

WORKPLACE | BUSINESS CASE | EULER HERMES, BRUSSELS |



Euler Hermes, a worldwide insurance group, wished to provide itself with a new image, both internally and externally. Brush away the dust, modernise, completely rethink the space and the way the company works. The space layout was the key to this change.

OFFICE DESIGN AS DRIVER FOR CHANGE

RELOCATION IN A NEW BUILDING AS THE TRIGGER

Euler Hermes recently moved three hundred metres from its previous offices in the Brussels European district. The workspace is quite unlike anything seen before – open, bright spaces with innovative seating concepts, no visible cupboards, no closed in offices...

■ Tim HARRUP

Photos: Marie BOURGONJON

Each of the seven departments works around a ‘hub’, there are informal meeting spaces, a network café. Subtle, changing colours enhance the principally white décor. A clean desk policy now operates, with each employee having a small ‘toolbox’ to store their personal effects at the end of the day. The ‘New Way of Working’ has now convinced the personnel, who were naturally wary at the outset. And the company invested itself totally in this radical and fundamental change in thinking. The personnel were invited to come and see the work in progress, a large screen in the existing offices showed the work being carried out, and a copy of one of the new hubs was also built in the old offices to familiarise staff with what they were moving into.

Flex-desks

The ‘office’ furniture itself features various types of seating from ‘pouffes’, through benches to modern high-backed chairs. There is an elevated wave design in the central areas, with people sitting below. Flex-desk use has been instigated where appropriate – the personnel just logs in to the fixed phone wherever they happen

to sit. Computers are not individually assigned and there will be a move towards laptops. Pictogrammes, rather than traditional signs, are used to show the various different office and relaxation areas. There is more use made of video-conferencing and conference calls.

Translating company culture into space design

Since the offices were opened, clients come here and can see all the personnel, and they always declare themselves delighted with the new look and feel of this traditional company. Euler Hermes Facility Manager Stéphane Vanbever underlines: “The old company culture tended to be somewhat static and rooted, and change sometimes needs to be forced a bit. The office design itself is a driver of change. Employees were wary at first, as is natural, but now they have real pride in their company and their places of work. The space has a real personality. I think it is true to say that we went for it 100% and for everybody”.

Strong idea

When opting for this radical change, Euler Hermes set itself (and its architects) a number of criteria: transparency, synergy, flexibility

were three key words. This translated as the least number of floors possible – achieved with 1.5 floors totalling 4,000 m² – and almost totally open floors (natural daylight crosses the entire floor with no barrier to get in its way).

For interior architects RoseStudio, Euler Hermes’ wishes had to be translated into reality. Director Julie Van De Put explains: “For a space to be able to communicate, there has to be a strong idea running throughout all of its elements. In this way, it can express the values of the company. We therefore created a dynamic theme which can be seen in the partitioning, the floor, the furniture and the signposting. No more closed and partitioned areas. Apart from the large meeting rooms, the space is open and transparent with meeting zones called hubs, which have been designed like a giant wave on which everyone can surf, exchange ideas or withdraw. There is a new convivial atmosphere between colleagues. The graphic chart has also been used to bring vitality to the different departments: red, blue, green and orange”. ■

WORKPLACE | BUSINESS CASE | EULER HERMES, BRUSSELS |



Euler Hermes employees have a 'network café' available for them to use, where they can eat and drink, welcome clients or organise a meeting.



Each of the seven departments is organised around a 'hub', a meeting area with informal get-together zones.



High-tech and futuristic decor for the management board meeting room

How the process evolved and how it has changed the company.

Interview with Stéphane Vanbever, Facility Manager, Euler Hermes



You have been the Facility Manager at Euler Hermes for fifteen years. How has this 'New Way of Working', impacted on your work

It has had a significant impact but this has not surprised me because I was behind the change, the company move and the choice of the new location. I focused my thinking on flexibility of working above all, and I was somewhat inspired by everything that has been done at the new STIB headquarters in Brussels. I also found some technical elements in the Getronics offices project in Diegem. I mixed the two together and then had to turn them into a concept. This changed quite a lot of things because we were in a building where the working areas were spread over seven floors, and now we are on a single level, much easier and much more practical. This is especially true for internal communications, because we are all together.

Are there things you have to do now which you didn't have to do before?

My work is more centred around the well-being of the personnel now, and we have taken advantage of the move to improve our efficiency. We have improved well-being by the work stations we created, and it is quite noticeable that the atmosphere is more convivial with the hubs we put in place. Each department is established as though it were a village, and at the centre of the village is the 'village square' in which can be found some of the technical equipment – copiers, kitchenette... I wanted the work zones to be considered as a working and a private environment. So there is an office area, a kitchen area – just like everyone has a kitchen at home – and a lounge area.

What would you say to your Facility Manager colleagues who might be frightened by such a change?

The change is very difficult and you have to be bold enough to make it. In our case we had the support of the board, but we didn't go too far down the road of asking everyone's opinion. The change of building obviously helped because we were no longer in the same space, and a change has to be made. But the personnel took possession of the space as though they had been in it all their lives. And they are also grateful for the feeling of well-being

You chose a young team – RoseStudio – to carry out this work.....

Yes, we undertook a market survey for the various elements of the move, including the big names in the sector, especially for the choice of building. But in the end we wanted to get away from the ordinary, to leave all the stereotypes behind. We wanted a situation whereby when people come to visit our building they haven't seen anything like this anywhere else. We wanted to stand totally apart. Rose Studio was obviously a choice which carried some risk because it is a small, young studio. But we decided to take this risk and it has all worked out very well! Their great advantage is their artistic and architectural side.