

The Changing Landscape of Legal Practice

BY VERNON MAYS

The whirlwind of law firm mergers and acquisitions is mostly over, and law firms are now dealing with issues of culture, operations, and work style, among others. They're responding not only to external forces like economic uncertainty, rising real estate costs, and the impact of technology and mobility, but also to a more diverse workforce.

This article appeared originally in *Dialogue* 15. ©2008.
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Signs of Change

Of the different factors reshaping law firms, the over-arching one is globalization, says Doug Zucker, leader of Gensler's law firm practice in San Francisco. "Global reach means that law firms have to add depth and broaden their practices. It also means having offices in more cities, and often having to bridge major differences in culture, language, and practice." That's not unique to law firms, but it has significantly changed the landscape in which many of them operate.

Diversity in the law firm workforce is a close second as a change factor. While today's law schools graduate more women than men, women are still underrepresented in the legal profession. "That's one diversity issue that law firms are struggling with," Zucker says. "Most have initiated programs to recruit and promote women and keep them in the firm." Another diversity issue is generational differences. "There's a divergence now in the ways that people work and interact," Zucker notes. For example, Boomers rely on their own knowledge and skills to produce results, while Gen Xers, the next younger generation, leverage their social networks. "Collaboration is the preferred work style for Gen X," he says. "Boomers would rather work alone."

Some other generational differences: Younger lawyers especially look to their firms to have a social conscience, expressed as community involvement and a "green" commitment. The younger generation is also more likely to switch jobs than their older peers. "An amenity-filled workplace is one way to keep them," says Barbara Dunn, head of Gensler's law firm practice in Los Angeles. "Along with provisions like a fitness center, having a healthy and sustainable work environment scores points with today's cohort of associates."

Building Expertise

Most legal research is done online now, not in the law firm library, and the mobility of young lawyers also cuts into their face time with peers and potential mentors. They're not getting the same level of knowledge sharing and acculturation that their predecessors did. No wonder, then, that the freshest crop of law firm graduates is hungry for interaction. In the past, there were coffee areas on practice floors near every lawyer's desk. Now the trend is one coffee area per floor, so people will gather there. These are social spaces with the look-and-feel of a coffee-house—sofas, lounge chairs, and full beverage service—designed to get a heads-down culture to open up and start communicating.

In Washington, D.C., Gensler's Steve Martin and his team took the concept a step further in the new offices of Dickstein Shapiro, designing the firm's Fireside Café dining room on its sixth floor—halfway up a 12-story workspace—with a Starbucks kiosk and lots of casual seating organized around a stone-clad fireplace. The central location and warm and casual setting make this the “hearth” of the office, bringing everyone—even family members—together. It's so popular that clients ask to meet there.

Supporting Teams

Dedicated workspaces are becoming more collaborative, too, says Zucker. “We've traditionally designed for focused work—a private office or a workstation. Yet people in law firms are spending less than half their time in those settings. There's a fundamental shift from individual to team success.” By 2010, focused work will be just 30 percent of the attorney workday as the need to collaborate ramps up.

One way that Gensler is accommodating this need is by designing “flex space” into the workplace. These are large rooms that people can reconfigure on the fly, with movable components such as shelving units that can be easily rearranged. A big case might warrant using the entire flex space; two medium-sized cases could each take half. “The concept was developed for litigators, but its benefits have led others to embrace it,” says Marilyn Archer, Gensler's Houston-based law firm practice leader.

In London, where attorneys typically work two to an office, new freestanding furniture products point to another trend on the horizon—the wall-less office. “It offers flexibility, cost-effective construction, lower running costs, and greater environmental awareness,” says Gensler London's Amanda Baldwin. She is designing wall-less office solutions for two U.S. law firms in the city. Adds her colleague, London managing principal Ken Baker, “This is a trend worth watching—collaboration plus efficiency is a great combination.”

Tuned for Performance

Rising occupancy costs are a constant inducement for law firms to consider new approaches to workplace planning. “Law firms traditionally saw the office in terms of peer entitlement,” says Chris Murray, one of Gensler's global law firm practice leaders. “The corner office meant everything—it meant that you'd arrived. In the U.S. Midwest, for example, that's changing. Law firms are much more business savvy about their use of real estate.” The efficiency of Gensler's plan for the new Chicago office of Seyfarth Shaw meant that the firm needed one less floor—a \$2 million savings over the life of the lease. That savings reflects smaller offices throughout. For Indianapolis law firm Locke Reynolds, Gensler Chicago explored using high-partition workstations before opting for uniformly smaller offices.

In New York, where prime office space has spiraled from \$70 to \$100 per square foot over a span of five years, the response has been to focus on the leaner occupancy of high-rise tower floors, says Julia Simet, who leads Gensler's law firm practice in New York. A corollary to this is a shrinking floor plate as developers respond to tenant needs. “We used to say it was 30,000 to 35,000 rentable square feet per floor,” Simet notes. “Now it's moving down to 27,000 to 28,000 square feet.”

To reduce their real estate footprint, many law firms are using technology to shift support and project-based facilities like litigation rooms to lower-rent space, sometimes outside the building or, in the case of mission-critical facilities, outside the city. The growing use of digital document management, encouraged by the courts, is slowly reducing the need for paper storage. Another change: the 3:1 ratio of attorneys to secretaries—once thought aggressive—is headed toward 5:1 as law firms on both coasts leverage “assist teams” for entry level associates. These teams are grouped in mini-service centers that provide phone coverage and administrative support. The result is better service at a lower cost.

What makes law firms especially worth studying is the degree to which they have successfully tackled the dilemmas faced by many other businesses: How to provide support to practitioners, clients, and even other attorneys, while keeping real estate costs in line? How to contend with mobility and still achieve the mentoring and peer interaction that build culture and knowledge? Law firms haven't solved these issues completely, but they understand that their futures ride on the answers.

Vernon Mays is a senior writer with Gensler and editor-at-large at *Architect* magazine. Contact him at vernon_mays@gensler.com or +1 202.721.5344.