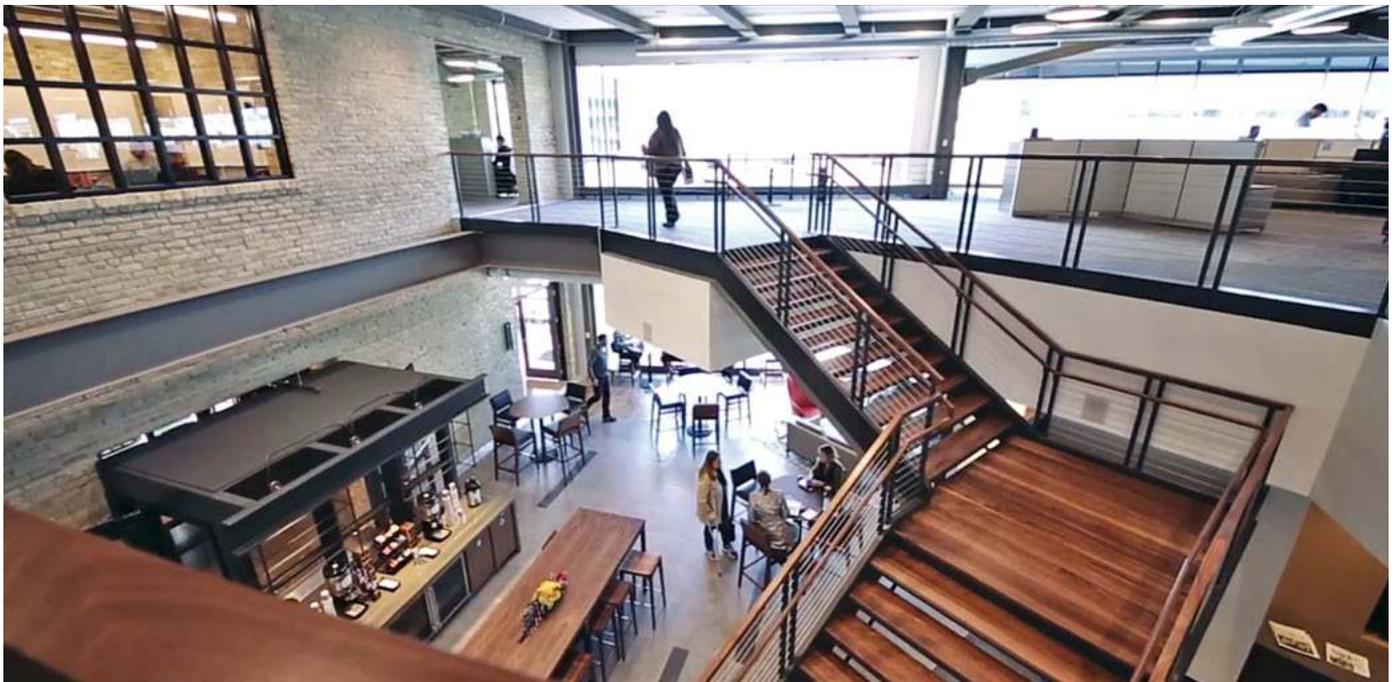


Creating Engaging Office Environments

How Planning and Design Can Support Employee Engagement

This article aims to clarify the goals of employee engagement and demonstrate the critical roles that planning, architecture, and management strategies play in your organization's ability to achieve these goals.



Employee Engagement

You *must* have engaged employees. You *must* drive innovation. You *must* attract and retain the best and the brightest from a diminishing workforce. You *must* foster collaboration to tap the full potential of your employees. After hearing all of these, you *must* be thoroughly confused.

Even as students of workplace trends and strategies, my colleagues and I in the PRA Corporate Studio sympathize with our clients who have heard all of this before but are wary of the generalized goals and unsure of the methods to achieve them. This article aims to clarify the goals while proving that you don't need to choose which of them to address. They are all closely integrated, and by successfully attacking each of them, you improve your score on all of them. We will also demonstrate that while management strategies are most important in determining your organization's ability to achieve these goals, facility planning and architecture play critical roles.

Background

A recent study entitled "Employee Engagement: The Key to Improving Performance" by Solomon Markos concluded:

"Engagement is about passion and commitment - the willingness to invest oneself and expand one's discretionary effort to help the employer succeed."⁽¹⁾

That's heady stuff – easily recognizable as a worthy goal for any employer. Once achieved, employee engagement itself can drive innovation. But, if you look at the five most-important things an organization can do to foster engagement, you see that "collaboration" is third on the list:

1. Align work efforts with strategy
2. Empower employees
3. Promote and encourage teamwork and collaboration
4. Help people grow and develop
5. Provide support and recognition when appropriate⁽²⁾

Thus, the thesis that all four of the above goals are inter-related and co-dependent. Having the best and the brightest employees to work with is critical, but placing them in collaborative environments can contribute to employee engagement and innovation.

But we all know it's not that simple. A 2014 study of the global workforce demonstrated that base pay, job security, and career advancement opportunities are still the top three reasons employees cited for job satisfaction.⁽³⁾ We believe that once these basic needs are met, employers looking for competitive advantages have a plethora of strategies to reach the next level of success. The challenge is to sort through them, choose wisely, and then manage these strategies effectively over time; adapting, tweaking, jettisoning - whatever it takes - to keep the team performing at peak effectiveness.

