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WORK WITH ME

United Way employees experiencing the office of the future right now

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When Leslie Andrus arrives at the office, she doesn't plant herself at a conventional desk or in a cubicle.

Some days, the corporate relations director for United Way for Southeastern Michigan may choose a spacious booth with banquette seating and a second-floor sunlit view of downtown's Campus Martius, akin to a setting you might imagine for a trendy restaurant. On another day, she'll sit at a different booth on another floor, overlooking Cadillac Square.

"I do try to sit somewhere different every day," says Andrus, 28, of Livonia. "I didn't want a permanent desk at all. I like the idea of being able to sit in a different place."

Andrus is among 100 United Way employees who moved last May from a narrow, 12-floor building to the renovated, cutting-edge quarters in downtown Detroit's First National Building.

Two-thirds of United Way's 100 employees don't have permanent desks; instead they choose to work at a range of booths, tables and open cubicles. Even the CEO, Michael Brennan, doesn't park himself at a formal desk or a corner suite, but chooses from the array of booths and tables.

It's an office arrangement known as free-range or hotelling, and the workplace gurus at Grand Rapids-based furniture manufacturer Steelcase say the United Way's workspace represents the office of the future.

Jeff Block, a senior consultant in design strategy for Steelcase, the nation's leading office furniture maker, says United Way's arrangement is the first large-scale design of its kind in the Detroit area. Steelcase itself has test-run the design in parts of its headquarters, and expects more firms and agencies to adopt the alternative approach.

"Nobody's done anything to the extent that Mike Brennan has done in terms of looking at space differently," says Block. "He realized that giving everybody a workstation, which would sit vacant much of the time because they were in meetings or outside of the office, didn't make sense."

"At the end of the day, it's hard for most organizations to make that dramatic a change," says Block. "It's a change in the culture, as much as a change in the space."

With the move, United Way is saving \$300,000 annually in maintenance costs. The United Way offices are laid out over two floors and a mezzanine. Parts of the ceiling and the walls are exposed, revealing work from the building's original 1920s-era construction.

"In every location, you see the new tied to the old," says CEO Brennan. "I describe this as a Class A

office space, loft living and urban ruins" all in one. Brennan gestures toward the bank of windows and the view down below. He calls it the "front porch of Detroit" as he gazes down on the bustle of Campus Martius.

There are sections of islands of glass-walled cubicles -- known as fishbowls -- with room for a desk and a chair, where staffers can park themselves. There are large banquettes alongside the expansive windows. If a staffer without a dedicated desk feels the need for enclosure, there are cubicles with doors available.

People don't need conventional offices to get their work done, says Dave Lathrop, director of research and strategy for Steelcase and an expert on future trends in the workplace.

He says the United Way's office redesign taps into a growing and global office movement. It represents how the workplace is adapting to the instant anywhere, anytime connectivity made possible by technology.

"Allocating all of our real estate to individual spaces makes less sense than it used to in a world that's all about collaboration," says Lathrop.

A Steelcase survey last year found that 69% of firms surveyed were using alternative work strategies -- such as allowing employees to work from home. They expect those arrangements to grow, as a way for employers to cut the costs of maintaining real estate and office buildings.

Without a desk, Andrus says she's learned to become less paper-dependent and relies more on technology. She, like other desk-less employees, has access to one drawer in which to keep files.

"It makes me rethink, 'Do I need a hard copy of this? Do I really need this?' " says Andrus.

Every staffer has a landline phone number, and they can log into that phone from any location, including their cells. They also have laptop computers.

At their old headquarters, at 1212 Griswold, staffers were spread over 12 floors. It wasn't unusual to go months without seeing various employees, and communicate solely via phone and e-mail. The new office's wide-open layout prompts more face-to-face communication, staffers say.

Rebeca Torres, 35, an accounting manager, has an assigned desk because work keeps her in the office five days a week. But Torres says the overall environment gives her a sense of spaciousness and mobility.

"I'm not glued to my desk," says Torres. "And because we do so much collaboration, I often find that I'm not at my dedicated workspace. And that's one of the things I like about this building is that we have so many options."

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