

“building for effectiveness”

by John Southerst

Mount Royal College

Forever, it seems, workplaces have looked like their organizational charts. Big offices for big titles, smaller as you go down the pyramid, with lots of walls and straight-line corridors between them. Anything that’s not on the chart – such as “task” rooms for team projects, concentrated study or one-on-one conversation – is an afterthought.

An ambitious academic institution in Calgary, Canada, wanted to test the idea that the look of a workplace should be governed by what people do, not by their job titles.

Mount Royal College had set its sights on becoming Canada’s leading undergraduate institution by 2005. Perhaps it was scholarly curiosity or perhaps it was a vestige of Calgary’s frontier mentality, but as college administrators planned for a new East B Academic Building in 2003, they wanted to try something different to make the most of



the investment. When the local Steelcase team offered its “work effectiveness” methodology, the college’s executive team seized on the potential advantage.

“Steelcase really helped us to understand how space can be used strategically and how a well designed work environment can help organizations meet their business goals,” says Judith Eifert, vice-president academic at Mount Royal. “We wanted to use the East B Academic Building as a pilot to test the concepts.”



John Southerst is a Toronto-area writer who believes the everyday stories of business hold a fascinating cultural record. He started his career as a teacher in West Africa and a reporter in India. He now writes for major business publications and acts as a consultant and wordsmith to manufacturing, financial services and high-tech clients. His other passions are his family, his vegetable garden, cooking (eating it) and squash (playing it).

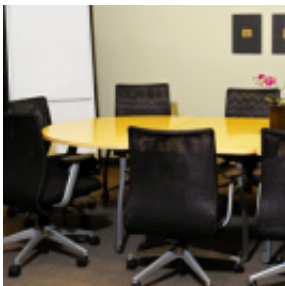
Building for Effectiveness, continued



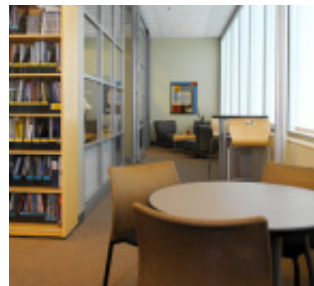
“Traditional workplaces primarily support the formal structure of an organization and the explicit processes – what people say they do,” says Robyn Baxter, an applied research consultant at Steelcase. “Our methodology allows designers to create workplaces that support the informal networks that allow real work to happen – what people *really* do.”

taking stock

Finding out what people *really* do is of course easier said than done. Working closely with project architects Kasian Kennedy Architecture and Design, the Steelcase applied research team held a strategic intent workshop with the international education leadership group. The first objective: find out what needed fixing. Through a variety of exercises, the workshop uncovered perceptions of the organization’s health and dynamics in key areas. Then it set out the specific goals of workplace re-organization.



“We knew we wanted to create a better work environment that would bring everyone together, improve interaction and enhance communication.”



finding identity

The International Education department’s growing popularity through the 1990s made it a perfect candidate for the new building – and for the insights provided by Steelcase work effectiveness tools. Parts of the language and teacher training program had sprouted wherever they could find space in different buildings and even on different campuses. Coming together under one roof posed both cultural and workflow challenges.

In spite of its previously far-flung components, much of the depart-

ment’s work is both cross-functional and project-oriented, says department director Lorna Smith. “We knew we wanted to create a better work environment that would bring everyone together, improve interaction and enhance communication. As well, we needed to remove the silos that had been created between the different groups within the department and we didn’t believe we could do this by using a traditional office model.”

What Steelcase offered was a customized workplace that was not only strategic in its use of space but also objectively tied to what the international education department actually did, every day.

But any investigation of what actually occurs in a workplace needs to focus quickly on the people on the floor. Electronic work effectiveness surveys questioned staff under three main headings:

- work styles to determine mobility patterns
- work tools workplace satisfaction to find out what works and doesn’t work
- network analysis to find out who works with whom and the structure of the department’s dynamics.

