

When the office staff jostle with electricians

Renovating an office while conducting business can be a tricky feat of logistics

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One night in June, "vandals" trashed the Wunderman Canada office in midtown Toronto. They wrote graffiti on the walls and left the floor littered with debris - toppled cabinets, a splintered badminton racquet, a torn copy of *Leadership From Within* by Peter Urs Bender. Clad in white jumpsuits, they could be seen taking turns ramming a large roll of paper into a crumpling wall, laughing and drinking all the while.

There was method to their madness: This was a staff demolition party, the advertising agency's way of letting employees celebrate a radical makeover of their cramped and outdated office space - and to let them blow off steam.

Wunderman has enjoyed some growth in recent years and the spurt in new hires resulted in its 220 employees being scattered across the Bloor Street West building's 15 storeys, sometimes with three staff members sharing a work cubicle. Rather than finding new digs, the company decided to remake its office space with a goal of getting most of the staff working across three floors in a bright, modern and collaborative environment.

As part of the process, on that night in June, employees were given permission to smash apart the agency's seventh floor - with the exception of landlord-owned areas, such as outer walls, bathrooms, windows and stairwells.

"It was an opportunity to let loose," recalled Lianne Grady, director of client operations and senior vice-president at Wunderman. "Everyone was swinging hammers."

As any homeowner might know, renovations can be stressful, and the same applies to the office - especially if the drywall installers, painters, electricians and IT technicians hammer and saw and fish for wires while the workers, as in Wunderman's case, are "creating."

Typically, a renovation of a 10,000-square-foot office takes about 10 weeks, said Carolyn Laidley Arn, vice-president of business development at Interior Dimensions, a company in Toronto that specializes in building office space. "If you're just repainting, replacing

carpet and replacing some fixtures, it will take less time than if you're completely rebuilding the space."

The other key factor, she added, "is whether we're building in occupied space - the client is conducting business in the same area we're working - or we're building in empty space."

With low vacancy rates, especially in hot spots such as Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton and Vancouver, more tenants are staying put rather than moving to a new office, and that means the majority of renovations take place in occupied space.

That calls for some logistics, such as moving employees about in temporary swing spaces while their work areas are being remodelled, bringing contractors on site during off-hours, such as evenings and weekends, and having cleanup crews impart some semblance of order before the office staff return to work.

"It takes a lot of strategizing and you need to figure out a balance between ripping through the job - potentially disrupting your work flow - and moving slowly, which tends to cause burnout; the client is excited at first and then after a few weeks they just want the contractor out of there," said Ms. Laidley Arn, whose clients include Coca-Cola Ltd. and the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan.

Even if the offices were being rebuilt in occupied space, there should be zero downtime, she said. "We can create redundancies, parallel computer systems."

When Interior Dimensions renovated Coca-Cola's offices in Toronto, Coca-Cola's management brought in massage therapists and offered breakfasts for displaced employees, she said. "It's easy to do - buy some coffee and doughnuts - but it makes a big difference in employee morale, especially for ongoing renovations in occupied space."

That was the rationale behind Wunderman's demolition party. "We want our employees engaged with the entire renovation project, not just the planning but the actual construction," Ms. Grady said. "It's disruptive - there's no question - but people have been surprisingly patient."

Teams have been kept together whenever possible, and because it's summertime, employees have been able to take advantage of vacated offices.

Wunderman eventually will occupy two full floors, each about 20,000 square feet, and share a third floor with sister-company Young & Rubicam Ltd.

Wunderman's renovation is costing about \$130 per square foot across more than 60,000 square feet (including the shared space with Y&R). Barring any major setbacks, Wunderman should be moved in and set up come November. "There are always IT frustrations," said president Trish Wheaton, careful to insist that "we have a great IT

department. But man, the time we live in, you're without your computer for an hour and ..."

THE OFFICE RENO DIARY

This is part four of a monthly series as Wunderman Canada renovates its Toronto workspace.

May 1: To move or renovate

June 5: Getting staff buy-in

July 3: Planning the space

Next month: Sustainable design