

Agnew Moyer Smith, Inc. Innovates Office

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After more than 20 years of business, the communication design firm Agnew Moyer Smith Inc. (AMS) was beginning to fight its space. Designed just as computers were entering the industry, the space didn't support mobile computing well. It had also failed to keep up with the firm's evolving team structure and processes.

OBJECTIVES

A CLEAN BREAK.

When AMS learned of a new clear-span loft building on the Monongahela River in Pittsburgh, the firm seized the opportunity to start with a clean slate. But if the move were to pay off, the new space would have to serve as a greater catalyst for AMS's work process. As a firm whose product is information, AMS depends entirely on how well its knowledge workers create, collaborate and communicate.

“We needed a workspace to support what our people really do day to day.”

DON MOYER | AMS Principal

AMS's work processes stress a free exchange of ideas, frequent brainstorm and working sessions, and peer critiques. AMS is also known for its hospitality—a necessity when clients stay for a day or more, fully immersed in the work process alongside staff. Clearly this culture called for a design process that could look closely at how the firm works, and then create space to support these processes. Understanding this, the firm's interior designer, Michael Fazio of Archideas, suggested that Steelcase's Community-based Planning (CbP) tools could connect AMS's collaborative business goals with their space. And CbP's collaborative process fit the AMS culture like a glove.

“Our workspace has to help us explore concepts and explain things to each other, but it also has to explain AMS to our clients when they come here—to reveal a true sense of who we are and how we work.”

REED AGNEW | AMS Principal

SITUATION

THREE UNIQUE CBP TOOLS.

Archideas began by making a series of extended visits to AMS offices to gather information and to begin the actual design process together with AMS staff. They used three unique CbP tools, designed to build spaces that achieve business results.

1

Observation: Using techniques developed by social anthropologists, the design team “lives” in the space to see how work really gets done. The team doesn’t simply compile an inventory of what’s there—they also seek to understand what’s missing by focusing on the patterns of interaction and the movement of people and information.

2

Network Analysis: Using an electronic survey that maps a company’s informal human networks, CbP creates reports that identify the relative strengths and weaknesses within those networks. These reports reveal who the “go-to” people are, how decisions are made, how structured or loose work processes are, etc. The network analysis focuses on enhancing five critical work issues: innovation, communication, decision-making, work process, and learning. This analysis reveals essential relationship-based insights that an organizational chart never could.

3

Co-design: Using structured exercises, the design team brings the space’s future occupants directly into the design process. They are asked to articulate ideas, identify needs, set priorities, and brainstorm solutions together with the designers. Network Analysis helps select the most appropriate participants from all staff levels, especially those who have the most connections to and the most influence with others.

The Power of Networks

All corporations have formal lines of communication based on official hierarchies, and informal networks based on social ties. “These informal networks are self organizing structures held in place by relationships of trust,” says Karen Stephenson, a cultural anthropologist who has pioneered the study of social networks in organizations. She has shown that understanding them is essential to strengthening communication and collaboration. Steelcase’s network analysis tool is based on Stephenson’s research.

What did the tools reveal about how the workplace could help AMS achieve their business goals?

For one thing, the Network Analysis results revealed opportunities to influence innovation and work process. The social network at AMS was very strong, but that doesn't necessarily mean it was healthy. While innovation is a social activity, not all socialization is productive or leads to innovation. Tightly knit networks may signal group isolation and a lack of diversity. Network Analysis helped the design team identify groups that needed more interaction with other functions within the company, opening channels for more diversity of ideas and shared learning.

The Network Analysis tool also revealed a highly structured work process at AMS. While this gives people clear direction, it can also limit innovation if people become entrenched. AMS wanted to keep work processes clear — but at the same time encourage people to innovate, embrace new ideas, and take appropriate risks.

Overall, Archideas, AMS, and Steelcase identified three key business issues that the new space would address:

1. Expressing the AMS brand by making work visible, and by showcasing thoughtful workplace innovations.
2. Fostering the sharing of ideas to support innovation and learning.
3. Supporting effective work processes and diverse work styles.

