

Case Study: Workspring



→ Flexible audio system helps unique conference center cater to collaborative meetings. Converge Pro makes all the difference at Workspring in Chicago

The Scenario: What kind of collaborative meeting space is most conducive to strategic thinking, idea formation, and decision making? According to Frank Graziano, Principle Researcher at Steelcase Inc., it's a space with great views, natural light, fresh air, delicious nutritional food and a wide variety of meeting tools and technologies readily available.

"We've situated ourselves on a full floor in a historic block nested in the River North neighborhood of Chicago - a location that is a great intersection of business travel, businesses, entertainment and residential." Graziano led the design team of Chicago's new Workspring conference center, which is supported by its parent company Steelcase. The intent is to render outstanding collaborative experiences for off-site meetings. "We have been studying collaboration and collaborative meeting spaces for many years," he explains. "One of things we came to know is how much hard work it takes to do collaboration, and how tiring it is. So we've designed a space where people can step away from the workday world and develop fresh ideas."

Courtney Williams, Workspring Sales and Marketing Manager, adds that "traditional hotel space and company conference centers are rarely conducive to collaborative meetings. They are often suited well for larger gatherings, while our premise is to support or cater to groups of less than 35. "We've committed approximately 50 percent of the space to support communal activities and informal interactions," she says. "We believe we need to provide settings for meeting breakouts as well as supporting the social side of work."

Workspring consists of five studios and multiple communal areas. Studio 5, the largest, can seat up to 30 when set up, as it normally is, with tables and chairs. Studio 2 normally seats up to 18, Studio 1 up to eight, Studios 3 and 4 just six or eight. There's also a Cafe, intended for welcoming and food service, a Forum for individual or small group work, an Oasis for sitting and discussion, and access to a private courtyard. "We continue to explore the best ways to creatively serve our guests," Williams adds. The collaborative space at Workspring in Chicago is a prototype, but it's not the first Steelcase has built. "We built an internal conference center in Grand Rapids in 1997 that was our proof of concept," Graziano says, "and we did another in 2000 which was our Learning Center." The new space is the third in the series, though the first to be available to other organizations. "Our aspiration is to learn from this site and develop additional sites across the country," says Faith Hurley, Director of the Workspring Facility.

While the Workspring brand is designed mainly for strategy and brainstorming sessions, Graziano and Williams feel it can be great for training, sales team meetings, even negotiations or mediations: any kind of meeting where creativity and open discussion is important.



Productive technology: The technology at Workspring is a little different than most conference centers, whether corporate or rental. Studio 1 includes two permanently mounted 46" LCD displays, mounted on 'totems' that book-end a table top shape that is designed to optimize both person-to-person and person-to-information interactions. Mack Truax, Grand Rapids branch manager for AV integrator Bluewater Technologies, says "we used a Steelcase product called media:scape, which incorporates an intuitive user interface allowing up to eight users to switch their laptops onto the shared digital LCD screens." The interface allows the users to seamlessly share content. All of the studios encourage people to stand up, walk around and write notes on oversized whiteboards. These unique "Springboards," developed by Steelcase specifically for Workspring, include a movable clear overlay that users can slide over any drawing, note or pre-printed image posted on a board. "The overlays provide a way to add my input without altering another's work," adds Graziano.

Studio 3 also includes two 42" flat panels, here mounted side by side, while Studios 2, 4 and 5 have projection systems. Studios 1, 3 and 4 use the media scape interface to switch laptop inputs, but the largest, Studios 2 and 5, use Crestron touchpanels. As in any conference center, the ability to bring people into a meeting via teleconferencing is important at Workspring, and the three largest studios share an audioconferencing system based on three ClearOne Converge Pro 880T audio processors and on Converge Pro 12 x 12 matrix

mixer. This combination of devices provides audioconferencing functions, digital signal processing and 48 x 48 matrix mixing. Graziano says they plan to add videoconferencing later this year.

When the videoconferencing gear is installed, they will continue to use the ClearOne gear to handle the audio portion of each call. According to Bluewater systems engineer Kirk Griffes, "that's partly because most videoconferencing units will support only a limited number of microphones, but also because the Converge Pro allows us to maximize the sound quality, adjusting, in particular, incoming audio for the characteristics of the conference room and outgoing audio to the bandwidth limitations of the conferencing call."

Guests using any studio also have the ability to webcast from Conference Plus, WebEx, Live Meeting or Unyte, show Blu-ray and standard DVDs or play audio from a CD or an MP3 player. The public areas include AV technology as well. The Forum has three wall-mounted 19" LCD monitors, perfect for single-person use or groups of two or three. The Oasis has a mobile cart-based 42" display. Staff have the ability to switch video or audio from any source to any combination of displays and audio zones anywhere in the facility.

A nice feature of the ClearOne audio system is the ability to assign any of 16 Revolabs and one Shure wireless microphone to any studio or public space. Griffes programmed the touchpanel to make this very easy for staff. "The set up screens include a floor plan of the entire facility. You just select the mics you want for each room and the system takes care of the rest."

Challenges in the design: One challenge in designing the AV systems at Workspring came out of a decision to hang six Crown microphones from the ceiling in Studio 1, in order to make it possible to pick up any participant's voice in an audioconference, whether or not he or she is wearing a lavalier. "Echo cancellation is a particular challenge in this kind of setup, with the mics hung directly below the ceiling speakers," Griffes explains. "If you don't get it right, there's no way anyone is going to be comfortable on the other end." This was one reason he decided to use the Converge Pro product. "It has the best echo cancellation I've ever seen," he says, "and Studio 1 really put it to the test."

Another reason Griffes chose ClearOne was that they make the only tabletop dialer he could find. "It really seemed like overkill to install a touchpanel in Studio 1 when all we needed was a dialer."



But it was the system of programming macros that ClearOne includes that was the deciding factor. “We pushed this product to its maximum with the routing of microphones,” Griffes explains. “Each time someone pushes a button on the touchpanel to assign a mic to a particular room, several settings on the DSP have to change. For example, the DSP has to assign the correct echo cancellation reference to the mic. Using the settings from Studio 5 would not work well if the mic was feeding the telephone hybrid in Studio 1.” Though he says he might have used another system to perform these functions, the Converge Pro saved him many hours of programming time.

Truax adds that ease of use was crucial to the success of the facility. “It’s a public space staffed by people who are not AV professionals. The user controls had to be so easy to use that people who had never seen the system before could navigate through the basic functions. And the staff controls had to be simple to use and understand, too. The audio system we chose made a very difficult job relatively simple.”

Graziano says that the AV systems, like the entire facility, were designed carefully and collaboratively over the course of the project. “We involved a variety of partners early on in the process. We got

Mack and his team involved before we even had a site picked out. We talked in depth at a very conceptual level and then, once we had a site, we kept refining the model, so that by the time it was built it came in well under budget, with very minimal change orders.

“It’s a pleasure to have someone as gifted, talented and knowledgeable on the job, and it’s been a pleasure to use these very fine audiovisual systems as well.”