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Law Firms Shun Old Hierarchies With Modern Office Updates

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360, Grand Rapids (November 15, 2017, 2:23 PM EST) -- Law firms in which partners have big corner offices, where heavy wooden doors isolate lawyers and staff and where fluorescent lighting floods the space with a yellow hue are becoming obsolete as firms create updated workplaces that reflect a new philosophy — one that values egalitarianism, community and wellness.

At Bradley Arant Boult Cummings LLP's new 35,000-square-foot Charlotte, North Carolina, office, the most powerful partners and newest associates all work in universally sized offices; architectural elements bring natural light into the space; ergonomic, adjustable desks are available to all attorneys and staff; and a bustling communal lunch and conference room draws people from all corners of the office together to share views of the downtown cityscape from 37 floors up.

"We're here a lot and it's nice to have these things contributing to the quality of our time in the office," said office administrator Vince Amico. "It's an inviting space. It feels healthy. We are able to reduce some of the physical strain of sitting for multiple hours a day, and that has improved, I think, everybody's perception of our physical space here."

Bradley Arant's decision to create a new, modern workplace when it moved a block away to its current Charlotte office last year is one example of a trend that is happening across the country, in which firms are placing more value on physical elements such as natural light and ergonomic desks to promote wellness, striving to create a more egalitarian and efficient environment by eliminating outsized corner offices for powerful partners, and encouraging collaboration through comfortable and appealing community work and social spaces.



Bradley Arant has several collaboration spaces throughout the office that were included to help encourage meetings away from desks and in a more relaxed environment. (Photo: Vince Amico)

According to Melissa Hoeffel, partner-in-charge of the Columbus, Ohio, office of Roetzel & Andress LPA, updated features that were included when the firm moved into a new office in the city in June — including adjustable desks, a number of collaborative work spaces, and a lounge area "with the aura of a communal coffee shop" — were a worthwhile investment that benefit the midsized law firm as a whole.

"I think that we want our employees, whether partners, associates or staff, to like coming to work and enjoy where they're working every day. If people are happy at work then they're going to be more productive and do better work," Hoeffel said.

Uniformly Sized Offices

When boutique litigation firm Butler Ruben Saltarelli & Boyd LLP relocated from Chicago's Loop to the city's River North, the firm strategically downsized into 26,000 square feet of new space to accommodate 57 attorneys and staff members.

One of the main reasons it was able to downsize, according to partner Robert Hermes, is that lawyers no longer lay claim to corner offices and that prime real estate is instead used for an employee cafe, conference rooms and collaborative meeting spaces.

While all of the law firm's lawyers still have private offices, they're all the same size. Hermes says that in the old building he had a huge corner office with a gigantic desk and a separate sitting area. And "it wasn't really necessary," he said.

"For a law firm, every dollar in rent you save falls to the bottom line," Hermes said.

And there were other benefits to the change.



Adjustable standing desks and abundant natural light are part of the ergonomic focus of Butler Rubin's new office space design. (Photo: Butler Rubin)

"It's impactful on a number of levels," he said. "There is a little bit of egalitarianism to it in the sense that you shouldn't feel intimidated to go into a senior partner's office because it looks like a cathedral. It creates the impression and feeling that we're all in this together."

Instead of gathering in a senior partner's office to talk about a case, Hermes said teams now will meet in a collaboration room with a conference table that fits 10 people.

Another benefit of universally sized offices, according to Amico, is that it offers office administrators more leeway when shuffling new laterals and associates into empty offices as the firm grows and practice groups change, since everyone is a good fit for any given office.

"You can move people around as practices change, as you grow, as other needs prompt moving lawyers around the office," he said.

Natural Lighting

Last spring, Bracewell LLP's Washington, D.C., office relocated and the law firm took the opportunity to update its workplace. One key feature of the new building, according to office managing partner Mark Lewis, is that it incorporates a good deal of natural light throughout.

Glass fronts on the perimeter offices and meeting spaces allow daylight to penetrate into the interior, creating a bright, open atmosphere.

"I think natural light makes people feel better about their work environment. There's something healthy about access to natural light," Lewis said.



Glass walls in Bracewell's office space serve the dual purpose of allowing natural light into the building and creating an atmosphere of openness and transparency. (Photo: Bracewell)

According to Roetzel & Andress' Hoeffel, her law firm consulted with six millennial associates when designing its new space in Columbus, and the associates made it clear that they valued natural light as a part of their work environment.

"They said they wanted to move away from the old-school, traditional law firm look and move to a more vibrant, colorful, bright, open space with a lot of natural light," she said.

There are a number of health- and productivity-related benefits to allowing natural light into a work environment.

A 2014 study by Northwestern Medicine and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign found that workers without windows reported lower quality of life when compared to their counterparts with windows, including physical problems and low vitality. And those without windows also reported worse sleep quality and more sleep disturbances.

When Butler Rubin moved from Chicago's financial district, deep in the shadows of towering office buildings, to the more open River North neighborhood, the law firm made use of the additional sunlight with glass doors and windows in conference rooms, floor-to-ceiling windows in lawyers' offices, and a glass wall in the employee cafe, all of which allow natural light to flow through the building.

"I think it shows the firm's commitment to making sure the people who are here are able to practice law in a comfortable environment," Hermes said.

Communal Spaces

In Greensfelder Hemker & Gale PC's recently renovated St. Louis office, lawyers, staff and clients can watch St. Louis Cardinals games from a commons area that overlooks the baseball team's stadium, according to CEO Timothy Thornton.

Having a communal space that is inviting and attractive allows the law firm to host client and internal social functions and helps to promote a sense of camaraderie among the law firm's

attorneys, Thornton explained. The firm also has a cafe and bar area, which allows people to socialize with one another after work in soft seating areas or at high top tables.

"It allows for a better level of human interaction," he said.



A primary feature of the 10,500-square-foot renovation of Greensfelder's office was the addition of a cafe and bar area, where events ranging from large receptions to informal staff breakfast and lunch gatherings have taken place. Windows line the entire south wall to allow for views of Busch Stadium, home park of the St. Louis Cardinals, and let in lots of natural lighting. (Architect: Christner; Photo: Alise O'Brien)

Greensfelder Hemker & Gale also made changes during the renovation, which was completed in 2016, that creates a more flexible space that is aimed at allowing attorneys to be more collaborative. Walls move to create larger or smaller rooms, and modular tables can be customized for individual attorney and group needs.

According to Hoeffel, one of the most important things her firm looked for when it moved to a new location in Columbus was that all of the employees would be located on one floor instead of two, which was the layout of the firm's previous office in the city.

"People on 11th and 12th floors didn't see each other unless they made an effort, so it was very isolating and didn't really lend itself well to collaboration and team-building and really seeing everybody in a daily basis," she said. "We wanted to find a space big enough to accommodate our current employees and future growth all on one floor."

Now, everyone comes through the reception area in the morning, uses the same kitchen and break room, and pass by one another in the hallways.

Additionally, the cubicles used for legal secretaries and paralegals have low walls that allow those walking through to see who is at work on a given day, and most of the lawyers' offices have a glass wall that allow them to see out into the rest of the office and others to see in.

Another element aimed at creating community and encouraging collaboration among attorneys is

a multipurpose room with a view of the state capitol that is half traditional conference room and half lounge, separated by a barn door that can be shut or left open.

"We're very proud of our new space and we like to show it off. There's been more interest in bringing people into the office and having a client meeting or hosting a mixer," Hoeffel said.

--Editing by Rebecca Flanagan and Katherine Rautenberg.