

It Started With A Fire

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In this issue of 360 we are celebrating several innovations that solve problems in new ways. In fact, we got our start more than 100 years ago doing just that.

For us it all began with a fire...and a car.

Working in offices wasn't always safe in the early 1900s. Buildings—made of wood and filled with paper—sprang up in cities, without a lot of thought about fire hazards...like people tossing cigar ashes into wicker wastebaskets. Which happened a lot. As cities grew, office fires became a serious problem.

Meanwhile, innovation in the early 20th century was fueled by the growing automotive industry. One new technology that emerged was the ability to bend and shape steel into a variety of new products, which was a big idea at the time.

And Peter Wege, an entrepreneur who was using this technology to make safes, had a big idea, too. He asked himself, "Why not make a metal wastebasket that won't burn?" No more fires ignited by errant ashes. It may seem like a simple idea now, but that's what innovation looks like: solving problems in new ways.

So Wege and a small group of disruptive thinkers in Grand Rapids, Michigan, created The Metal Office Furniture Company in 1912. At a time when most furniture was made of wood, Wege began exploring diverse product designs in metal, including the metal wastebasket. After creating steel file cabinets known for their sturdiness and quality (which also helped keep paper from going up in flames), the company eventually changed its name to Steelcase.

A lot has changed since then. Today, we are a company of makers, hackers, listeners, learners and global thinkers. We've created a diverse product portfolio—experimenting with all sorts of designs and materials that are never wasteful. We listen to people and observe how they work so we can deeply understand what they need today and in the future. But, through all these years, one thing remains the same—we put people at the center of everything we do and create innovative solutions that will help them love how they work.



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In her work at Steelcase, Christine is deeply focused on the role of physical environments in shaping the behavior of people at work. She is co-author of “Balancing We and Me: The Best Collaborative Spaces Also Support Solitude” featured in the Harvard Business Review and regularly writes and speaks about workplace issues for a variety of publications and conferences. Chris collaborates with leading organizations to help them rethink the strategic role of their physical environment and is a passionate advocate for the idea that organizations can leverage their workplace to help shape strategy, brand and culture.