an empty seat or sit shoulder to shoulder with their neighbors if they manage to get a seat. The result? Chairs remain unoccupied.

The following formula adds two to three inches to the above standards, thereby increasing comfort and allowing a greater percentage of the seating area to be utilized.

Step 1: Determine the number of rows that can be accommodated.

- Take the clear room length and subtract the space between the screen and the front row (normally two times the screen height) and the space between the back wall and the back row (minimum of four feet). *Note:* Two times the screen height is a standard that allows a person to view the entire screen comfortably. If you don't know the screen height, subtract 20 percent from the clear length of the room.
- Then divide by the distance between rows, measured from chair back to chair back (3.58 feet or 43 inches).
- Round the resulting figure down to the nearest full row.

Note: Do not exceed more than 30 feet of continuous seating before placing aisles. Many city fire codes will dictate a similar standard for adequate ingress and egress.
Example: 100 (length of room) – 20 (2 x screen height) – 4 (distance from back wall) = 76 (usable room length)
76 ÷ 3.58 (distance between rows) = 21.2 rows, rounded down to 21 rows

Step 2: Determine the number of chairs that can be set in each row.

- Take the clear room width and subtract space for aisles (normally about 15 percent).
- Divide by the distance between chairs, measured from chair center to chair center (1.83 feet or 22 inches).
- Round the resulting figure down to the nearest chair.

Example: 75 (width of room) – 11.25 lost to aisles (15% of 75) = 63.75 (usable room width) 63.75 ÷ 1.83 (distance between chairs) = 34.84, rounded down to 34 chairs

Step 3: Multiply the number of rows by the number of chairs in each row.

Example: 21 (rows) x 34 (chairs) = 714 people that can be comfortably accommodated in the room

Note: Seats from which the view of the screen or speaker is obscured should be removed. Seats located less than a 30-degree angle to the screen also should be removed since the viewing angle is too acute to provide easy reading of the projected material.

Classroom-Style Formula

Most hotels and convention centers offer six-foot and/or eight-foot tables that are 18 inches wide for their classroom-style setups. To determine the space between rows, the majority of facilities use a six-foot table as a measuring stick. A six-foot table is placed at a 90-degree angle to the first table in the room. The front of the first table is matched up with one end of the six-foot and the back of the second table is matched up with the other end of the six-foot table. The result is a three-foot gap between the two tables [6 feet – (2 x 18 inches)]. This standard is perfect for proper spacing between rows.

The majority of facilities will seat three people at a six-foot table or four people at an eight-foot table (allowing two feet per person). This is also a good standard for most sessions, although you may want to request seating of two people per six foot or three per eight foot if you're using large binders or conducting computer training.

The following formula uses the above standards, ensuring comfort and allowing for a greater percentage of the seating area to be utilized.

Step 1: Determine the number of rows that can be accommodated.

- Take the clear room length and subtract the space between the screen and the front row (two times the screen height) and the space between the back wall and the back row (minimum of four feet).
- Divide by the distance allotted per row, measured from table front to table front (4.5 feet or 54 inches, assuming the tables are 18 inches wide).
- Round the resulting figure down to the nearest row.

Example: 50 (length of room) – 14 (2 x screen height) – 4 (distance from back wall) = 32 (usable room length)
32 ÷ 4.5 (distance per row) = 7.1 rows, rounded down to 7 rows

Step 2: Determine the number of chairs that can be set in each row.

- Take the clear room width and subtract space for aisles (normally about 15 percent).
- Divide by the distance allotted per chair, measured from chair center to chair center (2 feet or 24 inches is the minimum space per chair for classroom seating).
- Round the resulting figure down to the nearest chair.

- Factor in the length of the tables provided by the hotel: six-foot, eight-foot, or both.

Example: 40 (width of room) – 6 (15% of 40 to determine space lost to aisles) = 34 (usable room width)
34 ÷ 2 (distance allotted per chair) = 17 chairs

Since the hotel only has eight-foot tables, you need to determine how many eight-foot tables can fit in the 34 feet available for seating (34 ÷ 8 = 4.25). The number of chairs in each row would be reduced to 16 (4 tables x 4 attendees per table).

Step 3: Multiply the number of rows by the number of chairs in each row.

Example: 7 (rows) x 16 (chairs) = 112 people that can be comfortably accommodated in the room

Banquet-Style Formula

Most hotels or convention centers use round tables that are 60", 66", or 72" in diameter. The standard used by the majority of facilities is to allow five feet between each round, which provides sufficient room for chairs to be placed around the table and for banquet staff to provide meal service. The ideal number of seats per table is eight at a 60" round, nine at a 66" round, and 10 at a 72" round.

To determine how many rounds can fit in a given room, it's helpful to think of each round as a square. Add five feet to the diameter of the table (60 inches plus 5 feet = 10 feet) and then calculate how many 10-foot squares can be accommodated in the space using the following formula.

Step 1: Determine the number of tables that can be accommodated.

- Take the clear room length and divide by each table's linear feet (from the chart below). Round the resulting figure down to the nearest table.
- Take the clear room width and divide by each table's linear feet. Round the resulting figure down to the nearest table.
- Multiply the two numbers.

Example: 75 (length of room) ÷ 10.5 (linear feet for a 66-inch round) = 7.1, rounded down to 7

50 (width of room) ÷ 10.5 (linear feet for a 66-inch round) = 4.76, rounded down to 4

7 x 4 = 28 tables

Step 2: Subtract excess tables that need to be removed for staging, buffets, rear-screen projection, or chairs directly in front of an exit, etc.

