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The next generation of offices

Law firm designer discusses post-pandemic layout possibilities

By Melissa Rubalcaba Riske

Law firm moves and renovations have slowed down as projects that began pre-pandemic have been completed. During this, hopefully minor, slow period, Chicago Lawyer questioned what was happening in the legal workspace, which like many industries, is now questioning its future office spaces. We sat down with Kristin Cerutti, a design leader with NELSON Worldwide. Cerutti has more than 17 years of design experience and is a director of the legal workplace team.

Imagining office space where attorneys could work without a designated office was something few Chicago law firms would even consider just a few years ago.

In today's post-pandemic world, it's a concept on the rise, Cerutti said. "Pre-pandemic, the design executives knew how many people had to fit in the space and we'd take that number and design the space," she said. "Now, we don't know. With some preferring hybrid options, there are questions about how much space is needed and what should we put in that space."

With each lease renewal comes a law firm and its leadership asking the question: stay, go, renovate? The answers aren't so easy with the appeal of new construction throughout the city and the new twist, whether to maintain hybrid work options or bring everyone back to the office full-time. Each firm is wrestling with what is the best fit for its culture, while considering how to continue to attract and retain talent.

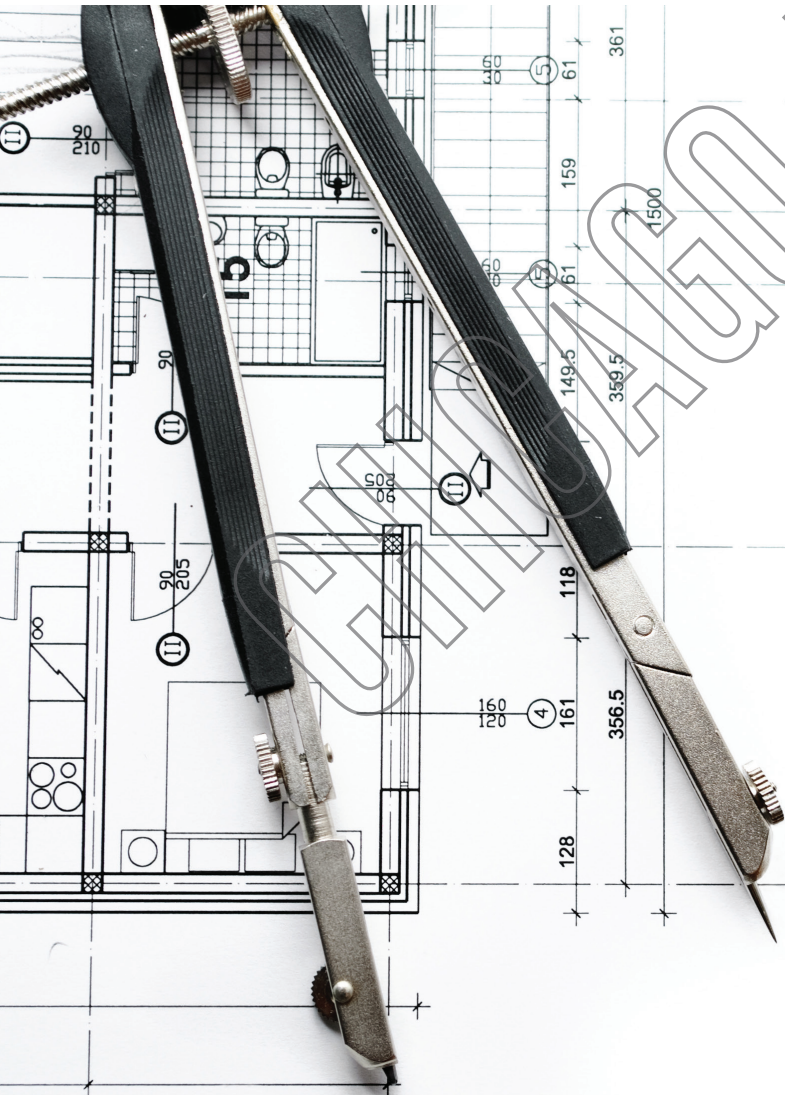
Before March 2020, working from home was about working after office hours or perhaps working from home on a Friday so you could leave work a little early before an out-of-town trip. When offices closed, firms had to quickly pivot to a complete work from home model. Many attorneys, who would have never considered working from home, adapted to the opportunity to enjoy a shortened commute to their home office and enjoying coffee breaks in the comfort of their kitchen.

