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More Mid-Law Firms Resolving Future Of Their Office Spaces



By **Emma Cueto** | Apr 25, 2022, 4:54 PM EDT · Listen to article



Mid-Law firms are increasingly beginning to make decisions about the future of their office space, with firms not only announcing plans to relocate but also expressing interest in renovations.

Earlier this month, Shutts & Bowen LLP announced it will be moving its Fort Lauderdale office into a new space in 2023, Dickie McCamey & Chilcote PC said that its Pittsburgh headquarters will have a new home come 2025 and Thompson Coe Cousins & Irons LLP unveiled its third major office space change since the start of the pandemic by relocating in New Orleans.

Kristin Cerutti, a design leader at Nelson Worldwide, said that since the end of 2021, firms have seemingly become much more willing to commit to office plans.

"People are starting to make decisions," she said. "What we've been seeing over the last few months is people are finally starting to feel comfortable making real estate decisions."

The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated rise in remote and hybrid work have prompted many firms to rethink their physical office space and how best to utilize it. For most of the pandemic, however, firms **were hesitant** to commit to new plans.

However, Cerutti said, in the last few months, firms have seemed to become more confident as restrictions have begun easing.

Dickey McCamey announced its Pittsburgh headquarters will be moving from a 100,000-square-foot space to an 80,000-square-foot one, with office manager Christopher Lee saying after the announcement that the amenities available in the new space will help with recruitment.

The new space will also feature uniformly sized smaller offices, more common spaces and technological upgrades, according to the firm.

Shutts & Bowens' Fort Lauderdale managing partner Joseph Goldstein, told Law360 Pulse that their new space will also feature uniformly sized offices instead of the differently sized partner and associate offices it currently has. This will hopefully give the firm greater flexibility when responding to evolving work-from-home preferences or the potential need to increase or decrease its square footage in the future, he said.

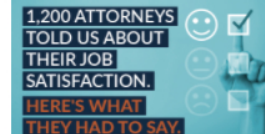
"We prefer people to be in the office," he said, "but we also want to recognize the flexibility we have learned during the pandemic."

The firm is also excited by the amenities in the new building, which was

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completed last year, and by the chance to be "closer to the action" and its downtown clients. The new building has a dedicated amenities floor that includes both indoor and outdoor spaces that can be utilized for work, socializing with colleagues and clients and for firm events, he said.

Cerutti said that these types of amenities are something a lot of firms are looking for, with many interested in moving into new buildings with features that can lure attorneys away from their home office setups.

Many firms are reducing their square footage, she said, but placing more emphasis on collaborative spaces, giving attorneys more places they can work even within the office. And after years of focusing mostly on the quality of client-facing spaces, she said, most are now placing an equal amount of weight on the "back of house" areas where attorney work happens.

"A lot of them are going to their clients' offices or meeting virtually," she said. "So that need for those upfront, client-facing spaces — the size of them and the quantity of them — is reducing somewhat."

Whether there will be a wave of office moves, she said, will likely depend in large part on when firms' leases are up in their current space. However, she said, many firms are also making the decision to renovate rather than relocate.

At Thompson Coe, the firm is in the process of moving office space in New Orleans and Austin, Texas, but is also renovating its existing Dallas space after renewing its lease in 2019. The firm knew at the time it wanted to renovate, said Shawn Phelan, management committee chair, but the pandemic has definitely influenced the type of space that the firm ultimately decided on.

Since the firm has embraced flex work and allows attorneys and staff to work from home several days a week, he said, the firm wanted to ensure that its spaces are outfitted for such arrangements. The new spaces in Dallas, Austin and New Orleans will feature flex offices, an emphasis on collaborative spaces and videoconferencing capability in every meeting room that is easily operated through Zoom from a company laptop.

"We want to promote being creative and [being] a creative law firm, and with creativity you need to be flexible," he said. "Our work-from-home flex situation has worked well for us this first year, and we see no change to that in the immediate future. And our offices reflect that."

Even little things can make a difference, he said, such as switching from coffee stations to coffee bars, which promote more interactions between colleagues.

Firms also believe that office features and amenities are a factor in luring attorneys back into physical offices and making the firm attractive to both current and potential future employees.

"Every firm we've been talking to recently, their main reason for wanting to do an office renovation comes back to attraction and retention," Cerutti said. "I think people are just really trying to rethink the organization that they're working for, the firm they're with, asking, 'Is this the right move for me?'"

Goldstein and Phelan echoed this, saying that retention and recruitment were very much in mind when planning office moves and renovations.

"Good attorneys, whether coming out of law school or thinking about making a transition between firms, have choices," he noted. Part of the decision to make the investment in a new space was to ensure that Shutts & Bowen stays competitive, he added.

Phelan said that after the first floor of its three-floor Dallas renovation was

complete, he immediately heard comments that the lighter and brighter space was "a different experience." While the firm has been pleased with the results of allowing employees to regularly work remotely, he said, it does want to still have people in the office regularly as well, and providing a pleasant and functional space to work in is part of that.

Cerutti noted that these trends are not confined to law firms. Many organizations are trying to rework their spaces, and they seem increasingly comfortable making decisions.

"Prepandemic, co-working spaces were trying to entice small businesses that didn't have offices to leave their home to go there to work, so it's interesting to see that we're once again trying to entice people to leave their home to go to work but with companies' own office space," she said.

--Editing by Andrew Cohen.



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