



Trends in Law Office Design

The Great Recession spared no sector of the U. S. economy, creating jobless white and blue collar workers at a rate unseen since the Great Depression. As businesses cut back or failed, the legal profession saw its workload dwindle accordingly, forcing the industry to join the rest of corporate America seeking new ways to be profitable while still delivering quality services.



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Law firms faced unique pressures, such as unprecedented mergers and acquisitions, a “brain drain” of Partners switching firms, and growing intolerance for the traditional cost-plus billing structure. They also found that their remaining staff was increasingly resistant to the demands of this new reality. As the first decade of the 21st Century came to a close, it became apparent that the firms that would survive and thrive in the second decade would need to control costs like never before while also increasing productivity and retaining top talent. Fortunately, the industry changes coupled with advances in technology and the changing demographics of the workforce and client base have allowed the profession to take advantage of the following trends:

1. Space Reduction
2. Flexible Planning
3. Collaborative Space
4. Firm Branding
5. Sustainable Design

Space Reduction

Prior to the recent downturn, the typical leasehold for law offices amounted to between 750-800 sf. per attorney. That range has now dwindled to 630-700 sf., partly due to smaller, universal attorney and associate offices, which are now typically around 200 sf. and 125 sf., respectively.

Technology has also played a part in the reduction of premium

space. Digital document management and e-discovery has reduced paper storage space by as much as 40%, and communication technologies have allowed firms to shift support and project based facilities off-site to lower rent space. Labor intensive work such as document review and due diligence can be outsourced to cities with lower costs of living, thus reducing not only space, but also employee costs. And finally, research databases have transformed the law library from 20-25 sf. per attorney, to 10-15 sf.

Flexible Planning

Long a staple of mainstream corporate design, flexible space planning has not been as easily adopted by the legal community. However, as firms have realized the benefit of minimizing the cost of changes over the lease term, flexible planning has become more common. Paralegals, legal assistants, workrooms, storage, copying, and meeting areas are now commonly accommodated with furniture solutions, rather than hard walled space, making changes to these areas much less costly.

Even the hard-walled offices have become more flexible by limiting the number of office sizes. One office size for Associates and another for Partners reduces the costs associated with a change in title and responsibility, while also allowing for furniture standardization. Some firms have taken this approach to its ultimate potential by providing a one-size-fits-all solution which, while not always easy to implement, can also positively affect the culture of the firm.

“Flex Space” is also being created with moveable components that allow for a large space to be reconfigured for the long or short term needs of litigators and other teams. A large case might require use of an entire room, but the same room could be reconfigured to serve two medium-size cases.

Collaborative Space

Utilizing another concept from the corporate world, law firms are encouraging more team-based collaborative work in an effort to increase productivity while reducing costs. One prime





example of this is the use of “service centers” that provide team phone coverage and administrative support, allowing a shift from a 3:1 attorney to secretary ratio to an aggressive 5:1 ratio.

Opting not to emulate many of their European peers who actually share offices, American firms are beginning to embrace glass walled offices, not only for the increased access to views and daylight that benefits everyone, but also because of its collaborative effects.

With increased online research and mobility, young lawyers are not getting the knowledge sharing and mentoring their predecessors did. To address this, social spaces are designed to coax attorneys away from their desks to interact and communicate. These spaces, designed as informal meeting areas with both soft seating and more typical cafe tables, have the added benefit of fostering a “family” culture in a profession focused on individual results.

Firm Branding

Taking another page from their corporate clients, lawyers are beginning to value the branding potential of their offices. Universally sized and glass walled offices can signal an egalitarian and collaborative culture, while contemporary forms, colors and materials can communicate an entrepreneurial or forward-looking culture.



Design choices and space allocation can also send strong signals to existing and potential employees as well. Choosing to locate a firm-wide dining or break area on the top floor with the best views for example tells clients and staff alike that management recognizes the value of its employees. Similarly, creating an amenity-filled conference center for client meetings can emphasize a firm’s regard for its clients.

The monetary value of firm branding is not always easy to establish. In fact, it can quite easily appear to add to the bottom line. But as Associates become more concerned about quality of life than they are about compensation, and clients begin to resent the traditional service and compensation models of the profession, expressing a change of culture can indeed build loyalty and profitability.

Sustainable Design

As many firms are becoming increasingly involved with clients from the environmental and energy conservation arena, making environmentally conscious workplace choices can have obvious benefits. But sustainable practices can also improve the health and productivity of your employees, attract and retain young lawyers, and reduce energy and water costs, all of which can contribute significantly to the success of a firm.

Implementing sustainable practices can range from the simple, such as choosing to use environmentally friendly cleaning products and having a rigorous recycling program, to the more

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complex, such as choosing to build or renovate an office to achieve Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Certification. Somewhere in between these ranges, initiatives such as maximizing views and daylight for everyone and using furniture and carpet with high recycled content and “cradle to grave” recycling programs can have a huge impact without an expensive and disruptive construction project. However, if the goal is to save money, strategies to save energy and water will need to be implemented.

Conclusion

For many years and for many different reasons, the legal profession has enjoyed a tradition of office planning based on the individual. The job required many hours of heads down, individual focused work. The strategy for attracting and retaining the best and brightest was based on compensation and workplace perks. And for many years, the profession prospered.

As we have shown in this brief synopsis however, advances in technology, changing workforce demographics, and client pressures to better align services with costs are forcing law firms to reassess their workplace processes and priorities. Fortunately, many excellent opportunities to improve services while reducing costs are available. The firms that recognize the need for change and are willing to take advantage of the opportunities will thrive in the decades to come.



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