

METROPOLIS

Midlife Crisis

Long after its glory days at the very top of the tech-world heap, a now-mature Microsoft turns to workplace design in the battle for young programming talent.

Fred Moody



Microsoft's Workplace Advantage (WPA 1.0) debuted in 2004. The second phase, WPA 2.0, was rolled out five years later. SkB Architects designed the Cambridge offices shown here. Completed in 2012, they include spaces for collaboration and impromptu meetings, and a welcoming feel for what the company calls the "nomadic worker."

Courtesy Magda Biernat

Back in the day, Microsoft had its pick of software programming talent. Kids out of college flocked to the company for its stock options, informal dress policy, free soft drinks, and the opportunity to work in relaxed private offices instead of the adult world's standard-issue dreary cubicles. I remember talking with one typical programmer (t-shirt, shorts, barefoot) in those days, when I encountered him in one of the Microsoft employee kitchens. He had

come to the company right after graduation because, he said, “I could either come here and work like this, or wear a suit every day and ride the train into Chicago to work in a sh***y little cubicle.”

Wander into any programmer’s office in, say, 1993, and you’d find pretty much the same spectacle: a sloppily dressed youngster sitting in the dark, grunge music blasting in the background, his computer screen full of software code, and a little window at the top of the screen displaying that day’s Microsoft stock price. When you have options on stock whose price doubles every year, as Microsoft’s did then, your salary is so small by comparison that you’re effectively a volunteer.

Good times.

Fast-forward 20 years and you find that that paradigmatic dark little office is a distant memory, replaced by studios, collaboration spaces, and open office arrangements tailored for segments of a many-times-larger (and more diverse) workforce. That Windows geek in the 9-by-12 cave that defined Microsoft in the 1990s is now an Xbox programmer, sitting on a couch, working at a laptop in an office that looks like a video gamer’s living room. That studio, as Microsoft calls it, is designed to sport an “edgy atmosphere, a hangout-for-rockers ambience,” in the words of Shannon Gaffney, senior principal at the Seattle firm SkB Architects, designer of the space.



A break-out area with a distinct hospitality vibe. The five-floor, 85,000-square-foot office contains four basic work spaces: open workstations, cafe zones, long communal dining tables, and random tables and chairs.

Courtesy Magda Biernat

Meanwhile, on the other side of the country, in a vast, brightly lit room at what looks like a long, sinuous kitchen counter with a spectacular view of the Charles River, sits a group of Microsoft sales and marketing employees (or, in that Xbox programmer's words, "marketing weasels"), whose airy, spacious work space—all soaring ceilings, bright light, huge windows, and vivid colors—sports, as Gaffney puts it, a "crisp, clean, European" feel.

Your first thought at considering the two spaces is that they couldn't possibly belong to the same corporation. But they do, both having been designed for Microsoft by SkB. The workplaces highlight the infinitely more competitive recruiting landscape that Microsoft now inhabits. The stodgy adult Microsoft has ceded cachet to such industry adolescents as Google, Amazon, the reinvented Apple, and countless other younger companies known for state-of-the-art workplaces that disdain the dreary private office that was once Microsoft's pride and joy.

Moreover, the exponential rise in Microsoft's stock price has flattened. And it's no longer a Pacific Northwest software company employing 12,000, most of whom were male computer geeks. It's now a global enterprise with a diverse product line and 127,000 employees and contractors of all stripes, working in 678 sites totaling 34 million square feet of office space in 107 countries.



The office serves primarily sales and marketing staff. Many of them are often on the road, so the facility has, in the words of SkB's Shannon Gaffney, "300 seats for 600 workers."

Courtesy Magda Biernat

Competition in the software business is first and foremost a tussle for talent. Amazon founder Jeff Bezos famously noted, in the early days of his company's life, that "a great programmer replacing a good programmer can improve a company by a factor of 100." And now that Microsoft no longer enjoys the built-in advantage it enjoyed at the birth of the personal computer industry, the company has to try harder. These days, attracting industry talent is as much about being cool as striking it rich.

And that quest can be a tough sell for a company whose product line is essentially invisible. Being a software company, "Microsoft doesn't have those cool products to point to like Apple has," says SkB senior principal Doug McKenzie. So a company message equivalent to that delivered by the iPhone and its packaging has to come through in the company's physical package—its offices.



The office blends different work and meeting spaces, often in close proximity.
Courtesy Magda Biernat

Microsoft came to SkB with this problem in 2004, and together they devised a plan of attack called Workplace Advantage (WPA). They rolled out the program in phases: WPA 1.0, launched later that year, was a research and testing phase made up of six pilot projects that involved redesigning offices and seeing how they worked. "Those environments wound up being studio-like, some highly confidential business units—entertainment and devices, gaming," Gaffney says. "Each one had a vastly different look, feel, and flavor."

