

MEDIA COVERAGE

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BusinessChange

The Rail Thing

Updating an established brand is one thing, redesigning the way an organisation interacts is another. Combining the two is a substantial task that should be handled confidently but with care as Martin Mitchell found at Northern Rail's head office in York

YORK IS SYNONYMOUS WITH MANY THINGS. As well as Rowntree's chocolates, York Minster, The Shambles and some fine Roman ruins it is also home to the National Railway Museum. So where better to find the headquarters building of Northern Rail which operates local and inter-urban services in the North and North East of England? The firm was set up as a joint venture between parent companies Serco and Dutch train company, NedRailways to bring together expert services management and engineering skills.

The firm recently occupied its new headquarters in York following an earlier refurbishment of a smaller office in Leeds. Malcolm Brown, Northern Rail's operations director, headed both projects. "We wanted to use the move as an opportunity to create a strong common culture throughout this new franchise, not just in terms of brand design but also layout and interaction between work colleagues," he says. "In addition to this, we aimed to ensure that the new premises were fit for the purpose, as they were needed to accommodate around 240 staff."

The move presented an ideal opportunity to really establish the forward-thinking franchise as well as introduce a more collaborative, friendly work environment. The decision to move had been prompted by the need to inhabit premises

that better reflected the contemporary, yet familiar image of the franchise, which was formed via an effective combination between Serco and NedRailways. Previously, Northern Rail had occupied a building in York that dated from 1906. Its long, dark corridors and cellular offices did nothing to promote the ideals of an organic, adaptable workspace that would encourage movement and interaction between staff members.

Following a series of feasibility studies on various premises, a 1960s-built office block was selected as the most appropriate location for the new premises, and Claremont Group Interiors began work with the building's existing landlord to amend and minimise costs prior to delivering their unique fit-out solution. The result was four floors of high-quality office space, designed to offer a less restrictive, collaborative environment whilst reinforcing the required balance between change and tradition.

Claremont designer, Matt Holmes explained the approach that was taken. "An important factor in developing the new facility was to challenge peoples' outdated views of a 'staid organisation' whilst creating something that was unmistakably Northern Rail," he explained.

The creation of Northern Rail's new 'common culture' was achieved via an extensive consultation process that involved and

Northern Rail's York HQ has created a balance between change and tradition

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The extensive use of eye-catching glass installations not only performs a screening role but also provides an opportunity to display local landmarks in York in the HQ (above) and Leeds office (right) that are relevant to the staff

plan. This was necessary not only to facilitate easier interaction between Northern Rail's staff, but also to encourage worker movement and task variance. This would result in a more ergonomically-sound environment for workers, meaning less sitting in individual offices staring at computer screens for hours at a time. Open plan would also positively encourage better communication between colleagues, by eliminating some of the need to send emails to people situated in the same building.

That said, some provision still had to be made for separate spaces and meeting areas to allow for confidentiality if necessary. As was the case in the premises completed in Leeds, the decision was taken to introduce seamless glass partitions and doors throughout. These were designed and manufactured by Bristol-based glaziers and interior branding specialist, Artwork Solutions Ltd. Again, similar to Leeds, the glass was frosted to display images of recognisable iconic landmarks from around the various locations served by Northern Rail's trains. As Malcolm Brown comments: "We wanted the glass to display landmarks that were relevant to the local people that work in our facilities. For instance, I can now sit in an office at our headquarters surrounded by images of York Minster's famous Rose Window, then look outside and see the real thing."

Having previously worked with Claremont on installations incorporating bespoke branded glazing for clients including Coca Cola and Reckitt Benckiser, Artwork Solutions was able to satisfy the requirements of the design brief employing their own unique expertise coupled with a knowledge of what was needed based on previous experience. The eye-catching glass installations echoed those already completed for Northern Rail in Leeds, and fulfil their screening role at the same time as subtly reinforcing the premises' landmark location and the identity of its occupants.

A further aesthetic device to reflect the nature of the company without compromising the subtlety of the overall design scheme was the hanging of a series of 1.5 metre long abstract canvases, depicting commuters and railway station scenes. These were created from a number of photos taken locally over the course of two days.

Design features and functionality operate in tandem throughout the new premises, which also boast brand new high-quality seating and flexible bench desking for all workers. Tenon 100 furniture was installed throughout and the provision of a much-needed library area was included as part of the scheme in order to store the organisation's extensive collection of books and manuals.

With further installations to follow in several cities at a number of Northern Rail's premises, Leeds are presenting a new and exciting challenge with its own unique restrictions and opportunities for innovation, creativity and problem solution, the future looks set to be an even more industrious year. With so much on the horizon, it is important that all parties can feel confident that the ongoing evolution of Northern Rail, its premises and its staff will continue to be handled in expert fashion.

welcomed contributions from all of the interested parties. The absorption of input and feedback from designer and tenant was key to the project's success. In addition to the senior staff and management, input was also sought from the general staff that would be in occupation of the premises, in order to ensure that even the smallest details and requirements could be considered. In ascertaining which departments were generally required to work together more than others, the design team was able to tailor the planned layout to facilitate the most efficient level of day-to-day operation, as well as providing an environment created to encourage less division – both spatial and social – between co-workers.

Northern Rail, although a relatively new organisation keen to further its presence, was also mindful of the previously established identities of its parent companies. This meant that the project team was charged with the delivery of specific objectives, to be satisfied within the boundaries of the overall design scheme. The primary objective was the transition from outdated cellular offices to open-

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