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# Firms Holding Off On Office Moves Amid Uncertainty



By Emma Cueto | Dec 17, 2021, 12:21 PM EST ·



A number of Mid-Law firms have moved into new office space in 2021, with such firms seemingly more willing to do so than their BigLaw cousins, but overall the industry appears to be holding off on relocations or settling on what office space should look like post-pandemic.

At a time when working from home has been normalized in the legal industry, office space choices are tied up by questions of how and where attorneys will work in light of that shift to home, with many long-planned moves going ahead this year but with seemingly more firms pondering decisions, even as the Omicron variant changes the calculus.

"The major trends that we're seeing is actually that firms are really interested in ... trying to understand what their attorneys are looking for, what the staff is looking for, what people are interested in, in terms of hybrid," said Kristin Cerutti, a design leader at Nelson Worldwide. "We're doing a lot of that work right now with every one of our law firms."

About a dozen Mid-Law firms have announced or completed an office move or redesign in 2021. Most have only made such changes at one location, although one notable exception is [Litchfield Cavo LLP](#), which moved into new space in Phoenix in April and later announced planned moves in Salt Lake City and Providence, Rhode Island.

Other moves include [Bass Berry & Sims PLC](#) announcing its plan to shift its Nashville, Tennessee, headquarters into a newly completed development; [Williams Mullen](#) relocating its space in Northern Virginia; [Miller Canfield Paddock & Stone PLC](#) taking a space in the West Loop in Chicago; and [Benesch Friedlander Coplan & Aronoff](#) moving to a new building in San Francisco's Financial District.

While many have speculated that remote work may lead firms to ultimately downsize their footprint, several firms indicated that their decisions were instead fueled by a need to expand their space.

[Vedder Price PC](#), for instance, said in an announcement that its November move to a new Washington, D.C., location was done to "accommodate the firm's continued expansion" in the area. [Flaster Greenberg PC](#) cited the addition of two dozen attorneys in Philadelphia as the reason behind its move out of its previous 10,000-square-foot-space into a 16,000-square-foot location three blocks away.

Industry experts, however, said that for many firms, relocating is not high on the priority list.

Dan Safran of Unbiased Consulting told Law360 Pulse in an email that many of his firm clients have not returned to work, and that the most he has observed on the office front is an interest in upgrading things like video equipment. Cerutti

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said that most of the clients she has seen proceed with moves this year already had plans before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The managing partners of [Smith Gambrell & Russell LLP](#), which relocated its Atlanta headquarters, and of [Kelley Drye & Warren LLP](#), which relocated its New York headquarters, both told Law360 Pulse the moves had been in the works since before COVID-19.

At Smith Gambrell, the pandemic did prompt the firm to tweak its design plans to better accommodate social distancing and to ensure the new space included a high-quality HVAC and filtration system. The firm also focused on adding more collaborative spaces and on technology upgrades — with managing partner Stephen Forte noting that the new space allowed for networking throughout the office.

Client-facing amenities, however, remained important to the firm, Forte said. One reason it chose the development at 1105 W. Peachtree, which it shares with [Google](#), was that it allowed access to a sky plaza that the firm couldn't get elsewhere, even in midtown Atlanta.

"We've already used this common area space ... and that was one of the amenities we targeted," he said. "And it's proven to be a very valuable asset."

The firm also switched to uniformly sized offices, which Forte said will better support a hybrid work model and more efficient use of space.

At Kelley Drye, managing partner Dana Rosenfeld said the firm had been looking to move from midtown Manhattan to downtown, where many of its clients are located. The move also involved reducing square footage — something made possible not because of remote work, she said, but by eliminating the need for the bulk of its paper storage.

The firm also opted for standard-sized offices and for more collaborative spaces, as well as tech upgrades that will further support its plan for hybrid work. While it supports flexibility, she said, the firm does want attorneys in the office some of the time.

"We want to maintain some degree of flexibility, but we are not intending — and don't think it works for us — to be a virtual firm, where people can work 100% from home," she said. "That doesn't work for the culture that we've built."

Cerutti said the type of design choices made at Smith Gambrell and Kelley Drye — such as tech upgrades and an emphasis on collaborative spaces — are similar to what she is seeing across the industry. She said there has also been more interest in health and wellness features, such as rooms that could be used for naps, meditation or prayer, or communal lounge areas for quiet work outside an attorney's own office.

The upshot, she said, has not been reducing the size of firm offices but rethinking how to use the square footage.

"A lot of them are saying, 'We think we can take less space' — but after we do a lot of that upfront workplace strategy ... the amount of dedicated space for people to do heads-down, focused work might be reduced slightly, but a lot of those collaborative spaces are increasing to get people to come back and engage with one another," she said. "So frequently we are seeing a slight square footage reduction or the same square footage but just using it differently."

Firms are also more invested in having the flexibility to add or subtract space, she added, with leases allowing them to increase or decrease by up to 20%. However, she said, many firms seem reluctant to finalize plans for office moves or redesigns.

"It seems like everyone is afraid to make the wrong decision," she said. "And this is not just law firms. ... Everyone is afraid that whatever they're going to do, in

two months it's going to be the wrong thing."

Mid-Law firms, she said, appear a bit more willing to move ahead with office moves than BigLaw. But overall, many firms are holding off, although Cerutti speculated there might be an increase in decisions made in the first quarter of 2022.

And there's also the question of how attitudes about working from home will evolve, she noted.

"I've been in the industry for 16 years; I've been focused mostly on law firms for eight of that. And like every other trend, the pendulum swings."

It remains uncertain if there's truth in the idea that a reconfigured office space is a means to coax attorneys back into the office.

"The new office — whether it's novelty or the fact that people can actually see others when they come in — has led to slightly greater attendance on a more consistent basis," Forte said. "Most people seem to show up at some point during the week."

--Editing by Orlando Lorenzo and Alyssa Miller.



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