Sustainable Business Transformation through Workspace Innovation

A Sabre Holdings Case Study
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Sabre Holdings Flexspace case study is designed to provide information and insight on the implementation of a holistic and multi-regional flexible workspace program, with detailed descriptions of the various phases of execution. The objective is to share challenges and best practices with Corporate Real Estate and Sustainability professionals across all industries who are looking to develop similar programs or extend existing programs in support of cost savings goals, space consolidation plans and environmental sustainability initiatives.

By shifting to an alternative, flexible space model where only a percentage of cubicles were assigned and others remained available for “flexible use”, Sabre was able to achieve significant savings within 18-months, reducing global real estate costs by 25 percent and ultimately create a sustainable enterprise transformation for value beyond the bottom line.

The concept of shared or flexible workspace has been discussed for years in the corporate real estate world, primarily as a way for firms dominated by so-called road warriors — who are rarely in the office — to trim real estate costs. The concept, often called “hoteling” gives employees a landing pad for occasional visits to the office, including little other than a generic desk and a phone, and enables a company to offer a temporary work space while avoiding the expense for office space that would otherwise sit empty.

Flexible and efficient workspace programs are also now an integral part of many corporations’ environmental sustainability strategies given that real estate and facilities are one of the greatest areas of opportunity for a corporation to reduce its environmental footprint. Flexible workspace programs achieve this by helping to reduce energy and water consumption, reducing employee commuting trips to and from the office, and making more efficient use of office resources.

But for Sabre the question was whether these “hoteling” principles could be applied to a business where only some employees travel, and not all of the time. Sabre’s goal was to create a system that would recapture the real estate value lost on all of the days employees’ desks sat empty and to begin shifting to the concept that “work is something you do, not someplace you go”. The unexpected outcome was that this radical shift in the workplace put a premium on agility within Sabre’s workforce, creating a crucial business transformation that not only changed physically into something more flexible and agile; it also accelerated a transformation in its employees and its work culture. Sabre’s employees adapted to their new environment, began working more closely with each other, breaking down many of the silos between projects and departments, created a more collaborative environment and ultimately strengthened Sabre’s competitive position in the fast-evolving travel technology industry.

“Flexspace created a physical environment of flexibility and agility in the workplace which positively influenced our company’s innovative and spirited culture, something that is critical in today’s competitive global economy.”

Sam Gilliland
CEO Sabre Holdings

1 Flexspace is the term Sabre uses to describe its Flexible Workspace Program
2 CoreNet Global
“In order to stay ahead of the game, our employees need to move quickly to meet our customers’ needs and anticipate new needs — so having a flexible, nimble and collaborative environment is critical to our company’s success,” said Sabre Holdings Chief Executive Sam Gilliland.

With Flexspace everyone at Sabre’s corporate headquarters sits in a cubicle — even the CEO. As a result, managers became more accessible and more in tune with their teams, and many who were used to dealing with employees face-to-face learned new skills for managing people remotely and trusting that the work was getting done, even if they could not “see” their team members. Employees enjoy better work life balance by having the choice and tools to work from home, a customer site or work on an alternative schedule.

Flexspace helped position Sabre to operate more efficiently as a global company, significantly reducing real estate costs and reducing its environmental footprint as it shifted from five buildings near its Southlake headquarters to two LEED-certified buildings that employees could walk between. More importantly, the program’s success provided a template for a viable real estate strategy as the company considers new leases for any of its 101 global locations.

Making a transformational shift like this wasn’t easy, and there were key success factors that proved vital to the implementation and sustainability of the program.

• **Let data support and determine your decision** — Not every office complex or organization is well-positioned to move to a Flexspace environment, but a detailed analysis including key data points such as attendance (badge swipes), travel and vacation days and commuting needs will uncover opportunities that are not always self-evident.

• **Build the business case with key stakeholders** — There are several elements that must be considered including cost and environmental savings, physiological and productivity impact on employees and results to the business. Working with a core team of primary stakeholders across several disciplines, including corporate real estate, facilities management, technology support, environmental sustainability, human resources and others will ensure that the business case and the implementation plan are balanced and positioned for success.

• **Secure executive management endorsement and support** — Buy-in at the top level of the organization will set a clear direction for implementation and expectations for success. This includes leading by example.

• **Develop a clear communication plan** — Ensuring employees know what’s happening and why, and having ample opportunities and venues to raise concerns and ask questions is crucial for the implementation to go smoothly and to maintain productivity.
• **Cultivate strategic partnerships** — By partnering with Jones Lang LaSalle, a leading Property Management firm, Sabre was able to gain forward-thinking insights and expertise as it developed and implemented its plan. This facilities management firm provided construction management, move coordination and planning and continues to play a significant role in maintaining the Flexspace program, collecting pre-decision data twice daily and actively managing the space.

• **Invest in flexible, robust technology infrastructure** — Having technology systems in place that create a plug-and-play environment supports both the implementation and ongoing maintenance of the program, and makes it easy for employees to work in the most flexible way possible while staying connected to their teams.

• **Never underestimate the human element** — Transitioning employees who have been accustomed to traditional hardwall offices or assigned cubicles to a flexible work environment requires a significant amount of change management. Executives and managers alike will need support and time to adjust to a new work environment. Provide private spaces like phone booth rooms and health rooms so employees can easily tap into these available spaces when they need privacy.

• **Know your global culture** — When considering global expansion of Flexspace, know your corporate culture and your local culture. Being sensitive to local culture is important, but keep corporate culture the first priority.

• **Expect the program to evolve over time to meet changing company needs** — Maintaining support and controls for the program, through enforcement of policies and regular data collection should be part of the initial implementation but also part of an ongoing review process. The program must be rigid enough to maintain balance and continue to achieve the original goals and objectives, but flexible enough to respond to the changing space requirements of a dynamic workforce.
Introduction

*Sabre Holdings* connects people with the world’s greatest travel possibilities by retailing travel products and providing distribution and technology solutions for the travel industry through its companies: *Sabre Travel Network, Sabre Airline Solutions, Sabre Hospitality Solutions* and *Travelocity*. For more than 50 years, *Sabre Holdings* has transformed the travel industry through technological advancements. *Sabre* is a privately held company with more than 9,000 employees in 59 countries.

