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Commercial Furniture

People | Products | Ideas... *That Make A Difference*



Washington Workplace: People, Products and Ideas that Make a Difference

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Celebrating 30 Years

30

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BY ROB KIRKBRIDE

PHOTOS BY RON DIEHL JR.

There are no official bosses, goals, quotas or forecasts. Teams operate within the company with nearly complete autonomy. Its team members work mostly remote (and have since long before the pandemic). It is based in the Washington, D.C. area, but does no government business. It doesn't chase bids.

The company expects sales to reach \$40 million in 2022, making it one of the largest independent office furniture dealers in the country. All of this without a single middle manager. There are 10 designers and no design manager. There are eight

project managers, but no one project manager manager. The title "sales manager" does not exist. In fact, titles of any kind are a rarity. Its org chart is flat as a pancake.

From the outside, it might be hard to imagine how Washington Workplace survives, much less thrives. But take a look inside the Washington, D.C. non-aligned dealer and you'll find a lot to like. From its unusual corporate structure to its staff of stone-cold closers, Washington Workplace works.

Need further proof of its success? Just ask its customers and the brands it represents. Both groups are more like fans than clients.



"Washington Workplace is very special," said Betsy Frantz, president and CEO of PathForward, a non-profit focused on homelessness and a customer of Washington Workplace. "They are intentional and sincere in their desire to know and understand their customers' backgrounds, motivations and needs. They are authentic and not focused only on closing the deal. The team really cares for each client, and you honestly can't get that level of service from most companies anymore. They will go above and beyond to make sure you are comfortable and pleased with your choices – and that they really work for your space."

Over many years Washington Workplace and AIS have worked on multiple projects together that cover the gambit of vertical markets and size. AIS's collective success with Washington Workplace stems from the company's upfront communications, willingness to collaborate and its ability to

stretch the boundaries in search of new concepts, said Nick Haritos, president of AIS.

Washington Workplace does not hire people without significant industry tenure and they pay well above industry levels for that experience.

"The leadership of the dealership is very much engaged at every level of the organization," he said. "They have created large teams within the firm and everyone supports each other. Regardless of the industry the up and coming generations want mentors not a boss. They also are keen students of the industry and closely monitor trends affecting the workplace. They understand the concept of 'trusted advisor' and definitely walk the talk."

For 30 years, Washington Workplace has grown through its family-friendly culture that has thrived because of its commitment to bottom line and personal accountability. It is a reflection of the company's Founder



and President John Murphy, who started the dealership in 1991.

"I've always had this belief that we should make the most out of every opportunity that comes our way and we still have that belief to this day," he said.

The company follows three key philosophies: turning business relationships into real personal friendships; being prepared for business opportunities when they arise and most importantly; being committed to serve others (clients, employees, the community) without regard to any personal benefit or return. Servant Leadership in action.

Yet those guiding principles have led to a lot of success for Washington Workplace.

Bernadette Michael has worked for Washington Workplace for nearly eight years as director of operations. Her story is typical of the company's employees. She came there from a completely different industry and found her way to Washington



Workplace when her husband was in medical school at George Washington University. She said she “just clicked” with the company and its leadership and said it has “been amazing ever since.”

She described Washington Workplace this way: “Imagine if a giant family put a company together. That’s how it feels to work at Washington Workplace. It is the most unique structure I’ve ever seen in a company. It is not corporate; everyone is part of the team. There are no true higher-ups. Everyone has a team lead, of course, but it is all focused

on everyone working together to get the job done.”

The Best Solution, Regardless of Who Builds It

Independence is key to Washington Workplace’s success. The company’s website is filled with pictures of products and successful installations designed to fuel a designer’s creativity and a client’s imagination. There are literally hundreds of photos, but not one of them lists the furniture brand anywhere. Products matter a lot at Washington Workplace, but when



it comes to the client and its preferences, Washington Workplace lets them decide. Products are specified because they work in the space, meet a budget and lead time, and help the customer, not based on who produced them or sales quotas set by aligned manufacturers.

Washington Workplace represents hundreds of brands — all with the same status and importance at the dealership.