Archideas' final design, organizes 16,000 square feet along a continuous corridor; no function is more than a few steps from this "Main Street." While the space is slightly smaller than AMS's previous office, workstations have an increased number of features, there is support for a more diverse range of work styles, and the ratio of individual to team space has been increased from 30% to 55%. So how did this solution fulfill each of the three key business issues that Archideas and Steelcase identified?

EXPRESSING THE BRAND.

AMS's expertise is communicating complex and important messages by making information visual, easy to navigate, and easy to understand. The firm's principals wanted clients to see and understand this when they visit the office. Said Reed Agnew, "Once you understand what we are able to do, the methods we use, the value we deliver, and the fact that we do it reliably, time and again...then you understand the AMS brand. We asked the Archideas team to find a way for our space to communicate this."

The solution Archideas developed with Steelcase responded to this need on two levels: explicit and implicit. They created opportunities to display completed projects by providing large, interchangeable boards along Main Street. These displays enable AMS to explain their work to clients in the relaxed context of an office tour. Archideas also worked with AMS to plan a display of twelve LCD screens in the Square showing AMS work as well as snapshots of AMS work process and culture. When complete, the screens will reinforce the AMS brand to clients as they arrive or while they relax between meetings.

In addition to these explicit messages, the solution helped reveal the AMS work process and the implicit statement it makes about the AMS brand.

“The differences have been immediate and apparent. We see more collaborative work sessions, clients spending more time here, more work on display and under discussion. Productive conversations happen at the coffee station. People can get quiet time. Across the board, I see us getting better results faster.”

DON MOYER | AMS Principal

The Square, an informal meeting and hospitality area, uses Coalesse Detour lounge seating to provide a clean, comfortable aesthetic. Cachet chairs support the relaxed atmosphere.

Modular, interchangeable tack/write boards are integrated throughout the space to make the AMS process visible. (The boards are also easy to remove and store when sensitive client information must be concealed.) Archideas also achieved a high degree of transparency throughout the space. Team neighborhoods feature an open plan in which Post and Beam organizes the space, supports lighting, and routes utilities. Enclosed spaces such as project rooms feature openable sides and distinctive corner windows. Wherever clients look, AMS thinking is on view.

Informal, considerate hospitality is also important to the AMS brand. One example is the Square, where reception and lunchroom functions blend. A central, high-bay space with comfortable Metro Detour seating, Cachet chairs, and refreshments, it creates a true commons for staff and visitors to cross paths and enjoy casual conversations over coffee.

FOSTERING IDEA-SHARING.

AMS is organized into seven functional groups, which AMS calls discipline teams. For example, a Project Management team manages budget and schedules; a Design team creates the form and structure of solutions, and a Software Engineering team develops code for interactive products. Each new project is assigned a project team, made up of specialists from the discipline teams who work closely with each other and the client throughout the project. A project team typically stays together from as little as a month to as long as a year.

The CbP exercises confirmed what AMS suspected: people within a project team needed easier ways to work together. Multimedia presentations were practical only in one high-demand conference room. Casual meeting spots were not available throughout the space. And computer network connections were limited to workstations, so that meetings involving computer information became impractical.

In the new space, Archideas placed a much greater emphasis on collaborative space, increasing the ratio of group to individual space by more than 80%. They created spaces in a range of sizes to suit different needs, and worked with AMS to create a range of display and technology features to facilitate group work. A wireless network and movable display boards mean that thinking is now portable; teams can quickly move their information to another space as conditions change. Now any size team can count on finding the space they need when they need it.

Archideas used CbP tools to resolve a longstanding AMS debate. Was it better to have discipline teams sit together, or project teams? The old space was a mish-mash, and strong opinions ran both ways. But network analysis revealed that while some overall networks were strong, discipline teams that were scattered had weaker networks. Observation confirmed that members of these teams were less aware of what fellow members were doing, and weren't learning from each other as much. These insights settled the debate. AMS decided to seat each discipline team together in order to strengthen team bonds and to increase the sharing of knowledge and learning. Because adjacency doesn't ensure communication, islands for stand-up meetings and peer reviews were integrated with Pathways Post and Beam in each team neighborhood.

SUPPORTING THE WORK.

