

Taking the Lead

Read how a human-performance consulting firm has embraced palette of place to nurture employee wellbeing.

ERGONOMICS CONSULTING FIRM EMBRACES PALETTE OF PLACE TO NURTURE EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

Inside an unremarkable building in an office park in Ann Arbor, Mich., not far from Detroit, something quite remarkable is taking place: the largest professional ergonomics consulting firm in North America is reinventing its workplace and looking for new ways to meet the needs of its people and business.

It's a reinvention that had to happen. Humantech had seen their work change dramatically in just a few short years. Some were macro changes that all business were experiencing, such as a more global economy, highly mobile workers, rapid technological change and generational shifts in workstyles and worker expectations.

There were also changes in how the company operated. Their work became increasingly project- and team-based. Consultants traveled to client sites in North America and Europe so often that half the consulting team was on the road at any one time. A fifth of the company's employees worked out of other cities or was embedded at client locations. Employees were so mobile and distributed that teleconferences and online meetings had become routine.

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JAMES GOOD | President, Humantech

What hadn't changed was Humantech's work environment. It was ergonomically designed, as you'd expect, but it relied on outdated real estate strategies such as providing all employees with dedicated offices, spaces that were now frequently empty. Work had become more collaborative but there were few collaborative workspaces.

The company's own business model had changed, too. From full-time management consultants, Humantech had transitioned in a few years to equal parts consulting firm and software company.

Since Humantech works with many Fortune 500 companies, leadership knew they were not alone in dealing with change at so many levels. But their standing with these clients presented a challenge. “We’d positioned ourselves for a long time as workplace ergonomics experts. Now we felt that we needed to take the lead on other fronts as well: supporting mobile and collaborative work, providing a healthier and more desirable work environment, a place that attracts great talent and makes better use of technology. Our company and the ways we worked had been transformed. Now it was time to transform our office,” says James Good, president.

IT WORKS FOR TOMORROW, OR WE DON'T DO IT

Good and a team of five of the company’s managers sourced ideas and input from the staff to develop their workplace strategy. In addition to creating an environment that better supported worker mobility and made it easier for people to collaborate, they recognized the need to create space that nurtured employee wellbeing, beyond just ergonomics. This included creating private spaces where people could do focused work or escape to reflect or rejuvenate.

Most important was an overriding principle: “If it doesn’t support how we’ll work tomorrow, we’re not going to do it,” says Good, to emphasize an ability and willingness to adapt to future change. “The transformation of our work environment doesn’t stop when we occupy the space. It continues to evolve.”

For example, since 80 percent of workspaces are unassigned and anyone can use them on any given day, all worksurfaces are height adjustable so they support people in both seated and standing postures.

Good points to the company’s seating selections as “a metaphor for how we changed our business. Ergonomic seating used to be designed for time at focused tasks, orientation to the worksurface, that sort of thing. But people don’t work that way anymore. You work on a tablet or smartphone, you twist, contort and swing around. That’s why Gesture works so well.”

COLLABORATION EVERYWHERE

Collaboration spaces abound: in addition to individual workstation support for collaboration, several informal meeting spaces create flexible work areas for large or small groups; client presentation and conference rooms come in varying sizes and configurations; lateral files placed back-to-back offer stand-up spots for collaboration; casual collaboration happens at lounge spaces or in the company’s new WorkCafé, a combination cafe, workspace and meeting area.

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There's also a media:scape collaborative setting. "My favorite part is video collaboration," says Kent Hatcher, director of business development and planning team member. "No more projectors. No more Function F5. It's just so quick and easy now to plug in and show what's on your screen. It's a new way to interact and share information."

Buoy stools are a favorite because of how they support collaboration through ergonomics and mobility. "We get asked all the time, 'What do you think about sitting on one of those medicine balls?' We prefer Buoy, a really functional, well designed answer to that question: five degrees of static stability and then 12 degrees when you start getting leaning, yet it doesn't go beyond that. There's adjustability so that a big person and a small one can use the same buoy. It weighs 14 pounds. I can hand it to you. It's an amazing product, one of the killer pieces in our office."

On the other hand, Humantech realizes that mobile, collaborative workers also require places for individual focus and concentration, so the workplace includes five fully or nearly-enclosed quiet spaces. "Some people get their intellectual energy from a different type of space and it's our obligation to provide for that. Plus, it doesn't matter if you're an extrovert or introvert, people need privacy sometimes," says Good.

NURTURING WELLBEING

To evaluate its workplace ergonomics, Humantech used their Ergopoint® software "to make sure we didn't have any issues with discomfort or ailments that we hadn't recognized." But ergonomics are just one way this workplace nurtures wellbeing. Daylight floods the interiors and everyone has a view to the outside. Employees have a wide range of possible places, postures and workstyles. Sustainability is a way of life here: the project has received sustainability certification from the National Science Foundation (NSF). Similar to LEED, the NSF protocol uses a points-based system with certification at four levels. Humantech earned platinum, the highest level. The company is also just the third professional services firm to receive sustainability certification by NSF.

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FUELING THE COMPANY'S CULTURE

A workplace that supports workers, work processes and wellbeing not only boosts productivity and effectiveness, it also nurtures company culture. The WorkCafé, for example, is an ideal place for working, eating or meetings, but its most valuable contribution may be as a place that supports collegial relationships. Winnie Ip, director of consulting, and planning team member, says that after a recent two-week business trip she was eager to reconnect with colleagues. "I plopped myself in the WorkCafé and worked there the entire day because I wanted to see the action, people coming to get coffee, water, whatever. Even though I was still working it gave me that coffee shop vibe."

“Because I hadn’t been in the office it gave me a chance to basically say hello to everybody that day. Everybody is using it like that. One day I didn’t even sit at a workstation. And then by the third or fourth day when I was back into my rhythm I picked a spot and that’s where I can interact with the other consultants.”

The space is a hit with clients, too. “Clients used to come here and we’d work eight hours in a conference room that was not very comfortable. Now we can work in a room with couches and we have a much more intimate discussion with them, more of a working relationship than when you’re working across a table. Our clients are generally Fortune 500 and coming from corporate America, big grey boxes. They come into this environment and they’re blown away,” says Ip.

Meeting spaces, both formal and informal, include media:scape collaborative settings and whiteboards where employees can easily share information.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Humantech’s business is built on relationships, which are nurtured by this new work environment, itself the result of a relationship developed with Steelcase. “What drove us to Steelcase,” says Ip, “is the fact that they’re not a furniture company, they’re a research company. Humantech is a very science-based, research-based organization. The match between who we are as a company, and Steelcase, that really comes through in this space.”

Businesses, markets and industries change, talent and technology are more mobile than ever. In this fluid economy, Humantech uses its work environment as both a flexible asset and a firm mooring, a place that adapts to perform, attracts and engages people, activates its culture and burnishes its brand. It’s a work environment that will likely be widely imitated by companies near and far.

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