



← The lunchroom and outdoor deck at Bingham McCutchen's San Francisco, California, office facilitate special events.

→ Translucent glass walls at attorney's offices encourage interaction at Baker Botts' London, England, office.



← The "Chill Lounge" at Cooley Godward allows attorneys to take a break during the day.

success • by design

Optimal use of a law firm's office space maximizes group collaboration and effectiveness.

BY DOUGLAS ZUCKER

Historically, law firms have been focused on the *efficiency* of the individual – doing more for less. In the future, the focus will shift to the *effectiveness* of the group – getting the job done better and faster. This shift from individual to group performance will have a profound effect on the design of your firm's office space.

Like most businesses, law firms have focused first on efficiency because it is easy to measure. Billable hours, square feet per attorney, the number of attorneys per secretary, profit per equity partner, etc., are well-known statistical categories that are easy to identify and measure. But are these the right things to measure today? While traditional metrics have precedent and value, do they adequately gauge the effectiveness of your organization?

It is easy to measure the productivity of an assembly line worker, but such measurements are more elusive when it comes to creative and group tasks. What we can do, however, is look for indicators of behaviors that have a high correlation with performance. If a law firm is able to encourage these behaviors among its attorneys and staff, it follows that the organization will be healthier and more productive. Research has shown that space design plays an important role in this equation. Along with technology and management strategy, office design is a powerful tool to support organizational performance.

SHORTCUT

Today, law firms are increasingly looking at the power of the group. Practices are managed nationally or globally across many offices, with attorneys being asked to look beyond themselves to their offices and to firm needs. The focus is clearly moving from individuals to group dynamics, and effective law office design is playing a major role in the shift.

CRITICAL TRENDS

Today's law firms face many issues that affect overall organizational performance, and office design has a key impact on all of them.

1. **Associates are increasingly dissatisfied with the individual nature of work.** The annual *AmLaw Associates Survey* indicates that, at most firms, associates seek more mentoring and quality time with their partners and firm management in general. They wanted to be included in more aspects of the work and have a greater understanding of how the firm makes decisions, especially those that affect them personally (the path to partnership, for example). The race to bottom-line profit, an emphasis on billable hours and a less-certain path to partnership has left them feeling like cogs in the machine. Perhaps it's time to pay attention to the health of the machine, and finding ways to facilitate interaction between partners and associates is one place to start.
2. **Mergers and growth are creating larger, more dispersed teams.** A law firm's stability and size has a great deal to do with its ability to manage effectively. According to Hildebrandt International, although the largest and most successful firms are much better managed than they were just a few years ago, most firms still have their work cut out for them. Merger activity was strong in 2004 and 2005, although most of these were actually acquisitions and not mergers of equals. Bringing together two cultures and business styles has challenges at the management and facilities levels, but most importantly, it drastically affects people's lives. According to the *National Law Journal*, there are now 100 firms with more than 400 lawyers, a number that has grown steadily during the past 25 years. Knitting together geographically dispersed practice areas requires constant effort, and facilitating seamless group work also requires new tools.
3. **Younger generations value collaborative work.** Recent research reveals that younger workers (in Generations "X" and "Y") typically value collaborative work much more than people in preceding

- generations. With the majority of associates falling into these younger generations, firms must deal with the reality that substantial portions of their professional staffs have grown up working more collaboratively and want to continue to do so.
4. **Women evaluate relationships and space differently than men.** A recent *New York Times* article reported that law firms have only a 29 percent retention rate for women, among the worst of all major professions. The number of women reaching the partnership level is even lower, barely increasing in the past 10 years to 17 percent. Although this problem has been studied in depth, solutions have been elusive. Attracting and retaining top female legal professionals will likely play a key role in your firm's long-term success. Women have a working style that is more inclusive and collaborative. In surveys, women consistently indicate that they consider office design significant to their productivity.

All of these trends – associate satisfaction, firm growth, mergers and acquisitions and female participation in the legal profession – show how work in law firms is becoming more collaborative and group-oriented. Because of this, decisions involving management, technology and effective use of office space will be critical to every law firm's success.

LAW FIRM DESIGN: A NEW MODEL

In the past, law firms were built almost solely on the idea of the individual. All key measures were individual metrics: profit per partner, billable hours, etc. Attorneys were evaluated individually – and they succeeded individually. Today, law firms are increasingly looking at the power of the group. Practices are managed nationally or globally across many offices, with increasing numbers of attorneys being asked to look beyond themselves to their offices and to firm needs. The focus is clearly moving from individuals to group dynamics, and law office design plays a major role in the shift. Take a look around your firm and ask yourself, "If we redesign this space to enhance collaborative work approaches, how will it be different?"

1. **Attorney Offices.** Nothing beats adjacency for enhancing communication. In general law firm practices, however, associates are often not located anywhere near the partners that they are working with for a variety of reasons: status, seniority, office views, inertia, general office design, etc. No other type of business would try to form a high-performance team without co-locating them.