The research was extensive. Teams conducted surveys and focus groups, observed workers on site, interviewed group managers, and came away with a set of guiding principles: one size doesn't fit all; the business groups are different; work spaces need to be function-based and about collaboration; human factors—access to daylight, texture, color, lighting—need improvement; and the branding and showcasing of Microsoft technologies should be a feature in all offices, however different they are from one another.



A cafe setting, for laptop work.
Courtesy Magda Biernat

Next, says Martha Clarkson, of Microsoft's Global Workplace Strategies group, the WPA team built "prototypes of various spaces—office, relaxation room, meeting room, etc., and brought people in and talked to them about the things that were possible for their group in these places."

Among the key things Clarkson's group learned: What was once considered a perk—the private office—is now considered a form of solitary confinement. Contemporary employees prefer flexible work styles, face-to-face collaboration, and the ability to customize and recustomize their work spaces. So the challenge became one of providing malleable space and furnishings in rooms that felt like home to the various personality types paid to inhabit them. "It wasn't so much coming up with a single way of doing it," Gaffney says, "as it was developing a set of menu items to select from."

WPA 1.0 also produced some major sites, including a Microsoft Museum, an executive meeting center for conferences, and a Workplace Lab, all designed to tastes particular to each site's constituency. With the completion of 1.0 and its design principles formulated, Microsoft went full bore into WPA 2.0 in 2009 with the mandate to promote flexibility, comfort, the needs and activities of Microsoft's plethora of business divisions, and to accommodate the company's constant restructuring.

WPA 2.0, which involved a number of architecture firms working worldwide, has been mind-bogglingly massive in scale, malleability, and variety. SkB's numerous 2.0 projects have ranged from remodeling small office spaces to gutting and reinventing the interior of an entire abandoned grocery store. "We've done everything from designing a skunkworks space for working on gaming devices, to sales and marketing offices with a more corporate vibe," Gaffney says. "These places need to be adjustable as well, to accommodate different groups."

Cases in point: Pioneer Studios in Seattle, with its bare wood floors and unfinished brick walls, combining a gamer-friendly ability to shut out daylight with a Pacific Northwest-friendly view of the outdoors. The building is replete with both large collaborative spaces and smaller (and darker) rooms furnished with couches, easy chairs, and large, wall-mounted screens. The large spaces are furnished with chairs and tables that are easily moved around to either facilitate large group collaboration or the kind of private, solitary work you might undertake in a public space—"that corner spot at Starbucks that everybody tries to get to," in the words of SkB's McKenzie.

In many ways, the garden-variety WPA 2.0-informed workspace is a mirror image of the old Microsoft individual-office-centric design: Now, it is the collaboration space that is freely available, with the relatively rare private office space available by reservation only. "Traditional offices can be good for focusing by yourself, but not working together," notes Janet Galore, director of advanced strategies and research at Microsoft (in her salad days in the gaming industry, she was known as Planet Janet). "We're in the brainstorming business now, and brainstorming is best done collaboratively."



These spaces are designed to accommodate a variety of work styles: collaboration, solitary work, hardcore strategy sessions, and shared public spaces, for sales and marketing employees who spend most of their time in the field.

Courtesy Michael Walmsley

A major (and ambience-opposite) WPA focus has been on spaces friendly to the “nomadic worker”—the Microsoft sales and marketing folks who spend most of their workdays out of the office. The company’s Bellevue, Washington, Lincoln Square space—a 50,000-square-foot remodel of three connected buildings—has no private offices, and none of the darker tones and light levels that characterize the programming side of the company. “The leader of the group was from France,” recalls Gaffney. “Several people were from Germany and other European countries. They wanted to separate themselves from things they’d seen elsewhere at Microsoft. They wanted a Swedish look: bright wood, bright colors, and so on.” A similar aesthetic informs the company’s sales office in Cambridge, Massachusetts. With “300 seats for 600 workers,” says McKenzie, it nicely suits employees who “come back only occasionally for meetings, collaborative sessions, maybe to catch up on office work. Everything is shared.”

That space, with soaring ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Charles River, and moveable furniture in spacious rooms, looks more like a brand-new college commons or learning center than a corporate office. It is as good a showcase as any for the array of environments WPA 2.0 tries to fit into a single facility. “Essentially,” says McKenzie, “we offer four different types of places to work: an open workstation; café zones with the best views and the best light; a place at a long dining table, as if at a kitchen table—in this case with a killer view of the Charles River— and random tables and chairs.”

Well, not entirely random. "You make things too mobile and adjustable, and things walk off," Gaffney says. "Some are so interesting that people take a table or a light fixture, and put it off in their corner somewhere, and what's left is an uninspiring empty space. You need the right mix of portability and stability." In that respect, among others, WPA 2.0 is still a work in progress. "Microsoft lets us take this kind of cyclic approach because they know that some things won't work," Gaffney says. "Their capacity to let you fail and learn from it has been really great."