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For 40 years, Progressive AE has been quietly transforming how West Michigan thinks about architecture. The Grand Rapids-based firm's Director of Design Bryan Koehn spoke to us by phone about integrated design, collaboration, and how space can make or break a business.

What does "integrated design" look like in practice at Progressive AE — on a day-to-day basis?

We sit next to each other when we're working … we're a collaborative team. What we've done recently is design spaces that have multi-media and writable surfaces so you can sit in a team setting, converse in a digital format, sketch.

How do you get anything done with all the interaction?

You need real-time interaction to make sure technical details express a cohesive idea. Historically, in our profession, it's always been: If your head's down and you're working alone, you're being efficient. We try to make sure that we're not sitting at our desks and working alone. You never know where a good design is going to come from.

How is integrated design visible in the final product you deliver to clients?

Our interpretation of integration is that all systems reinforce the design concept. For example, if sustainability is one of our goals—which it often is—you should see sustainability when you walk in the door. Nothing should distract from it.

What is your own workspace like?

I sit at a table that we designed, what we call a spare table. We bought bowling alley lanes and refurbished them, and we found some bikes and revitalized them. You can wheel it around. It's mobile, and it can go anywhere in the office. Anyone who wants to talk to me at any time can come up and talk. It's awesome.

You have a rolling office? Other than the cardio benefits, how

does that help your work?

I need to have a change of setting to make my mind more active. We're creating more "we" space and less "me" space. By giving up a workstation or an office—I gave up an office—I now look at the building as my workspace. To me, that's empowering.

When did you first start noticing the trend toward open-plan workspaces like this?

At least eight years ago, there was a major shift. But I would say it's amped up because of the economy since 2008. It's just a more competitive business environment.

How do your clients feel about this approach to workspaces when you're designing for them?

It all depends on the type of business. We would only support open and collaborative workspaces if the clients come to us saying, "We want to increase collaboration and speed." That's when we go into the mode of bigger "we" spaces, smaller "me" spaces.

What advice would you offer business leaders who want their workspaces to inspire innovation, but who can't start from scratch with a new building?

Get input from the people who you are expecting to act a certain way to act in that environment. That is not an easy thing to do. Then have the courage to follow through with your vision. You have to make sure your space aligns with that vision. If you don't align your environment with your strategic vision, it will not happen. You won't get the success. It might trickle through, but it will stall.

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