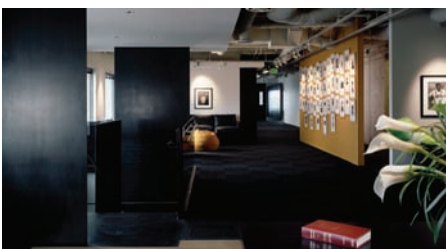


Summit Law Group, a 25-lawyer firm in Seattle, Washington, has inexpensive furniture throughout the office; a reception-area wall covered with informal photos of lawyers and staff; and 63 offices, all with window views and all the same size, 10 feet by 13 feet. Overall the space is modern, functional, and minimalist, characterized by open ceilings, a steel staircase, and moving walls.



# The Non-Hierarchical Law Firm

**Summit Law Group's office design supports the firm's egalitarian culture and makes it an extraordinary place to work for attorneys and support staff alike.**

BY MARC G. REYNOLDS, CLM

Expensive furniture. Valuable art. Large offices for partners, small ones for associates, and cubicles for staff. You won't find any of these at Summit Law Group, a 25-lawyer firm in Seattle, Washington.

Instead, you'll find simple, inexpensive furniture; a reception-area wall covered with informal photos of lawyers and staff; and 63 offices, all with window views and all the same size, 10 feet by 13 feet.

There is no room and no need for cubicles at Summit, because everyone has an exterior window office. That's right, *everyone*, from a document clerk to the lawyer with the highest billing rate, has an identical office. The space between the exterior offices, which would traditionally house clusters of cubicles, is used communally for file storage, copy rooms, and a family-style kitchen.

This iconoclastic space plays a pivotal role in supporting the firm's egalitarian culture, maximizing the effectiveness and job satisfaction of lawyers and staff and delivering increased value to clients. As you've probably guessed, Summit Law Group is not your typical law firm. By strategic intent, we have created a non-hierarchical culture and design that is intended to make the firm an extraordinary place to work.

## SHORTCUT

Summit Law Group rejected the traditional law firm model and started from scratch to design a modern law firm founded on a single principle: customer service. To support this approach, the firm designed an office that maximizes individual efficiency and job satisfaction.

### EGALITARIAN AND ENTREPRENEURIAL

Summit was founded in 1997 by 16 lawyers who came from two large law firms in the heart of downtown Seattle. These founders believed that the traditional hierarchical law firm model was outdated and not sufficiently aligned with clients' interests. Such interests would be better served, they decided, by a law firm that was both egalitarian and entrepreneurial.

The most visible example of Summit's non-traditional business model is the lack of associates. All lawyers have an equity interest in the firm. Every lawyer (and every staff member, too) receives daily and monthly financial information about the firm. Staff members enjoy competitive salaries like those of their peers at traditional law firms. But, they also enjoy quarterly and annual bonuses, which can be extremely generous.

### SPACE AND CULTURE

The founders' vision called for inexpensive, highly efficient office space on the fringe of Seattle's downtown business district. But rather than creating their own space right away – which would be an expensive proposition for any law firm – the founders sublet a group of software developers' offices in an industrial section of the city. The corner offices were immediately converted into conference rooms. The remaining offices mostly looked out on one another, were the same size, and had the same furniture.

By 2002, the founding team of 23 lawyers and staff had expanded to 50 and outgrown the firm's initial space. It was time to move. A task force located a building under construction in Seattle's International District and retained award-winning architect Tom Kundig, from Seattle's Olsen Sundberg Kundig Allen, to help create a space that matched the firm's culture.

"Creating the design for Summit Law Group was an extraordinary opportunity to fulfill expectations for a non-hierarchical office environment," Kundig said. "We were honored to help make a very special

place for a special group of people – and to, perhaps, stretch the definition of legal office workspace."

This "special place," located on two floors, has eight conference rooms and 63 identical window offices, each having 130 square feet of space. That's considerably smaller than partner offices in many traditional law firms, where they can occupy 600 square feet or more. The furniture in each office is largely built in, so that the only variation among offices is the number of bookcases versus filing cabinets. Overall the space is modern, functional, and minimalist, characterized by open ceilings, a steel staircase, and moving walls. It speaks of simplicity, low overhead, and genuine equality.

Accounting manager and ALA member Richard Wood remembers interviewing for a job at Summit. "One interviewer took me for a tour around the offices," he said. "I was surprised when we arrived at what would become my office, which I realized was the same size as the lawyer offices I had just walked by. I was even more surprised when I realized that all of the staff, even those working part time, had their own offices as well."

### IMPACT ON LAWYERS

Summit lawyers enjoy the space for many reasons, including the fact that it's far quieter than other law firms.

"When I joined Summit last year, I immediately found the offices to be calm and focused," said lawyer John Chun. "They're highly functional and aesthetically pleasing. But the cultural benefits are deeper. Having an equity interest in the firm where I practice has made me a better lawyer, and it's also more fun."

Contemporary office design and egalitarian culture have been attracting the best and brightest in other industries, notably high tech, for years. Summit's founders believe that a similar effect could be created within the legal industry. But this transition was neither easy nor obvious, requiring new perspectives on resource management and

cultural commitment. Fortunately, the results have far exceeded the investment.

