



CREATING A NEW OFFICE SPACE HIT

CI went behind the scenes with Signet Electronic Systems as the Massachusetts integrator planned its new workspace, which leans heavily on employee input and the firm's in-house technical expertise. **By Tom LeBlanc**

TACKLING A NEW office space design can be daunting. It's a little different, however, for an integration firm that specializes in solving workspace technology challenges. It's even more distinctive for Norwell, Mass.-based Signet Electronic Systems, which is unique in its focus on audio, video, telecommunications and security.

So between its in-house expertise and the fact that its customers across all vertical markets are focusing on rethinking their workspaces, it was very appropriate for Signet to take on a lot of the planning itself when the firm turned the workspace challenge on itself.

The opportunity came up when Signet, which had been in its facility for 25-plus years, bought a building just a few doors down. The approximately \$40 million inte-

gration firm with 138 employees across New England had tripled its size since 1992, and has reflected changes in the industry since the company appeared on the very first issue of *Commercial Integrator* in 2011.

President and owner Bradford Caron recognized that the new space would better accommodate growth and would allow his organization to create a more collaborative and efficient work environment.

The new building can accommodate more engineers, technicians and project managers, according to a Signet press release. It offers a 2,400-square-foot area for production, assembly, testing and certification and boasts a 14,000-square-foot environmentally-controlled warehouse.

Caron also recognized that the old space wasn't allowing the organization to evolve its workflows as quickly as needed.

He wanted a space that current and future employees will embrace.

"To be an industry leader, we must be able to attract high energy, fresh, tech-savvy talent," says Caron. "An environment designed around state-of-the-art technology and natural light, combined with amenities such as a lounge, café, outdoor patio, individual private lockers, and designer furniture is attractive to Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z."

Highlights of the new space include:

- › Use of windows and glass to "borrow" natural light. "If you are standing in the center of the building, you can see clear through two departments to the outside" says Stephen E. Archibald AIA, president of Archdesign, Inc., a Massachusetts-based architectural design firm that Signet worked with

on the project. Two 4-x-8-foot skylights were installed into the interior engineering area, and a 16-foot glass entrance tower was added to bring a new look to the exterior.

- › A complete passive and active data infrastructure including a new data center with redundant firewalls, fiber connectivity, UPS backup and IP climate-control HVAC.
- › A security package with a unified IP access control and CCTV system and zoned intrusion detection system anchored by a Genetec platform.
- › Exterior LED lighting controlled via a networked lighting control panel for scheduling and lighting scene control.
- › An addressable fire alarm system throughout the building.

While Signet partnered with ArchDesign and Mass-based construction company Callahan/Hoffman Company, Inc. on the \$2 million renovation, it leaned heavily on input from its staff. With about one month left in the build out and prior to the move into the new building, *Commercial*



The new reception area is more open, welcoming and leverages digital signage for branding.

Integrator visited the former office space to talk with some of those employees about the process and plans.

Deciding to Move

Andy Pelletier, director of project management: I think to bring our building up to the level of service that we offer our clients and to better represent what Signet offers our clients, we need to be in a better, higher-class building. The new office space is class A, so certainly a large jump in the

quality and fit-out of this space as far as amenities are concerned and design elements.

Entering DIY Territory

Pelletier: Being an integrator we're self-performing as much work over there as possible. We're turnkey-installing our own fire alarm system, turnkeying the data infrastructure, turnkey on the audiovisual packages and turnkey on the security as well.

"We've been working very hard to break silos and become a much more cohesive team. We've got weekly meetings set up, standing meetings now, between all the department heads to flag any issues and talk about how we can improve communication efficiencies."

—ANDY PELLETIER, DIRECTOR OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT



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We're taking over the exterior lighting as well, because we have our own electricians on staff. We almost treated this project as a typical project with an outside client, so Brad [Caron] in this situation was the client.

Greg Hussey, VP of engineering: What we're really good at, is what we call our power of one. We're one company, but we can do all of these things — life-safety company, business communications, telephone systems. We're doing speakers and clocks and everything else. We're an audiovisual company. We're also a structure cabling

company. And security — access control, video surveillance, intrusion alarm.

How the Space Is More Customer-Facing

Pelletier: I think it will promote bringing more clients in to show what it is they're investing in, because it's not just a product they're investing in. It's obviously the company and the service.

Especially on the service side, it's a partnership, so being able to show them really what kind of background we have, what kind of product, how we operate and the type of facility we operate within, is a good indicator of how we handle our clients.

Communication Was Critical

Pelletier: We took it through the entire project phase, from discovery/design submittals to an extent. We had weekly meetings with [Caron] and the rest of the managers that were tasked with each vertical, if you will.

To flush out the scopes, we put budgets to it, to estimates, everything. We've put it through the typical product lifecycle here at Signet. I was heavily involved with the data infrastructure, audiovisual and, towards the end, the security designs.

Describing the Design Phase

Pelletier: I worked with the engineering staff to kind of create our AV design for the different spaces, hammer out the details of the infrastructure, what we're putting in, why, where, so on and so forth ... I work directly with our AV engineer. We try to kind of apply the KISS [keep it simple, stupid] mentality to it, but not to the extent that we were creating spaces that had any shortcomings for our needs.