The Seeds For Sabre’s Flexspace\(^3\) Program

The seeds for *Sabre’s* Flexspace program were actually planted in 2000, as the company completed its spin-off from its American Airlines Inc. parent, AMR Corp., and began planning for its new corporate headquarters in Southlake, Texas. The travel technology firm was moving from being a mainframe computer-driven company with a corporate culture rooted in traditional hardwall offices to a more agile technology firm poised for growth.

As executives strategized plans for *Sabre’s* new headquarters, they decided to look at things differently, from how they wanted employees to work to what building materials they wanted to use. Efficiency and flexibility would be important, both for how employees would approach their work and how the building would operate.

*Sabre Holdings* was among the first major corporations to build a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)-certified headquarters in the U.S., and only the second such building in Texas when it opened in 2001. It was a bold statement about a company looking towards the future, and looking at growing its business in new and innovative ways. Thanks to some inspirational and forward-thinking individuals, as well as the LEED design and certification criteria, *Sabre’s* corporate headquarters would become a leading example of best practices in green buildings.

The 154-acre campus reintroduced native grasses and wildflowers and built new wetlands, which would help conserve water and minimize consumption. More than half of building materials came from recycled materials, and the carpets were made of recycled fibers and limited to areas that needed sound control. The new campus was built using native stone from quarries within 500 miles away to reduce the energy need for shipping and support the local economy. The roof used a reflective material to reduce cooling costs during sizzling Texas summers; windows were designed to maximize daylight and conserve energy, and are visible from every workstation.

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\(^3\) Flexspace is the term *Sabre Holdings* uses for its flexible workspace program
Many other energy, water and resource conservation practices were employed both in the building and the ongoing maintenance of the facility. It was a forward-looking approach that positioned Sabre well for future energy savings and a work environment that was better in sync with the local community and the community Sabre was beginning to build internally.

Planning for the new building included several key decisions that ultimately put important resources in place to make the Flexspace program possible six years later. The most pivotal of these was to move from a traditional office structure to the open environments favored by many agile, fast-growing start-up technology firms. With hardwall offices reserved only for top executives, employees would work in an environment designed to promote collaboration. The new headquarters would have modular cubicles that could be easily reconfigured as teams shifted.

The Corporate Real Estate team nurtured a strategic partnership with Sabre’s Chief Information Office (CIO) to plan for smart technology investments that would optimize flexibility in the future. Most employees were migrated to laptops and the building was outfitted with wireless service, enabling employee mobility. Phones used cutting-edge Cisco Systems voice-over-Internet protocol (VoIP) technology with a robust menu of features. Common areas, such as break rooms, restrooms and elevators, were centralized on each floor to foster employee interaction and collaboration.

By 2006, Sabre had successfully made the transition to a fast-growing technology firm and, with global expansion in its sights, Sabre found that its needs were changing. The two new headquarters buildings used an open concept and offered flexibility, but the company’s other three buildings in the area didn’t offer the same flexibility.

Teams working in those buildings still had hardwall offices, making it more difficult to work collaboratively on fast-developing projects. And with business units in multiple locations, the Corporate Real Estate team was expending a significant effort — and cost — to move about 80% of employees each year as teams outgrew space, or needed to be installed adjacent to other teams for short-term projects. After gaining approvals to convert one of the other traditionally configured buildings to open space — which came with a hefty $15 million to $20 million price tag — Sabre decided to plan for another, more radical approach.

Traditionally, gauging real estate performance means measuring real estate costs per employee. It’s a simple calculation multiplying a building’s total cost per square-feet by the number of square-feet allocated per position. But as a travel technology company, a healthy percentage of Sabre’s employees traveled on business, leaving their desks empty. Dean Sanderson, Sabre’s Vice President of Corporate Real Estate at the time, realized that if there was a way to increase utilization of the space, real estate costs could be dramatically reduced. But could it be done?

“...The more you understand the business, the better program you can design.”

Dean Sanderson, former Vice President of Corporate Real Estate
Data To Support And Shape The Program

In 2006, Sabre was allocating about 350 square-feet per employee, well in line with industry standards at the time, although companies were beginning to look for ways to reduce that figure to 250 square feet\(^4\). Deeper analysis of Sabre’s real estate metrics was revealing. Even by traditional measures, the company had too much space. Its five headquarters buildings had 4,000 seats, but housed around 3,000 employees. After reviewing approximately six months of badge data from security checkpoints campus wide, Sanderson confirmed what he and his real estate team had already guessed: employees were frequently out of the office, and on average, only 60% to 65% of them were actually in the office on any given day.

At least on paper, it seemed that Flexspace — the term Sabre Corporate Real Estate uses for standardized workstations that are unassigned and used on a first come, first serve basis by any employee who is in the office on a given day — could work, but more planning was needed to navigate through all the issues that such an approach would entail. Sanderson brought in Kay Alig, a change management expert who had helped with Sabre’s planning for its new headquarters to help lead the effort and prepare for a major shift in corporate culture.

With help from facilities management partner Jones Lang LaSalle, Sanderson and Alig delved deeper into the data, looking at desk occupancy figures for each “neighborhood” in the two main headquarters buildings, which already had flexible, modular furniture. Taking into account offsite meetings, vacation and sick time, even employees who didn’t travel and considered themselves in the office every day could easily be absent from their desks a month out of the year. The team also analyzed how space was being used, and took a detailed census twice a day to get a clearer picture of the building’s true occupancy.

The concept of shared workstations — also called “hoteling” — had been implemented by a few firms with a travel-heavy workforce starting in the 1990s, as a way to hold down real estate costs as they grew\(^5\). In recent years other trends, such as a heightened focus on corporate environmental sustainability have pushed even firms without a travel-heavy workforce to look at alternative ways of managing their space. Technology advances, including wireless connectivity and virtual private network access have made working remotely easier. Additionally, more work is now produced collaboratively rather than on an individual basis, putting more focus on the flexibility offered by open office environments and tools to support telecommuting and remote offices rather than traditional hardwall offices. The shift to collaborative work — comprising as much as 80% in 2010, by some forecasts — has pushed some companies to devote as much as half of their offices to some type of shared space\(^6\).

Sanderson and Alig studied alternative, shared workspace programs implemented by other companies, visiting several sites and talking with key leaders at other major corporations to get a clearer sense of what worked and what challenges may lay ahead. Some firms, for example, used a reservation system allowing employees to hold their seat in advance, but experience demonstrated the system failed when reserved seats went unused after an employee’s scheduled changed. This research proved crucial as the team recognized the importance of creating a plan customized for Sabre’s needs and culture.

