



The state-of-the-art kitchen at 255 McCaul St. features rotating exhibitions of employee art.

U of T goes for gold with sustainable building

BY TAMMY THORNE

Other than treating employees with respect and supporting their creativity, what do you need to do to get the most out of your staff? This is the question that Ron Swail, assistant vice-president (facilities and services), asked himself when he was tasked with finding a new space for his team on U of T's increasingly crowded St. George campus.

In 2005, when he became aware of the need to move his team, along with the real estate office operations, out of 215 Huron, Swail started to push for a space that could house both groups, since they work closely together on a daily basis. He proposed a move to the fourth floor of the warehouse at 255 McCaul, a space for which there were no plans. Once approved, the McCaul Street offices were renovated and completed under budget and on schedule, with staff moving in during August and September.

"The main objectives were to make us more efficient and effective in serving the university, and to demonstrate leadership in sustainability," Swail said.

By recreating the office space Swail said he has changed how staff work -- for the better. He has noticed an increase in communication and credits the design with an observed overall higher staff morale.

"We know we do not have enough space at U of T and that staff are our greatest resource," he said. "The new work environment at 255 McCaul addresses both concerns: ensures staff have a positive, effective and sustainable work environment with quality furniture and amenities that facilitate collaboration, and at the same time do this in a very efficient manner -- we are, in less space." Twenty per cent more staff can now be accommodated in 10 per cent less space.

It was by reducing "I" space and creating more "we" space -- along with ergonomic furniture, Energy Star energy saving appliances, lots of natural light and a large, designer kitchen complete with espresso machine -- that Swail was able to achieve this higher level of teamwork and morale. Not to mention smaller sized and back-of-the-building placement for executive offices. Other sustainable features include a rain water recycling system and a bike storage facility.

Shared work stations are also a prominent feature of the new space. "Hotel offices" are shared work areas used by property managers, external contractors and employees who work from home part time. Swail said it just makes sense for property managers to share space since they are away from the office with their customers 65 per cent of the time

He also started a work-from home program a year ago. "It saves staff money, saves them time, saves wear and tear, saves the environment, saves us real estate," Swail said. "Here, if you work from home, you have to give something up: you have to share a work station. There is no point in having a work station empty there three days a week. People that are working from home are very happy with the program."

U of T's chief real estate officer, Nadeem Shabbar, said working from home has been a success in some private sector companies, too. "We did a post mortem survey with Xerox," he said. "Xerox had 30 per cent of its workforce that worked from home. The survey results indicated close to 90 per cent employee satisfaction."

Swail jokes that the only complaint he's heard is that the space is sometimes too bright. "It's brighter, it's open and it's good design that brought this around. It's not about the size, it's about the efficiency. We need to use space better and that is what sustainability is about."

The hope is that 255 McCaul sets a standard for office design and becomes U of T's first LEED gold certified building. LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design and is a voluntary, consensus-based green building rating system. U of T's first LEED-certified building was the Hazel McCallion Academic Learning Centre at University of Toronto Mississauga. It was given silver certification. Swail is confident that 255 will win gold.