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Order in the office: Trends at law firms

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The stereotypical law firm office is spacious, laden with conference rooms, decadent flowers, tasteful art and plenty of dark wood. All of that, however, is starting to change.

Increasingly, there is no one look for a law office. Yes, they're becoming more modern, with sleeker fixtures and the eradication of the pinstripe suit equivalent of casework. But today's legal offices are more likely to reflect the personal taste of their management committee, as opposed to a universal vision for how a law firm is supposed to look. This change is due in part to the far-reaching financial impacts of the recession that caused firms to rethink real estate costs. It's also reflective of the values of today's top legal talent. Young law school recruits want a flexible, modern office culture. And hip (or hipper, anyway) office surroundings can reflect a more open workplace even on a figurative level.

Here are three trends we're seeing among firms looking for space:

1. They don't want to pay for any wasted square footage. For years, the common denominator among white-shoe law firms was big, grand lobbies and airy conference rooms that went largely unused. But real estate, particularly in Class-A buildings in popular areas, is expensive - around \$55 per square foot in Boston. Investing in massive rooms that weren't in perpetual was no longer a good idea post-recession. In fact, the overall square footage of law offices has gone down. 10 years ago, you might have seen between 900 and 1,000 square foot per attorney. That number today is more like 550-650.
2. There is more of a focus on embedded technology. Since many firms are readjusting the number of big conference rooms often used for video conferencing, lawyers want to be able to have that same technology throughout the office - not just in a dedicated room. With advanced technology available everywhere, firms are further able to reduce their square footages and save costs. Lawyers can now work anywhere.
3. They want flexible floor plans. The law firms of yesteryear had very separate sections for each practice: Labor & Employment on one floor, M&A on the next. That, too, is starting to change. Managing partners want to see increased collaboration among departments, which is particularly attractive to clients. Being able to promise potential prospects that legal departments are closely connected, even in their physical spaces, is good for business development. That means flexible office plans that can meet a variety of changing needs.

Yet, while there's no question that law firms are making some adjustments to their looks, some things will never change. It's unlikely that there will be a rash of open floor plans that are so popular with tech companies right now. That's partly due to the nature of the business; highly sensitive legal documents belong in closed-door offices. But, at their core, law firms still remain deeply traditional companies. So you can put away that ping-pong paddle and stow your beer mug. At least for now, you won't need them.

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