

Small Business Bets Big on the Office

Employment services firm, Ballard Group, doubles down on physical space — proving that design can drive culture, collaboration and growth.

 Read 4 minutes

As some organizations continue to fine-tune their hybrid work policies, Ballard Group is doubling down on a fully in-office strategy and its conviction that the office matters more now than ever. The Alberta-based employment services and consulting firm believes the office is where culture comes alive, and this requires work environments designed to spark collaboration, strengthen relationships, and make people want to be together.

The company recently unveiled two new spaces in downtown Edmonton— a vibrant training and program hub in Energy Square and a corporate headquarters in Stantec Tower — designed to reflect its culture, fuel collaboration and prepare for future growth. For small and mid-sized businesses, Ballard's story offers a compelling case study: Physical space isn't just overhead—it's a strategic asset. And they have the data to support it: Ballard's employee net promoter score, a metric that measures employee satisfaction and loyalty, jumped almost 20 points.

For Ballard, the commitment to the office is not negotiable. Nearly all staff work on-site full-time, a policy made clear to job candidates from the outset. In return, leadership sees the physical environment as a key benefit — perhaps the most important benefit — in attracting and retaining talent.

"I have a strong belief that the physical space you work in really matters," says John Corie, Ballard's founder and chief executive. "Being together in person in a functional, high-quality, enjoyable, nice-to-look-at space is incredibly important. I think it's a competitive advantage, now more than ever."

Corie rejects the notion that remote work is the inevitable future. Instead, he sees the office as a differentiator, particularly for companies that thrive on collaboration and human connection. "We're very much an in-office culture," he says. "If we're taking remote work off the table, then the next most valued thing we offer is the space itself. The space itself becomes everything."

Ballad's core business is people. More than half of its work involves employment services — helping individuals, often with significant barriers, develop the skills they need to enter or reenter the workforce. That means classroom instruction, one-on-one coaching and group collaboration. In an era when adult learners can easily disengage, the company believes an inviting, energizing environment can make the difference between a student completing a program or dropping out.

A space for collaboration, learning and community

Before the move, Ballard's Edmonton staff were scattered across three downtown offices. "We were always siloed," recalls Sydney Gunn, director of Strategy and Operations. "Our consulting team was in one building, employment services in another. It was hard to build the collective vision we wanted."

Energy Square changed that. The Energy Square location occupies an entire floor — about 10,000 square feet — split evenly between staff work areas and training facilities. The front-facing side is dedicated to clients: bright classrooms of varying sizes, flexible furniture to accommodate different teaching styles, and a sprawling kitchen café that takes up nearly a quarter of the floor.

"The kitchen was huge for us," Gunn says. "When we did our design workshops, it came up over and over. People wanted a place to gather—just like in a home, where you can make connections."

"Flexibility was also key, especially in the classrooms. Every facilitator teaches differently, so 100% of our classroom furniture is mobile. You can go from U-shape to breakout groups in minutes," explains Gunn.

The result? A space that feels less like a traditional office and more like a learning community—one that inspires both staff and clients. "If you're inspired when you walk in, you're going to want to spend more time there," Gunn says. "And that leads to better outcomes."

Behind the scenes, staff workstations line the windows to maximize natural light. Enclosed offices hug the core, leaving open collaboration zones sprinkled throughout. Lead interior designer Lori Cox of Lori Cox licensed interior design Inc. says the design was shaped by a workshop that revealed just how much Ballard's teams valued working side-by-side.

"Collaboration was the number one thing," Cox says. "There's no large corner office here. The biggest room is the boardroom — and even that seats only about 10 people."

At a Glance

Ballad Group at Energy Square

Industry

Employment Services + Consulting Firm

Location

Downtown Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Square footage

10,000 sq. ft.

Number of employees

60 team members, with future growth planned toward 85 by 2026

Project Goals

Unite previously siloed teams
Create an inspiring, approachable space for adult learners
Support collaboration and community

Sustainability

Product choices support Ballard's B Corp certification

The Results

Net Promoter Score up almost 20 points after move-in

Dealer: [RGO Office Products Edmonton Ltd.](#)

Stantec Tower, a few blocks away, houses Ballard's corporate leadership and executive teams. Here, Ballard created a showpiece for leadership meetings and client engagements—a space that blends mid-century modern aesthetics with contemporary warmth. “We wanted a place that reflects who we are and where we’re going,” says Gunn.

The boardroom, for example, replaces the traditional long table with a mix of soft seating, a round dining-style table, and a sectional sofa. “We wanted it to feel like a living room,” says Cox. “Interviews, strategy sessions, even celebrations—it’s all about making people comfortable.”

A “Reflections Workshop” facilitated by Steelcase and local dealer RGO helped the company identify priorities: ergonomic seating, better access to natural light, spaces for both privacy and teamwork, and, above all, areas that brought people together.

Quiet corners and enclosed rooms offer refuge for focused work, while open lounges encourage spontaneous collaboration. “We designed for different work modes,” Cox says. “Because not everyone thrives in the same environment.”

Ballad's approach may resonate with other mid-size organizations. By working closely with local partners, the company was able to create spaces that feel high-end and are cost-conscious. “We just built a great team. They showed us how to be economical in some areas and invest more in others,” says Gunn.

Designing with purpose

Ballad's commitment to space goes hand-in-hand with its commitment to its values. The company is proudly B Corp certified—one of the few in its sector—and sustainability was a priority throughout the project. “We didn't want to create something disposable,” says Gunn. “We reused furniture where we could, and we asked every vendor about their sustainability story.” Steelcase provided data on recycled content and environmental impact, helping the company align its choices with its certification goals.

“It wasn’t just a nice-to-have,” Gunn adds. “It contributed to us achieving one of the highest B Corp scores in Canada in our category.”

Measuring the impact

Has it paid off? The numbers suggest yes. Ballard’s employee Net Promoter Score—a key engagement metric—jumped from 50 to 68 after the move, its highest ever. “The new workspace definitely played a meaningful role in that improvement,” says Gunn. “Happiness and wellness scores also climbed. People want to be here.”

Recruitment has benefited too. “When candidates walk into Energy Square, they’re like, ‘I want to work here,’” Gunn says. “In a tight labor market, that matters.”