Case Study

To demonstrate how we helped one of our clients navigate this challenge, we will examine the new Bader Rutter headquarters in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Bader Rutter (BR) is a business marketing agency previously located in a suburb west of Milwaukee. Since creativity and innovation are so critical to the success and growth of their business, they recognized the need to make radical changes to their physical environment – where it was located, what it felt like, how it functioned – if they were to compete for talent, cultivate engaged employees, increase collaboration, and drive innovation.

Their first step was to move out of the building they had occupied for many years in a remote office park and relocate to downtown Milwaukee. They chose to become the major tenant in a new office building composed of a 100-year-old manufacturing building coupled with a new, modern addition. The new office would accommodate 260 employees in approximately 60,000 RSF on 2 ½ floors.

Their primary goals for the space should sound familiar:

1. Attract and retain the best and the brightest employees
2. Increase collaboration and cross-pollination.
3. Become the premier business marketing agency in the world.

The third one may not sound exactly familiar, but if you substitute your line of business into the sentence, you can likely hear yourself saying it. It also implies that there is something amazing about the company that distinguishes it from every competitor – something innovative that their clients can find nowhere else.

Creating the Anti-Office

Our approach to the first goal above was inspired by the belief that employers looking to increase engagement of current employees or attract the best prospective employees should start by offering a consumer-like experience for everyone. Many companies still create “front-of-house” or client experience areas that differ significantly in quality and attention to detail from the “back-of-house” employee areas. Innovative companies strive to treat their current and prospective employees the way they treat their clients. At BR,

that goal led to the creation of an environment patterned on a boutique hotel, and in doing so, made the staff feel like there was no place they would rather be. Shortly after opening, one visitor summed up what the BR staff have been hearing a lot:

“I didn’t know if this was a hotel or an office!”

Key elements that contribute to the accomplishment of this goal:

- Creation of a standing height “Concierge Desk” in lieu of a Reception Desk (First impressions count!)
- Locating a large, two-story coffee bar in the center of the plan, complete with a central communal table, lounge and bar height furniture, and a riverside fireplace



Employee Engagement

- Work stations arranged in 120-degree pods in lieu of grids, with lounge seating dispersed throughout
- Lighting fixtures and levels more typically found in hospitality environments, including dimmable suspended discs, floor lamps, and decorative pendants

Collaboration that WORKS

There is not a business leader alive today who hasn't heard that collaboration is the key to success for their business. We're told that knowledge workers require it, Millennials demand it, and everyone is doing it. But collaboration literally isn't for everyone, and if poorly implemented, it can in fact be counter-productive. In their 1995 book, "The Knowledge Creating Company", Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi described the four modes of the knowledge based worker:

1. Focusing
2. Collaborating
3. Learning
4. Socializing

A successful business needs to recognize these four modes and provide the correct quantity and location of spaces suited for each of them, sometimes depending on the type of work in a particular department, (ie. Accounting vs. Creative), and sometimes based on the requirements of different individuals. (ie. Introverts and Extroverts.) At BR, we addressed this issue with the following design solutions:

- A 90% reduction in the number of enclosed offices, including the elimination of offices for the President and the CEO
- The creation of "Neighborhoods" of no more than 15 open workstations with 42" partitions
- The creation of small group collaboration spaces, screens and other barriers between the Neighborhoods to mitigate distractions
- In addition to a large, divisible Training Room, 4 War Rooms, and 5 client facing conference rooms, 1 dedicated conference room per department and one 1-2 person Focus Room per every 5000 sf. was provided, ensuring space for focus time if and when anyone needs it



- Creation of a central Work Café with a monumental stair and an indoor/outdoor space called the "Backyard" to encourage chance interactions, socializing, and collaboration, and even individual focused work in a more social setting

Walls that Speak

Bader Rutter is a communications company. Their business revolves around the use of words, images, and sounds to communicate something important about their clients' goods or services. To stay fresh and relevant, they create and innovate every day. To support this reality, their new space needs to be a canvas for their art – a three dimensional and changeable expression of what they do and who they are. The decision to use the boutique hotel as our "muse" for the space infused a strong message into the space, but there were many other



branding elements incorporated into the space, including:

- Each department entrance includes a custom-designed, 6' tall video kiosk on which to display anything that department or the agency deems appropriate. The initial concept was for the kiosks to feature a customizable Instagram feed as a way to celebrate the people and the team it represents, but the beauty of video allows for infinite changes to the concept.
- Walls were carefully planned and vistas choreographed to provide areas for long and short term branding and art installations to be seen from both inside and outside the building.
- Fully cognizant of the views from the street outside into the space, the studio created for monitoring social media was designed and oriented so that it can be seen by the cars and pedestrians outside.

Conclusion

The new Bader Rutter headquarters demonstrates how one company interested in attracting employees and improving employee engagement, collaboration and innovation accomplished those things at least partially through careful space design. As usual, not all of the approaches we used on this project would be appropriate for other clients, even in the same industry, and even the most amazing space design could not overcome poor management. But with this project, we proved yet again that motivated clients can transform their businesses with inspired design.

- (1) Solomon Markos, et. al., "Employee Engagement: The Key to Improving Performance", International Journal of Business and Management, Dec. 2010
- (2) Richard S. Wellins PhD., et. al., "Employee Engagement: The Key to Realizing Competitive Advantage", Development Dimensions International, 2005-2015
- (3) Towers Watson, "2014 Global Workforce Study", Aug. 2014
- (4) Center for the Built Environment, "Acoustical Analysis in Office Environments Using POE Surveys", July, 2007

Photography courtesy of Bader Rutter.



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