

## How INL builds for innovation

Sharon Fisher | Idaho Business Review | November 8, 2022

One of the most innovative companies in Idaho must surely be Idaho National Laboratory (INL). Consequently, if one is interested in best practices in designing innovation spaces for business, it makes sense to see what INL is doing.

And what INL is doing has taken a radical shift in the past two years because of responding to COVID-19 and the new patterns of work it spawned.



*Idaho National Laboratory has various innovation spaces, from updated conference rooms to spaces for “hoteling.” Photo courtesy of INL*

“We are in a different world today when it comes to innovation space compared with pre-pandemic,” said Jennifer Hunt, with INL. “What worked pre-pandemic isn’t necessarily working today. Pre-pandemic, we had all of our employees, for the most part, in the office. Now that we are hopefully on the other side, we’re looking at our employees and what is working best for them.”

### **INL’s innovation spaces**

Obviously, someone who develops nuclear reactors isn’t going to be setting up shop at home in the den. But there are plenty of INL employees who are either hybrid — working from home and office — or who have moved to 100% teleworking, as well as those who work in the office full-time, Hunt said.

“Work has had to expand beyond the range of activities that can be performed in the office,” Hunt said.

This isn’t just a matter of keeping employees productive. It’s a matter of keeping them at all, because in retention and recruiting, employees are looking for jobs with a remote component, Hunt said.



*Idaho National Laboratory conference rooms have had technological upgrades to accommodate in-person and remote (or hybrid) work. Photo courtesy of INL*

So, what did INL need to do to make this work?

1. **Made its conference rooms capable of supporting video-based collaboration software:** While INL had a number of conference rooms set up for videoconferencing, it wasn't set up for the video-based collaboration software everyone started using during the pandemic. To do that, conference rooms needed to have their audio-visual components upgraded with better camera and microphone support. Now, five conference rooms have been set up to support up to 16 people in the room with an additional up to 16 people working from home, Hunt said.
2. **Developed on-site workspaces:** For hybrid employees, INL created hoteling spaces, each with two monitors and a docking station, that employees can reserve when they're planning to come into the office. In fact, some departments have designated hoteling spaces within their current locations, meaning that when those people come into the office, they get to sit with their coworkers, Hunt said. In addition, INL has created "touchdown zones," or rooms that people can use without having to make a reservation. In particular, the ones in Idaho Falls are handy for employees who normally work at the lab's desert site, so they don't have to travel so far, Hunt said. INL has also dedicated different areas as "quiet zones" with hard-wall offices and encouraged office etiquette such as wearing headsets for calls. People used to the quiet of home after teleworking for three years find offices too noisy, Hunt said.
3. **Created private spaces:** One of the downsides of working in an office is having everyone able to hear what you're doing, whether you're scheduling a doctor's appointment or interviewing a job candidate. Some organizations within INL have installed hoteling "pods," with comfortable chairs and that are more private, and some have even installed "talk boxes," or private cubes that people can use for confidential conversations, Hunt said.
4. **Open atrium collaboration areas:** Some of [INL's newest buildings](#), such as the Collaborative Computing Center and Cybercore Integration Center, feature areas specifically set up for collaboration, including tables and white boards on wheels that can be moved around and have power for people to plug in their equipment.

"This is to encourage that collaboration and make it the most user-friendly for whatever the occupants might use it for," Hunt said.



*A rendering of the CEI Future Tech building stairway. Image courtesy of CEI*

### **CEI's innovation spaces**

INL's partner in this activity is College of Eastern Idaho (CEI), the regional community college that receives funding and in-kind support from INL to help it develop the skilled workforce that INL needs.

For example, INL is contributing both funding and expertise to help build [Future Tech](#), a planned 88,000-square-foot building intended to support careers in cybersecurity, energy and agricultural technology — including at INL. Battelle Energy Alliance, the company that manages and operates INL, pledged \$1 million toward construction, and the two organizations signed a memorandum of understanding that lets INL provide training, mentorship and guest lecturer opportunities.

“We spend a lot of time talking to INL,” said Chuck Bohleke, CEI's dean of career and technical education. “They're the largest employer in Idaho Falls. We listen to what they're looking for, their needs and construction projects that are going to be happening, so we are making sure we're prepared for the jobs of the future.”

Currently, plans for the Future Tech building are done, and CEI is close to reaching its fundraising goal, with construction slated to start in the spring, said Amanda Logan, CEI's director of external affairs.

A big part of the plan for Future Tech is to create innovation through different disciplines working together, Bohleke said.

“We had distinct disciplines years ago,” he said. Now, there's a lot of overlap between the technology used by different programs, which means a single piece of equipment might be used for several programs.

Future Tech will also have space for group meetings, and open labs, so that representatives from INL and other businesses can demonstrate technology to several groups at once.

“You get people together who might not work together,” Bohleke said. “That's where innovation comes from.”

In addition to Future Tech, CEI recently held a ribbon cutting for the Eastern Idaho Workforce Training Center, which is also intended to help improve innovation at CEI, for both INL and eastern Idaho. Formerly the Bonneville County Technology Center, which INL had been renting, it boasts 32,000 square feet with eight high bays.

“I could build a two-story building in there,” Logan said. “It’s a great blank slate.”

CEI is working with local industry — including INL — to determine how best to use the space, which is likely to include construction and large machine training, Logan said. Plus, since it comes with some grant funding, work on it can start right away, she added.

Both INL and CEI emphasized that their watchword for creating innovation spaces was flexibility.

“We know our business landscape is going to evolve,” Hunt said. “We need to be able to reconfigure, rearrange and repurpose as needed.”

“We’re doing our best to predict our needs in five years,” Logan said. “Who knows what it’ll be in 10 or 15 years?”



*An Idaho National laboratory “talk box.” Photo courtesy of INL*

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