Watlow
St. Louis, MO

Case Study
Watlow, a $500-million global innovator in the design and manufacturing of thermal systems, wanted to renovate the company’s 50,000-square-foot global headquarters and create a state-of-the-art technological development facility. Since 1922, when Watlow developed low-wattage industrial heaters for the St. Louis shoe industry, the company has expanded its technological competencies to become an industry leader in providing customers with cutting-edge thermal solutions for their most challenging issues. Watlow wanted its new headquarters building to reflect that heritage and commitment to continued innovation.
Breaking Down Barriers and Building a Community

Knowing that the creativity of its 2,000+ employees brings innovation and growth to Watlow, the company was looking to create a new headquarters space to support the needs and activities of its people, fostering a universal sense of community and collaboration that retains good employees and attracts top talent.

A company with global reach and facilities around the world, Watlow was finding it difficult to maintain a collaborative culture, which it needs to support company-wide creativity and innovation. Instead of people working together, silos had formed, and their St. Louis headquarters building was perpetuating them with walls and separation.

With these physical barriers to collaboration and a space lacking a feeling of community among employees, people were unable to do their best work. Creativity was suffering, and employees felt unmotivated and unfulfilled. Moreover, it was becoming more difficult for Watlow to retain current employees and even more difficult to attract new talent.

Fortunately, Watlow recognized that engaged employees and collaboration are the keys to its continued growth and innovation. With input from its people, the company set out to create a space that supported all Watlow employees—onsite and globally—and provided the future-focused environment they needed to do their best, most creative work together.

When employees lack energetic engagement, it creates a strange paradox for a company that’s all about energy.
An Open Hub for Collaboration and Innovation

In 2014, Watlow’s leaders decided that the company needed a global technological hub that would bring people together as a community, rather than separate them. This was the impetus for a complete building renovation that would result in the creation of the Advanced Technology Center (ATC) at their headquarters in St. Louis. Everything about the new ATC building was designed specifically to make it easy for people to come together—from within the facility or any of Watlow’s global locations—to communicate, collaborate, and share ideas, enabling the creativity and innovation the company prides itself on.

Watlow’s new space has a far more open environment than its predecessor. The number of private offices has been reduced and the few remaining have been located on an inside wall. To further open the space, the amount of bulky physical storage has been reduced in favor or digital files. Not only does the open plan offer more daylight and outside views to the entire office, it invites collaboration and community with easy access to others at workstations and a variety of informal spaces that accommodate quick huddles, work sharing, unplanned meetings, and discussion. New formal conference rooms have been added, as well, to provide the technology needed for presentations and working sessions.

Being a technology hub means that the building is also designed for improved workflow. Because Watlow believes that technology happens through hands-on interaction, the technology group was intentionally placed in what is considered to be the best location in the building, with easy access, the most light, and the best acoustics. Since the manufacturing area is no longer cordoned off from the engineers, it is now convenient and attractive for engineers to go to the lab and the manufacturing facility—to be more involved in the manufacturing aspect of the business. “We really took the wall down, in some cases literally, between the manufacturing and the engineering,” said Peter Desloge, Watlow CEO.

“We’re able to look around at our co-workers, grab them for a quick conversation at our desks. If we find that the conversation is going to be a little longer, we can move to collaboration area so that we’re not disruptive to other teammates. We can use the white board spaces. We can really get up and move around.”

– Brittney Phillips, Watlow Engineer
Social Spaces

The new open environment allows Watlow to make use of several social spaces to encourage personal connections and foster a sense of community. Strategically placed beverage stations within each work area entice people to gather, supporting serendipitous meetings and conversations. “In the old building, those spaces just didn’t exist, so that impromptu meeting—or the meeting after the meeting, where folks leave the conference room and stop to freshen their cup of coffee—that interaction is happening naturally now,” said Shawn Bailey, Northstar Management Company Project Manager.

The highlight of the social spaces at Watlow is Louie’s Café. Not just a cafeteria where employees can enjoy healthy meal options, Louie’s also offers a variety of seating and table options that can be used by employees for individual relaxation, reflection, and work or collaboration, as well as social interaction with others—all in a centrally-located space filled with natural light from outside. The Café’s outdoor patio provides a change of scenery, allowing employees to take their meals, discussions, and informal meetings outside to enjoy some fresh air. And as part of Watlow’s sustainability efforts, the Café follows the practice of not using plastic utensils. “Louie’s Café was designed with the intent of creating a space that makes people feel good, and part of that is being very environmentally conscious,” said Desloge.
People-Led Design

For Watlow, a company that focuses on creating innovative solutions for its customers, keeping valued employees happy and attracting new talent were huge considerations in the creation of its Advanced Technology Center. “We want a workforce that feels energized with autonomy, mastery, and purpose to meet the demanding challenges our customers face,” noted Sheryl Hicks, Watlow Vice President of Human Resources.

