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[Sept. 14] Buffalo Next: How two companies solved their office space needs, on one floor

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How two companies solved their office space needs, on one floor

What happens when one company needs less office space, and another is looking for more?

In the case of Mower and Milestone, they get together, on the same floor.

Mower, a public relations, advertising and marketing agency, subleased some of its space on the 13th floor of 50 Fountain Plaza to Milestone, a financial services firm. The two firms occupy opposite ends of the floor, but they share use of a conference room, a kitchen and bathrooms. Mower also allows Milestone to use its training room as needed.

"There's a nice fit because we're both in the business services space," said Doug Bean, Mower's vice chairman and chief brand officer. "We're having fun referring to us as, 'Hey, we're all going to be roommates.' It's like going back to college."

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Doug Bean, Mower's chief brand officer.

Libby March

Lots of companies are taking stock of their office space needs, after the pandemic turned so many employees into remote or hybrid workers. The Mower-Milestone arrangement represents a creative twist.

Mower, which has several offices around the country, explored downsizing its office space even before the pandemic hit. After its offices essentially emptied out for two years due to the pandemic, Mower considered subleasing at least half of its space at Fountain Plaza.

Just a block away on Main Street, Milestone needed more space to accommodate its growth. The firm's core business is qualified settlement fund administration. After big legal settlements, those funds go into a trust, and Milestone administers the trust. The company also provides financial advice to plaintiffs and attorneys.



Amy Fogle, CEO of Milestone, at her office at Fountain Plaza.

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About a year ago, Milestone surveyed its employees about how they wanted to work.

"It came back that everyone wanted a hybrid approach," said Amy Fogle, the CEO. "They wanted three days in the office when they could collaborate, but two days at home to really enjoy that flexibility that everyone has come to love during Covid."

But even in a hybrid format, with not everyone coming in every day, Milestone still had a space crunch. Two of its attorneys were sharing an office.

Clarke Thrasher, director of corporate services with Hunt Commercial Real Estate, put Mower and Milestone in touch with each other, and a deal came together. The building's owner, Ciminelli Real Estate Corp., agreed to the plan.

Compatibility is important

Thrasher said finding the right combination of firms was important.

"When you've got to put two companies under the same roof with no (partitions), you better make sure they're co-habitable," he said. "Just knowing the Mower folks and then knowing the Milestone folks, it was a no-brainer."

Before Milestone moved in, Fogle led her team on a "field trip" down Main Street to Fountain Plaza and talked to the employees about how the building represented the next step in the company's growth.



Julia DiCristofaro works at her desk on the Milestone side of shared office space at Fountain Plaza.

Libby March

"Luckily, we found this space, which was just the perfect size for us, and also the light that's in here is so perfect, to really inspire everyone every day when they're in the office," she said.

At Fountain Plaza, Milestone has about three times as much office space as it used to. The company plans to grow its workforce from the current 20 employees to about 25 in the next six months, as it expands its services.

Milestone moved this month, leaving behind its longtime home at 737 Main St. Step off the elevator at Fountain Plaza.

Each firm has its own distinct entrance, so they retain their individual identities. But employees from the two firms can easily move back and forth within the office space, and leaders of both companies say that's not a problem. Plus, some of the employees from the two firms already knew each other.

Milestone benefited from moving into space that was immediately ready to use. Bean even gave up his corner office, with its spectacular view of downtown and the mist rising from Niagara Falls, to Fogle.

Mower is 'remote first'

Mower has about 43 employees attached to the Buffalo office. But they are working in a "remote first" stance, so the agency had less need for office space. Mower still brings everyone together for a featured event once a month, such as a recent guest speaker for Pride month, Bean said.

Mower also recently took another significant step: The company became employee owned, under an Employee Stock Ownership Plan. Bean said the ownership transition fits nicely with the decision to sublease space.



Maggie Hooper, a management supervisor, works at her desk on the Mower side of the shared office space.

Libby March

"It became even more of a payoff as we started to look at the ESOP, because rent was our largest expense after staff," Bean said. "We've reduced that significantly, which can then go into staff, training and profitability and all the things that make an ESOP work."

Mower and Milestone are just getting settled in as neighbors. Mower had two refrigerators in the kitchen, but with fewer of its people coming in these days, Milestone's employees are using the other one. Sticky notes on the doors distinguish the two.

Beyond those practical considerations, leaders of the two firms wonder if the new arrangement might lead to some collaboration or mentorship across company lines.

"It's kind of nice that we're both in the business services space, with slightly different takes on it," Bean said.

Want to know more? Three stories to catch you up:

- A remote possibility: living in Buffalo, working for out-of-town employers
- How productive are remote workers? Employers weigh in
- How Rich Products keeps its focus on innovation

THE LATEST

Recent news tied to Buffalo Niagara's economy

A North Tonawanda housing project is getting nearly \$5 million in tax breaks from the Niagara County Industrial Development Agency.

The United Way of Western New York is getting a new leader.

A top executive at Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center is calling for more funding for cancer screening programs.

The Perry projects in downtown Buffalo are in line for a major makeover that will replace boarded-up buildings with new apartments.

Plans to renovate and expand the Eliza Quick boarding house **are being scaled back.**

A city panel has approved demolitions that are needed **to clear the way for the Main Street Lofts project.**

The Elmwood Crossing project received approval for changes to its planned unit development designation.

More than 200 jobs **could be coming to the former Dresser-Rand plant in Olean.**

Four more local nursing homes have reached deals with their unionized workers, leaving only two of the 12 facilities that were threatening to hold five-day strikes without agreements.

Unionized workers at Kaleida Health are taking **a high-stakes vote this week on whether to authorize a strike as contract talks continue.**

Take a closer look at the making of Bison Dip, a local tailgate party staple.

New Mercy Hospital president Marty Boryszak says the hospital's recovery and success will be about progress. **"It's going to take time,"** he says.

ICYMI

Five reads on the Buffalo Niagara economy

1. Pickup in WNY housing inventory means more opportunity and time for buyers. Homebuyers in Western New York are starting to breathe easier and take more time before making their decisions, now that there are more homes for sale

on the market and less need for them to act quickly. But they still can't dawdle. And it doesn't mean they're getting a deal on houses, which are now priced much higher than they would have been a year or two ago.

2. Why so many apartments? Buffalo area seeing an explosion of growth.

From the Elmwood Village and Allentown to South Buffalo and the West Side, from Tonawanda and Amherst to Orchard Park and Hamburg, developers are putting up new apartment buildings or converting old industrial warehouses and offices. The apartments are highly desirable – with new units filling up almost as soon as they come online.

3. A remote possibility: living in Buffalo, working for out-of-town employers.

The pandemic has opened up job possibilities that were relatively uncommon before spring 2020, like working from home for a company far from the Buffalo Niagara region. It's a welcome twist on the all-too-familiar story of local workers finding jobs elsewhere.

4. Spotlight on the economy: Slow growth in average pay in Buffalo

Niagara region. After spiking during the Covid-19 pandemic, the earnings of Buffalo Niagara workers have settled back into slow-growth mode.

5. Business People: See who's moving up in the Buffalo Niagara workforce

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Reporter

