

Innovative Call Centre Design

BY DAVID MYRON

Bell ExpressVu, a division of Bell Canada, prides itself on its ability to retain agents. Its annual agent attrition rate generally hovers at about 16 to 18 percent and only three percent of promoted agents leave the company annually. In January 2002, however, this nirvana was threatened.

As sales sizzled at Bell ExpressVu - Canada's largest satellite provider - it soon became evident that to meet customer service demands the company would have to double its customer service division to 400 employees, which was impossible to do in its existing Toronto offices. So the company moved its customer service center to another of Bell Canada's multitenant buildings, a 60,000sqft facility about four miles away from its headquarters. This added some 20 to 30 minutes to employees' commute due to the highly congested roadways around the larger facility. "That's enough to get some people to quit," says Mark Knapton, vice president of call centre sales and customer service at Bell ExpressVu. In fact, Knapton was expecting to lose as many as 40 percent of the customer service reps. To make matters worse, he adds, agents were to leave a "highly desirable location," which featured a satellite dish farm outside and a "funky interior" in the single-level, converted warehouse. "[The previous call centre] represented our culture: a fast growing, modern company with a high-tech feel to it." Bell ExpressVu executives were concerned about the harder commute and the new environment, which Knapton says was "too uniform and too rigid." The larger office space "had a huge floor plate, which was a great opportunity," Knapton says, "but how do we create a sense of belonging and community in a space that large?" Bell ExpressVu chose to hand over the project - its largest structural project to date - to architectural firm Julian

Jacobs Architects Ltd., with which Bell had previously worked. Under the direction of Julian Jacobs Architects' interior design partner, Gail Weininger, the drab, rigid office space was completely renovated. Workstations were built in grape clusters that use less space than the traditional eggcrate grid design. A serpentine walkway of stained concrete was built to break up the large space and evoke the feel of a villa, with a soothing, comfortable flow. Vine-covered trellises were erected to mask overhead cables, and to add greenery and dappled shadows. The furniture, too, was designed with appearance and comfort in mind. Workstations were opened up to 120-degree angles, rather than traditional 90-degree angles, to create more of a sense of space at each workstation. The new facility accommodates 773 employees at 600 workstations. Aside from solving functional needs, the new design created more space for each person, a 10 percent savings on IT (mainly because cables could rest on the overhead trellises), and most important, the attrition rate remained unchanged.

The creative design soon became "the envy of other people in the building," and set the tone for subsequent redesigns in other departments at Bell Canada, Knapton says. Julian Jacobs, principal at Julian Jacobs Architects, says that at least 100 corporate entities in the past year and a half have come from as far away as Japan to view the Bell ExpressVu call centre. **The Payoff:**

An innovative call centre design enabled Bell ExpressVu to

- Keep agent attrition between 16 and 18 percent
- Realise a 10 percent IT cost savings;
- Provide more space at each agent's workstation;
- Maintain high agent morale;
- Create a comfortable, soothing work environment.

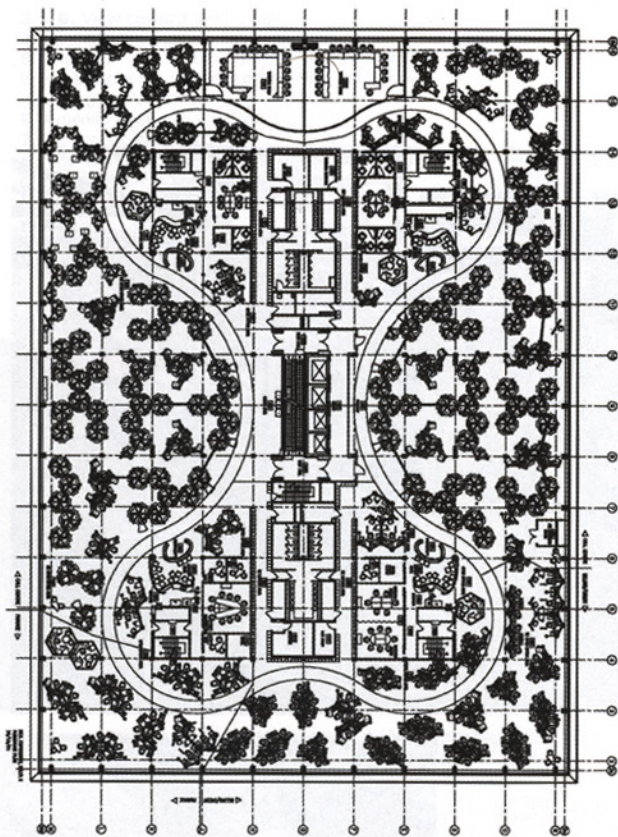
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Scaling Technology

Text: Sujatha Mani

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FLOOR PLAN

A world-class facility which brings in a human scale and a sense of community is the need of the hour for call centre industry. There is an energy and excitement when one enters the BellExpressVu centre by Toronto-based Julian Jacobs Architects because you find it different from many other environments. The architects imbue the modest building with nobility and poetry.

