

Ep.2.25 - Heather Lanier

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Heather Lanier

- A** Announcer 00:02
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:28
Hello, I'm your host, Ed Clemente and welcome to the show. Today we have a guest, Heather Lanier, she's the Chief Operating Officer and Shareholder for NBS Commercial Interiors. Welcome to the show, Heather.
- H** Heather Lanier 00:40
Thank you, great to be here.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:41
I'm so glad you're here and I'm gonna make you even explain where you're at, but not yet, leave that as a teaser. But let's hear a little bit about what you know, what does NBS Commercial Interiors do?
- H** Heather Lanier 00:57
So, very simply put, I would say that we are in the business of commercial interiors. We work with our customers and our clients to plan and implement inspiring environments for the

people and the teams who are going to use them. And we do that for corporate offices, educational facilities, a variety of health systems, and the spaces we created are comprised of a variety of products and services that include architectural products, like modular walls or freestanding pods like the one that I'm in, furnishings for teams and individuals, whether it's seating or chairs, or height adjustable desks, as well as floor covering. And then a variety of technology tools and products, like large-scale displays, and cameras, and microphones. All of those things are comprised and compiled together. We procure them, and then we implement them or install them, for our customers. So really, we like to say that we are workplace integrators and we're passionate that these thoughtfully planned spaces can help employees work, to their best ability, perform at their best levels and that in turn, allows the organization to get the best results from them and achieve the business objectives that they have.

E

Ed Clemente 02:28

So, you know, you did mention one thing, but I want you to explain it. So you're actually in a pod. And I had the fortunate opportunity to come tour your facility. So you're located in Troy, but you do clients around the whole country, though, correct? I mean, you help out around the country with your clients, right?

H

Heather Lanier 02:51

We do. So we have locations in Lansing, Bay City, and our headquarters in Troy, as well as Ann Arbor, and then an office also in Toledo, Ohio. So we work with customers in those areas. And then if they have locations across the country, we're able to help support them, you know, through those objectives as well. And those spaces as well.

E

Ed Clemente 03:15

And let's talk about the pod now, because I tell, I know you call it a pod, but why don't, it's really more than that, it's really cool. Actually, you've got two different sizes right?

H

Heather Lanier 03:26

Yep, there's lots of sizes, some people would refer to these as phone booths, I'm in a size that actually has a private office in it. So it's a small desk and some storage, there could even be room for guests to visit me. And it's freestanding, it can move about in an open planned environment. But it gives me acoustical privacy, airflow, lighting, so it's really one of the trends that we're seeing with a variety of our customers that they need to bring some privacy into their environments, but they don't want to use traditional construction to do so.

E

Ed Clemente 04:05

Can you explain a little bit why you think that's a growing trend a little bit? And why you think that's happening?

H

Heather Lanier 04:11

Absolutely. I think, you know, based on the pandemic, which we all know has changed the world. And you know, it put focus on space in a new way. And for someone who's in the office interiors business, I get a lot of questions that say, well, that's not really a great place to be in right now. But I would disagree, I think we are on the forefront of what space is going to mean in the future. And a trend is that hybrid work is going to remain, in fact something that many organizations are dealing with and encouraging for that matter. So if hybrid is not going away, how are organizations going to be prepared to provide more focus, or more places to duck in and have a private conversation in an environment where there's not a lot of acoustical traits? These pods bring that acoustical, and lighting and again, closed door privacy to an environment that didn't have that before.

E

Ed Clemente 05:23

Yeah, it is sort of fascinating as someone who most of my career had my own private office, but it makes so much more sense with these ideas of these pods. But I think also, when I came there, the technology also is a big aspect. Because obviously, you sound really good, I'm looking at you, you know, even though this is audio only, but you look like you got a microphone set up, and you can't hear anything. I think I've seen some people walking around behind you. Like none of that, you know, popping up. So why is that going to be I think, the combination of the setting and the technology, can you because you showed me some pretty cool stuff when I was there.

H

Heather Lanier 06:04

Yes. And we really believe that our Showroom Experience Center is for our clients to be able to come and explore what they don't know is even out there. So we pride ourselves in the fact that we have showrooms and a variety of our locations and encourage our clients to come and kick the tires. So you did see a variety of rooms that are very technology rich, and if hybrid is not going away Ed, we need to all think about the spaces that we exited, when we left and went home for the pandemic. Those spaces were often about presenting and having conversations maybe between two, two, or three or eight people, but all in a room. Most of the organizations across the country weren't doing the amount of video connections that we are now doing. So having spaces that provide privacy, like I have right now, but also provide more collaborative interaction, are going to be important. And it's not just for the people that are in the space, but it's for the people that are on the far end of the conversation. So you and I are having a private conversation, you know, individually, but if I was here with a few other people, what would the experience be for you, if I didn't have a good camera, good lighting, good acoustics, it can become very distracting. And we believe that we can help our clients really think about how they're gonna braid this physical and digital experience by thinking through technology, the space, the furnishings, and the architectural elements earlier on in the process. And most of them probably do not have spaces that are going to support that if they would return right now.