“The more you understand the business, the better program you can design,” Sanderson said.

\(^4\) Jones Lang LaSalle
\(^5\) BNET, “Checking Inn at the Office,” October 2000 http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1563/is_10_18/ai_67185381/?tag=content;col1
\(^6\) Jones Lang LaSalle, “Perspectives On Workplace Solutions — Redefining Space,” November 2008
Building Management Support, Making The Business Case

If Sabre was going to fold its five headquarters offices into the two LEED-certified buildings, it would have to plan for 1.35 employees per cubicle — a significant increase from the 0.81 employees per cubicle the company had in 2006. Cubicles, which varied in size depending upon an employee’s position and level within the company, would have be reconfigured into a standard size and outfitted with the same technology, so that employees could expect the same environment regardless of where they sat. Executives too, who were the only employees with hardwall offices in the new headquarters building, would have to move to cubicles to make room for the additional meeting space required.

Over the course of two months, Sanderson and Alig began sharing the plan individually with 20 senior managers within the company and gaining additional feedback on potential challenges to the plan. It was that feedback that helped to shape the plan and drive its success. It was clear from discussions with managers that getting buy-in from employees — and successfully implementing Flexspace program — would require a robust communication plan that clearly identified the key benefits of the program. The Corporate Real Estate team would need to:

- Clearly identify and communicate the economic benefits
- Make the program credible to employees
- Secure unwavering management support
- Ensure the program was implemented transparently and fairly

“If you’re not transparent, people may think there are other motives to doing something, and you can lose respect,” Sanderson said. “We had to make sure that we put the business case in terms that people could understand and not just real estate terms.”
The figures were compelling. Flexspace would reduce Sabre’s headquarters buildings from 1.04 million square feet, to 470,000 square feet, slashing annual operational expenses by $10 million within three years. In addition to operational savings and lease expense, the company would be able to generate additional cash by selling the other building it owned. Cost per employee at headquarters would be cut in half, and the program would reduce global real estate costs per person by more than 25%.

Executive support for the program was enthusiastic. Sabre’s CEO Sam Gilliland, who would be moving to a cubicle himself, urged the team to cut the rollout timeline in half, a move that would allow the company to avoid a new lease on two of its buildings and capture the savings more quickly. The third building would be marketed for sale.

Mark Miller, Sabre’s CFO, says the program was significant because there are few things a company can do to quickly eliminate $10 million in expenses. By pushing for greater utilization of Sabre’s office space, the company was extracting more value out of its real estate assets, realizing cost savings and hence was able to avoid less appealing cost-cutting measures necessary during weak economic cycles, such as deep headcount reductions. “Ten million dollars is worth 100 jobs, when you consider all the costs,” Miller said.

The goal wasn’t to change the way people scheduled their work, but to more closely match the number of employees with the way they were already using the space, fitting the anticipated campus population of 3,000 employees into 2,200 seats. The pilot program was launched in June 2006 with plans for campus-wide rollout to start in 2007.

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Good Communication Is Paramount

Sam Gilliland, Sabre’s CEO, announced the program in a companywide town hall with the message that even he and then-CFO Jeff Jackson would be moving to cubicles. This would be a corporate mandate, an aggressive strategy to cut costs and be more efficient and flexible, not a program that employees could choose to opt-into.

“In order to compete on a global basis, we have to have a cost structure to compete,” Gilliland said. “Moving to Flexspace means we can invest more in products to serve customers and leverage our assets to provide greater value.”

“The fact that Gilliland was moving to a cube helped. “People don’t want to feel like you’re just imposing something on them. Everyone has to be in the same boat,” he said.

Sabre’s Corporate Real Estate team met regularly with a core team of stakeholders across the campus to consider the key elements of the project, including technology support, facilities management, environmental sustainability, human resources and others, to ensure the plan was well balanced and that they had identified any potential roadblocks. Through human resources, managers were given tools to navigate the range of change management issues. Technology support leaders worked through how to modify existing systems for the new work environment.

An internal corporate blog, called “Our Space” was launched with introductory messages from Gilliland and Sanderson. The site was regularly updated with answers to questions, clarifications to myths floating around about the project and details about how the space would be reconfigured. Employees could send questions to a general mailbox, or leave comments on the blog.

Alig led more than 100 hours of employee meetings, offered only in person so that she could get a deeper sense of the core issues of concern, which were sometimes different from the ones initially expressed. Meetings with employees helped the team identify early issues and shape implementation, a key contribution for the success of Flexspace program.

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CEO, Sabre Holdings
Logistics For Implementation

With unassigned cubicles, how would employees access their files? And what about spreading germs if there was a different person using the keyboard, mouse and phone each day? For employees coming from the three other buildings, which had hardwall offices, there were concerns about noise.

As the initial moves were made, employees were invited to see the new space, ask questions and raise concerns. An office etiquette guide, built from the feedback of employees, was published. Employees were given both pre-move and post-move packets with key details, including where their new space would be located, how to prepare for the move and how to operate their new desk.

The Corporate Real Estate team offered each work group basic guidelines on how to determine if an employee should be in a Flexspace or assigned workstation, but left it up to each group to allocate the space they were assigned as they wished to attain the 1.35 people per cubicle ratio.

From the corporate real estate perspective, there were only four reasons an employee had to have an assigned space:

- If there was a physical limitation or accommodation needed, such as a special chair or desk
- If there was a specific technology need beyond the laptop most employees used
- If the employee was an administrative assistant, serving as the anchor for the “neighborhood”
- If there was a special requirement in an employee’s job function, such as heavy paper requirements

Sabre’s Human Resources and Legal departments were the only exceptions to the program, given the sensitive nature of their work. That’s not to say that privacy was gone completely in other areas. The reconfiguration of space included a variety of reconfigured or new conference rooms for scheduled, long-term and impromptu meetings or confidential phone calls. Mark Silagy, now Senior Vice President, Customer Care and Support — Airline Solutions, said he sometimes takes advantage of “flex time” by starting his day with a block of time at home, where he can make sensitive calls without having to book a conference room.

“Having the CEO in a cubicle takes away some of the mystique and transforms the CEO into a “man of the people.” That changes the culture. It feels like you could go talk to him if you needed to because you see him around.”