#### IMPACT ON STAFF

Longtime IT manager Stu Harris, also an ALA member, is convinced that Summit's classlessness boosts productivity.

"The staff here are not second-class citizens working in cubicles while the highest-billing lawyers have spacious corner offices," he said. "This consistently reinforces that my work is highly valued and makes me want to do the best possible job."

#### APPEAL TO CLIENTS

When culture and office design resonate with clients, it gives the relationship new perspective. Not many offices outside the legal industry resemble that of the traditional law firm. By having an atmosphere that is welcoming and friendly, client relationships have also evolved.

Summit's attempts to shift the client relationship parallel the employee relations. Perhaps the best evidence of how clients view the firm's approach is through the firm's "Value Adjustment Line" on each billing statement. This allows clients to assess the

value of the services they received. Clients can then adjust the bill up or down. In some matters, clients have increased their own bills by tens of thousands of dollars, reflecting their assessments of the value received from this nontraditional firm.

#### DUPLICATING THE SUMMIT MODEL

When I speak to ALA members about the firm's flat organization and unique office design, people are often impressed with the approach. This office structure and culture both require a definite commitment to change and a particular kind of building footprint that is not typically found in downtown office high-rises.

The jury is out on whether Summit's office model will become more prevalent. Even though the change from a traditional workplace structure may not be the easiest, such a commitment to equality and client service is highly successful and a thoroughly enjoyable approach to the practice of law.

#### *about the author*

**Marc G. Reynolds, CLM**, is the Executive Director of Summit Law Group. Contact him at [marcr@summitlaw.com](mailto:marcr@summitlaw.com) and learn more about the firm at [www.summitlaw.com](http://www.summitlaw.com).



## Introducing the **NEW** Professional Services Locator

*An official site of the National Court Reporters Association*



- **Locate** firms and reporters offering specialties you need in realtime, captioning, CART and more...
- Easy **searching** by reporter type, name, location, and keywords.
- Many listings will allow you to **schedule depositions online!**



**The Improved and Convenient Way to Find a Court Reporter FAST!**

**Visit <http://psl.NCRAOnline.org>**

# Law Firm Design: A Focus on Image and Functionality

If your office color scheme is more institutional than inspiring, or your furniture is older than most of your associates, it may be time to consider redecorating.

As a firm tries to woo young associates, its office can give either a fantastic –or flawed – first impression. (And, of course, clients could notice that rip in the reception area couch, too.)

“Law firm design is a two-part situation – image and functional design,” says Anne Kniffen, Managing Principal of Dallas-based lauckgroup, an interior architecture design firm that specializes in legal office interiors. “Many firms sign long leases, and when the leases come up, they comment that the office ‘no longer works.’ ”

The next step? Determine how the firm has changed. If the demographic has shifted younger, a firm may have different space and amenity needs.

“Young attorneys don’t care about having a big office,” Kniffen said. “They want an office that works – the right lighting, room to spread out and plug in their laptops, ergonomic chairs.”

## ONE-STOP SHOPPING

Lawyers work long hours, so comfort is key. Some firms, like Clifford Chance, which has 27 offices worldwide, offer employees several in-house amenities to make life a little easier.

When Clifford Chance moved its London office to a new Canary Wharf facility in 2003, attorneys gained access to a staff restaurant, on-site gym, swimming pool, squash courts, and a shop offering dry cleaning and postal services. The facility also features a hair salon, juice bar, and a coffee lounge that becomes a bar on Thursday and Friday nights.

A spokesperson for Clifford Chance noted that the new office was designed around the firm’s belief “that the quality of our office environments is critical to the well-being of our lawyers and business services staff.”

Firm-sponsored services are a growing trend. “Many firms provide a dry cleaner to pick up clothes, a wide spectrum of snacks, or cater nice food in,” Kniffen said. “Some even have late-shift word processing help on staff.”

## IMAGE IN THE ELECTRONIC AGE

Other firms find their redesign needs are primarily technological. When Lewis and Roca LLP, with 170 attorneys and offices in five cities, redid its Phoenix office in 2005, each conference room was upgraded to include high-definition plasma-screen televisions with computer and teleconferencing outlets.

Office light fixtures, carpeting, and furniture were changed to complement the new technology.

“We have a fabulous space, but it needed to be updated,” said Jane Reddin, a former partner at Lewis and Roca. “We wanted something that would make a statement about our firm.”

Lewis and Roca’s library also received a facelift.

“When the space was first built out, we had one of the largest law libraries in the state,” Reddin said. “But with technology being what it is now, we didn’t need more room for books; we needed a space that allowed more technology.”

## NEW OFFICE, NEW STANDARD

Yet, even with today’s technology, paper storage is still a major issue for many firms. Reducing the leased square footage to cut costs is another common redesign goal.

Each firm should approach its renovation by determining its big-picture goal – which, in addition to storage, size, and amenities, in most cases will involve making the office more relaxing, Kniffen says.

“There was a period where law firms really tried to impress clients – [using] more crown molding, dark wood, chandeliers,” she said. “As time marches on, they are toning down offices. They don’t want it to look like their clients are paying for it. They want to have a comfortable, professional environment.”

## *about the author*

**Erin Brereton** is a freelance writer based in Chicago. Contact her at [erinbrereton@yahoo.com](mailto:erinbrereton@yahoo.com).

