

NBS

commercial interiors

Why Space MATTERS

I arrived at NBS Commercial Interiors

armed with a few key pieces of information: (1) NBS provides health care, higher education, and corporate clients throughout Southeast Michigan and Northern Ohio with a wide range of workplace furnishings, floorcoverings, architectural elements, and technology tools. (2) The company provides space planning, technology consulting, and furniture and carpet cleaning to support the products it offers. (3) NBS is the largest Steelcase® furniture dealer in the Great Lakes Region.

While those facts are accurate, they're lacking the one element that makes NBS the unique, innovative organization that it is: passion. Passion for its clients, passion for its staff and their well-being, and passion for space. Above all else, NBS believes that space matters, and that belief is palpable throughout every square inch of its Troy headquarters and throughout the new space the company recently designed for its neighbor, Automation Alley. They lead by example and live what they do, and that's a significant differentiator.

A Brief History

NBS formed in 1948 as an office supply and business machine distributor. In 1976, the company expanded to include contract office furnishings and began its decades-long relationship with Steelcase®, the world market leader for workplace furnishings. In 1997, the founding family transitioned



On May 19, 2011, NBS held its annual Health Care & Higher Ed Vendor Fair. Forty vendors were on hand to display their products and services. The event also featured keynote speakers on topics such as Global Aging Trends in Healthcare and The Library of the Future, as well as office yoga demonstrations (yoga can be done in an office chair!).

ownership of NBS to two managers, including current President Rich Schwabauer. Soon after, Rich exited the office supply business and focused more intently on office interiors. Over the years, NBS made several acquisitions and expanded its product and service offerings within the business, healthcare, and education work environments. Notably, several of these occurred during the recent recession. "We saw the downturn as the right time to expand our product offering, hone our mission, and position for post-recession growth," explains Schwabauer.

Within the last few years, NBS acquired its Bay City and Lansing, Mich., locations, an audio-visual company, and a commercial carpet cleaning company. The company has an acronym that comprises its offerings: AFT, or architectural, furniture, and technology products. All three should be designed together, and each should support and reinforce the others within the architectural parameters of the space. "Some organizations might enlist three different organizations to help them with these three distinct product areas," says Schwabauer. "Our value proposition is to bring them under one roof so they can all work together, much like Plante & Moran has diversified into a number of industries and services to become a universal advisor for its clients."



Rich Schwabauer and Heather Lanier relaxing in Automation Alley's new space, courtesy of NBS. "Companies relocating to Southeastern Michigan come here to work before they have an actual presence," says Lanier. The entrance is welcoming (in 20 languages!) and features a collaboration space with tables whose tops are comprised of an expansive circular notepad.

Space...The Final Frontier

Companies that don't understand that space should work as hard as their employees are missing an important piece of the puzzle. "Business owners tend to focus on three things: attracting and retaining staff, building effective processes, and effectively leveraging technology," says Schwabauer. "What's missing from that? A space strategy. Space, when optimized, can be a driver for all three of those other areas of focus."

Historically, as staff members rose up in the ranks, they were afforded extra square footage, even though they might be occupying that space a mere 30 percent of the time. "Is that space working harder?" asks Schwabauer? "Absolutely not."

When it comes to space, Steelcase® research has concluded that business leaders focus on five key issues. They are:

1. People. "People are working differently," says Heather Lanier, vice president of corporate resources and marketing. "Research shows that about 80 percent of our days are spent interacting with other people. This often translates to fewer 'I' spaces (those for staff to be alone) and more 'we' spaces — from conference rooms equipped with high definition video conferencing to private enclaves where people can go and talk."

