

Globe Property Report
Wunderman reno series
Employee buy-in, Part 2
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Posters lined the office walls like billings for a summer blockbuster: Wunderman 2007: A Space Odyssey. The placards featured screen grabs from Stanley Kubrick's iconic film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, but with new taglines such as "The dawn of a new fridge in a new, clean kitchen." They marked Toronto advertising agency Wunderman's upcoming all-staff "town hall" meeting, held Feb. 22 at Varsity Theatre. The Odyssey? An office renovation.

That day, all 220 employees watched as management unveiled plans for the upcoming reno. With the Kubrick film soundtrack playing and the lights flashing, it was just like being at the movies. "The payoff was showing staff the 'wow' factor," says Lisanne Grady, director of client operations and senior vice-president. "They were very impressed."

The impetus behind the posters and the multimedia show was singular: get employees excited about the renovations, which include a shift from separate, closed offices into a more open, collaborative layout, "a change that can be quite emotional," says Wunderman president Trish Wheaton. "Our business is the manufacturing of ideas, and our 'equipment' is people, so if you're changing the way they work, you need them to buy into it and embrace the space. You need employee buy-in."

For some employees, embracing the space means more meeting rooms and open areas for teamwork. "We hold daily status meetings, and every morning we're running around trying to hijack a room," says account supervisor Sam Sakhavarz. "The new space will bring us all together." Sakhavarz says his co-workers are excited for the change because "we feel like we're part of the process. They're not just telling us what will happen, but asking us what we want."

Employee Amy Wood is also excited for the change. "I want to work in an office that reflects the business we're in, which is creativity," she says. "I'm from Winnipeg, and when my family visits, they're expecting a flashy downtown advertising agency, and then they see our offices."

Happy employees means less turnover and more productivity. "We spend more than 40 hours a week in the office, so you need to create a space that is comfortable, efficient and healthy," says Theresa O'Connell, vice-president of human resources at Redwood Custom Communications Inc. in Toronto. O'Connell says it's natural for employees to be fearful or anxious of a move or renovation, so the best route is to include staff in the decision-making process and to "keep employees from guessing about what's happening."

Encouraging employee input can be as simple as conducting paper and web-based surveys, as Redwood did before choosing and designing new office space. “We also held informal chats over coffee with every type of employee, and posted weekly updates online and in the kitchen,” says Ms. O’Connell. “I won’t say there weren’t blips along the way, but involving employees certainly made it a much easier road to travel.”

Redwood asked employees what they wanted in a new space, where they wanted to be—in this case, downtown Toronto near the St. Lawrence Market—and then office manager Loretta George led an employee team through the process of designing workstations and group areas. “Since the move, our turnover rate has dropped by more than two per cent,” says Ms. O’Connell.

Like Redwood, Wunderman also asked its employees for input, and then acted on their suggestions. For example, instead of simply buying new office chairs, Wunderman brought in four different chairs and invited staff to test and rate them. “We had huge participation and [staff] appreciated that we were asking for their input,” says Ms. Grady. “It was an easy thing to do.”

Other companies have taken similar approaches to office space change. Before marketing company Karo Design moved into new office space in 2005, management issued a survey and held one-on-one meetings with staff, asking what they would add to make the new workplace ideal. The response: more parking, better lighting and a Smart car that employees can sign out during the day or after work.

Other ways to get employee buy-in during a renovation or move: allow staff to choose paint colours, like Toronto-based publisher Thomson Carswell; and invite staff to design their own cubicle space, like Canadian PR firm High Road Communications.

Achieving staff buy-in doesn’t mean you have to ask for employee input on every single decision. “We sought input and then made decisions based on everyone’s behalf,” says Ms. Wheaton, “but this isn’t the Peoples Republic of Wunderman and move forward.”

Some companies don’t bother with employee input before or during a major decision such as a move or renovation. “It amazes me when I hear of companies that have Monday-morning move-ins, where the employees have no idea where they’re sitting or why the layout was changed,” says Don Crichton, vice-president of workplace solutions at design firm HOK in Toronto. “It causes so much unnecessary grief that could be entirely avoided if the employees were part of the process.”

Some companies don’t ask for employee input because they want to move quickly without slowing down for consensus. “It’s the too many meetings, not enough time mentality,” says Ms. O’Connell. “Or maybe they don’t want to hear the

answers, or worse, their mission/vision statements say they value their employees but in reality/practice, they don't really care."

Such narrow thinking can transcend a move and permeate the company culture. This is often the case at large companies, such as advertising agency McLaren McCann. When the company went through a renovation at its Toronto offices, "no one sat down with any of us during the change," says a McLaren creative director. "As far as I know, non-executives had no input into design or layout."

Adds another McLaren employee: "We aren't allowed to have our own lamps because they ruin the 'glossy' look of the place, the colours are reminiscent of baby poop and if we forget to behave ourselves, we can look at the stenciled words of wisdom in the windows."

Wunderman hopes to circumvent such grief before the first move-in date of June 22. "We're communicating updates through e-mail and recently embarked on a cleanup campaign called Thirsty Thursday," says Ms. Grady. "It's basically a drink cart. Start packing up your office and have a beer."