**Stephanie Bundick,**
**Director, Business Operations — Airline Solutions**
The program's implementation was indelibly influenced by Sabre's employees, who worked on a team-by-team basis to optimize Flexspace for their needs. For many teams, key managers and senior vice presidents were given an assigned seat, with the idea that they needed to be in a predictable seat for easy communication with their employees. Some employees agreed to pair up to share a single, assigned desk, and alternate working from home.

A few teams converted some of their neighborhood into an open “bullpen” setting, with two assigned workstations in the footprint of each cubicle, to foster the interactive and collaborative environment needed for development projects. Other teams opted to make nearly all team members use Flexspace workstations.

For some teams, a collaborative approach at the management level helped smooth the transition. Jan Altemeier, Senior Vice President, Global Operations — Sabre Travel Network, charged her group’s “employee council” to work together to develop the best approach for the department. “This wasn’t really about Flexspace. It was about how we were going to manage in an environment where we didn’t have enough space for employees,” Altemeier said. “Inviting our employees to design the solution helped facilitate the change management because folks felt they had input into the decision and plan.”

Two-way communication once the moves were complete was also important, making sure employees felt they still had a place to voice concerns. The company conducted employee surveys, supplemented by focus groups to better understand the issues and, where possible, changes were made accordingly. “But there were some times when we had to realize that we couldn’t satisfy everyone’s request,” Alig said. One key lesson was not to make any rash changes. “You have to give people at least 90 days to live in the space and get used to a ‘new normal’ before you react to any perceived issues,” Alig said.
Cultivating The Right Partners

Implementing such a major transition required industry-leading partners who could help provide thoughtful planning and strategy to identify opportunities and execute the plan. For Sabre, that partner was Jones Lang LaSalle. The firm has provided Sabre’s facilities management services since 2004, with team members fully integrated on Sabre’s campus. In fact, Jones Lang LaSalle staff work out of Flexspace and assigned workstations within the same guidelines as Sabre employees.

Jones Lang LaSalle played a pivotal role, managing the construction on the newly configured space, contracting with several outside vendors to move more than 3,000 employees. Sabre also sought support from consulting firm DEGW, to conduct pre- and post-move surveys, focus groups and assist in occupancy data collection.

“Jones Lang LaSalle was key from an implementation perspective,” Sanderson said. “We couldn’t have done it without them.”

The corporate real estate facilities management firm helped Sabre gain broader insight into how other firms were managing similar issues.

“Sabre has always been a tad bit ahead of the curve,” said Evamarie Smith, a National Director and Senior Vice President for Jones Lang LaSalle, who worked as Sabre’s Client Relationship Manager from 2004 to 2008, pointing to the company’s move into an open workspace in 2001, conversion to laptops over desktop computers and leading approach to environmental sustainability. “The plug-and-play environment allowed Sabre to move quickly into this workplace strategy without too much pain because it had already invested the technology infrastructure and open environment. The thing that prevents most companies from doing this today is the cost required to put those in place.”

Smith said Flexspace shows how corporate real estate can be leveraged to provide more value as an asset, rather than just being an expense item on your balance sheet. “It’s no longer fashionable to have large portfolio holdings when you don’t have the business to support it,” she said. “From an employee flexibility perspective and for sustainability initiatives, you want the smaller footprint that Flexspace can enable.”

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Evamarie Smith, a National Director and Senior Vice President for Jones Lang LaSalle.
Converting The Space, Making The Moves

Reducing its headquarters footprint by 55%, from 1.04 million square-feet to 470,000 square-feet, and consolidating from five buildings to two took careful planning and coordination across the organization.

The moves, initially proposed to occur over 18 to 21 months, were completed in just nine months. During 2007 as the company moved to its flex space environment, Sabre made 4,000 moves, in some cases, having to move teams more than once to make room for construction and fitting all the teams and business units together in configuration that would enable close collaboration.

Prior to a move, employees were asked to consolidate and clean out their file cabinets in preparation for the new space where they’d be limited to a “kiosk” — short, single file pedestal-style storage unit that they’d move to their desk each day — and limited file space included in each neighborhood. Cubicles in the new configuration would all be the same size, with three furniture options so that employees could choose a seat in the neighborhood set up the way they like to work. Glass partitions at the top of the cubicles were removed, except for hallways or high traffic areas to keep an open environment.

For the most part, cubicles used existing furniture, helping Sabre to manage the cost of the transition. Cubicles had either one large boomerang shaped table, two small boomerang tables, or one small boomerang and one small round table. Among cubicles with two small boomerang tables, one had a keyboard tray and the other could lift so that employees could choose to work standing. Desks were fitted with a data cable, flat screen monitor and VoIP phone with extension mobility.

Each desk was numbered and labeled with a green flag to indicate whether it was designed for Flexspace use. The signs were positioned at the top of the cubicles so that employees could quickly identify available desks from the entrance of the neighborhood.

Sabre’s Corporate Real Estate and Chief Information Office teams, under the coordination of Jones Lang LaSalle, moved two neighborhoods each week, allowing three weeks to move an entire floor and a fourth week buffer to finish any construction on new meeting space, supply rooms and break areas. The key was to use a streamlined and repeatable approach to each area. “Swing” spaces were created in one of Sabre’s other buildings and in the two headquarters buildings to create a space for employees to move temporarily while their neighborhood was being reconfigured.

“We got better as we went along,” said Chris Fernandez, a Client Relationship Manager with Jones Lang LaSalle who worked as a project manager to implement Flexspace at Sabre. “Once we got through the first few floors, we could tour people through the space and give them a feel for the new environment. People saw that the space wasn’t as compressed as they feared.”
The pre-move and post-move packets that were distributed to employees included details about how to pack and label their items, where they would be moving and how to log into the phones in the newly configured desks. Desks were packed on a Friday and moved over the weekend, making way for crews to dismantle the cubicles.

Once the furniture and carpet was removed, X-rays of the floor were performed to ensure that new data cores slated to be drilled didn’t compromise the building’s structure. Once the new data cores were drilled, the carpet could be replaced and furniture put back together in the new configuration. Converting to Flexspace required strategic planning for all the space in the building, not just the workstations.

Break rooms were also revamped with additional refrigeration space to accommodate the increase in users and an open seating area with a flat screen TV, tables and comfortable seating that could double as a place for casual meetings. The renovation of the break areas used the same LEED practices followed when the building was constructed, adding cork flooring, a bamboo ceiling and low VOC paint. Former supply rooms, storage areas and janitorial closets were consolidated to free space for additional meeting rooms.

