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Bye Corner Office, Hello Shared Desk: Law Space Designer


 By **Kevin Penton** | November 10, 2021, 10:47 AM EST

Lawyers having their own desks, partners getting an office with a view: that's so 2019. As a return to the office looms, many law firms are deciding to revamp their workplaces for a post-pandemic era they hope is just around the cubicle.

Attorneys who say they want to pop into the office no more than three days a week can expect to be asked to reserve a desk on an app, while workspaces with windows may be used as an enticement to get lawyers through the door, said Kristin Cerutti, design leader for interior design firm Nelson Worldwide.

Law firms are increasingly looking beyond their direct competitors and inquiring how companies in other industries, such as technology, are looking to use their office space, said Cerutti, who noted that her company currently has more than 100 plans in the works for law firm clients.

Cerutti recently shared what her clients are requesting, as the next generation of legal office spaces begins to take shape. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How are larger firms approaching their office redesigns?

We're not seeing much of a reduction in overall square footage. What we're seeing is they are really acknowledging that physical space is something that maintains company culture, that brings people in for mentorship opportunities between associates and partners, that allows summer associates to be immersed in what's happening in the different practice groups. I'm not looking at them significantly reducing the total amount of space, but rather utilizing their space in a little different way.

How are firms looking to use their space differently?

What we're hearing people say they want to do is to determine a specific day or two each week that an entire practice group will come into the office together. How that's manifesting in planning is that we're planning in modules, so that if you imagine an office floor as a big square or a rectangle, each of the four corners would have everything that you need. So each corner would have a six-person conference room, one or two huddle rooms, a couple of little phone rooms, a staff workstation, a couple of interior offices, a couple of exterior offices, a copy room, all within one of those modules.

So when a practice group comes in, they all pick their seats on their app to sit in that module, so they're all near each other. So instead of you and me being in the office on the same day, but you're on the eighth floor, and I'm on the 10th floor, and we only see each other for 10 minutes, we're sitting in the same zone together.

Why are law firms more open now to doing things differently, including looking at how other industries design their offices?

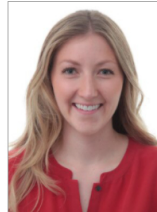
The law firm industry has consistently been about 10 years behind everyone else when it comes to picking up trends related to physical space. They're much more conservative. They don't want to make a change because if they do it first, they're afraid that no one is going to want to work for them because they're offering something slightly different from someone else.

What I think the pandemic has done is leveled the playing field. Everyone was sent home, everyone realized they could work from home, and most firms have some attorneys or staff who are saying, "I don't feel like I need to be in all the time any more." So they're all now having to deal with the same concerns at the same time. So they're making decisions on policy, square footage and what they're going to provide in their office space at the same time that most of their competitors are doing it, so they're less concerned about making a change that's going to appear as a negative to either a lateral candidate or someone coming out of school.

Why are there so many unfinished projects?

Most of our clients put their projects on hold last year. When all of this hit, unless there was a project that was already in process at that point that we just finished out, everyone else went, "I think we're just going to pause for a minute and see how this shakes out."

About May to June of this year, all of a sudden everyone started going, "People are vaccinated. I think we're going to go back to the office. We need to figure this



Kristin Cerutti

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out, and we need to figure it out now." So all summer, it was a mad scramble to get everyone planned into a bunch of different buildings to see what might work for them.

Now what we're finding is that no one necessarily wants to send their staff back before the holidays because they know they're going to be around family that maybe they hadn't been around before, maybe somebody will get sick, we've got flu season, etc. So a lot of firms seem to be eyeing the beginning of next year for when they'll start sending people back more regularly.

I think what we're going to see is about the second quarter and third quarter next year, a lot of these clients are going to be moving in, and then we'll get some real test data on what is working.

--Editing by Alyssa Miller.



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