1 & 2. Workstations arranged in 120-degree angles creating more of a sense of space at each workstation.

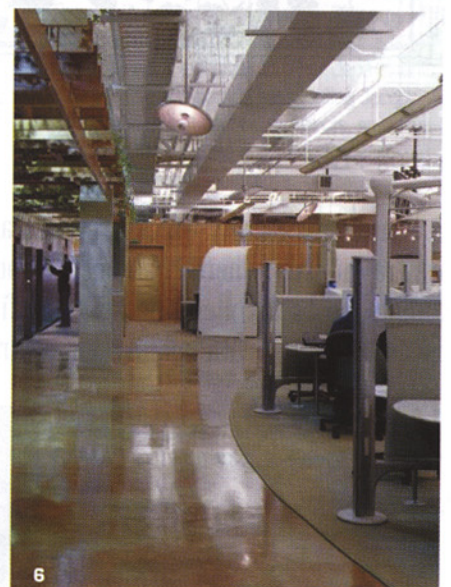


Architecture should extend boundaries and embody a sense of human spirit. The work of Julian Jacobs architects by converting the drab, rigid office of BellExpressVu into a vivacious office exemplifies how interior design can improve the working conditions. The architects converted the old warehouse into a fully integrated facility including not only the technical infrastructure but also a call centre and executive offices. Workstations were built in grape clusters that use less space than the traditional eggcrate grid design. A serpentine walkway of stained concrete was built to break up the large space and evoke the feel of a villa, with a soothing, comfortable flow. Vine-covered trellises were erected to mask overhead cables, and to add greenery and dappled shadows. The furniture, too, was designed keeping appearance and comfort in mind.

BellExpressVu's new Wynford call centre was to occupy one storey in a low-ceilinged, non-descript office building in suburban Toronto. The vast floor plate - 60,000sqft of usable space would accommodate 773 employees at 600 workstations. Workstations were opened up to 120-degree angles, rather than

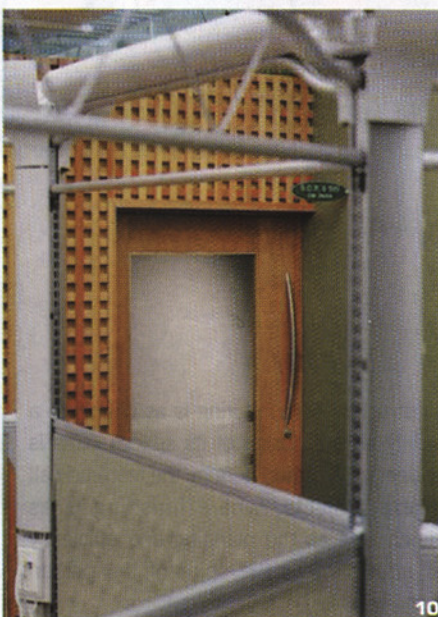
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traditional 90-degree angles, to create more of a sense of space at each workstation. Office workstations traditionally make 90-degree connections, which form the much-reviled ice-cube tray or cube farm. This allows groupings that evoke natural shapes such as honeycombs or clusters of grapes. The workstations on an average is 30-per-cent smaller than in old quarters. Each employee now gets just 95sqft, the minimum allowed by code. The new desks have a boomerang shape that wraps around you and gives one more usable space, so they feel bigger. The serpentine pathway, resembling a gaint butterfly in plan, knits the big floor plate together. It has a soothing effect on the employees. Such behaviour speaks volumes, as it were, about the centre's acoustics. People

- 3 & 6. View toward trellis wall.
 4. Photocopier station.
 5. View of serpentine path. The walkway breaks up the large space and evoke a soothing feeling.
 6. Amenity area.
 7. Ivy topper corridor.
 8. The workstations were designed as grape clusters which in turn occupied less space.
 9. Cave art on meeting room door.



tend to talk quietly on the path because the curve calms them down. Due to the width of the path and its distance from adjacent workstations, customer service representatives don't look up at the passerby on the path. White-noise generators hanging throughout the space, carpet tile on the floor and an acoustical treatment spray-painted on the underside of the ceiling slab further attenuate noise levels.

A key factor in preserving the feeling of shared, open space on the immense floor plate is the placement of the breakout rooms. For the architects the priority was to leave the windows unobstructed to allow daylight to permeate the floor area. The same thinking drove the decision to use translucent fabric screens on the workstations.

Voice, data and power cables delivered through troughs within the furniture system about (every 1,000sqft) helped avoid the added expense of creating a raised floor. Office furniture typically carries cabling through a narrow channel at floor or deskheight, which hinders cable access. Even the locker area benefited from a major rethink. The designers not only halved the space usually allotted for lockers but also introduced a romantic country element to what is usually an ugly, dead zone.

In an industry plagued with monotony, the Wynford call centre boasts the remarkably high employee retention rate of 1.5 turnovers per seat per year.

The design was a resounding success with employees. Bell ExpressVu managed to improve employee morale, reduce attrition (below 20%), and actually reduce IT costs (by using the trellises to manage cabling). A great example of how interior design can improve the overall working condition. ■