

a customer story

professional services

Building demonstrates how workplace contributes to success



Smith Carter

Architects and Engineers

Credits:

bf workplace

Smith Carter

In many places of business, managers frown at employees heading to the beach for the afternoon. But at the prominent Winnipeg architectural engineering and design firm Smith Carter, it's part of a day's work. The same goes for a stretch in the skybox or a spell at the elbow bar.

The professionals in this firm, leaders in their field, are not sunbathing, catching a ballgame or hoisting a pint. They are collaborating on highly specialized design projects in a building featuring advanced concepts that assist in growing intellectual capital, enhancing and sustaining creativity and developing an agile organization.

"The "beach" is project-based studio space with a proliferation of meeting areas, shared layout tables, reservable workstations and videoconferencing facilities. The "skybox" on the upper floor

features multipurpose furniture, breakout areas with games for casual get-togethers, secluded training areas, a quiet room and, facing a wall of windows, an "elbow bar" ideal for reviewing project files. These advanced design features play a mission-critical role in Smith Carter's business strategy.

For Smith Carter, the ground-breaking head office project started when its leadership recognized the need to develop specialized and high-margin expertise to win the engagements it coveted with global organizations – projects requiring innovative thinking and multi-disciplinary collaboration. But the strategy demanded changes in the way the organization interacted. Smith Carter's skilled professionals formerly worked in three buildings, but complex projects required not only integration and communication but also innovation involving research, learning and experimentation.

That's where the Steelcase Workplace consulting team came into play. "We chose to work with Steelcase and use their consulting process and applied research tools to help us make the explicit

"We chose to work with Steelcase and use their consulting process and tools to help us make the explicit links between our workplace and our business goals"

Esther Patzia
Principal, Smith Carter

links between our workplace and our business goals," says Esther Patzia, a Smith Carter partner who oversaw the project. "What Steelcase brought to the table was an understanding of how people interact and how organizations work."

Front and centre in the Steelcase role was its applied research methodology. This rigorous process began with focus groups and executive visioning to align goals and priorities, then accelerated into intensive studies of Smith Carter's work patterns and organizational behavior using methods such as network mapping and video ethnography. Through their research, the Steelcase consultants accumulated valuable measurements of current levels of employee satisfaction, internal network density and organizational health with respect to innovation, decision making, communication, learning and work process.

Working closely with Smith Carter ownership group, they then turned their attention to applying the research. To guide them, the visioning process had identified clear organizational priorities for the project:

- To enhance and sustain creativity
- To grow intellectual capital
- To develop an agile organization.

Smith Carter management also based the project on substantial financial expectations. The new 50,000 sq. ft. building is anticipated to be worth \$30 million to the company over 25 years based on net present value. That is, it will realize gains of more than three times the projected cost of construction, furniture and new IT systems.

Targeting these ambitious goals, the project needed to draw on insights specific to Smith Carter – the applied research conducted by the Steelcase Workplace Consulting team. As a result, the new building turned many workplace design concepts on their heads. Instead of reduced space per employee, it nearly doubled to 450 sq. ft., much of it shared, like the beach, skybox and elbow bar areas. CEO Scott Stirton now happily occupies an open, accessible space similar in size to that of his staff. Personal workstations feature individual task lighting and thermostat controls.



Flexible furniture solutions enable collaboration and communication both inside and outside the building.

Referred to as a “Green Beta Site for Serious Play” – a reference to meeting the highest environmental standards, its role as a testing site for new materials, technology and design concepts, and its linking of play and innovation – the building's impact was soon apparent, notably in contributing toward achieving the project's stated goals:

To enhance and sustain creativity

- Post-completion survey results identified improved employee satisfaction in many areas staff had identified as most important to their performance.

Performance Factor	Satisfaction Improvement
Quick access to information	11%
Quiet space/ privacy when needed	37%
Access to right technology	13%
Right furniture and tools	26%
Spaces for sharing and exchanging ideas	23%
Natural light	12%
Helps productivity	26%
Helps communication	19%
Helps effectiveness in job	15%
Helps creation of new ideas	17%

- Smith Carter executives say the space has been instrumental in winning major projects.

To grow intellectual capital

- Work studies showed the “learning” component of organizational health improved into the “normal” range (62.5%) from a previously below-normal level.
- More internal training sessions are taking place due to better meeting spaces and technology support.
- In performance reviews, employees speak of spontaneous transfer of knowledge and easier access to senior knowledge experts.
- Five key hires over the last 24 months are at least partly attributable to the new building.

To develop an agile organization

- Work studies also showed the “decision making” component of organizational health improved to an “optimal” (97%) level from a “normal” (85.5%) level.



The Skybox on the upper floor features a variety of settings that accommodate formal and informal meetings, training and contemplative work. The space also includes breakout areas for casual get-togethers.



- Overall employee satisfaction has risen 75 percent over pre-move levels and productivity jumped three percent, attributed to a more flexible work environment where employees plug in or use wireless technology virtually anywhere.

Employees are still learning to use the space to its full advantage, cutting down on personal resource materials and experimenting with different configurations. Central archiving of reference materials and group protocols are helping and, gradually, people are welcoming the freedom granted by the common areas.

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Anecdotally, the new facility is also achieving its purposes. "We see more collaborative work sessions, more work on display and under discussion," notes Ms. Patzia. "Productive conversations happen at the coffee stations and in the library. People are happier across the board, and I see us getting better results faster."

The new workplace also became both laboratory and test site for sustainable design practices, flexible workspaces, new materials, and collaborative environments. In doing so, it presents the public face of Smith Carter to clients, employees and new recruits.

"It works on two levels," says Ms. Patzia. "Our building increases visitor's confidence in us and gives us an edge over our competition, and prospective employees are given an immediate message that we care about them and the environment in which they work."



Consulting tools/methods:

- Executive Visioning
- Network Analysis
- Workplace Satisfaction
- Observation (video ethnography)
- Employee focus groups
- Collaborative Design Translation

Products:

Steelcase: Montage[®], Answer[®] Panels, Pathways[®] Post & Beam, Universal Overhead Storage, Leap[®] chairs, Leap[®] WorkLounge, Cachet[®] Chairs and Stools

Steelcase Wood: Relevant[®] and Unison[™]

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Vecta: Werndl Freewall, Emerge[™], Wilkahn Nuvolas; Confair[™] tables, Kart seating, Please chair

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