NetApp: Making Nerdy Look Good

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I t's easy to talk about the benefits of collaboration, integrated teams and adaptability. But when an acquisition occurs in the middle of the project, the amount and pace of change can test a team's mettle. The team behind the NetApp's new Boulder offices did more than survive. By staying focused on overall project success, they took advantage of a dynamic situation to create a unique environment that suits everyone to a T.

Elsy Studios was nearly finished with the design and ready to submit the plans for client SolidFire's new headquarters – their third project together – when they had to reboot. Fast-growing SolidFire, which provides all-flash storage for data centers, had been acquired by data management firm NetApp. The resulting shift in brand, culture and personnel would dramatically impact nearly every aspect of the project.

With a hard-and-fast schedule of only two months (dictated by move-in dates), they had to reassess the project's space planning and design. A newly integrated team of SolidFire and NetApp personnel worked closely together, with Elsy Studios Associate Cathy Loftus' leadership, to determine their approach. A couple of initial decisions helped guide them.

They would redesign the 67,000-square-foot space they had chosen to house SolidFire's new headquarters, rather than looking for different or additional space. Located on Boulder's Pearl Street Mall, they agreed the space would serve the new company's needs now and into the

OPENING ART:

By using the opening created for the core-shell crane between the two floors for an open stair, Elsy Studios was able to create an obvious physical and visual connection that opens up the entire suite.

TOP:

A vibrant graphic representation of the Flatirons on the wall across from the bleachers provides a backdrop for a mix of comfortable, stylish lounge chairs located to facilitate impromptu meetings or breakout huddle space from the large bleacher area.

BOTTOM:

Behind the bleachers, Elsy Studios created a backdrop with pops of color mimicking diagonals found throughout the space. Bright colors create a vivacity that energizes the area.

future. While everyone was behind it, SolidFire was especially passionate about staying on Pearl Street. It was an important part of their identity and an amenity that helped attract employees.

Second, the team would integrate the character and requirements of both companies without losing cohesiveness or employees' sense of culture. SolidFire, says Loftus, had a "more traditional Boulder feel, with earthy tones and fun and comfortable spaces." NetApp was more focused on the technology company identity, requesting that the team "nerd [the office] up."

Perhaps most importantly, everyone on the team agreed that project success meant an office that made employees happy. Attracting and retaining top-notch employees – and specifically millennials – was critical to continued growth.

With these three guiding principles in mind, and joined by general contractor Swinerton Builders and Project Manager Sara Lounsberry of CBRE, the team set to work. Together, they would successfully fuse all these requirements into an office that is both serious and playful, functional and comfortable.

The Pearl Street space does have its quirks: It actually spreads across two floors of two buildings, connected by a glass walkway. It also has fairly low ceilings for a commercial building, at about 8 feet.

To overcome the first challenge and help employees feel more connected, the team created common spaces designed to encourage mingling. Instead of several break rooms, they built a single, centrally located one. Described as "the social hub of the office," it offers plenty of seating, a stocked refrigerator, a variety of snacks, even a Kegerator. "We wanted this to be a draw for people, to keep them engaged and mingling," Loftus said. A common game room similarly entices with pingpong and video games that allow employees to break from intense coding sessions.

Even the centrally located open stairwell is designed as a gathering place. Light and spacious, it features a steel structure complemented by wood treads and a glass handrail – and a bleacher seats just off to the side where people can informally meet, relax or gather for large all-hands meetings. Echoing the thoughts of several on the team, Swinerton Project Manager Connor Madigan says the stairwell is "a highlight of the space."

The low ceiling meant low ductwork. This had the most pronounced effect on the bleacher area, which was originally designed to span the two floors. Says Madigan, "We really had to look hard at the mechanical ducting, AV, the acoustical tile, and make sure everything would fit." With close coordination with the subcontractors, the equipment was reworked to accommodate bleachers.

The team used several tactics to achieve NetApp's goal of "nerding up" the space while acknowledging the culture and character of SolidFire. Among other things, they designed glass dividers custom printed with pieces of the company's computer code and used pixelated photos of the nearby Flatirons as a graphic element in the common area. As Loftus says, "We had to respect both clients" with a design that merged their cultures in a cohesive, meaningful way.

NetApp, as a more established company, came with more formalized brand standards and a few unique requirements. They specified no private offices, instead requiring a mix of open cubicle seating and shared meeting spaces. The caveat was that meeting spaces had to provide "literally a seat for every person at all times," says Loftus. (A more typical ratio is 10:1.) The final design includes a wide variety of meeting spaces, huddle rooms and individual workstations that give a change of scenery. The spaces stay busy in part, Loftus suggests, because, "There are enough of them around, all employees feel free to use them, unlike in some offices where the meeting rooms are reserved for certain levels of meetings."

While having so many stakeholders could – and sometimes did – lead to an abundance of good ideas, the team thrived. Loftus credits a strong, collaborative team with mutual respect and a willingness to compromise for the good of the project. Madigan agrees, "Everyone came together and really kept focused on project success." \\