Reflecting Signet's Improved Workflow

Pelletier: We've been working very hard to break silos and become a much more cohesive team. That's from a management level. We've got weekly meetings set up, standing meetings now, between all the department heads to flag any issues and talk about how we can improve communication efficiencies.

In the new office space, we really took that into account. Brad kind of spearheaded the overall design and the flow of the office, and it really speaks to just a



The new training space was a focal point for Signet. Among other things, it now allows the firm to video record training more efficiently.

project flow from conception in sales and engineering all the way through operations and then into service.

Rethinking Office, Work Spaces

Pelletier: We've also really changed the quantity of offices, the layout, the type of cubicles that we're using. Right now, we have a very office-heavy environment here, especially in modern office terms, a lot of people in offices. The same thing with the cubes. We have the high 72-inch walls. They're very large, but there's only one person inside of them. The new office space really promotes collaboration.

More Open Space Required Acoustics Focus

Kelly Clasby, business manager: We went with one of the top-of-the-line sound masking vendors, because we knew that sound was going to be an issue and it was going to be a lot different than what we experienced [in the previous space]. The flooring type was taken into consideration, the sound masking, the placement of certain departments.

Technology Has to Be Intuitive

Pelletier: The idea in the smaller conference rooms was again something very simple to use. Anybody can walk in without an instruction sheet. You want someone that can walk in, turn the display on, figure out where they need to plug into to be able to get their display up on the screen or do what they need to do. In the new space, we have two smaller huddle spaces, huddle confer-

ence rooms. Both of them have been fit out with 55-inch displays, nice table boxes and just a little control keypad on the wall.

Entrance Is Everything

Clasby: We're expanding the lobby area, so there is actually a place to kind of guide our visitors to a comfortable seating area before their party comes to meet them. It's lot more welcoming and open. We've kind of knocked down a wall to an additional unit and just continued to build a row of offices as we go. It's a much more free-flow versus just hallway by hallway by hallway.

Emphasis on Digital Signage

Clasby: Digital signage is a huge initiative that we're pushing out in our new space. We only have one digital signage screen here in our office, and this is what we do. We're looking to take this opportunity in the new space and really make it kind of a showcase of our many disciplines, digital signage being one of them. I think we have 10 screens going in the new space, and we're going to put content on there. We have our Internet page, our website. We want to bring in a little ESPN or news feature. ... Internally we want to turn it into more of a major communication tool. We're always looking to decrease email communication.

Also, recognition of employees. One of our biggest challenges is maintaining that connection with our field employees. We want to maybe kind of showcase a technician of the month or just employee anniversaries or birthdays, something as simple as that.

Opportunity to Improve Shipping Distribution

John Hobbell, warehouse manager: We're looking at everything. I'm looking at how we restructure it out there, looking at the flow. When you were a smaller business, you fired an email off to purchasing. "Hey, I need this." Then you would send an email to the warehouse saying, "Hey, can you make sure you have six of these?" We now are trying to automate that process so that it follows the step the entire way through.

Forward-Thinking About Training Facility

Hussey: We've been talking for many years about recording in the training facility. We have designed an AV system to allow us to record. We want to be able to publish our training systems. We want to make them available to our customers as well.

Better Remote Capabilities

Pelletier: We are on Office 365 and Skype for Business. With traffic getting increasingly more difficult these days and employ-

ees all over Massachusetts and New England, we're starting to leverage the remote capabilities of Skype, whether it's for conferencing, screen-sharing, chat, whatever it may be. We've added Skype support so that someone can bring in their laptop [into a huddle room] and use some nicer equipment than what's built into the laptop.

Fewer Offices Equals More Meeting Spaces

Pelletier: Because of the more collaborative environment, there's less office space to meet. If there's a spot meeting or a meeting with up to really eight people, we can move into one of [the small meeting spaces]. One of them is a little bit larger than the other. Conference room, our main primary board room, is larger than this. It seats 16 people.

Improving Logistics

Hobbell: We're capturing square footage better. We had at one point five warehouses here. Part of our warehouse is upstairs, and part of our warehouse is downstairs. The inefficiencies were just poor. Now we're

moving to one physical location. We've invested probably close to \$80,000-\$90,000 in different shelving and equipment, and that's with what we're moving from here. The goal there was really to have it all in one area, have it inventoried differently.

Taking Advantage of a Huge Glass Tower

Clasby: We strategically placed a digital signage screen in the glass tower that's going to be part of our main entrance, so that it will be lit up all day and all night, pretty much. I call it the Batman signal.

Too Many Cooks in the Kitchen?

Pelletier: That was definitely one challenge upfront ... There's a lot of coordination items that we've had to say, "Okay. Well, we need to make a decision now and figure it out," so I think that's been one of my biggest challenges.

I've worked with Brad in a lot of these things and had to bring different questions to him or decisions that hadn't been made that day just to keep the ball rolling over there. It was kind of interesting in that perspective. **CI**

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