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Redefining the Traditional Law Office

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As some semblance of normalcy returns to a legal industry forever changed, many law firm leaders are making long-term plans for their physical office spaces. In addition to traditional considerations about cost and location, safety considerations and potential business disruptions have been added to their long list of concerns.

At the height of pandemic shutdowns, virtual work became a widespread necessity, leaving thousands of expensive law offices empty. Many firm leaders began to question the value and role of the physical office space, choosing to either move to a 100% virtual business model, downsize considerably, or reconfigure the utilization of their spaces.

Law firms nationwide are redefining the traditional law office and here are some trends evolving out of these changes:

Moving to Virtual

In a virtual law firm setting, attorneys and staff perform all client and administrative services within a cloud-computing virtual environment. Tech tools, such as [legal practice management software](#) and conferencing platforms, allow firms to operate from any location without the need for a physical office.

While the virtual office has been a reality for many solo attorneys for more than a decade, more small and medium-sized firms are now moving in this direction for a variety of reasons:

- Tech innovations have made the transition to virtual easier to navigate
- Reduced overhead costs
- Increased work schedule flexibility
- Improved mobility
- [The extensive use of client portals for client interactions](#)
- Promoting a safer working environment for firm members

Even with so many benefits, virtual office arrangements raise serious concerns about ethical compliance, client confidentiality, and the supervision of law firm staff members. In making this change, law firms must maximize their use of technology to effectively meet these demands.

Reducing the Financial Footprint

The explosive growth of virtual work arrangements has sparked conversations about the necessity of physical office spaces. Within an industry where large office buildings and prestigious addresses equate to status, law firm leaders began questioning whether a reduction in their real estate footprint could offset financial challenges brought on by the pandemic.

Even some of the nation's largest law firms have considerably downsized their office space, doing away with expansive libraries, large corner offices, and expensive downtown views. These previous law firm norms are being replaced with standard-sized offices for all firm members regardless of seniority and the reduction of common spaces. Trendy collaboration areas and floating workspaces that entered the law firm environment in recent decades are becoming a thing of the past.

Hoteling is another office space management option garnering attention among law firms. Under these arrangements, instead of having assigned offices and workspaces, firm members schedule their use of shared workspaces such as desks, cubicles, and offices ahead of time. This technique essentially takes the finer points of residential hotels and applies them to an office setting for the benefits of a flexible workplace.

Some of the advantages associated with hoteling include:

- Easier adherence to social distancing norms
- Effective utilization of space
- Improved productivity
- Cost savings

While these tactics may result in some level of financial savings, serious questions have been raised about the long-term effects of downsizing efforts on the culture and cohesion of a legal practice. Particularly within a large firm, collaboration plays a major role in meeting client expectations, so firm administrators must weigh the potential loss of camaraderie that may result from these office decisions.

Promoting Flexibility

Flexibility has evolved from being an added bonus to an absolute necessity. As law firms redefine the physical law office, they do so with an eye towards the future and the potential for another business interruption in the months or years ahead. The pandemic has made it painfully clear that law firms need systems that allow for quick pivoting to meet unexpected circumstances.

Firms are accomplishing this goal in a number of ways, each requiring its own level of elasticity. A one-size-fits-all model does not exist because every firm has its own dynamics. Employee satisfaction, specific practice area needs, client expectations, technology, and policies all play a role in how firm leaders and administrators incorporate flexibility into their office planning.

Risk assessment is a standard aspect of practicing law, but that term has taken on a whole new meaning as a vital component of office decision-making. Leaders must assess potential hazards within the office and implement strategies to address them. That includes adding safety measures, such as more frequent cleanings and space dividers, to the office environment.

This also means evaluating the needs of individual firm members, especially those who are more vulnerable to illness due to age or underlying conditions. Within a flexible work environment,

firms may allow these members to continue virtual work or implement other social distancing policies within the physical office.

Flexibility at your law firm should also include the ability to quickly pivot in the event of another shutdown or some other interrupting occurrence. This includes ensuring that the right technology is in place to support virtual [law firm operations](#) and that your employees are adequately trained in what steps to take should another interruption occur.

The Takeaway

Law office flexibility will require some experimentation as leaders struggle to adapt to evolving needs. Data analysis regarding space usage and employee feedback should be an ongoing part of the process.

Now, more than ever, it is important to be adaptable in all aspects of your business, including financially and operationally. The right legal technology tools can support virtual and hybrid work while ensuring both productivity and client confidentiality.

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