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Partners in Change: Law Firm Design Trends

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The current economic climate has hit the legal industry particularly hard. In 2009, more than 12,000 attorneys across the country received their pink slips. At the same time, the legal sector has seen more drivers of functional change than at any other point in recent memory. As a result, many law firms are rethinking the path to partnership for young attorneys, creating new structures commensurate with ability and the realities of achieving partner status, wrestling with work-life balance issues and the number of hours that associates are willing to commit, and struggling with work loads under reduced staffing models. In addition, many clients are no longer willing to pay for the work of first and second year associates -- a phenomenon that is impacting profitability.

Other factors influencing change include merger and acquisition activity, lateral movement of partners to firms other than where their careers began, multiple generations at work, diversification, environmental stewardship, corporate America's waning tolerance of the hourly billing structure, and the continuing embrace of more advanced technology. These issues and others are forcing attorneys to look differently at their workplace solutions, adopt a more aggressive approach to reducing the cost of their leasehold, and incorporate unprecedented flexibility into the legal workplace planning solution.

For almost 35 years, the industry has used the metric of "rentable square foot per attorney" to measure the effectiveness of their workplaces. We have seen this number reduce more in the past five years than in any other point in its history. Space is no longer being used as a vehicle to award successful career paths and advancements. As the second highest cost to a law firm's bottom line, the cost of occupancy is being significantly impacted by reducing this metric from 750 to 800 sq. ft. to an average now close to 630 to 700 sq. ft. per attorney. Some law firms across the country have been able to achieve even lower ratios by implementing alternative occupancy strategies more commonly seen in other professional service firms like accounting or consulting. These strategies include universal office sizes for every attorney, interior offices off the window wall, shared offices, and even open office workstations for attorneys.

Technology's impact on reducing square footage in the legal workplace has been significant. With the availability of research databases, many firm libraries have reduced from 20 to 25 to 10 to 15 sq. ft. per attorney. In correlation, support staff-to-attorney ratios continue to climb to as much as 1:4 in many firms. This particular change in administrative support for attorneys is also creating the opportunity for legal administrators and management to incorporate a teaming approach to support attorney needs. Critical issues such as attorney coverage, balancing work load, and equipment sharing creates greater efficiency, yet requires a more thoughtful approach to planning than in the more traditional model. In addition, technology advancements and changes in regulatory court system filing is allowing for document scanning and imaging, e-discovery, and electronic filing to reduce the need for physical file storage, which has been reduced by as much as 40 percent compared to 10 years ago.

Now more than ever, a key to operational and performance success in the legal environment is a firm's ability to allow for change to occur in the design solution while minimizing the cost of that change over the lease term. This flexibility is more typically seen in an open plan environment, not a heavily demised workplace such as a law firm. However, by reducing the number of workplace standards for both professional and support staff, a more universal approach to firms' unique requirements can be achieved. For example, requirements for paralegals, legal assistants, workrooms, file storage, high volume printing, and meeting areas—all critical components—are achieved with furniture solutions and not rigid drywall partitions. Such an approach to planning allows the configurations at these locations to change with minor cost impact.

Although it is a long way from being fully realized, the legal profession is being challenged by clients to implement alternative fee arrangements to the traditional hourly billing rate model, including flat fee or fixed budget options. A gradual evolution to these models will require law firms to focus on reducing their bottom line and efficiently manage the process of delivering services.

The design solution that responds to this shift will exhibit a teaming oriented approach to deliver services in a more efficient and productive fashion. Workplace settings that integrate more focused, "heads down" spaces with shared spaces for two or three and team spaces for five, six or more will be required. The zoning of those functions and people who support specific clients will be enhanced well beyond the traditional notion of locating practice groups together. In a more efficient model, the factors of time and productivity will be critical. We will see greater use of transparent and semi-transparent materials, which will increase visibility and promote exchange. We also will see more attorneys and other professionals who are working together on a case or serving in an advisory role sitting together with appropriate technology and other resources required to expedite solutions.



Seyfarth Shaw in Atlanta achieved an efficient 675 rentable sq. ft. per attorney. Glass fronted, universal offices for every attorney at the window wall allows uniform natural light infiltration around the entire floor plate, with teams of legal secretaries, high volume printing, file storage, and impromptu document review areas at the corners of the floors to support attorney needs.

A recently completed NELSON law firm project for a top firm in Atlanta incorporated many of these strategies and achieved a very efficient 675 rentable sq. ft. per attorney metric. Glass fronted, universal offices for every attorney at the window wall allows uniform natural light infiltration around the entire

floor plate, with teams of legal secretaries, high volume printing, file storage, and impromptu document review areas at the corners of the floors to support attorney needs. Paralegals and case rooms with immediate adjacency to these secretarial teams and similar in module and footprint allow enough flexibility to address the need for change without significant cost.

Adaptability is one of the keys to survival. While it has been common practice in corporate environments and among other professional services providers, many law firms have been slow to adopt some of the aspects of flexibility and view the workplace as tool that can offer a competitive advantage. The past 18 months have created a "new reality" that no business can afford to ignore. Understanding the many nuances of the legal workplace and helping firms to embrace new standards that ultimately support profitability and growth is a clear pathway to success.

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