In AMS's previous space, the typical workstation was 8' x 10', with two very deep worksurfaces to support the large-format documents that were once more common to AMS's work. CPUs sat on the worksurface, dividing it and consuming its most useful area. It was difficult for two people to work together with papers, or to both see the screen at once. And much worksurface sat unused, or simply collected piles of documents.

The solution was smaller, more effectively configured workstations that support the way AMS works today. By getting worktools, piles, and monitors off the worksurface, people now have more usable worksurface in a dramatically smaller footprint. Steelcase's [Answer](#) system efficiently routes wires and cables to the worksurface, while a Details Slatwall lets each person configure their worktools individually. A Details swiveling monitor arm with a flat screen allows multiple people to view computer-based information.

Smoke mobile tables let staff subtly adjust the size and configuration of their space, and borrow additional worksurface to meet short-term needs. [Leap](#) chairs provide comfort and boost productivity over the long hours that AMS staff sometimes puts in. Team islands provide space for stand-up meetings, and their location at the center of a workstation cluster invites participation, eavesdropping, and idea-sharing. And as people's needs change, they can exchange worktools at the "trading post", a room of mobile furniture and worktools.

In every way, the new workspaces support the individual work process while opening the process to the constructive exchange that is essential to encourage new ideas and prevent entrenchment.

In addition to supporting the work process, the new design provided another huge advantage as well. Taking workstations from 80 square feet to 43.8 square feet opened up valuable space that was put to work as project rooms, conference rooms, and enclaves. As a result, anything that might not get done in the workstations—from deep solo concentration to boisterous group collaboration—can get done superbly somewhere in the office.

RESULTS

IMMEDIATE EFFECTS.

The immediate impact of the new space is universal. “I love to watch reactions as clients step off the elevator,” says Lorraine Bridy of the Support team. “They’re immediately drawn in. I can tell that they secretly want to wander off and explore.”

AMS’s new space begins to communicate the right messages to visitors as soon as they step off the elevator.

Principal Reed Agnew tells how a tour of the new space changed the perceptions of a longtime AMS client. “I took him into a project room where a complex project was underway. The walls were covered with detailed drawings and diagrams. He looked around, turned to me and said, ‘I had no idea you guys were into all these things!’ ” Sarah Williams, a marketing consultant and an AMS client commented, “I love to spend time with AMS at their new space. I enjoy the energy of the team, and I know that whatever I’m doing, I’ll be comfortable and able to focus.”

More importantly, positive changes to the work process were immediately apparent to AMS. There’s more collaboration, more opinions are sought and received, more thinking is on display. “We’ve rediscovered how much design can take place within a conversation, especially a whiteboard conversation,” said Don Charlton of the Design team. “And with two or three minds working together, it’s broader, deeper, better design.” Despite many new types of work environments, all of them were adopted immediately by the staff, and all remain busy.

“Our old space was a former industrial loft with wood beams and exposed brick, and everyone asked how could we leave behind all that historic charm. I confess to having wondered that myself. But from the moment I set foot in our new space, I’ve never looked back. It’s that good.”

NORM GOLDBERG | AMS Strategy Team

Ten months after AMS moved into the new space, the Archideas team and Steelcase came back to conduct the Post-Occupancy Network Analysis Evaluation. This tool allows the customer, the design firm, and Steelcase to measure the success of the project in quantifiable terms. The evaluation confirmed much of the anecdotal evidence. It showed that networks that encourage collaboration and innovation are now 14% healthier. Innovation measures are up 15%, and the effectiveness of work processes is up 37%.

Concludes AMS principal Reed Agnew, "Our space says, 'Wow!' Visitors can immediately see our thinking, our products, our culture. It increases their confidence. CbP helped us get here."

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Agner Moyer Smith

Agnew Moyer Smith helps businesses solve communication problems by making messages visible. Teams of knowledge workers apply a wide range of skills to projects. AMS builds sophisticated web sites, creates large-scale automated publishing systems, develops electronic learning curricula, and helps businesses build strong brands.

Archideas

Archideas, a Chicago-based firm founded in 1992, has built a staff of more than 25 professionals. It's a multidisciplinary design firm committed to creating insightful, imaginative, and enduring architectural, interior, and product solutions that meet the business objectives of its clients.

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