Remember that associates survey? Access to partners, more communication, more feedback and more frequent interaction could all be enhanced by co-location. It would also help the partners to provide input in a natural way, without making it yet another non-billable task. Law firms should avoid building or occupying space by creating partner and associate rows on opposite sides of the building. When selecting a building, be aware of what will naturally happen if a building has fantastic light and views on one side and a building blocking them on the other. Those great views that you will be paying dearly for may end up costing you more than you think.

Of course, working teams comprise more than only partners and associates. The same rules of adjacency apply to secretaries, paralegals and the frequently required support amenities: printers, copiers, files, workrooms, etc. Some describe it as creating a "legal neighborhood." At home, your neighborhood has all of the conveniences that you need nearby. The same should apply to your office. Putting these frequently accessed amenities a floor

away may make economic sense, but may actually cost you a great deal in less effective team interaction and knowledge sharing.

Simply co-locating these functions adjacent to one another will not in itself ensure successful collaboration. Co-location will support informal learning, but you also need spaces for more structured communication. You need to have more meeting places for both physical and virtual meetings. Desktop video conferencing or another similar technology may be required to keep attorneys "adjacent" and collaborating with their practice area peers in other offices in much the same way as physical adjacency does in their own offices. Conference tables within the office or "P" top desk surfaces will also facilitate interaction, provided that they don't get permanently covered with work. Providing small conference rooms or team rooms nearby may also be a good solution.

2. **Firm Services.** Having accessible printers and files is also important. In a recent focus group at one law firm, the printing protocols there prompted a universal outcry. Every attorney nodded in agreement when one mentioned how much time that they wasted going to the printer and sifting through their peers' output. Many solutions to these problems entail a combination of behavioral/management strategies as well as space. The attorneys' most frequently voiced solution was to have more files and printers near them. While giving everyone a printer might not be the right solution, making them walk across the office floor to sift through stacks of paper also seems like a waste of valuable time. A compromise approach will likely work best.
3. **Legal Secretaries.** Today's legal secretaries are parts of multiple work groups, and their effectiveness must be carefully considered. Many firms are considering two new models for secretary workflows.

The first is a team approach. Three or four secretaries (plus some additional accounting/billing support) work together as a team. The team supports several attorneys, and the varied skill sets of the secretaries are available to all of them. By working in this way, an experienced legal secretary is freed from doing timesheets and copying, can contribute in meaningful ways and serve as a mentor to less-experienced staff. Fewer highly skilled legal secretaries and more administrative assistants also means a lower payroll cost.



Cafeteria and attorney dining at Sidley Austin's, Chicago, Illinois, office encourages socializing.

The second model is a pool approach, in which first- and second-year associates are assigned to a pool of secretaries. This pool services them at a higher ratio. (+/- 5:1) Where firms have adopted this model, young associates typically experience an increase in service, as they don't have to compete with partners for attention.

Both of these approaches are good examples of thinking about work in a different way and utilizing the power of the group to produce better service with fewer, lower-salaried people. Both of these also have strong office and acoustical design implications.

4. **Collaborative Meeting Spaces.** A law firm's traditional group spaces are its conference rooms. While meeting many of the traditional needs, today's conference rooms are changing to better accommodate technology. They are larger and have more space around the tables for court reporters and video depositions. They also accommodate technology ranging from video and conventional teleconferencing to projection, where a group of people could simultaneously view/draft a document. While expensive, using technology to improve lawyers' productivity seems well worth it if it is easy to use. And technology is often the only way to connect dispersed teams.

Sitting around a conference room table, however, is not going to encourage collaboration or mentoring. Those behaviors require familiarity and trust that is more frequently built through casual social interaction. Creating a conveniently accessible space oriented around food and drink is usually the most effective way to engage attorneys. If there is a draw – cappuccino, wine tastings or a large-screen TV with news or sports – then there is a natural opportunity for this to occur. Reinforcing the social nature of collaborative work in your culture and behavior is critical.

A SHIFT IN THINKING

Changing the way lawyers think about work – shifting from an individual to a group activity – can have profound impacts on the satisfaction and enjoyment of the work, the quality of the work product and the firm's bottom-line profitability. Doing so requires rethinking the interaction between people, processes and technology. Well-designed office space can be a powerful tool, enabling you to make your organization more effective. ✱

about the author

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The following articles are available in the *ALA Management Encyclopedia (ALAME)*, www.alanet.org/alame.

- "Practice Groups: Organization And Management"
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The following are accessible via ALA's Legal Management Resource Center, <http://thesource.alanet.org>.

- "Office Priority: Make Firm Space Work" by Tim Bentley – Type keywords "**office design**" in the search engine
- "Developing and Implementing Strategic Plans that Differentiate Your Firm from the Competition," by Joel A. Rose – Type keywords "**practice group**" in the search engine

On the Web

- EDGE International Review, "Intelligent Design for Law Firms" – www.edge.ai/files/intelligent_design_for_law_firms.pdf
- "Team Building: Managing the Norms of Informal Groups in the Workplace" – www.accel-team.com/work_groups/index.html
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