

Work Hard, Play Hard: How the Work Environment Affects Employees

Workplace Industry Roundtable

February 11, 2016

By Joy Shen, MassEcon Co-op

[MassEcon](#) kicked off the 2016 Industry Roundtable series with co-host [Sasaki Associates](#) at Biogen in Cambridge to discuss how workplace settings and structures have evolved in response to a changing economy in private business and academia.

The panelists included **Dena Quinn**, Portfolio Manager, New England and Mid-Atlantic at [Microsoft](#), **Ed Dondero**, Director of Real Estate and Planning at [Biogen](#), **Jaime Bonilla Ríos**, Professor and Researcher at [Tecnológico de Monterrey](#), and **Joe Naughton**, Director of Capital Projects [UMass Building Authority](#) who discussed how collaboration increases efficiency, partnerships, and innovation. **Victor Vizgaitis**, principal of Sasaki Associates, ably moderated the panel.



*Panelists at the Workplace Industry Roundtable –
From left: Victor Vizgaitis (Moderator), Jaime Bonilla Ríos, Dena Quinn, Ed Dondero, Joe Naughton*

Efficiency

Employees require spaces to work both together and privately when needed, and the challenge is discovering the best way to integrate these spaces so that they do not interfere with one another. One solution utilized at Biogen, are various-sized “huddle rooms” where employees can hold small meetings. The law department has two-person huddle rooms to accommodate lawyer preferences for private workspaces. The sales department has four-person and six-person huddle rooms since people in that unit prefer to collaborate and communicate with several others at once.

Joe described the importance of creating a space that does not compete with other spaces, especially across multiple campuses. Even though the UMass campuses might seem like separate entities, they are still part of the same university system. Having the campuses collaborate with each other and their nearby communities can help integrate academia and the private sector.



Joe Naughton

Partnerships

Academic and private business partnerships are valuable because they allow companies to integrate new employees who offer fresh ideas, and allow students to gain experience working at “real-world” jobs. Jaime discussed the iSemester program that Tecnológico de Monterrey implemented where students are given the opportunity to help companies solve their problems.



Jaime Bonilla Ríos

Dena discussed the “Boundary” program that Microsoft implemented in order to attract university graduates. Microsoft hires about 40 top spots from universities across the nation for three months and observes how they work to get a better understanding of how students collaborate.



Dena Quinn

Ed highlighted the mentoring program at Biogen that allows new employees to communicate with those that have worked in the field longer and share their expertise with the new employees. This relationship creates a comfort that can help integrate the two generations together instead of separating them.



Ed Dondero

Innovation for Gender Inclusion

Biogen offers a daycare program to its employees as a benefit to recruit and retain working mothers. This benefit can help working mothers who may not have wanted to work beforehand, due to caring for their child, but now can work without worrying. Dena added that it is about having all employees feel comfortable in the work environment, regardless of their gender. Microsoft focuses on “wellness rooms,” which are not gender specific as opposed to “mother rooms.”

Tour of Biogen

Ed and his colleague, Paul Norris, led tours of one of its buildings in Cambridge so guests could see first-hand how Biogen organizes its space to encourage collaboration. At Biogen, no one has a closed office space; everyone has a desk with a nametag (including the executives). Each floor is equipped with a kitchen, different-sized huddle rooms to accommodate employees’ needs (small meetings, private calls), and a feature called the cloud concept. The cloud concept is an adaptable area that takes a couple of hours to set up. The ceiling has a feature where walls can be inserted or taken down in order to create an open or closed area; for example, the open plan can be used for co-location, in which employees from multiple departments use the space to work together.



Biogen lobby in Cambridge

Biogen strives to provide accommodations for its employees to better serve them and create a space they want to work in. The employees were involved in the building construction process by observing the progress while on tours and selecting the furniture for the huddle rooms. The employees had higher satisfaction rates with the office due to their involvement during the construction process. When employees are satisfied with the office space, it fosters an environment where employees want to come into the office (despite possibly being tempted to work remotely).

The space we work in is important because it affects how we work. Not only having open spaces where employees can collaborate and discuss ideas, but also having rooms where employees can work on their own can create cohesiveness in the work environment. Whether it is in the academic or corporate world, having a comfortable, accommodating work environment can make all the difference.

Thank you to co-hosts Sasaki Associates and Biogen!