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OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT

Crafting the Ideal Law Firm Work Environment

Firms are increasingly adding creative amenities to help make coming to the office enjoyable.

BY ERIN BRERETON

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While the majority of law firms — 83% — now have a hybrid work policy, a number still place an emphasis on coming into the office, according to CBRE's [2024 Law Firm Benchmarking Survey Results](#) report.

Virtually all the firm leaders the commercial real estate service provider spoke to said they feel being in the workplace is essential for both mentoring and feedback as well as morale and relationship-building. Seventy-five percent believe working remotely reduces opportunities for professional development.

To encourage employees to be onsite, some firms have introduced incentives. Sixty-four percent have sponsored events or perks and 46% supply food, according to [research](#) from software provider Maptician. Others have reassessed their physical space, modifying the layout and design to position it as an enticing destination.

In 2020, intellectual property law firm Marshall, Gerstein & Borun LLP began making renovations in its Chicago office, such as installing new conference room video screens.

“Those are things we did early in the pandemic, realizing these are the kinds of changes we need to attract people back,” says Chief Operating Officer Michael Motyka. “We [were] used to having some portion of people working virtually on a regular basis. We already recognized the importance of people being present to promote

things like mentoring, in-person collaboration and culture.”

Three years ago, the firm added a ping pong table.

“It was still in that period of time where we were trying to find ways to make the office experience attractive — bringing our employees into the office while our summer [associates] are here [to] engage with them and [have] fun activities,” Motyka says. “That was very much the intention behind it; and that worked.”

Festive Facilities

Architecture and design firm [Perkins&Will](#)’s law firm clients have incorporated similar socially oriented items, including a game room, cold brew bar and dispenser that allows wine to be served on tap — “things that have more of a restaurant vibe,” says interior designer Amber Hughes.

One law firm, according to design principal Lina Murillo at Perkins&Will, wanted to institute a music room with records, a record player and a large TV, where it could have a happy hour or a meeting.

“We’re seeing more hospitality spaces for gathering and social events,” Murillo says. “A lot of people are working hybrid, so attorneys aren’t necessarily going to an office; but if they do, it’s for meetings or an event.”

When Duane Morris LLP decided to combine two Manhattan locations into a new 80,000-square-foot office in New York City, the international law

firm included a warm walnut- and oak-toned lunchroom with table, counter and banquette seating.

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It also built employee cafes that have a coffee shop atmosphere, says Duane Morris LLP’s Senior Manager of Real Estate and Construction Ferd Boisvert. Some have been outfitted with activities like shuffleboard and foosball.

“We have bean-to-pot coffee makers,” Boisvert says. “We upgraded all of our vending [options] so there’s fresh food in them, not just chips and soda. We did a lot of work on enhancing that employee experience.”

Areas to Assemble

Collaborative workspaces are also a growing focus for firms. The ones that participated in Maptician's survey reported an average 6.6% increase in square footage that's dedicated to meeting use.

Reconfigurable furniture can help firms create multipurpose rooms — such as foldable stone-topped tables that could be utilized as banquet seating for several people or combined to make a modular conference table, Hughes says.


"We want to be able to easily move them in and out but still have that high-end feel," she says. "That's what we're doing in a couple of the projects I'm working on now."

Law firms have repurposed portions of their workplace into small informal settings, which Terrence Davis, a project interior designer at architectural and design provider [Corgan](#), says can spark interaction and support a more dynamic workflow.

"This type of amenity cannot be replicated in a remote setting and gives the employee a purpose for coming into the office," Davis says. "Lounge seating near tenured attorneys can make drop-in conversations less intimidating for new graduates seeking mentorship."

In addition to dimmable lighting attorneys can adjust to their desired level, the New York office Duane Morris recently debuted sports a variety of gathering spots — including conference rooms with wheeled folding walls, a set-up that's allowed the firm to host up to 80 people at client functions, partner meetings and other events.

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Firm members can pop into breakout rooms that have privacy panels to meet with opposing counsel. Or, they can assemble in huddle rooms situated throughout the floor where attorneys and staff sit — which contain a round table, several chairs and a phone — without having to reserve the space ahead of time.

“We kept an eye on creating a communal atmosphere,” Boisvert says.

Determining What to Add

To identify what design elements and amenities would be most worthwhile, law firms can obtain input from sources ranging from designers they work with to employee surveys, which [Marshall Gerstein](#) distributes annually.

An associate-based committee recommended providing different food and coffee choices in Duane Morris’ new Manhattan workspace, Boisvert says.

“The wellness room was also one of their ideas,” he says. “Two to three people can go in and do yoga, lift a few weights, maybe have a book club — [we’re] trying to capture all of the benefits of being at home and bring that employee experience to the office.”

Elements such as access to public transit and free parking can ease firm employees’ commutes,

possibly serving as an incentive to work on-premises, according to [research](#) Corgan conducted.

“Our survey found that — in an industry known for its long hours and late nights — the amenities that matter most are those that support convenience and employees’ health and wellness,” Davis says. “Nearby coffee shops, restaurants and gyms are a perk for attorneys who get to the office early or stay late. Office location is important.”

Law firms that lack the budget for a move or complete construction overhaul of their current space may still be able to make their environment more accommodating.

Hughes has seen firms incorporate tech components such as docking stations to facilitate working on-site. Employees simply need to plug in their laptop to automatically connect it to a monitor.

Marshall Gerstein replaced its soda fountain machine with an upgraded version that has more beverage choices and also began holding its monthly firmwide lunches every week.

“That really has been a critical part of driving our connectivity across the firm,” Motyka says. “People are seeing each other regularly on those Thursday lunches.”

Fostering Future Operations

Adjustments law firms make to increase their workplace’s curb appeal can pay off — potentially

boosting employee satisfaction and supporting firms' retention and hiring efforts.

"For a lot of attorneys, the first impression is a big deal," Murillo says. "[Firms] are trying to create spaces that are very evocative and appealing so they can recruit people and maintain their current workforce."

Office culture is particularly important to recent law school grads; mentorship from senior attorneys and feeling a connection with coworkers are their top priorities at work, according to Corgan's survey.

Today, firms actually often assess potential office leases based on a location's ability to provide competitive resources that will appeal to younger industry members, Davis says.

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"Law firms are grappling with a modern workforce that wants more from their workplace

in terms of flexibility, connection and amenities,” Davis says. “When designed thoughtfully, the office can be a tool for connection.”

Duane Morris’ new workspace has had a positive impact on employee attendance. To date, it’s been higher than in the firm’s previous two Manhattan locations, Boisvert says.

Feedback Marshall Gerstein has received, according to Motyka, seems to suggest its employees also appreciate the accommodations the firm has introduced to encourage them to blend working remotely with being on-site.

“It really helps with retention,” he says. “As people get onboarded, those are things [they] cite pretty quickly. You invest not just in how you train and manage your employees, but in these tangible, physical ways — in the amenities and making sure the in-office work environment is productive.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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