E

Ed Clemente 08:04

Yeah, it sounds like we're going into a new world because of everything's going to be much more customized. And obviously, you guys are in position, but you also work a lot, I'm going to have you break down one other room but not right, the second, but why don't you mention your relationship to Steelcase because they're a big player here in the state.

H

Heather Lanier 08:24

Absolutely. We proudly represent Steelcase, they are our number one vendor partner. And they are located in Grand Rapids on the west side of the state. Most people know Steelcase for the products that they manufacture, including desks and chairs and files, but they create modular walls and different technology products these days. But another big thing that they do, that we're able to draw from and help our clients by taking insights is that they spend a lot of time researching what's next. What are the trends that are coming their way that are producing problems that need to be solved for? So they look for those gaps, and then they come back to their facilities and manufacture and bring great new products that are very innovative to the market?

E

Ed Clemente 09:19

Steelcase is a global company, isn't it?

H

Heather Lanier 09:21

They actually are, yes. And so they are able to bring those global insights back to us in Michigan. And we have a lot being the automotive capital that we are, the Motor City, there are a lot of organizations with, you know, headquarters in other countries around the world. And we're able to glean on what Steelcase is learning about what's happening in Asia Pacific or in Europe and help our customers locally incorporate some of those things if it's relevant to their culture.

A

Announcer 09:58

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E

Ed Clemente 10:15

Hopefully you can remember this, but you, you actually walked me through all the technical side of one room we went into where certain mics could pick up certain things. Could you kind of explain that too? Because I think that, you know, one of the reasons I wanted to have you on the show was that you guys, you know, this is like, you got to make these decisions to help, you know, with companies, because they're not going to know sometimes what they're going to even be doing. So you and Steelcase are kind of helpful in showing them options, right? So can you explain that one that that was pretty fascinating that place?

H

Heather Lanier 10:48

Oh yeah, absolutely. There's some new technology out there that are allowing individuals to collaborate, while they're in a room, but also working with people who are remote. So, it's a highly interactive software that allows you to leverage a variety of different platforms. So it's agnostic, it could be Teams, Google Meet, and a variety of other. At the same time, while you are able to put content on the board, and you as a far user, if I was in the room, could be able to see all that content and interact with it. So you'd have the ability to contribute to a brainstorming session. It's definitely something that needs to be experienced, it's not very easy to describe. But I would say Ed, that's another trend that we're seeing is that these kinds of rich spaces that are very intentional, are going to be the spaces that are going to help employers game the commutes of their employees. So there are going to be some clients that are not going to come back to the office at all, but many are saying that they want to. So I would say to all of our listeners, think about a space that you feel inspired by. Where you would say, you can do your best work. What motivates you about that space? What does it feel like? What does it sound like? Just take a second and think about that. And then compare that to the office that your company provides you or the workspace your company provides you? Does it evoke those same feelings? For many people across the country it does not. I'm very fortunate, for me, that I have this great space that I come to every day. But this is the opportunity that organizations have, it's a moment that they can decide if they're going to choose to have space, how are they going to design that in a very intentional way so it inspires their people to come in. One thing's for certain there isn't a one size fit all, there never really has been. But if companies can really think about what they want their people to do, and listen to what their people need, they will have the opportunity create these inspiring spaces that people will choose to come into and experience whether it's several days a week, several hours a week. But there's a lot of opportunity right now, for clients to make those decisions.

E

Ed Clemente 13:23

Yeah, I can't tell you how many times I was on some virtual meeting room, when most of the people were either remote, but there was still like five or six people at a table. And you couldn't tell who was talking? And you would see it and I think one of the things one of your that actually is it like a directional mic, or how does it pick people up and show their face to I think?

H

Heather Lanier 13:45

So there's a software and a camera system that we're using in what we would call our training room or our classroom, and it is highly sophisticated that yes, there are, I think five cameras in the room and a very, very good mic system. And it follows the sound. And so as people are talking, it will bounce from person to person and focus in on that person. It'll also focus in on a dry whiteboard, if there's a dry whiteboard in the room. So people that are on the far end, really have a better experience, you know, and feel like they are participating in the meeting.

E

Ed Clemente 14:27

Yeah, that was always a challenge with us, as some people were more and more were coming in. It just seemed like it was almost counterproductive to know who is making motions. or who.

You know, I've been on a lot of boards for example and you know, just it was just sort of and I think what this is doing, like we said earlier is we don't know what the final verdict is going to be sort of on hybrid. And it's going to be customized, as you said, for every organization and what fits the needs and the objectives, their strategic plan, you know how to get stuff done?

