

# Rethinking the law firm workplace

Younger partners are looking for brighter and more efficient spaces that foster collaboration.

BY WAYNE BRAUN AND KEN BROSCHE

For law firms, workplace efficiencies and improved office functionality have historically run a distant second to aesthetics.

Oversized partner offices with large desks and credenzas, spacious law libraries, long hallways of private work spaces and in-house mock courtrooms tended to rule the day, regardless of their associated real estate costs. Some said, "That's just the way law firms are."

That is, until a law firm comes to what many describe as a business pivot point—the decision to either renew an expiring lease or move to new space. This is particularly the case with law firms that signed 15-year leases in buildings constructed 20 to 30 years ago.

While the decision to stay or go ultimately is based on costs, there certainly are other factors to take into consideration. If the firm stays, how can improve-

ments be made without disrupting billable workflow? Is there a way to recapture existing space that is not being used effectively? On the other hand, does the cost of starting over in a new space outweigh the cost of redesigning the existing space?

Getting objective help in analyzing what the firm has, what it needs and what the partners want is the first step in this difficult task—but it is one that can pay many dividends.

Regardless of the decision reached, there is clearly a move afoot, particularly among younger partners, to create workplaces that are smarter and more efficient and that support the firm's fee-generating workflow.

## A LESS STODGY LOOK

Today's attorneys are looking to create a workplace environment that looks less like the "Old Esquire's" law firm and more like the offices of their profitable corporate clients.

They want a lighter and brighter space

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**Firms should increase IT budgets and staffing for profit-generating plans, not just "keep the lights on" functions.**

Locating the primary conference rooms near the entry eliminates the need to escort visitors past private offices.

## LAW FIRM ADMINISTRATION

PROFIT, FROM PAGE 14

these questions are answered with the help of effective IT project-management processes and automated tools.

• *IT can help law firms remove paper to reduce storage and administrative costs and increase efficiencies within cases.* The reality is that firms will likely never be fully paperless. But IT can help in facilitating, identifying and project-managing which paper documents/records must be retained, which can solely exist in electronic format, etc. All of these decisions should be aligned to the requirements of reducing costs to the firm, increasing efficiency and increasing client satisfaction.

An example of IT leverage to improve client satisfaction includes the use of electronic-discovery automation to help identify "the smoking gun" in litigation matters. IT can identify the appropriate software to allow the firm's lawyers to perform keyword searches against electronically stored information instead of endless and sometimes fruitless searches in paper. The efficiency, reduced costs and client satisfaction derived by these types of IT solutions shows strong IT value.

• *IT can help firms easily find data.* Within the corporate world, studies show that 80% of the most important data live in IT operational systems such as Oracle and SAP. Within law firms, important data can live in as many as 10 to 20 different key systems, within, depending on firm size and scale, hundreds of software applications and databases. The result is that information is often redundant, incorrect and difficult to find.

The method to address these disparate systems is to bring many of these applications and inherent data to a single presentation source via a "dashboard." A dashboard is a user-friendly, typically highly graphical presentation of aggregated information on a Web site or intranet.



## Firms should increase IT budgets and staffing for profit-generating plans, not just "keep the lights on" functions.

Dashboards allow lawyers and firm managers to easily find and measure information including case-related documents and records, client intelligence, competitive intelligence, cross-selling data, billings, cash collections, docketing data and conflicts, to name but a few. IT can help drive the analysis, design, implementation and effective use of dashboards by key stakeholders of the firm (and some-time clients).

• *IT can help with litigation automation support.* Many law firms struggle with how to provide automation support to the litigation teams: "Should I charge back my client for litigation support?" "How can I position the value of electronically stored information, versus paper, to

that is progressive and sophisticated. They want more collaborative work settings where attorneys and support staff can mingle and share ideas openly and casually. There is a demand for more "war rooms" dedicated to particular attorneys and cases. Oversized law libraries are giving way to smaller, more efficient hallway libraries. Mock courtrooms are becoming more functional and, yes, even partner offices are getting smaller.

As a result of these and other changes, law firms are able to do much more than just get a new look and feel. They reduce

their real estate costs, lower operating and personnel costs and, above all, increase productivity and ultimately profitability.

The most important concept in creating a more effective workplace lies in designing space that fosters collaboration. For many firms, the opportunity to share information at unexpected locations in the office has proven invaluable.

New ideas to consider include using lounge seating arrangements, open library concepts and more gracious, lounge-like coffee bars. When it comes

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One key area of high-performance law firm IT departments is the IT strategic analysts group. IT strategic analysts within law firms bring a more business-centric view to IT and help drive the strategic opportunities mentioned above.

Finally, data from Bain & Co. (based on a survey of more than 500 senior business and technology executives) suggest that 85% of businesses do not have highly effective IT capabilities. "Only 15% placed themselves on the highly effective side." And "only 7% of respondents said that their IT organizations were both highly aligned with business strategy and highly effective in delivering what was asked of them." David Shpilberg, Steve Berez, Rudy Puryear and Sachin Shah, "Avoiding the Alignment Trap in Information Technology," MIT Sloan Management Review (Oct. 1, 2007), <http://tinyurl.com/ah5npc>. The key to enabling revenue growth is to align and execute strategic IT initiatives.

The opportunity to leverage law firm IT to improve firm profitability is significant. Think about it. Much of the work that legal firms do these days is in front of a computer. Great opportunity is locked up in law firm IT shops. Corporations think of IT very differently than do law firms—and they have long since realized the value of IT through systems such as e-commerce, supply-chain and enterprise-resource planning. Law firms can and must do the same, if they want to survive and prosper.

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