

Digital Obeya or Physical Obeya: That is the Question—Or Is It?

by Gwendolyn Galsworth, PhD, field originator/workplace visuality and visual thinking expert

Which is better—a digital Obeya or a physical Obeya?

If you are reading this, you are not a casual bystander—you are already invested in Obeya and its outcomes. The better question is: Do you know how to respond?

While you may not be the one who makes the final decision or assigns resources, you are the one who needs to describe, understand, and explain the differences—and in so doing, to influence or even shape the decision.

To do that, you need to appreciate the science. You need to study the research.

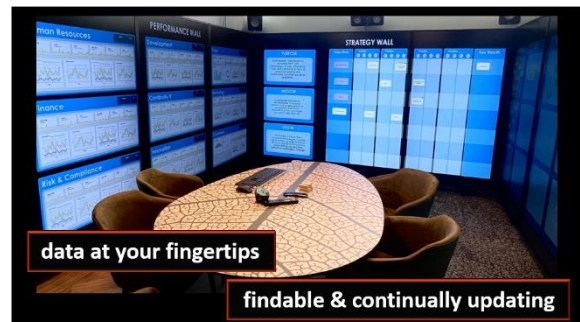
The findings are clear. Physical boards do something the human brain is exquisitely designed for. Digital boards do something entirely different—something no wall can do. Most of us sense these distinctions. Few of us articulate them. Fewer still design, deploy, and lead their Obeyas with those elements in mind. By elements or distinctions, I mean strengths and limitations.

When digital boards come to dominate the informational landscape, subtle failures emerge. Interaction shifts into observation. Engagement thins into explanation. Alignment appears stronger than it is. Results plateau—not because visuality fails, but because the information on the Obeya monitor is made visible without regard for human use.

The reverse is also true. When physical boards lag behind the need for rapid data collection, update, and correlation, memory falters—and with it, problem identification and decision making. The trail is lost. Line-of-sight results waver. Progress slows. Teams are forced to rely on recall and a deluge of sticky notes instead of smooth access. Sessions stall, waiting for information to be found or reconstructed. The room waits for a fuller picture. What is present may be vivid, but what is absent is potent in weakening the whole.

When these distinctions are applied, the roles become clear. Digital Obeyas carry and track the data and make it seamlessly continuous. Physical Obeyas are where investigation and analysis become messy, tangible, and divergent. Urgent questions get raised and resolved within a single session—and meaning is tested and revised. Along the way, the very structure of the board shifts as new physical dimensions are added in order to widen the understanding and usability of the information on that board.

Study the research and the bias becomes clear: cognitive and systems scientists favor physical boards because they engage the neuro-linguistic layer of human cognition. What does that mean in practice? It means that people are drawn to touch information physically—not as an exception, but as a natural response. When asked why, more often than not, they murmur, ‘I just want to know it better.’ And yet, many digital-first Obeya rooms leave no space for a makeshift physical board. This is short-sighted. For some, allowing a messy physical board alongside a modern digital display feels like a step backward—even a betrayal. Our rejoinder is simple: Find the science.



When these distinctions are understood, the case for combining both becomes an attractive option. I call it the *hybrid model* and have seen it work persuasively at a client site in Australia: both formats in fluid connection across the same real estate in an authentic thinking environment, the strengths of one meeting the strengths of the other—by design.

Your personal encounter with the research is indispensable. A good place to begin is the study of embodied cognition, especially Edwin Hutchins' *Cognition in the Wild*. Add to that the growing body of work around distributed fields, spatial memory, neuroscience, and human interaction with information environments, and the discussion becomes far larger than board preference. One of my objectives in this session is to share the science as a way of encouraging you to study the research for yourself and broaden your own understanding of how Obeya functions and what it can become.



Let me be clear: the 6-Panel Obeya is a magnificent learning and teaching tool, but it cannot carry the enterprise forward on its own. Obeya is a cognitive framework designed for complexity and impact—a coupling of structure and flexibility, with the capacity to change and grow as new priorities emerge. Your Obeya is alive. Give it oxygen. Let it breathe. Find the science.

So: Which is better—a digital Obeya or a physical Obeya? Who finally makes the call—the decision? Your boss? Or your boss's boss? But the question bosses want answered—well in advance of commitment—is different: Is Obeya worth the investment of time, energy, and hope? Will it have impact? Will it deliver? Or will it, like so many other improvement efforts, sink without a trace?

Your own question operates at a different level. Which Obeya format will best serve the tactical outcome of this current project—and still align with my overall goal of structuring Obeya to function as a strategic instrument in this company? Too often, we speculate on the first and assume the second. This is where weakening begins—where ambiguity takes hold and clarity is lost.

You know what I know: your job title is far less important than your ability to study these factors and apply Obeya thinking to them. When you do, the choice that is right for your company becomes your choice. Without that, the need for a decision easily defaults to habit, preference, persuasion—or whoever in the room speaks the loudest and longest.

So have you decided? Will you use the next Obeya project to stabilize—or transform the organization? If these are your questions, you are already moving toward expert practice—because you cannot answer them without studying the research.

And the Obeya movement needs experts. Why not become one? I'll bet you are already qualified to take that on. You have the starter kit: a hunger for knowledge and know-how, the disease called curiosity—ideally at the contagious stage, and a passion for discovering and naming why and why not.

Build your own case. Master the discussion. Form your own Obeya Debate Team. Go ahead—you'll enjoy it. Meet with two or three of your Obeya buddies once a month, take sides, and talk it out. Let someone win. Let someone lose. That's how the thinking sharpens—not just what you say, but how well you stand for what you believe, and how well you understand why you lost. When you do, your thinking becomes quick, sharp, and clear—and valuable to teams and their bosses. You don't have to become king of the Obeya world. You do have to grow and contribute.



Be the person who moves the field of Obeya forward—beyond tools and false binaries, toward rational, intentional use, grounded in human cognition, impact, and real-world effectiveness. Find the science.

Join us.

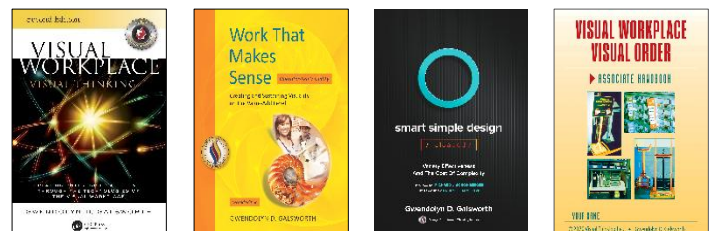
Gwendolyn Galsworth



Gwendolyn Galsworth, PhD, is a visual workplace and visual management expert credited with codifying visual concepts, principles, and technologies into a single, coherent framework of knowledge and know-how. Founder and President of Visual Thinking Inc., Visual Thinking Europe, and The Visual-Lean® Institute, Dr. Galsworth has led visual conversions on four continents and trained trainers and consultants for more than 30 years.

Dr. Galsworth is the author of seven books, two of which—Visual Workplace/Visual Thinking and Work That Makes Sense—won the coveted Shingo Research Award. Her work has helped define the modern field of workplace visuality and its practical application across manufacturing, healthcare, logistics, offices, and service environments worldwide.

As a core part of her curriculum, Dr. Galsworth trains and certifies trainers in her Obeya Effectiveness process, which integrates visuality, operational impact, cognitive engagement, and performance-driven leadership.



Dr. Galsworth now lives in Europe and works with companies throughout the world. When she is not on a client site or writing a new book, she can often be found hiking.