2. Real estate. Organizations are realizing that their staff — especially their millennial staff members — are working differently. Therefore, it's important to evaluate space differently. "People often equate space planning with space reduction," says Lanier, "and it can be. We often conclude that organizations need 10-15 percent less space, saving them dollars toward their bottom line. However, just as often, the answer is a reallocation of that space, adjusting it to support one's work processes and ultimate goals."
3. Attracting, engaging, and retaining talent. Research shows that technology is a given for millennial (Generation Y) staff entering the workforce. Flexibility is key as well, as the staff are used to working wherever/whenever (thus, more "we" spaces are important). If your space doesn't support these requirements — let's say your office is comprised of 65" grey cubicles, for example — odds are these staff will head elsewhere, even if it means less money.
4. Reinforcing one's brand. A lot of companies do a good job of conveying their brand in the marketplace, yet their facilities are completely generic. This is a missed opportunity to reinforce to recruits and current staff what your company is all about. When you walk into NBS, for example, it doesn't look like "Anyorg U.S.A." In fact, you walk into the company's café, a very deliberate technique designed to promote collaboration and camaraderie among both staff and clients.
5. Wellness in the workplace. This goes beyond ergonomics to how the work environment can support staff from a wellness perspective. NBS, for example, subsidizes the cost of a yoga class each Monday. "A lot of FORTUNE 500 companies have workout facilities," says Schwabauer. "We had to determine how a company like NBS with 125 staff that's trying to attract the same pool of talent could differentiate ourselves." Something else that's rather unorthodox: the company also subsidizes healthy snacks. "A bag of pretzels is \$.25," continues Schwabauer, "but if you want a candy bar, you've got to pay the full price."

Traversing the “You Rock” Wall

Turnover at NBS is nearly nonexistent, thanks to some rather innovative practices. First and foremost, the “You Rock” wall, a wall composed of staff acknowledging other staff for assistance or a job well done. “It could be anything from helping to fix the copier to loading boxes into a co-worker’s car to staying extra hours to finalize a proposal,” says Lanier.

“We incorporate a lot of the principles from the Disney Institute,” says Schwabauer. “One of them is that you should treat your internal customers the same as your external customers. We constantly strive to go above and beyond no matter who the ultimate customer may be.”

NBS also believes in having fun at work. They have a “traditions team” whose sole function is to recognize and reward. This results in everything from ice cream Thursdays (sometimes they even take the Good Humor truck out to clients!) to the summer picnic to the recent “blender bash” where staff concocted a variety of interesting drinks to responsibly enjoy as part of a happy hour.

Even staff name plates are unique at NBS. Rather than just listing one’s name, they also include job titles and interests. For example, Rich Schwabauer’s says, “I’m the president; my daughter is in to equestrian activities, and my wife and I spend a lot of time taking her to horse shows.” Heather Lanier’s says, “I enjoy spending time with my children (ages 5 and 3) and my husband and laughing about something every day.” This is a great way to connect not only with other staff but also with clients.

NBS’s Newest Client: NBS

In late May, NBS began a renovation to its headquarters facility in Troy, Mich. “We’re a different organization today than when

we moved into our building in 2004,” says Schwabauer. “We have expanded services, new products, new technologies—it’s time to embrace all of this change to our benefit.”

The company is currently organized by disciplines to enable easy collaboration. (All designers sit together, all project managers sit together, etc.) “Going forward, we’ll be organized according to cross-functional teams we’re calling ‘neighborhoods,’” says Lanier. “One might be health care, another higher education, with the idea that having sales support, designers, and project managers together can solve our clients’ issues more quickly, get things done more efficiently, and provide a better experience for staff and clients alike.”

Although NBS won’t premier the new space until an open house on September 15, those interested in seeing the progression can follow along at navbus.com/neighborhood. This idea of online renovation is one Schwabauer plans to roll out to clients in the not-so-distant future. “Now we have the technology to show clients in 3D what their work space could look like, and we can show the progression step-by-step online so that they can share the development with their staff and clients.”

It’s one thing to say “space matters”; it’s another to live it, and Schwabauer sets the tone at the top. NBS staff are all very passionate about their business and doing the right things for their clients and each other. Stop in for a visit. I’m betting that you, too, will leave feeling differently about the importance of a work environment and the impact it can have on your company’s goals.

This feature on NBS was written by Plante & Moran’s Mindy Kroll.



Here is Automation Alley’s high-tech conference room. Visiting companies often use it for interviews or to put together business plans. The room is set up for eight people to plug in their laptops and share information simultaneously.