

Global Strategy Achieves Local Success

Insurance broker Aon works with Steelcase to localize its global workplace strategy in Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Implementing a new global workplace strategy for over 500 offices in 120 countries is far from easy, but it is exactly what insurance broker Aon set out to do. Customer needs were changing, and Aon knew it needed to evolve to stay relevant in its industry. To define the company's ambitions for the future, Aon worked with various workplace designers, architects, and corporate real estate firms to create a global workplace strategy focused on enhancing collaboration, attracting young talent, and increasing space flexibility with activity-based working.

With a clear roadmap in hand, Aon sought out the Applied Research and Consulting team (ARC) at Steelcase to implement and localize the program at select offices. The effort, labeled the "Admirable Project," took off in the center of Rotterdam, Netherlands set next to the harbor.

EXPLORING THE FUTURE

To begin, ARC conducted interviews and a strategic work session with leaders to explore the company's goals. "Our ambition was to foster better collaboration to improve knowledge sharing and to seek or give help to others," describes Marianne Salomons, Aon's executive director of facilities management. "We also aimed to stimulate a creative way of working and provide more client focus and optimization of services to support our employees."

Users were also heavily involved in guiding the project outcome. Co-creation sessions with leadership, managers and employees focused on the key work behaviors the office wanted to foster. Connection, creation, and coaching arose as central elements for designing a space that bridged communication across cross-functional teams, made work visible and encouraged risk-taking.

ARE YOU READY?

To translate the goals and desired work behaviors into a workplace concept, ARC helped Aon gauge how ready the organization was for change. Three scenarios, each increasing in the level of change, prompted people to envision how their work would evolve. Leaders and employees selected the scenario they felt would best support them in their evolution which fed into the final design.

"By individual coaching of first-line management and through team sessions in which teams were challenged with the use of a 'readiness check,' the organization was prepared for the new way of working," says Salomons.

And people were ready. Users selected a more intense level of change than the leaders which was somewhat of a surprise to the ARC team. "It was interesting users were pushing for more change, says Annemieke Garskamp, a Steelcase consultant on the project. "That told us, people were on board and saying if the company was going to make a change, they should go all the way."

DESIGNING A CULTURE OF CONNECTION

Architect studio HofmanDujardin turned the vision into reality. The result is a layout that encourages sharing with seven desks for every 10 people. It offers a range of zones that cater to various work modes..The unite zone, a multifunctional space with an informal atmosphere, received extra emphasis to cultivate a culture of connection. As Salomons describes, “The unite zone is the heart of the floor. It is the place to meet, connect, work and socialize with colleagues and clients.”

Individual work and small ad-hoc meetings occur in the functional team zone where small enclosed rooms provide a place to focus and height-adjustable desks integrate wellbeing into the workday. The project zone offers dedicated space for project teams to array information, collaborate and shift the setup of the space as project cycles change.

To introduce the employees to the new spaces and ensure users knew where and how everything worked, local Steelcase dealer OCS+ stepped in to guide on-boarding. “We helped with a smooth implementation of all of the furniture,” says Meeuwis van den Hooven, an OCS+ account manager. “After each delivery phase, we organized instruction days to help the employees learn about and understand how to use the spaces and workstations.”

TRACKING FEEDBACK

Together with ARC, the leaders and colleagues of Aon designed an office that supports them in their ambitions for the future. The success of the space is echoed by user feedback during monitored floor talks where employees can voice their opinions. “We’ve received feedback that employees find it easier to share knowledge within their team, that the fresh environment provides more energy and that the unite zone is a nice place for workers to meet with other colleagues,” says Salomons.

Leaders are happy as well. “We have transformed our floors into bright and inviting spaces, mainly designed to support a flexible, effective and healthy way of working,” says Marc van Nuland, Country Manager of Aon in the Netherlands and a member of the EMEA Executive board. “Our Direction Board is proud of what we have achieved. Our offices are recognizable due to the Aon look and feel, and most importantly, everyone embraces the whole new way of working enthusiastically.”

To ensure the workplace continues to perform and meet user needs, all space types are tracked by a sensor system to monitor space utilization. Aon will also run an annual engagement survey with a section focused on the workplace. This quantitative data and qualitative feedback will aid the team in comparing pre and post-project results to track improvement regarding employee satisfaction surrounding the workplace, workplace behavior and technology.

A GLOBAL COLLABORATION

It took a large team to pull off the project, especially with Aon’s acquisition of Dutch broker Unirobe Meeùs Group during the process. In addition to changing the work environment and encouraging new behaviors, the merger transformed the project into an integration program. “With the new work concept, Aon was able to build the “new Aon,” says Salomons. “A joint new start in a new future-proof environment.”

To guide program management, Aon hired YNNO, a workplace and change management consulting company. “YNNO helped us change behavior by enhancing the organization’s capacity for change,” says Salomons. Aon and CBRE Project Management delivery teams also played a significant role and contributed a lot, which led to the decision for a further roll-out in other Aon offices in the Netherlands.

“I think the wonderful collaboration between all of the parties is what made this project so successful,” says Garskamp. “We see this more and more. Projects get more complicated as organizations get more global and distributed. Great teamwork among many specialists is crucial.”

Salomons also sees the collective nature of the project as the reason for its success. “We collectively developed the concept design for Rotterdam alongside Aon’s workplace strategy. This gave us an enhanced experience for Aon colleagues, as they had an external team with the experience and approach of ARC to guide them through some of the journey.”

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