“When it comes to a bid, there are certain times that we’re going to be at a disadvantage because someone’s going to the designers who are putting together

the specs who might be fans of (one of the majors),” said Sarah Gabriel, partner and one of the company’s project team leaders. “So our lane is really companies who want a partner who can help them create a beautiful space and bring value by giving them options. I think we all do see ourselves more as consultants and agnostic providers of furniture than we do pushers of product.”

Industry veteran Tom Tolone worked with the Washington Workplace team for years when he was president of Paoli and Cherryman. He remains friends with many at the dealership to this day.



The Washington Workplace difference, he said, is its true professionalism, respect for all stakeholders and willingness to take time with its partners.

"They understand the value of relationships and as a non-aligned contract dealership, developed and cultivated those with their supporting manufacturers," said Tolone. "The company engaged with the leadership of those manufacturers, but most importantly, acknowledged those independent representatives who serviced the company and team."

Teams Approach

What makes Washington Workplace truly unique is its teams approach to sales. Each salesperson has his or her own team, complete with designers, project managers and sales coordinators, more similar to how real estate firms operate than office furniture companies. These teams operate effectively, profitably, and independently, under the Washington Workplace's outside-the-box system.

That's why having the right teams and team leaders in place is so critical for the



firm. Most good salespeople do not want to manage people. Understandably, they want to go out and sell. Salespeople who possess the skill and desire to sell and manage a team is important to Washington Workplace and very hard to find

“So if I decide that I really want to create more of a leadership role for me and do less of the order entry; if I don’t want to generate quotes, but I want to be delegating my team to do that, it’s totally up to me how I run my show, which I think is very, very different than other dealerships,” said Gabriel.

The teams see projects through from

start to finish. The prospects are generated through the teams as are sales, design and project management. There is no centralized design or sales department within Washington Workplace. All that happens through the team. The team approach creates great efficiency, said Gabriel.

“We realized that if you had a really strong lead at the top that knew how manage people, maybe we’d be better off to run a little bit more like an A&D firm with studios, essentially,” said Christine Miller-Langemak, one of the first people to join Washington Workplace, a partner and team leader at the company.



Charlie Atwell and Ray Holden have only been with Washington Workplace for about three years, but they are a good example of how experienced salespeople are brought in to run a team. Both Atwell and Holden came from Innovative Business Interiors, a dealership they founded in the Washington area. When they left the dealership, they were able to move some of their team to Washington Workplace and build the rest.

“I guess it’s because we’re all entrepreneurial at heart and we’re independent,” said Atwell. “It’s easy to tell if folks aren’t performing. It’s all self-disciplined. We’re doing what we need to do to make it happen.”

When asked what makes Washington Workplace successful, Ben Maxwell, senior vice president of sales for the Eastern Region of AIS, said it is the company’s people and teams.

“Their story is great and they have always been great leaders,” he said. “Their whole team is very good and very smart. They are

a mid-size dealership and are very selective about who goes to work at WW. Like I stated, the sales people hire their teams so if there is a weak link, they don’t last for long. Sarah Gabriel is on our Dealer Council and she has been giving us great feedback forever – even before our Dealer Council existed. Now it’s formalized so we hear from her regularly. We know what she says should be taken seriously and it is. It makes us better. Also, Ron Diehl is her project manager. Everyone from top down knows Ron. We hear from him a lot. But it’s all very good feedback. Who is a better partner than those who make AIS better? They do.”

Culture of Empowerment, Community and Family

So who is the boss at Washington Workplace? It really depends on the team. The staff is more like a family, said Gordon. Everyone who works there has the flexibility to make their own success. As they succeed individually, the company succeeds as well.

The company started out slowly, she said,



but quickly grew when the right salespeople and teams were created. That's when Murphy set them loose. The sales teams have found their niche and thrived, the most successful of whom make high six figure compensation. It is a pay scale many dealers in the industry would find unimaginable. Murphy feels it's just good business.

"I think one of the ingredients of our secret sauce is our independence. We can do whatever the (expletive) we want and have no factory telling us what to do or how to do it, or how to pay our people," he said.

Still, the company is frugal where it counts. It doesn't spend lavishly on its office or showroom and most of its employees work from home, keeping overhead low and costs down.

