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BANK STRESSES BALANCE TO ATTRACT, KEEP EMPLOYEES

BofA boosts workers' flexibility

Satellite location is a big hit as it cuts need to commute uptown

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A year ago, Bank of America Corp. staffing executive Angie Dulweber gave up her office with all of its files, trinkets and personal space.

Now she signs up online to use a desk at the bank's Ballantyne satellite office when she needs it or works from home. Occasionally, she goes uptown for a meeting.

"It was liberating in some respects," she says. "It was a great chance to clear out a lot of stuff and learn how to work a different way."

Dulweber is one of about 250 Bank of America employees regularly using the funky, high-tech office in south Charlotte to beat the commute and better balance home and work life. The office has been such a hit, the bank is adding space at Ballantyne Corporate Park, opening a Huntersville location and eyeing spots in other cities.

The satellite locations are part of Bank of America's "My Work" flexible work program that allows employees to do their jobs from home, customer offices or bank offices as needed. The program provides a glimpse of a virtual workplace where colleagues connect mostly by technology and work schedules that better fit their lifestyles.

Mark Nicholls, Bank of America's corporate workplace executive, says the goal is to better accommodate employees while cutting the company's real estate and energy costs. He also sees it as necessary to recruit today's workers.

"We're promoting this primarily to differentiate us as an employer of choice in the area," said Nicholls, who is in charge of all of the company's corporate real estate.

The Charlotte-based bank started with 25,000 square feet of space in Ballantyne and is adding 12,500 more by early next year. Initially, the program was for employees in the personnel department, but it's been expanded to technology, corporate affairs, finance and other units.

Bank of America is also creating drop-in office space in the Hearst Tower that will be ready later this year and plans to open a 15,000 square-foot office at 8015 W. Kenton Circle in Huntersville early next year. Nicholls said the bank is considering similar sites in other cities, but declined to elaborate.

Keith Wilson, Carolinas market leader for Mercer Human Resource Consulting, said Bank of America is one of many companies trying to help dual wage-earning families with flexible hours and other amenities. It's becoming a must to attract and retain employees, he said.

From the outside, Bank of America's Ballantyne location is just another one of the low-slung, upscale office buildings. Inside, though, the space looks more like the home of a nascent dot-com than a bank.

Employees tap wireless Internet connections from silvery space-age cubicles organized in pods. Back-lit columns in "Bank of America red" break up the space. Floors are environment-friendly bamboo.

Workers who use the office give up their designated cubicles in other buildings and must take four hours of training, which includes an admonition to lower voices in the wide-open space. All employees access the building with key cards, and those who deal with confidential employee data use an extra-secure room.

In the day of laptops disappearing with personal information inside, Nicholls said security is always an important consideration. But with employees already highly mobile, he said he doesn't believe satellite locations aggravate the problem.

Don Addison, a Bank of America quality deployment executive, works in Ballantyne about three days a week. The Fort Mill, S.C., resident can reserve a cubicle or a private office if he's making sensitive calls. When he joined the company about a year ago, the flexible work environment helped lure him. "I've become more efficient and better organized as a result of it," he said.

Dulweber said she initially had some reservations about giving up her office but doesn't miss it. With a 10-year-old and a 13-year-old at home, the Matthews resident likes being closer to home and school.

Still, she does get flak when she works too much around the house. "The kids will say, 'Mom, put the Blackberry down,'" she says. "You have to be disciplined."

BofA Looks to Grow in Charlotte

As Bank of America's corporate workplace executive, Mark Nicholls is responsible for 93 million square feet of space used by 201,000 employees in 9,000 facilities worldwide.

In the Charlotte area, where the company has about 13,000 employees and 6.6 million of square feet of space, he said he expects the work force to expand.

"I would expect it to grow commensurate with the company," he said. "This is our world headquarters city. We're very proud of it."

He said he's constantly evaluating space needs in the city, but wouldn't comment on future building plans.

One of his focuses has been making the bank's offices more green, including incorporating state-of-the-art environmental features in the tower the bank is building in Midtown Manhattan. Next the bank is looking to win environmental certifications for new bank branches, he said.

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