Soon they saw benefits not previously realized in the field, from gaining back time spent commuting or the monetary savings from no parking payments and less trips to the gas pump.

As businesses ask how to bring back people into the office, it's important to understand factors that may serve as the rationale why some prefer working remotely. Cerutti said before sketching office layouts, it's worth consulting staff to gain a better understanding of where people are in terms of their office needs and existing roadblocks. She said clients are examining what their future office needs might look like, and without a crystal ball, these consultations can provide important data.

"With more data they are better able to make a decision and feel more educated, thus mitigating the risk down the road," she said. "It may not be related to the office space, but if we don't ask, we may not know."

For example, the team may learn people would prefer to have access to on-site parking, instead of paying rising fees in the city.





Using surveys and interviewing staff can help create a better collection of data about work habits, Cerutti said. Businesses are reaching out earlier to engage a design team and begin talks as they consider options well in advance of expiring leases.

Additionally, as a firm's design team considers office space options, she sees greater engagement that extends behind senior partners to include associates and staff.

"This says we know these people are important to us. We want to be able to offer something for everyone," she said. "It's part of the inclusive culture as well as attraction and retention, the biggest drivers."

NEW WORK HABITS

In 2018, Cerutti said she had a few firms incorporating hoteling, or swing desks, more so to accommodate associates visiting an office. Today, she said, it's a given that flexible workspace will be incorporated and it's a question of whether it will be within a group or provided on each floor.

"Five years ago, every attorney needed a dedicated office. Every office would have a large conference room," Cerutti said, adding the pandemic has created a shift in the workplace.

There are plenty of reasons staff would prefer to be in the office, from the dedicated workspaces to the dependable WiFi and the ability for in-person collaborations. Cerutti said a top concern from her clients is how remote work creates challenges in the ability to provide mentorship with younger associates. The ability to knock on an office door to ask a question or to pull someone into a conversation isn't easy when remote.

For those planning their office spaces post-pandemic, some of Cerutti's clients are opting to reduce their physical office footprint by 20 to 30 percent, saying that having less people in the office is one of the reasons. Another factor in reduced footprints is the move to create uniform offices, a design feature that has been on the rise for several years.

One of the trends is re-imagining large conference rooms that can seat 20. While it was perfect for a quarterly board meeting, the daily use was more likely to be a small group of five or less individuals and scheduling could be a challenge with limited conference room space

needed for small groups. Cerutti said a design solution is creating smaller conference rooms that are connected by movable walls that can open into a larger space when needed.

OFFICE AMENITIES

In the past, firms would incorporate amenities for their staff, like fitness rooms, yoga studios or in-house cafés.

These trends are fading as newer office buildings are providing these amenities within their construction. There is no need to add in a fitness room when there is a two-story workout space with a spa located a few floors away.

"Most of the newer buildings have ample amenities with fitness centers, access to restaurants," Cerutti said. "I'm seeing less need for these types of spaces within the office space."

One of the coveted amenities is access to outdoor space, with a plaza or terrace, she added.

Additionally, firms are including dedicated event space in their office designs, like a large multi-purpose room that can be used for entertaining. Often located off the reception area, it can be a large room with movable walls and furniture that can be transformed into two or three smaller rooms. The designs for this space include a wet bar, catering kitchen and even a pass-through window where a bartender can serve drinks during an event, or the window can easily be stored away behind beautiful millwork when not in use, she said.



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