

Designing Joyea: Technology and Humanity in Harmony

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Joyea, an industrial automation company in Danyang, China, has a well-earned reputation for innovation and robotics evidenced by a steady stream of industry-changing technology patents. But this ability to continually innovate at Joyea is attributed to one of the company’s guiding principles: placing people at the heart of its business. When the time came to establish a new headquarters, Joyea approached Steelcase to bring their holistic vision of employee wellbeing to life. Together they created a work environment where creativity, innovation and healthy working lifestyles have flourished, demonstrating that when technology and humanity work in harmony, exceptional things happen.

Ten years ago, many Chinese companies defined their point of difference on the international stage by focusing on mass production, cost reduction, and selling products and services at highly competitive prices. But building a business this way leaves little room to address the quality of employee wellbeing; little scope to develop essential skills, enhance the overall environment, contribute to society at large, or deliver a truly sustainable business model. As Mr Wu, founder and president of Joyea, observed this landscape, it galvanized his belief. He saw that the Chinese companies who would take the lead, with a highly skilled and robust pipeline of future talent, would be those that genuinely cared for their people and invested in a holistic comfortable, healthy and rewarding employee experience.

Since establishing the business in 1992, Mr Wu has grown Joyea based on altruistic values. Joyea’s Chinese name translates to “just one” and is inspired by Taoist philosophy. “Tao is rooted in human nature - living with dignity and taking responsibility for ourselves,” Mr Wu explains. “Everyone longs for goodness and kindness, and desires to have a dignified life.”

This belief is a foundational value at Joyea, and the company has created an ethical business environment that encourages shared responsibilities and a culture of generosity, benefiting all employees, customers, business partners and broader society. It’s an approach that delivers results—Joyea is leading in its market, with more than 150 patents in the field of robotics, and many more applications in progress.

This concept of “doing good” is the bedrock of the company: machines can be automated to do production work, enabling people to pursue new knowledge and ideas, and innovate freely. As Mr Wu emphatically states, “Machines are replaceable, people and culture are not.”

FOCUSED ON CULTURE

Originally a packaging company, Joyea now works with its clients to custom-design their automated packaging and production equipment. The company offers packaging-line solutions for the pharmaceutical, healthcare and dairy industries, including more than 85% of the domestic market share in infant milk powder packaging. These are all industries that demand meticulous levels of hygiene and accuracy.

Joyea has 150 employees, with an average age of 29 years. Most come from highly advanced engineering backgrounds, with skills that are fiercely sought after in China’s manufacturing sector. The company’s attitude to innovation means that employees are encouraged to experiment—and face no penalty if their innovation results in losses for the company. They do, however, bear the responsibility for analyzing the outcomes and optimizing processes to prevent the same errors occurring in the future. In this dynamic, inventive environment, high levels of trust and responsibility rest with each individual. The organization relies on people thriving in their work. Many of Joyea’s policies promote generosity and encourage acts of kindness, care and consideration.

This approach is embodied in the company’s culture of sharing: education is paramount to Joyea’s philosophy. Employees are encouraged to upskill, pursue development, share knowledge and host exchanges of ideas and perspectives.

To attract, retain and cultivate talent, Joyea custom-built a new campus, “Wisdom park”, a workplace where employees do meaningful work and are proud to bring their families to visit. From indoor basketball and badminton courts to a gym and Olympic-sized swimming pool, everywhere you look, Wisdom Park promotes a healthy, balanced lifestyle. The campus hosts many visitors, with the aim of leading by example, sharing the lessons they have learned, and championing their vision for the future of work.

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MR WU, | FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT OF JOYEA

CHOOSING TO WORK WITH STEELCASE

“Every company in every country talks about innovation. But it’s about how our environment supports innovation,” says Mr Wu. To ensure that the new Joyea campus was the ideal workplace for his employees, Mr Wu turned to Steelcase to deliver on his vision. “Steelcase inspires people to thrive by creating healthy work environments that support innovative teams. They were the perfect partner.”

Thunder Ray, Steelcase Greater China Managing Director, remembers meeting Mr Wu for the first time and being inspired by his approach: “Mr Wu is a passionate and humble person. He was seeking to create a workplace and environment where his employees could gain respect and dignity—a human-centered place that didn’t compromise on performance.”

From the beginning, the brief was clear: the campus was to be an open and supportive environment that promoted employees’ ability to work creatively, innovate, think independently, communicate with one another, and develop synergy. It needed to encourage holistic learning and sustain a culture of sharing. Spaces needed to be easily personalized, to elevate an employee’s individuality and sense of belonging.

To approach a project of this scale, Steelcase brought together a multi-disciplinary team of experts from different countries. “The team came from different departments to contribute to the planning and delivery of the entire project,” says Michelle, Steelcase’s Shanghai-based interior designer. The team started by listening, observing and workshopping with Joyea leaders and employees to uncover their aspirations, needs and behaviors, and develop a vision for the new space.

“Once we had finished the workshop, our journey started,” says Michelle. We had to transform initial data into high-level findings, applications, scheme and material selection, graphic design, and soft furnishings...it has been a long, but incredibly rewarding, journey to get the space to where it is today.”

ESSENTIAL EDUCATION

As society changes, skills are renewed at a faster pace. To remain competitive, Joyea recognizes the need for continuous education and self-improvement, and sets itself apart by including education in its corporate culture and employee experience. Education at Joyea is centered around the 5Cs, which are considered essential to establishing an innovative culture: collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, communication and curiosity.