Building for Effectiveness, continued

With the networks analysis section, the team really began to home in on the five critical business interactions of innovation, learning, communication, work process and decision making.

The researchers observed the international education team in their current work environments. Using techniques of social anthropology, they shadowed, photographed and measured. In the end, they could specifically identify patterns of interaction and movements of people and information – useful knowledge for designing a space that supports what workers do.

And that's what they did next. The studies had already identified what organizational charts don't reveal: the "hub" employees at the center of most processes and decisions. To keep the design process firmly rooted in reality, the researchers brought these central figures into the loop. As the new workplace began to take conceptual shape, the team knew it was close to the mark.

"Through co-design, we gained an understanding of how the organization really works from the ground level," says Lois Wellwood, director of design at Kasian Kennedy. "Involving users is key to the success of the final design solution."

setting the target

Not unexpectedly, the study revealed the extent of the international education department's disconnected internal communications. Full-time, part-time and project employees often barely knew each other. Overall, communication within the larger group had to be formal and planned or it didn't happen. And the



▲ communal space

◀ knowledge gallery

coaching nooks ▶



impact was far more serious than purely socialization. There was limited sharing of knowledge, mentoring was inhibited, and curriculum development was slow. Often, staff didn't even know who was in the office on a given day. Distractions and complications due to the work environment were costing employees nearly half an hour daily.

The co-design team knew that the move into East B Academic was a prime opportunity to build a single and cohesive departmental culture. The new design had to make sure it inspired that team spirit while at the

same time supporting internal processes, sparking creativity and helping the speed and flow of communications. A tall order.

With a little analysis, several design drivers emerged. Central communal space for team-building. Views into group spaces for people finding. Spaces that support diverse work processes and storage. User control over boundaries and work tools that make it easy to move from one task to the next. Using passageways between spaces to share information and transfer knowledge.

Building for Effectiveness, continued

As the new department took shape, the spaces earned names — not just to explain their purposes but to make them destinations for those purposes.

Reference materials and display technologies reside in the Trading Post, for instance, which sits beside the interactive public area known as the Knowledge Gallery. The group's central gathering spot is the Information Promenade. Mentoring and Coaching Nooks give staff a place to meet one-on-one. The Campground gives part-timers and contract employees temporary workspaces to plug in and work.

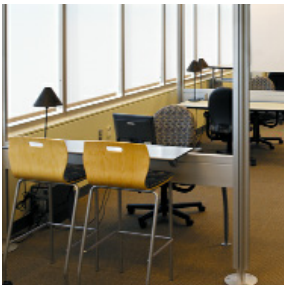
It's all about diverse spaces for many different needs and styles of work — collaboration and concentration, visible and private, planned and unplanned, permanent and temporary.

us to realize that we need to function differently," says David Wood, manager of the department's Languages Institute. "The whole discovery phase and the findings helped us to create an environment that supports the way we need to work."

Team leaders note a more relaxed atmosphere and team cohesiveness, which is reflected in results from employee satisfaction surveys: 87% believe the new workplace enhances their effectiveness, up from 33% in their old setting; 98% are satisfied with their access to relevant colleagues and 95% are pleased with space for formal and informal meetings. Even students are noticing a difference, saying the new space gives them a better opportunity to get to know instructors.

"From an institutional perspective," says Eifert, "when I look at the number of people that are accommodated in the space and consider the actual space allowance given to them, it's ended up being a very efficient and cost effective use of space."

"People seem to be really proud of being able to work in this innovative and creative space."



◀ campground

collaboration ▶



all in favor

Given the strong hand they had in creating their workplace, it isn't surprising that International Education staff members are raving about their new home — and the process that brought them there.

"The space is forcing us to work as an entire unit, and it has also helped

The International Education space is now a showcase for visitors to Mount Royal. "People seem to be really proud of being able to work in this innovative and creative space," says Eifert, the Mount Royal VP. "That's reflected to the public and students who come into the area." It's a model for the way the college wants to present the way it works, she notes, and when you add that to greater effectiveness and improved morale, the investment has paid off handsomely.