While collaboration is important at Watlow, individual workstations are still needed to provide employees with a dedicated personal space for focus work. Multi-generational steering committees were created to help determine what people needed from their workspaces to do their best work, while supporting Watlow’s brand and culture. Mockups of individual workstations were created for the steering committees to try, and adjustments were made based on experiential feedback that would not have been available if everything were just done “on paper.”

A key issue brought by the steering committees involved the need for more privacy at workstations. However, after testing the mockups and discussing health and well-being issues, the committees concluded that sit-to-stand workstations were a higher priority. The ergonomic height-adjustable desks allow employees to shift positions in their personal spaces during longer periods of focus work for comfort and movement, while privacy can be found simply by moving to another area or conference room available throughout the building.

The interior design of the ATC building not only reflects Watlow’s branding, it supports employee happiness and well-being, as well. Active patterns and warm colors have been used to symbolize heat and energy, showcasing the company’s heritage and identity, making it evident to everyone who walks in the door that this is Watlow. The designs bring motivation to the space itself and make it a place where people feel energy, instead of energy being taken from them.

Shawn Bailey, Project Manager for Northstar Management Company, observes, “It actually looks like a state-of-the-art facility. It’s a place where folks want to work and be there helping push that cutting edge with their design.”
Flexibility for the Future

Coming from a 1960s-era building that had been expanded and only partially renovated as the company evolved, Watlow’s new technological hub has eyes on the future. The building is designed to be flexible and adaptable to change now and as the company evolves down the road.

Even though Watlow retains traditional office workspaces, those spaces have been made more flexible and easier to change. Fewer traditional walls and workstations centered around a kit of parts, allow for some workstyle customization and simpler reconfiguration for the future. Raised access flooring also provides the flexibility to move and add workstations quicker and with minimal effort. Access to HVAC, data, and technology needed for tools and equipment can be easily routed and rerouted through the floor. In fact, Watlow has already taken advantage of this and successfully made some changes, adding and moving workstations.

“We’re in a perfect position for a lot of new technology, a lot of growth, increased collaboration,” said Desloge. “We’ve just scratched the surface of the real value that this is going to create. The future is bright. We’re very excited about what we have here.”
A Collaborative Culture Serving Creativity and Innovation

Two years into their new office, the ATC building has become a manifestation of Watlow’s organizational vision for the future—a modern hub of technological development, collaboration, and innovation where people really want to work. “We are already seeing everybody coming here to do their meetings now, to do collaboration from the other sites,” said Chris Gaffney, Watlow Director of IT. “I think there’s going to be a lot of new things coming out of Watlow in the future.”

Watlow is also seeing significant returns on their investment already. Post-occupancy surveys are showing increases in group interaction, better job performance, and employees’ overall satisfaction with the environment. With their collaborative culture, creativity, and innovation now being supported by the new building, Watlow describes the quantifiable and qualitative results as one of the best investments they’ve ever made.

“I think the biggest success that we’ve had here is the collaboration, and the culture change. In the end, the greatest value we create is through our people. We’ve got neat technology, and great customer relationships, but it all starts with our people, and we’ve changed the culture here.”

– Peter Desloge, Watlow CEO
Customer Profile

Founded in 1922, Watlow designs and manufactures industrial heaters, temperature sensors, and controllers, as well as supporting software and assemblies—all the components of a thermal system. With global sales offices in 16 countries around the world, the company holds more than 980 patents and employs 2,000 team members in 14 manufacturing and technology facilities in the US, Mexico, Europe, and Asia. Partnering with customers to optimize thermal performance, decrease design time, and improve efficiency of their products and applications, Watlow brings its experience to industries including semiconductor processing, medical equipment, energy processes, diesel emissions, medical, and food service. Today, the company continues to grow, while its commitment remains the same: to provide customers with superior products and services for their individual needs.

Haworth Product

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- Openest®
- X99®
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- Reside®
- Beside®
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- A Series®
- X Series®
- Tec Cret® Flooring
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