Featured Article

The Future of the Law Office Will Be Social

by

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The future of the law office will be social

The traditional legal workplace is passing away. The law office of the future will put people at the center of its purpose and design. Here's what that'll look like.

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The long reign of the office is ending, its iron grip on the lives of white-collar workers finally broken by the pandemic. US office vacancies are above 20% and rising, an over-capacity crisis that could have harsh consequences for banks, municipal governments, public transit, and local businesses, among others.

"Attendance in the ten largest business districts is still below 50% of its pre-COVID level, as white-collar employees spend an estimated 28% of their workdays at home," *The Atlantic* reports. "With a third of all [US] office leases expiring by 2026, we can expect higher vacancies, significantly lower rents, or both. And [AI] could drive office demand even lower."

The decline of the office will be a transformative force in the legal sector. In 2021 and 2022, nearly half of all leases of more than 50,000 square feet signed by top law firms saw an average space reduction of 49%. Compulsory full-time office attendance is also over: Two-thirds of surveyed US law firms encourage or mandate in-office work only three days a week, while 22% require just two days a week and 11% have made attendance optional. Try telling that to someone in 2019. They'd never believe you.

The pandemic broke law offices by exposing their myths. The first year of COVID-19 lockdowns proved that law firms could function adequately and profitably without fully staffed centralized workspaces. The next two years demonstrated that anywhere from a third to half of all law office workers just didn't want to come to work every day.

The illusion that physical proximity is both inevitable in and indispensable to a law office was shattered. Many law firm leaders are now trying to pick up those broken pieces and glue them back together.

1. They claim that in-person attendance safeguards the firm's culture — even though the resistance to return-to-office suggests the opposite conclusion, that many lawyers find the culture unpleasant, degrading, or toxic.
2. They insist that physical presence enables the firm's training and development — even though that "training" has mostly consisted of repeatedly carrying out low-level tasks that Generative AI is soon going to replace anyway.
3. They say that proximity to partners allows young lawyers to build their careers at the firm — even though the vast majority of associates will never sniff full partnership and many of them weren't interested even before the pandemic.

What we're really seeing, in the efforts of law firm leaders to stuff the lawyer toothpaste back inside the law office tube, is an understandable but ultimately fruitless attempt to restore the old

ways law offices used to work. I think we'd be better served by figuring out what purpose these offices are going to serve in the future. To do that, we should first understand what purpose they served in the past.

Originally, the office was just the physical location where everything you needed to get work done was kept — a desk, a chair, a work telephone, stationery, filing cabinets, an actual "In Box," and so on. That's why you went to the office every day — all your work stuff was there. Other people were at the office too; some to do work, some to tell you what work to do, and some to do the work you gave them. The people were productivity units. The premises were an afterthought. The whole purpose of the office was to be a place where work got done.

That's not the case anymore. You can do knowledge work pretty much anywhere, including at home. You can assign and receive work from people by email and video. In those circumstances, organizations need to give employees a really good reason to leave their homes and climb into vehicles to assemble five days a week at messy desks in narrow cubicles under banks of fluorescent lights. Most workplaces can't offer one.

What about law firms? I've argued recently that Generative AI is going to take over most knowledge and process work, of which there's reams in this sector. The remaining legal work, and the legal work yet to come, will be strategic, preventative, empathetic, and advisory — in a word, it'll be personal. That's how lawyers and law firms are going to deliver value to clients in future, through the collaborative development and delivery of creative personal solutions to individual problems and business opportunities.

If your organization depends on people coming up with personal strategies and solutions for others, then you need to do more than just persuade or bully those people to come to the office, as law firm leaders are now doing. You need to create a workplace that *facilitates the development of those strategies and the discovery of those solutions.* You need an "office" that's centred not around furniture and equipment and work, but around people, ideas, and solutions.

Just as the value of lawyers in future will be mostly personal, therefore, the value of the law office in future will be mostly *social*. An office will be effective in direct proportion to how well it allows people to connect with each other, to talk about work and life, to socialize and strategize, to be creative and empathetic, to trade ideas and discuss challenges and brainstorm solutions — to be human with each other.

Consequently, law firms that want their workspaces to be filled with people being social and productive will have to be intentional about the purpose and type of offices they design. Here are some steps they should take.

- Accept that the days of mandatory full-time office attendance are gone, gone, gone. The train has left the station, and no amount of standing on the platform shaking your fist and shouting after it is going to bring it back. Let it go. Start fresh, with a new vision of office life.
- Recognize that productivity is going to look and feel different in the future office than it did in the past. If people are standing around talking with each other, resist the urge to barge in and tell them to get back to work. They *are* working. Encourage more of it.
- Lawyers produce work of value individually, but they usually generate the valuable insights that power their work in and from their teams. So create dedicated spaces for practice teams and industry groups, and fill those spaces with collaboration tools and social working opportunities.
- Lawyers need private quarters to produce work of value. But they're not automatically entitled to *personal* quarters. One large US law firm recently told its lawyers not to expect a dedicated office if they're in the office fewer than eight days a month. That's a good standard to work from.
- Make the office a destination. You don't need to install "fancy coffee bars, outdoor patios, and in-house catering." But the general idea is right: Create attractive communal places that will draw people out of their homes. Design for personal interactivity. Make the place enjoyable. Dare I say, make it fun.
- Build or renovate for flexibility, not for maximum capacity. Allow your offices to expand and contract as needed, even throughout the week. Keep your "surge" capacity external; reserve your office space for core people creating essential value.
- There are a lot of assholes in law offices. We all know this, right? And the most powerful of them exercise their assholery with impunity. They're the biggest reason many lawyers hate coming into the office. Fire the assholes. It won't kill your firm. It will probably save it.
- Above all, recognize that the office's primary function is no longer to "get stuff done," but to enable people to maximize the value they can generate, individually and collectively, through human interaction. Offices used to be work-centred; in future, they'll be *people-centred*.

Just as the future of lawyer work will be personal, through direct, sincere, and empathetic connections with people, the future of law offices will be social, through creative, community-

building, value-generating connections among people. Great law firms will be more than the sum of their parts — they'll be the exponential product of their parts, building off the incredible capacity and insight of their human assets to generate extraordinary client outcomes and experiences.

But just as in law offices of today, those incredible assets will walk out the door every night, and they'll have more reason than ever to keep on walking. So stop demanding that your people come into the office. Start giving them excellent reasons why they should.

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