Meeting space on each floor was split between rooms that could be reserved in advance and project rooms that were set aside for private calls and impromptu meeting needs. Since all employees, including executives, would sit in cubicles, the hardwall offices previously used by executives were converted into “jump-in” meeting rooms adjacent to their new cubicles and administered by their administrative assistants for impromptu calls or meetings. Project rooms were created to be reserved for extended periods, but are governed by the local neighborhood teams. Areas between neighborhoods were reconfigured to include additional “hotel” desk space for guests and “teaming” areas with small tables and comfortable seating for casual meetings.

Sabre’s cafeteria was also revamped to prepare for increased volume — which rose to 200,000 meals served in 2009. Some food stations were moved to improve traffic flow, and check-out lines were expanded from two to four and moved out of the serving area so that the area would not get congested. Old-style cash registers were swapped for a computer-based system to make checkout more efficient.

Parking capacity also became constrained, so for a short period a shuttle system was provided to allow for parking in remote lots. An electronic counter indicating the number the parking spaces available was added at the entrance of the garage providing employees with a rapid way of seeing if parking was available. A RideShare or carpooling program was also established, offering participants premium parking places and incentives for regular use. The RideShare program also supported Sabre’s environmental sustainability initiatives.

Janitorial support was another area that needed adjustment. While consolidating from five buildings to two reduced costs overall, it did require additional support in the two headquarters buildings that remained, since these facilities would undergo more intense use.
Having Right Technology In Place

Having a robust and agile technology infrastructure in place provided a significant advantage for Sabre as it transitioned into Flexspace and is a foundational element for any company contemplating the model.

At Sabre, smart technology investments were driven by a strong partnership between the technology and real estate planners formed in the planning of the new headquarters building in 2001. As a result, Sabre had already shifted the majority of its workforce to laptops, enabling them to work from home or while traveling on business, and had a strong wireless network in place throughout the building.

Communications technology, such as instant messenger, was readily available and shifting to Flexspace helped drive adoption and use, creating more value for Sabre. “Anytime you can get people to use technology more, then we increase our benefit,” said David Gula, Manager, Unified Communications — CIO. Other required technology changes were related to adding density in the office, including adding access points for the wireless network and more cabling to accommodate the new floor plan.

The transition to Flexspace helped to streamline functions for Sabre’s CIO team. Workstations were standardized with flatscreen LCD monitors and cubicles were set up so that data ports and power outlets were all in the same place. Employees who used secondary PCs either got assigned desks, or moved the secondary device into a lab. Keyboards and mice were issued individually to employees, to eliminate concerns about spreading germs with shared devices and to enable employees to use device models they were comfortable with. “When we went to Flexspace, we realized we needed a standard technology footprint in every desk so that no matter where you sat, you’d know how to operate. From a plug-and-play perspective, all the pieces that had to be in place for an employee’s workspace to work were already there,” said Todd Pickett, Manager, Regional Service Delivery — CIO.

Docking stations posed one challenge. The company had a supply of docking stations that worked with its Toshiba laptops. But as the three-year laptop replacement cycle progressed, Sabre began using laptops from other manufacturers that weren’t compatible with the existing docking stations. When a well performing and affordable universal docking station couldn’t be identified, the company elected to discontinue them, resulting in additional cost savings.

One of Sabre’s key advantages was having a VoIP (voice over Internet Protocol) telephone system in place that allowed users to port their number anywhere within Sabre’s North American offices. The “extension mobility” feature offered by Cisco Systems wasn’t activated prior to the move to Flexspace, but proved to be a key technology tool to the program’s success. The phones were set up with a single profile by office so each desk has the same screen and a
five-digit extension that can only be dialed from the inside, hence there’s no risk of customer calls reaching an empty desk. Once a user logs in, his or her preferences are activated; the phone automatically logs out after 14 hours. Additionally, remote employees or those who are telecommuting have access to “soft” IP phones, which allow the employee to port the number wherever they are in the world using their laptops.

The simplified system means that if there’s ever a hardware issue, the phone can be swapped out in a matter of minutes, rather than having to get a new device and program it to the user’s profile. The shift to extension mobility enabled Sabre’s technology team to provide telecommunications support at a lower cost because it requires fewer support technicians. Before the transition, the company needed two people to provide support for its headquarters buildings; today, those two people can provide support for the company’s entire North American operations. “Even with our remote offices, if we have any problems we just have to take another phone from the cabinet,” Gula said.

Printers were another area where Sabre was able to realize immense efficiencies. Prior to the transition, many employees had desktop printers. While desktop printers are relatively inexpensive, the maintenance and inventory to service them were not. With Flexspace, a centralized print area was created for each neighborhood with a color printer and a multifunction printer that also allowed users to scan and fax documents. The new scanning function proved vital as more employees shifted to electronic or “soft” copies of documents to reduce their file space needs and to reduce the use of paper. In further support of Sabre’s environmental sustainability initiatives, all of the printers were also pre-configured to print on both sides of the sheet to reduce paper consumption.

One unexpected technology advantage was Sabre’s innovative community platform, called “SabreTown.” This internal social media site, whose launch coincided with the rollout of Flexspace, helped employees connect across Sabre’s global offices and leverage the network’s knowledge base by allowing them to pose communitywide questions and contribute to answers or ideas. The site also allowed teams to form customized groups that helped members feel connected, no matter where they worked, such as Eco Teams, Working Mothers groups or motorcycle enthusiasts. SabreTown also allowed for the creation of a virtual “personal” space, where employees could exhibit the kinds of things that were typically placed on a desk: family photos, banners of favorite sports teams, alma mater flags, favorite travel destinations, etc. This gave employees the ability to “show who they are” and demonstrate their individuality without having to do so at their desk.
Engaging Employees, Managers

Employees are adaptable to most workspace environments, but that doesn’t mean the transition is always easy. Given a choice, most people would prefer to have their own assigned desk or office. But technology has changed the way we work and put a premium on a flexible, agile workforce and that includes the office environment.

“Fifteen years ago, not having an assigned desk would have been as foreign a concept as employees working together virtually or having conference calls with customers instead of meeting with them in person every time,” Gilliland said. “Thanks to increased flexibility and technology, we are now able to work anywhere in the world and to have continuous conversations in addition to traditional in-person interactions.”

