

NCR IN SCOTLAND RETHINKS WORKPLACE DESIGN

by John Southerst



In a brand-new research facility at the gates of the quiet, historic city of Dundee, Scotland, a remarkable building marks a seminal change for workplaces and productive organizations.

Completed and occupied since December 2001, the four-story structure houses the Financial Solutions Group of NCR Corporation. It's the research and development arm of NCR's manufacturing facility for automated teller machines, one of the key employers in this town of about 145,000 on the Tay Estuary, north of Edinburgh on the North Sea.

With numerous windows and natural light, plus an all-day café, the site's ultra-modern features represent the latest in enlightened workplace thinking. Inside, the open-plan design with movable screens and subtle post-and-beam divisions liberates and democratizes its inhabitants while gently directing them to various activities. Throughout, cables strung beneath raised flooring bring power and data to any desk or corner, giving the site a garden mentality: New teams blossom in one location as activity slows in another where projects have reached the end of their life cycle.

Pleasant, convenient workplaces are, happily, increasingly commonplace around the globe, especially in industries anxious to recruit and retain skilled workers. What is startling and unprecedented, especially for a facility of this size, is that the people who occupy this site played a huge role in planning it. The NCR Dundee research facility is a milestone in workplace self-rule. It is a working community — with a community-based plan. Until moving into the new building, NCR's R&D group was housed in the manufacturing facility, just a fairway shot away across the NCR campus. Built in the post-war years, the plant eventually won NCR's mandate to design and develop ATM products. But success was a double-edged sword: As software and engineering resources grew, their common living arrangements with the manufacturing side of the business became more and more unsuitable.



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).

NCR in Scotland, continued

Few windows, outdated heating and ventilation and unimaginative cubicle pods made for a stark environment. It certainly wasn't the best milieu for the innovative and technologically savvy workforce of 1,500 inhabiting it. Worse, it didn't make a contribution to knowledge sharing. "Our old environment inhibited the cross-fertilization of knowledge," says Gill Tulloch, head of software development. "I found that on average, our projects were delayed a month because we couldn't get meeting rooms when we needed them." Nor did it suit the project-oriented focus of product development work.



"Our business changes very fast," says Ray Robertson, NCR's head of facilities management. "There are always new projects emerging and old ones coming to fruition."

Shifting patterns of work and personnel were taking a toll on everyone. "I couldn't count how many changes of layout we did in a year," says Robertson. Each time, it took hours to move partitions and cubicles and rewire for electricity and communications. The impression was growing within the NCR management group that the old building was standing in the way of product-development teams, disrupting the road to market.

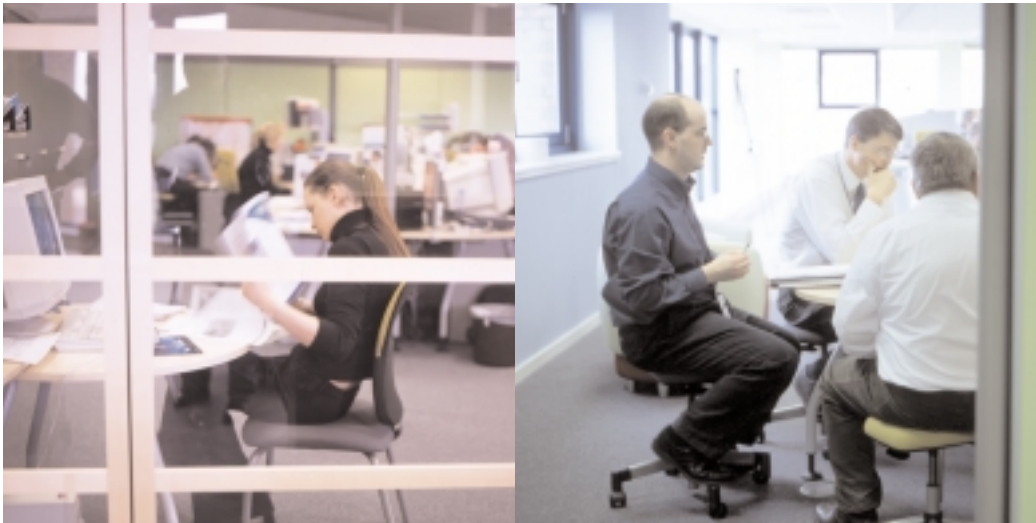
"We needed to be more productive," says Mark Grossi, the chief technology officer for the Strategic Solutions group. "If you can get spontaneous discussion, then you can get innovation, and that's all about environment. Clearly, the way we were going to achieve our goals was through a flexible environment that contributes to easy communications in many different styles of work."

And so the decision was made to build a new structure. It's just a five-minute walk from the old one, but the proximity ends there. A football field in length, one floor of laboratories and three floors of open-plan office space spread in two wings from the central service core with few interior walls. Bright green and blue décor, accents and fabrics announce NCR's newfound vitality and openness. The communications technology speaks — as it were — volumes. Data ports are everywhere. Some workers carry wireless phones that link into the office environment. Projectors abound. Smart boards digitally capture notes from brainstorming sessions. And movable furniture and touchdown spaces throughout let people gather where they work — and work where they gather.

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But such a wildly different way of working needed buy-in — and that's why NCR latched onto the concept of Community-based Planning offered by Steelcase. Community-based Planning is driven by business objectives and uses instrumental input from the people who actually occupy the workplace. The process garners information through observation, surveys and feedback sessions. It uses newly created software tools and network analysis to make sure the people who will use the place have a say in its planning and design in order to meet the organization's needs. In short, to build a community with various kinds of space for the work being done.



Using these techniques, “we gathered insights and findings to take back to the leadership group,” says Frances Graham, the account manager at Georgeson Office Interiors, the local Steelcase dealership. “This building was an investment in their business, in their future. NCR wanted to be able to attract — and keep — the best talent. They wanted to provide the best people with the best type of environment.”

“This project led us into quite a different role with NCR,” adds Graham. “As we started planning out the space, the company’s leaders realized we understood their business, and we gained their confidence.”

When the move finally came, it was accomplished without missing a beat, thanks to the new building’s designed-in flexibility. “We lost zero time,” says Robertson. “We could now probably cope with any sized move over a weekend.” Reviews are still overwhelmingly positive: No one is more than 20 feet (six metres) from natural light, and each quadrant of each floor contains its own breakout areas with lounge seating. Glass-fronted “quiet rooms” are set up as private discussion areas for groups of three or six.

“Everyone is now being asked to work as part of a team,” says Robertson. “Communicating and sharing knowledge is a lot easier to do, a lot more natural than having to walk across a factory floor and it happens within the workspace, in the team space, in the informal space, at the photo copier, in the restaurant. So there is a lot of sharing of knowledge because the environment makes it easier to do so.”

NCR in Scotland, continued

Mr. Robertson believes measurable results will follow: more ideas and innovation from the engineering group, improved time to market for new products and, of course, greater employee satisfaction.

Meanwhile, NCR's Financial Solutions Group exudes a confident sense of self-determination. "Our success comes from defining in advance what our requirements actually were," says Robertson. "We didn't ask the usual real estate people or facilities people. We got down to the grass roots level and asked the people who matter, the people who were going to be using the building. And that was probably the key."

"One of the main reasons to move here was to create an inspiring environment," says Grossi. "Inspiration comes from being given the latitude to go and think and be creative. And this is what this environment is all about. It's supportive towards creativity and thinking. I'm a great believer in the environment contributing significantly to people's creativity and if you get the right environment — where people are happy — then they'll be creative. And I think that's what we've got here."

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