



Starting a case study at the beginning is usually a bit too obvious, but in this case we'll make an exception. We've just checked in at the ground floor lobby of Portwall Place in Bristol, and with little ado we've whisked up in the lift to see EC Harris. Where, unusually, there is no reception desk. No signing in for the second time in as many minutes, no barrier, no sense of intimidation.



ec one

Instead we are greeted warmly but professionally in an open space. Designed to encourage free access by clients and visitors, this is a physical statement of the EC Harris business culture, yet subtly intoned. The market leading built asset consultancy clearly wants to work with others.

Richard Bonner, the partner in charge of EC Harris business in the West of England and South Wales, explains the thinking. 'We'd grown rapidly in the last six years,

outgrowing an elegant Georgian building in Clifton. But for us, this move to Portwall Place in the heart of Bristol's business district is more than just a case of finding a bigger, better office. We saw the move as an opportunity to use our Bristol HQ to express our business culture internally and externally. The way we work here, the close proximity to our professional peers, colleagues and clients are all vitally important aspects of what we've done here – we wanted to bring in the marketplace to

meet with us. Our informal reception is a big part of that – and we use it as the forum, hosting various professional seminars and meetings. It's all about bringing our peers here.

'I like the way we don't have a reception. It was a bold step, but it works really well,' comments Project Manager EC Harris Associate Edward Gurhy. 'It's not sterile; you can see the work areas, although there is some screening. It's about fostering openness – for example in the client facing >>>



▶▶▶▶ meeting rooms, and the way that the ‘back of house’ is part of the ‘front’. It sums up our approach, open and not intimidating. In fact our culture at EC Harris is how we arrived at the layout – and it works well on a day to day basis.’

‘Culturally, we wanted to work more collaboratively,’ adds Richard Bonner, ‘with more flexibility around clients and projects. We have an inherent core of five key teams, and the way the workstations are grouped reflects that. However, a new project might

need a group to add certain key staff, so we’ve built in flexibility to allow us to do that easily and quickly to respond to the demand. It’s a flexible desking concept – nobody owns a desk, there are no pedestals and everything goes away at night. We also ask people to work in different places, to work in the place that’s most appropriate for the task they’re currently engaged in.

‘We have 40 workstations for 50 staff. Many of our professionals are out of the office frequently, and at the same time we often have visitors, but the desk ratio works very well. In addition we have a small raised bench area for touchdowns, as well as meeting rooms and breakout areas.’

We asked about staff acceptance of the new work style, so Richard explains the process of achieving the all important buy-in of the new way of working. ‘We had a few battles! People naturally have a sense of ownership, and of course there are cultural issues. To resolve potential difficulties we embarked on a long engagement process before the move.

‘Our staff realise the benefits of what we’ve done here, and I think it’s important that we led from the top by setting the right example. There are no executive ▶▶▶▶▶





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In order to make such an approach work well, significant amount of attention has been paid to the whole issue of storage, paper, archiving and personal effects. In fact, one could argue that if this element wasn't designed and managed correctly, the whole new work style at Portwall Place would be in jeopardy. The integrated approach to the

potential minefields of information retrieval and archival works smoothly, as our tour of the space revealed.

'We have introduced printing and scanning hubs,' explains Richard. 'We're not completely electronic, but not far off considering the realities of the industry in which we operate. We limited filing space to 1.5 metres per person, set up in an easily accessible bank of Bisley Systemfile units, with back up by a very efficient local archive company. For access to files archived

off site we can phone at 10am for delivery by noon.'

'We told everybody before the move that there would only be a limited amount of filing space available,' adds Edward. 'We also had a skip delivered – which was a practical way of getting rid of stuff we didn't need, but it also added a note of humour while being surprisingly cathartic. For day to day work and people's personal effects, we have a hot box system which drops into the Werner Works System S lockers. We worked with our design and fit-out company Total Utopia, furniture suppliers Chris Fox at Furniture 23, and ei2 to develop the bespoke lockers to accept the hot boxes, so that staff could take their current work to whichever workstation they are sitting at on any given day. The system works well – and also allowed us to move away from lever arch files, thereby saving space and improving efficiency.'

In line with the space saving attributes of the filing and storage policy, EC Harris makes full use of technology to support the business culture. Supporting the free address workstations is the use of VOIP throughout the office – access is simply achieved by keying in an extension system. The Techo





Platform bench workstations back this up by being hardwired throughout, with Total Utopia and EC Harris spending a good deal of time ensuring the power/data/workstation conundrum was fully addressed in preparation for the move. Furniture 23 organised showroom tours, mock ups and assessment of various workstation cluster shapes before the project team settled on five runs of eight person benches. 'It was about cost, efficiency, cable management and good clean detailing,' notes Richard. 'We also like Techo's Ekotech tops – a nice chamfered edge detail, but also an environmentally friendly alternative to solid core laminate.'

Interaction and flexibility is everywhere. The breakout area, known as The Hub, is an inviting attractive space where staff are able to meet informally. Stylishly furnished with Arper chairs and Allermuir tables, the space positively encourages the EC Harris team to take breaks and collaborate. The Friday evening 'celebration fridge' looked well stocked too!

Impressed, we asked if the Bristol space was to be a standard throughout the EC Harris network. Richard Bonner is clear and unequivocal. 'We took some elements

from Head Office in Regent's Quarter, such as the branding, but there is a different workstation strategy there for many good reasons. This is just the latest iteration of an evolving business that is constantly striving to provide good value for our clients.

'Here in Bristol we were very clear what we wanted to do, and did what we needed to do.' ●



essential ingredients

Client:	• EC Harris
Design and Fit-Out:	• Total Utopia 0117 973 3566
Furniture Supply:	• Furniture23 01934 830488
Workstations :	• Techo 0207 430 2882
Task chairs:	• Herman Miller 0845 2267 202
Systemfile storage:	• Bisley 01483 485 600
Loose furniture:	• Randers +45 8780 2222
	• Senator 0208 980 0272
Hot Box Storage:	• Werner Works / ei2 0207 422 8220
Whiteboards:	• Anders & Kern 01638 510900
Touchdown bench:	• Vitra 0207 608 6234