But shifting employees to a system where they didn’t have an assigned desk did present an element of uncertainty. One of the primary challenges of Sabre’s Flexspace program was mitigating the appearance of haves and have-nots created by the new system: those who would continue to have an assigned desk, and those who would choose from available Flexspace workstations each day.

As part of its planning and change management associated with the Flexspace program, Sabre’s Corporate Real Estate team worked with key stakeholders, including Human Resources, to develop talking points and training for managers to help employees through the transition.

“We all learned from each other,” said Altemeier, Senior Vice President, Global Operations — Sabre Travel Network. “We learned about things that work and things that didn’t work. Together, we found ways to make the environment productive.”

Altemeier said Flexspace pushed managers to think of their local teams differently. “We’re a global company, and we work with people who are remote all the time. We had to learn skills and adopt tools that enabled us to work with geographic disparity, and having local people working remotely was just a continuation of the process,” she said.

Altemeier said she didn’t expect to like Flexspace when it was first announced, but today, “it’s just the way of doing business. We all adapt. I never doubted that we could find ways to work effectively, but I don’t think I expected to think of it as positively as I do now,” she said. “Going into an office environment, whether it’s a customer or a supplier, and meeting with people in a traditional office seems a little old fashioned now.”
Barb Kotowski, Vice President, Marketing — Sabre Travel Network, used humor to break the tension and just let employees vent as they dealt with the change. Because Flexspace came as Sabre was making a number of other strategic changes, including shifting to having more employees outside the U.S., some employees feared the lack of an assigned desk would further disassociate them from the company. She keeps her team engaged with weekly staff meetings that employees can attend in person or by phone. Kotowski, who wasn’t enthusiastic about Flexspace, has recognized many of its benefits over the years. As a manager, she became more comfortable with virtual meetings and allowing flexible work schedules that offered employees a better work-life balance, an important transition for a business climate where the “real” meeting isn’t necessarily in the office, but with most participants online or by telephone.

“I learned that virtual meetings could work,” Kotowski said.

Woody Tatum, Vice President, Sabre Air Services — Product Services Delivery, tried to keep his employees focused on the big picture, that Flexspace saved the company from having to spend money on additional office space. “If we build another building, products don’t get better and customers don’t benefit,” Tatum said, adding that employee reactions weren’t positive initially. “But that shouldn’t prevent anyone from trying it at all,” he said. “The way I internalized it and communicated it to my teams was that the work you do is far more important than the place you sit. The flexibility of this system has pros and cons, and you have to decide which you’re going to focus on.”

Employees transformed their work habits in different ways. Some employees adjusted their work schedules, coming in earlier than they had previously to ensure they could sit in the same Flexspace workstation each day. Others began telecommuting on days that it made sense to do so, or scheduling with other employees in their group to manage the Flexspace. In some cases, employees with assigned workstations leave a note on their white boards noting which days they are not in the office so that other employees can sit at their desk if a Flexspace is not available that day.

Several years after the program’s implementation, some employees still set up their Flexspace workstations each day in the way they had it before, with personal pictures, awards and desk supplies and their kiosk of file drawers within easy reach. For many, that was a ritual that they gave up after the initial period of adjustment.

“‘The work you do is far more important than the place you sit’”

Woody Tatum,
Vice President,
Sabre Air Services —
Product Services Delivery.

“I’m more organized now. I don’t use as much paper because I don’t have the filing space and I know if it goes into a drawer it’ll just collect dust.”

Alicia Gardner,
Director, Customer Self-Service and Training Solutions
Sabre Travel Network
Most employees adjusted to less storage space by creating fewer paper files, opting to scan documents and save them electronically instead — a shift that also served Sabre’s Sustainability initiatives to reduce the company’s environmental footprint. “Before I used to have stacks of paper and clutter around. Now, my desk is my briefcase,” said John Arney, Principal, Sales and Customer Care — Travelocity, who works from home once a week. “It’s very fluid for me to work from home or the office.”

Managers also had to make adjustments. Recognition programs that depended on certificates or desktop awards no longer made sense in an environment where many employees don’t have an assigned desk. For Altermeier, the solution was to create a special award group on Sabre’s internal social media site, SabreTown. There, her managers and employees can offer recognition in a forum where other team members can add their own congratulations. Employees can now “show off” their awards on their virtual profile. The shift has been a positive change, offering the employees recognition for a variety of efforts throughout the year, rather than being limited to a handful of awards issued each quarter.

Sabre already had a work-from-home program in place, but the shift to Flexspace simply pushed more managers to consider it. If employees were being asked to be mobile enough to work anywhere at the office, working from home could make sense too for many employees. Some employees, who were already working from home on an occasional basis, took the opportunity to make that part of their regular schedule, even if it was just once a week. “It opened my mind to doing things differently,” Tatum said. “Even if we were all sitting around each other, someone would always be gone on vacation or traveling for work.”

Mobility is a selling point for Gen Y-er Joshua Bright, an information architect in Travelocity’s User Experience Group, who occasionally works from home and shifts his work hours to avoid driving in heavy traffic. “I expect that I’ll have that flexibility,” Bright said. “With VPN access and laptops, there’s no reason you shouldn’t be able to work from home.” That flexibility extends to other spaces within the office, including the break rooms, common areas and the cafeteria.

“Being able to work from home on Fridays gives me a chance to regroup. It’s just a calm way to end the week.”

John Arney, Principal, Sales and Customer Care
Travelocity
Silagy, the company’s SVP of Customer Care and Support for Airline Solutions, decided to lead by example and take a Flexspace workstation himself — a decision he said initially got a negative reaction from some friends and family, who equated a lack of an office or assigned desk with losing prestige. From his perspective, the change to Flexspace resulted in countless benefits. Sitting closer to his team, “I had a better appreciation for what they did and what issues they were facing,” Silagy said. Communication and collaboration within his team also improved, as individual objectives and projects seemed less siloed. “The team is a lot more aligned and collaborative,” Silagy said. “That wasn’t all because of Flexspace, but Flexspace helped because it eliminated those physical barriers between people.”

For Silagy, the implementation of Flexspace simply set a different tone for how Sabre was going to do business. “To me, it means we’re completely virtual, both the mindset change in association with Flexspace and the tools we have to do that make us a much more dynamic and competitive workforce,” Silagy said.