Step 3: Multiply the number of tables by the number of chairs to be set at each table (from the chart below). Example: 28 (number of tables) x 9 (number of people at each table) = 252 people that can be comfortably accommodated in the room

After you've taken the time to figure out the capacities of the function rooms, don't leave the actual setup of the rooms to chance. Be sure to specify, in writing, the standards that you require the hotel to follow such as 4.5 feet between table fronts for a classroom setup or 22 inches from chair center to chair center for a theater-style setup. You may even have to show the setup crew how to properly place the tables and chairs. (Also be sure to clearly communicate what wall you want the chairs to face — north, south, facing airwall, facing banquet service hall.) It's a little extra work, but it will ensure that your delegates are comfortable. Remember, comfortable delegates are usually attentive delegates.

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How Many People Can Fit at a Banquet Round?

Available Sizes	Linear Feet Needed	Number of People
60" round	10'	6-9 people
66" round	10.5'	8-10 people
72" round	11'	9-11 people

Quick Calculations

To quickly figure out how large of a room you need for a setup, multiply the number of people by the appropriate square footage per person from the formulas below. To determine if a certain meeting room can accommodate a desired setup, divide the room's total square footage by the appropriate square footage per person from the formulas below.

Theater Style

- 12 square feet per person for groups of less than 60 people
- 11 square feet per person for groups of 60 to 300 people (the most common size breakout session)
- 10 square feet per person for groups of more than 300 people

Classroom Style

- 22 square feet per person for groups of less than 60 people
- 20 square feet per person for groups of 60 to 300 people (the most common size breakout session)
- 17 square feet per person for groups of more than 300 people

Banquet Style

- 13.5 square feet per person

Conference Style or Hollow Square

- 30 square feet per person

U-Shape

- 35 square feet per person

Note: The smaller the room or more square the room is, the greater the square footage needs per person. In a smaller or square room, there is more wasted space per person in the front, back, and sides of the room.

Formulas for Other Situations

Unless your meeting is quite small, chances are you'll need to look beyond theater, classroom, and banquet seating when attempting to determine whether a particular facility meets your space requirements. The following formulas will help you factor a variety of situations into the equation including exhibit space, receptions, dance floors, rear-screen projection, and stage height.

Exhibit Space

Exhibit booths: Number of booths x booth length x booth width x 2

This is a very common and widely accepted formula in the meetings industry. Basically, you determine the area needed for the exhibits and double it to accommodate the aisles, lost space in corners, and other miscellaneous space-takers. If you need extra space for registration or food service, just add the gross square footage of those items to the total area required for exhibits.

Example: 100 (booths) x 10 (length) x 10 (width) x 2 (aisle space) = 20,000 square feet of space required to accommodate the booths.

Note: The formula works in reverse. To determine how many 8' x 10' booths will fit in a 12,000-square-foot space, divide 12,000 by 2, then 8, then 10 (or simply divide once by 160). You'll be able to fit 75 booths in the room.

Tabletop exhibits: Think of tabletop exhibits as 6' x 8' booths … and follow the above formula for exhibit booths.
Example: 30 (booths) x 8 (length) x 6 (width) x 2 (aisle space) = 2,880 square feet of space

Poster boards: Think of poster boards as 3' x 8' booths … and follow the above formula for exhibit booths.
Example: 200 (posters) x 8 (length) x 3 (width) x 2 (aisle space) = 9,600 square feet of space required

Receptions

Number of people x 10 square feet per person

Many ballrooms don't have sufficient foyer or assembly space to comfortably accommodate a reception for several thousand people. This formula will enable you to quickly determine whether a particular area can hold your entire group. If you need extra space for extensive buffets, bars, staging, or props, simply add the gross square footage of those items to the total area required for the function.
Example: 2,000 (number of people) x 10 (square feet per person) = 20,000 square feet minimum needed

Note: To visualize what 10 square feet is, picture yourself standing in a three-foot square and you're just about there.

Dance Floor

Number of people x 2 square feet per person (assuming about 1/3 of the group is dancing at any one time)

Generally, hotel setup crews dislike putting down and picking up a dance floor. It's heavy and time-consuming. So if you leave the size of your dance floor up to the setup crew, you may end up with a dance floor that's too small. Use this formula to figure out your requirements.
Example: 200 (number of people) x 2 (square feet per person) = 400 square feet minimum needed for the dance floor

Rear Screen Projection

Number of People	Space to add
Less than 100	add 1,000 square feet
100 to 200	add 2,000 square feet
200 or more	add 3,000 square feet

These formulas will help you decide whether there's sufficient space for rear-screen projection in a function room. To apply them, first calculate the minimum square footage requirements for theater-style, classroom-style, or banquet-style seating using the formulas on page 63. Then add the appropriate additional square footage from the chart above based on the number of attendees.
Example: 3,750 square feet (banquet-style seating) + 3,000 square feet (based on 280 attendees) = 6,750 square feet minimum to accommodate rear-screen projection

Note: If your audio-visual needs are elaborate, consult your production company before using these formulas.

Stage Height

Room length ÷ 50

Common stage heights are 8', 12', 16', 24', and 32'. Staging comes in three primary sizes — 4' x 8', 6' x 8', and 3' x 6'. Be sure to find out what sizes are available and then specify your staging requirements by length, width, and height.
Example: 75 (room length) ÷ 50 = 1.5 feet or 18 inches needed for stage height

— David Lutz