
LAWYERS JOURNAL

L A W P R A C T I C E M A N A G E M E N T

3 tips to help your firm make the most of its return to the office

By Dan Adamski

The legal industry has been among the fastest to return to the office this year following a year plus of working remotely due to COVID-19. Many companies, including law firms, have set their sights on fall as the next “benchmark” for their teams to return, at least in a hybrid model.

Beyond ample health and wellness practices and enhanced safety standards, there are other ways to make your return more efficient long term, maximizing your leverage in the market and developing a deeper understanding of how effective your space is for your team.

1. Understand occupancy vs. utilization – and how your firm stacks up

While your firm may be returning to the office on a more regular basis, your new normal may also entail a hybrid work structure. This means you will need to plan for peak in-office days as daily headcount fluctuates throughout the week – a challenge arising across the office sector.

When planning for peak in-office days, it’s not enough to rely solely on your square footage and headcount. Understanding how your space is utilized will give you a better sense of which spaces are most used compared to others over time, whether its purpose is being met, and where you may need to make alterations to your space moving forward.

Space utilization analysis helps uncover crucial details about the purpose and priority employees place on a given space. With this data, office managers can make more accurate decisions about whether spaces are being used efficiently, what types of space their teams prefer, and whether there is an opportunity or need to upgrade to a higher quality space or downsize to save costs.

2. Stay apprised of market conditions

As a result of the pandemic, the downtown Pittsburgh office market is facing strong headwinds. Most relevant to

law firms, though, is the opportunity to secure higher quality space at a lower rental rate than pre-pandemic.

Because most companies hit pause on most of their real estate decisions over the last year, many landlords are willing to negotiate more competitive lease terms with prospective tenants. Think: reduced rental rates and other concessions, such as tenant improvement allowances or free rent for a long period of time.

Some firms in the market are signing new leases several years before their existing lease expires – an indicator of the competitive deals being made while the market recovers. Quite often, these firms are moving up to a higher quality space that they’re able to secure at a lower cost compared to just 12-15 months ago.

Staying in tune with market conditions and leasing activity is to your firm’s benefit. And when the opportunity presents itself, be ready to act.

3. Recognize what your workforce values now

Along with flexible work arrangements, today’s workforce is keen on amenities, albeit a different kind. The pandemic uncovered new ways of working and exposed some gaps in existing offices, like a lack of thoughtful meeting areas, wellness-focused amenities, and functional space that facilitates more casual conversation or networking.

Office design that focuses on communal space over individual workstations can help associates feel a stronger tie to the firm’s culture, while private offices or pods facilitate more focused work.

Replacing your associates or support staff is difficult and often expensive, especially now during a talent war raging across all industries. Identifying what your firm’s associates value now and adapting your office space to meet those needs will not only help retain existing attorneys, but recruit new talent as well. ■

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