What started as a physical space change fueled by the Flexspace program developed into a generative business transformation for Sabre. Flexspace transformed the way teams and people work together, created more flexibility in how people worked with team members, made people better users of technology and ultimately made the entire organization more agile in a fast-moving business environment.

“The team is a lot more aligned and collaborative. That wasn’t all because of Flexspace, but Flexspace helped because it eliminated those physical barriers between people.”

Mark Silagy, SVP of Customer Care and Support Airline Solutions
Environmental Payoffs

Over the last decade, environmental sustainability has developed in numerous ways within corporations and can now be considered a core component of a corporation's strategic direction in various areas across the business: corporate responsibility, operations, product design and development, and corporate real estate. As corporations seek to reduce their environmental footprint and internal expenses associated with their facilities, the role of the corporate real estate department and the professionals within this department has become a determining factor of success.

In 2007 Jones Lang LaSalle, a leader in integrating environmental sustainability into corporate real estate planning and management, partnered with CoreNet Global, an international association of workplace and corporate real estate executives, to survey more than 400 industry professionals on four continents to gauge corporate awareness and understanding of the key issues driving sustainability in real estate.

The resulting report “Sustainability Perceptions and Trends in the Corporate Real Estate Industry” demonstrated that over half of corporate real estate professionals around the world saw environmental sustainability as a near-term critical issue for their business. That same survey was repeated in 2009 and respondents indicated that, as real estate professionals, they are more highly involved in sustainability activities today, including developing workplace strategies to help reduce energy costs and decrease overall space needs.

For Sabre, the corporate real estate strategy dovetailed perfectly with the company's environmental sustainability initiatives to reduce the company's overall environmental footprint.

By consolidating offices and making more efficient use of its facilities overall, Sabre was able to reduce overall resource consumption as well as CO2 emissions and has avoided the need to build or lease additional facilities. On a square-foot-per-employee basis, Sabre reduced its space needs by 51% in three years, eliminating 570,000 square-feet of office space at headquarters. Less space also means less energy use; since 2006, Sabre has reduced its energy consumption by 61%, slashed its carbon footprint by 54% and saved more than 22 million gallons of water.

"In terms of green initiatives, there are a certain number of things you can do to a building to make it more carbon-neutral, but the biggest savings that you get is by not occupying another building,” said Jones Lang LaSalle’s Fernandez.

Committed to minimizing the environmental impact of our global operations and to promoting sustainable business practices in travel and tourism: www.sabre-buildings.com

Going Global

Sabre’s Flexspace program got its first global test in 2009. By the end of 2008, its Buenos Aires office was a fast-growing development center on pace to outgrow its facilities before its lease expired. The office had 318 cubicles, 255 employees, more than 50 open positions and an anticipated growth of 100 additional employees each year. Taking on more space would be expensive, requiring the company to pay for two locations and future growth for the center was uncertain, making it difficult to predict how much space the next facility would require.

One option Corporate Real Estate considered was a short-term lease for additional space recognizing that another move would be necessary once the lease on the main office expired. That would mean breaking up some teams in an office with mostly younger employees who put a premium on collaboration and possibly giving up the great location of the existing office.

Through its partnership with Jones Lang LaSalle, leaders at Sabre’s Buenos Aires center learned that, like the Southlake headquarters, existing desks were occupied an average 68% of the time due to travel schedules and other time employees spent out of the office for vacation or personal leave. Jorge Cordova, the site manager for Buenos Aires at the time realized that if the center was to continue growing without overspending, moving to Flexspace was a viable and attractive option. The approach would ease the immediate space demands and give Cordova and his team more time to forecast the needs the center would have for the next five years. Converting to Flexspace would save the center at least $500,000 in capital expenditures and an additional $200,000 a year in lease expense for a larger space.

While few employees would have chosen to give up an assigned workstation, the argument that Flexspace would help the center to keep growing offered a compelling argument for a young workforce looking to advance. In addition, Cordova reinforced the idea that Flexspace could help with the center’s environmental sustainability initiatives, a passion point for employees there.

Building on the success of the Flexspace program in Southlake, Sabre’s Jones Lang LaSalle Facility Manager Agustin Alvarez held meetings with managers and with each team to explain the urgency for the transition and answer questions. Much like at Sabre’s Southlake headquarters, the space was surveyed to track occupancy and demonstrate capacity could be found in the existing space. Cubicles were reconfigured so that they would be standard across the office and special configurations were set up in a grouped fashion for Web designers who needed special computer monitors with screens calibrated in a certain way.
Unlike Sabre’s corporate headquarters, the Buenos Aires office did not have the same Cisco Systems VoIP phones with extension mobility that allowed employees to port their phone to any desk. Some employees were already using IP phones that allowed them to make calls from their computer, but others had a traditional handset that had to be carried from desk to desk. Early on in the implementation process, that issue was simplified by migrating all employees to IP phones. The conversion also saved money, since they were less expensive to operate than traditional handsets. Employees were issued a mouse, keyboard, portable file drawer and headsets for use with the IP phones.

Much like in Southlake, daily data collection continues to be an important tool for maintaining the Flexspace program. The data provides ongoing credibility for Flexspace, allowing local real estate managers to gauge when a team is outgrowing its space and which teams have more capacity. Flexspace allowed the Buenos Aires center to increase its capacity by 18% and drive greater utilization. Workstations are now occupied nearly 80% of the time, rather than 60% to 68%, Alvarez said.

Flexspace allowed the Buenos Aires center to increase its capacity by 18% and drive greater utilization. Workstations are now occupied nearly 80% of the time, rather than 60% to 68% — Agustin Alvarez, Facility Manager, Jones Lang LaSalle.

Similar to the experience in Southlake, the Flexspace program pushed some managers to be more open to allowing employees to work from home at least one day a week if they chose to. Under Flexspace, managers also worked more closely with other managers in the same neighborhood, keeping each other abreast of important visitors and other occasions when they anticipated having their entire team onsite. Managing virtual relationships was less of an issue, because most employees were already using a variety of technology to work virtually with coworkers in the U.S. and other global offices.

The youthful age of many employees in Sabre’s Buenos Aires office also played a role in the successful implementation of the program as did their technology.
Managers also tended to be younger, meaning they were more open to trying new approaches, Cordova said, and less connected to office space as a sign of prestige or management level. “For employees here, the idea of virtual management or supervision was already a reality,” Cordova said.