The independence has attracted key people. Most of the Washington Workplace sales team leaders previously owned their

own businesses or dealerships. Gabriel owned her own business prior to joining the company.

"I just don't think I could have worked in a place that told me how to do it and when to do it," she said. "I mean, we give each other advice and we bounce ideas off each other, but nobody's standing over you going, 'You must do this or you must do that.'"

That flexibility extends to where people live and work as well. Even before COVID hit, most of the company's 45 employees worked from home. Many people on the Washington Workplace staff live outside the Washington, D.C. area. Employees literally live coast to coast.

"They might have initially worked for us in town and then for one reason or another moved to different states and we found ways to keep them because they were good employees and did great work," said Gordon.



"They have flexibility. You know, everyone's raising kids and trying to have a life outside of working. So there is a lot of flexibility with the staff."

Washington Workplace takes care of its people as well. During the pandemic, not a single worker faced layoff or furlough as offices in the Washington area and around the world shut down and the workflow trickled down to less than half its usual volume. Not a single hour was lost. The care and concern afforded workers results in employees who really like being part of Washington Workplace. The company measures tenure for most of its employees in decades, not years.

Washington Workplace not only supports its employees, but the community as well, said Kate Bates, president and CEO of the

Arlington (Va.) Chamber of Commerce. The Arlington Chamber of Commerce has had a longstanding relationship with Washington Workplace, both as a customer and through Washington Workplace's active participation as a member of the chamber. As a customer, the chamber has always experienced exceptional service, she said.

"Washington Workplace has a wonderful sales team and consistently provides great service and quality products. They truly care about the wellbeing of their clients and do everything possible to create a well-functioning work environment and a positive experience for the customer," said Bates. "Washington Workplace does just as much, if not more, to support other businesses as much as its own. For example, they regularly provide tickets to non-Chamber events for



small businesses and nonprofits to attend, which not only saves money but at times provides access to events that may not otherwise be feasible for an organization's budget."

In Washington, No Government and They Don't Chase Bids

Washington Workplace is unique for other reasons as well. The company is based in the Washington, D.C. metro area, but does no government business. Instead, it focuses on the companies that serve the government. It also works for a host of the D.C.-area corporate clients that have grown nationwide.

Even without the government, there is a lot of work for Washington Workplace locally. The company focuses on the traditional

Washington economy — associations, finance, legal, IT, government contractors, lobbying organizations, embassy work, restaurants, healthcare and some education.

Though it is based in Washington, D.C., Washington Workplace is effectively a national office furniture firm. It works on projects everywhere, not just inside the Beltway. Only 60% of Washington Workplace's business comes from the "DMV" — The District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia. Project business comes from everywhere, not just the Capital area. The company usually works in all 50 states, every single year.

Washington Workplace is concerned more about sales teams chasing jobs that the company shouldn't than the company does



closing the jobs that they should. That can be counterintuitive for some, especially those new to working at the dealership.

Picking and choosing only projects they will win allows Washington Workplace to spend 100% of its resources on profitability, therefore, there is no pressure to fill the pipeline or sales funnel. "I don't want our people spending their emotional capital on dead ends because it's a spirit killer. Our resources have to be spent on wins," said Murphy.

Gabriel said: "We're the people who are able to respond first or are the quickest in our deliverables to them that other people can't do."

Where They've been and Where They're Going

It was not easy to run a fledgling office furniture company in the early 1990s. Still, Murphy relied on his upbringing to push the

business forward. Being the oldest in a family of 11 helped him develop a skill set that worked in his favor and directly translated into the way he would run the firm — no nonsense, no waste; using the skills of those who surrounded him, shoring up weaknesses, nurturing and growing teams.

The people who work for Washington Workplace are part of this family-friendly culture. As part of a work family, employees are held accountable for what they do. The wins are celebrated and the rare losses are studied so they won't happen again.

While some entrepreneurs outline the struggles they've had building their businesses, Murphy shrugs the difficulties off, thankful for the luck he has had. "I feel like it's never been hard; it's never been tough," said Murphy. "I've always been blessed with a lot of good luck and a lot of great, caring people." **MP**