H Heather Lanier 15:02

And their people, right? Yeah, what are their people want? I think one thing that gets lost in a lot of this is that I've heard a lot of clients say, well, we're going to build a space that's going to be for social, it's going to be for collaboration, it's going to be for fun and it's going to bring people together. And all of that's really important, but there is a group of people who want to come to the office to escape, they need focus, because maybe they have small children at home, or maybe they have a spouse who's working full time, remotely at home, and that spouse has the best seat in the office that has the door that closes. So they're stuck at the kitchen table. So really thinking about what the individuals in their organizations need, and trying to provide a very well rounded solution is going to be key.

E Ed Clemente 15:53

You know, it's I'm paraphrasing Mary Barra from GM, but she said, You know, there's a war for talent and talent's winning, right? Because it's sort of a weird time in history where, you know, this, the employees really kind of can help dictate what the future of their office space and workspace is going to be, like, more, not dictate, but at least have an input into it.

H Heather Lanier 16:20

Yeah, their opinion, their opinion, more than ever matters. And for years, we've tried to inspire organizations to think more broadly about that space as an asset to them, and that their space really matters to the work that their team is doing. And again, like I said, more than ever, the pandemic has kind of flipped that on end. And you're right, the employees are saying more of what they want, if they're going to come to the office, these are the benefits that they're looking for. these are the spaces that they need. These are the accommodations they're looking for. So to me, it's an exciting time.

E Ed Clemente 16:56

Yeah, you know, a lot of HR manuals have been rewritten recently, [Absolutely] as to what are essential employees too because I mean, during the whole time, people still had to go into offices. So, you know, that's something they got to factor in as well. It's not an option for some folks, you know? So it'll be interesting how this plays out. Is there any other trends, you wanted to identify beyond what you said, or do you think those are most of them?

H Heather Lanier 17:20

I would think one other thing that could be on people's minds is to think what the different

generations are looking for out of the work environment. And I think that we tend to generalize what all of these different demographics, you know, want. And at the end of the day, there's still made up of a variety of individuals that have unique needs. And, you know, the millennials get a lot of feedback that they aren't really interested in coming into a workplace. And I would say, that's the contrary. We've hired several people, and even some Gen Z, that are very passionate about being connected to their culture and wanting to shadow and mentor and be a part of the organization. Doesn't mean that they don't want and value flexibility. So, you know, just be careful in generalizing too much, I think, when you're making a decision around workplace and what you think people are gonna want. Think the best thing any organization can do is ask their people, even if people's voices are, are heard, but you can't act on, you know, every request, they still feel like they've contributed and that it mattered, that their opinion mattered.

E

Ed Clemente 18:38

Right, and it's so hard to predict how the previous generation will influence the generation right behind them because, like, right now, you know, it's a tougher economy. Probably not just Gen Z, but whatever, I think it's Gen Alpha, whatever they're gonna call it. Is looking at what's happening to kids graduated from college right now, because a lot of kids graduate from college, had two years of remote education. And so they're thinking, I know, my nephew changed his whole plan after he was in high school the whole time. And now he wants to go to college now. So it's going to change again, and I don't think we can do it, but it is an exciting time, which dovetails into your next question. If you could give your high school self any advice? What would you tell yourself today?

H

Heather Lanier 19:24

Well, I think I would say that life is way too short, to not love what you're doing. And we all spend way too much time at work to not really enjoy it. So find a way to pick a career that blends the things you love. And then work hard, work hard, work hard, because you get out of life, what you put into it. I think everyone has the opportunity to create a great outcome for themselves if they put the right effort in.

E

Ed Clemente 19:56

Yes, so to your last question, is you've obviously been in Michigan, but I know you you're not from Michigan, you moved here when you were three years old, but what do you like best about the state?

H

Heather Lanier 20:10

So hands down. I love the change of the seasons. I look forward to each of them. And the uniqueness that they bring. The temperatures, which I don't love all of them, but the views are always great. Different wardrobe changes and different activities. And I would say that there

are two that I love more than the other. Summer because I love to be paddleboarding, love the warm days and the warm nights and the fall because there's nothing like Michigan fall, and all those colors and the leaves changing. Plus the apple picking cider and donuts, I'm in.

E

Ed Clemente 20:48

Yeah, we're very fortunate. I always realized that with every guest we talk to. You'd be surprised that it goes by fast. And once again, our guest today was Heather Lanier, she's Chief Operating Officer at NBS Commercial, she's also a shareholder as well. And thanks again, Heather, you did a nice job. Thanks again for coming on the show too.

H

Heather Lanier 21:08

Thank you very much for having me. I appreciate the opportunity.

E

Ed Clemente 21:11

Join us next week where our guest is going to be Ray Boeman is the Director of IACMI a Michigan State University institute based in Corktown and how the future of manufacturing materials may lead to a sustainable future.

A

Announcer 21:26

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