When considering global implementation of the program, gaining a deep understanding of corporate culture is key, even though few modifications may be necessary to address distinct cultural considerations. “One size doesn’t fit all,” Cordova said. “What we did here is very close to what we had in Dallas, but not exactly.”

In Buenos Aires, for example, many young workers live with their parents, making working from home less appealing, and the size of homes in cities is typically smaller than it is in suburban areas like Southlake, Texas making it more difficult for employees with young children at home to work without interruption. Furthermore, some cultures put a high priority on hierarchy, so putting executives or top managers into cubicles with rank-and-file employees may not be looked upon favorably by employees or customers. In some cases, work-from-home flexibility can also be limited by available Internet bandwidth for residential customers. Yet, many countries outside the U.S. have more generous vacation schedules which, combined with travel time can make the implementation of Flexspace that much more compelling.

These global issues are typically narrowly defined, and can be accommodated as limited exceptions in a broader Flexspace model, said Paul Bray, who oversees Sabre’s corporate real estate operations today as Director of Corporate Services. “People assume that there’s a culture against Flexspace in other countries, but for the most part, it is not tied to a country’s culture, it’s just change,” Bray said. “You have to look at country-by-country.” For Bray, the question has become when — rather than if — global offices will implement Flexspace. He already has Sabre offices in Krakow, Bangalore and Manila in his sights as the next places Flexspace will be implemented.

“Our base case for every office move going forward is that we’re going to implement Flexspace,” Bray said. “The real opportunity is to design offices for Flexspace from the beginning. If we can plan for 1.3 people or more per workstation, then we’ll have built-in savings of 25% on any real estate investment” Bray said the key to transforming existing locations will be waiting until those centers reach a point where space is constrained and data exists to support how Flexspace can offer relief. Making the transition before then, Bray says, is simply too hard to do politically. “Management support of Flexspace is absolutely critical,” he said. “Without it, nothing is possible.”
Maintaining And Evolving The System

When Sabre first began exploring its Flexspace program, companies were looking for ways to reduce their footprint to 250 square feet per employee. Today, firms getting aggressive about workplace mobility and flexible schedules are ratcheting that down further to 150 square feet, exclusive of common area space.

Flexspace wasn’t new to the industry when Sabre first began exploring it, but it wasn’t widely accepted or used either. Today, that’s changed, as companies look for cost savings and to meet the needs of a changing workforce, said Jones Lang LaSalle’s Smith. “The younger the generation, the more they’re used to working nontraditional hours and in nontraditional space,” Smith said.

But even as Flexspace programs gain acceptance in the industry, maintaining the program requires constant monitoring and active management. As staffing levels fluctuate with business cycles, a campuswide “restacking” — what corporate real estate calls a comprehensive space reallocation — is important for maintaining balance between workgroups and neighborhoods. “Even if we had gotten it 100% right on Day 1, the organizations and business evolve and you have to be prepared to make changes,” Alig said.

Because acquiring or building new office space is a lengthy and expensive project, “restacking” can be one way to address space concerns as business needs change, giving the company more agility. In a sense, Flexspace strategies must always be a work in progress, adjusting to a company’s needs.

Data is paramount for keeping a Flexspace program well managed. At Sabre, occupancy data is collected for each neighborhood twice a day, giving the Corporate Real Estate team the information it needs to confirm whether a neighborhood truly needs space. In many cases, it’s a matter of restoring workstations that a team had transformed to assigned spots back into Flexspace positions. “There are daily battles to move from Flexspace to assigned,” Bray said. “We constantly have to walk people through the daily occupancy numbers and explain the big picture.”

Sabre doesn’t just track use for workstations. The Corporate Real Estate team also measures use for other common spaces, such as conference rooms, the cafeteria and parking garage. As Sabre’s Corporate Real Estate team looks ahead, it is preparing to move into Flexspace 2.0 at its headquarters campus. The restacking will implement standardized layouts in each neighborhood — something not mandated in the program’s first iteration — as a way to keep utilization rates up and to make it easier for Flexspace employees to quickly identify available space wherever they are in the building. Similar to the initial transition, that approach will depend on unwavering, top-level management support, strategic partnerships like the one Sabre has with Jones Lang LaSalle and discipline to work through any change management issues that arise. “We know it works, and we’re going to be more disciplined about it,” Bray said.
Technology is another area that takes constant monitoring and where ongoing developments and innovation can bring additional benefits. While the VoIP phones and their extension mobility function offer great flexibility while in Sabre offices, the IP phones that employees access from their laptops offer even more. Sabre’s David Gula says it won’t be long before telephone calls are seamlessly integrated into other communication modes, such as instant messenger. That transition could further promote communication and collaboration between employees in disparate locations and eliminate the need for a traditional handset at each workstation.

Conclusion

Implementing a workplace transformation strategy like Flexspace can provide meaningful corporate savings that go far beyond the bottom line, and should be considered as part of any modern corporate real estate program. For Sabre, Flexspace was a corporate real estate strategy that slashed existing operating expenses by 25%, offered a template for reducing the cost of future real estate expansions, and accomplished significant gains in reducing its environmental footprint.

But implementing Flexspace went far beyond the real estate balance sheet; it also fueled a business transformation that not only changed physically into something more flexible and agile; it also accelerated a transformation in its employees and its work culture. Sabre’s employees adapted to their new environment, began working more closely with each other, breaking down many of the silos between projects and departments, created a more collaborative environment and ultimately drove better results for customers and for the business.

The new work culture promoted increased flexibility in all senses; a flexible schedule working between home, office, customer sites, airports or planes, and the adoption of technology that positioned the workforce on the cutting edge of a global industry where 9-to-5 shifts no longer make sense. Even seemingly simple adaptations, such as storing electronic documents rather than keeping printed versions, meant employees could indeed work from anywhere, accessing key data and files at a moment’s notice.

It was a dramatic transformation that required careful planning, key internal partnerships, innovative technology, ongoing stakeholder engagement, strategic external partnerships and a corporate culture open to innovation and receptive to developing a flexible, agile workforce.

“Although cost cutting provided an initial carrot, our employees drove some of the most valuable contributions to the success of the Flexspace program, adapting and transforming the way they worked to provide more value to Sabre’s customers,” Gilliland said. “Flexspace created a physical environment of flexibility and agility in the workplace, but it also drove that same nimbleness and innovation in the mindset of our workforce, something that is critical in today’s competitive global economy.”