Joyea’s campus features training rooms and lecture spaces to support current employees, new team members and interns in developing practical skills and personal development. Practical skills training covers topics such as mechanics, electrical fittings, design, finite element analysis, simulations and negotiation. Induction training includes sessions on Joyea’s strategy, philosophy and values. Corporate management courses about procurement, human resources and marketing are also on offer.

Mr Wu is often invited by the country’s leading business schools to give talks, and he has spoken at Peking University, Southeast University and Nanjing University. There are plans in the pipeline to establish strategic partnerships with more institutions and MBA programs, so that Joyea can become a learning centre for their students.

Mr Wu believes that when a corporation interacts with an educational organisation, both parties experience the benefits. Educational institutions are responsible for offering students insights into the realities of the working world and the challenges they face. By collaborating with corporations, students are better able to adapt and learn more about new technologies and areas of development; while companies are also able to identify talent for their future workforce.

Wisdom Park has a range of training rooms to host these activities, Steelcase brought expertise in education spaces to the campus, optimizing each classroom for active learning. This allows learners and educators great flexibility to arrange the classroom quickly and easily transitioning between various activities – from paired or small group-work, ideation and problem solving to group discussion or lecture format. Active classrooms at Joyea are equipped with highly mobile furniture and a range of digital and analogue communication tools to let participants communicate and share information and perspectives readily with one another.

A SENSE OF PURPOSE AND PLACE

From integrated technology to workstations designed for wellbeing, an eco-system of hard working collaborative spaces, classrooms, a range of storage and more, Steelcase’s solution for Joyea was comprehensive. “I had never worked on a project with the scale of Joyea,” says Michelle. “It was more than 10,000 square meters; the first largescale project of my design career.”

The Joyea campus was zoned for different functions, and the Steelcase design team looked closely at how best to support the teams that inhabited each zone—not only with furnishings and systems, but also with décor. Color was applied to reflect the purpose and function of each space, as well as enhancing the natural light and existing architectural aspects of the building.

The idea behind the expansive design was to make it easy for employees to quickly and easily settle into their personal working rhythms, with all the different tools they need close at hand. “we wanted to create workspace that helped Joyea empower its employees to generate ideas and innovate, by effectively using different spaces, floors and settings,” says Michelle. “Some spaces may be physically separated by the building’s design, but they are emotionally connected with a harmonious and thoughtful approach to applications that support and adapt to various work modes.”

THE SOLUTION IN ACTION

Michelle, Steelcase’s Shanghai based interior designer, worked with a talented team to help Joyea redefine their workplace. Distinctive spaces capture the culture of sharing and the open-door leadership style of the company.

The Town Hall

With Joyea’s strong focus on community and team spirit, it was important to create a space where everyone—the whole company—could come together. The Town Hall meeting room seats upwards of 100 people and combines a custom designed, formal Chinese circular meeting table. Surrounding this central element, they introduced something new.

“Normally in China, these traditional round meeting tables are surrounded by rows of seats, for an extended audience, but this felt too passive for the culture at Joyea. We aimed to make the space welcoming, comfortable and open,” says Michelle, “By introducing mobile café-style tables and chairs we provide a much more comfortable, inviting and functional space. It supports note-taking and the use of technology, allowing more flexibility to adapt for different meetings.” It has opened the meetings up and it is now far easier for employees to join and actively engage, or step away when they need to without causing a disruption.

Mr Wu’s office

Mr Wu, has made his office a space for social interaction, focused work, and reflection. “It is not a big space,” says Michelle, “but it accommodates many different activities.” Modern leadership is about balancing privacy and personal focus with open-door cultures that echo a flat hierarchy. The space is designed for collaboration, with settings that integrate technology to connect Mr Wu with teams elsewhere on campus, and with clients across China. As Mr Wu is an avid reader and philosophical thinker, the inclusion of large custom bookshelves serves as a personal library—which he refers to as his learning corner—and encourages others to also pursue knowledge and new ways of thinking.

Directors’ offices

Accessible leadership is a cornerstone of how Joyea operates. The company’s directors worked with Steelcase to create offices that act as ecosystems, and can accommodate a range of activities and dynamics. “Early on in our collaboration we ran a number of workshops to hear exactly what employees and leaders were looking for in a space,” says Michelle. To ensure the team gathered valuable insights, workshops were targeted: one was on settings that support social connections, one was on collaboration, and on-site visits took place to effectively visualize the future space. It was clear that employees value the ability to talk and connect with their supervisors and directors—who in turn enjoy working with transparency and in informal settings. “Teams voiced their desire for open spaces, meeting rooms, and break-out café areas,” says Michelle, “this feedback shaped the final solution—the directors’ offices are welcoming spaces designed to transition between focused work and hosting lively discussions as well as moments of reflection.

DESIGNING FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

Overall, the Joyea campus is a revolution. Steelcase + Joyea continue to collaborate and host visitors there - it is fast emerging destination. A great Japanese ramen restaurant and other facilities for the community make this really much more than a workplace. “More and more Chinese companies are treating their work environments as an investment that can help them enhance their employees’ sense of belonging,” comments Thunder. “This is how companies are going to attract and retain the talent they need to gain an advantage over their competitors.” The new, open and comfortable working environment has improved efficiency and helped promote innovation and independent thinking at the company. “Steelcase designed and developed this solution from conception,” says Thunder, “and while it reflects the practical needs of daily business, more importantly, it reflects the important role played by the workplace in creating positive relationships between people.”

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THUNDER RAY | STEELCASE GREATER CHINA MANAGING DIRECTOR

This is true for Joyea, where employees are fiercely loyal. Mr Wu’s philosophies for working life make many feel as if they are part of a big family, not a business. Even past employees sing the praises of Joyea and use it as a shining example of progress and success for China—heralding a new future of work, not just for the community, but for the country.