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The Law Office Management Association (TLOMA)

How to Re-Purpose Space to Suit Current Trends

By Lynn McGregor



Compared to other types of office space - Legal Firm design seems to inspire a lot of interest. ATrends in Legal Firm Design® is the subject of many articles and on-line pieces. One wonders why? Some might say that Legal Firms are more conscientious about keeping up with their competition. Could it be that these firms are better at planning ahead than others - and appreciating trends helps them do so with better vision? I have always been impressed by how good Legal firms are at sharing information on operational and administrative issues, with each other. This is what TLOMA is all about. Could it be that this sharing might actually be fuelling trends, encouraging people to follow in others successful footsteps?

Those charged with providing Aoffice space® are often challenged with how to re-purpose their existing space to respond to >trends<. Before we can discuss the AHow To® re-purpose, we need to examine what the current trends are.



Current Trends Fall into Two Different Camps

As in Canada, international trends in Law Firm design fall into two basic camps; those that are inspired by a reaction to our current challenging global economy; and those that are inspired by a desire to *Be the best*, or to be seen as Leaders.

Many legal firms have global connections or branch offices in different regions. This tends to inspire empathy for economic woes, even if the economy in the region of the headquarters is doing relatively well. Quite often the response to economic pressures is to cut back on spending. In a quest for fiscal responsibility, firms try to *Do more with less*. This often means fitting more people into less space; and eliminating *Afrills* that might appear ostentatious to clients who are struggling.

Interestingly, flying in the face of this perspective, is the second major movement, led by those who don't mind spending a little more on facilities that will be seen as leading edge. These firms are also inspired by a sense of responsibility - to the environment, to the disabled and to the community in general. These organizations want to be seen as good citizens who *Give back* in some way. And they want their office space to demonstrate this commitment, through gestures such as LEED certification and full accessibility. These objectives, if pursued fully, generally necessitate more square footage per person, specifying systems that often involve cost premiums, etc.





As different as these trend directions are, they share a similar goal. They want to ensure their firm is seen in the correct light, by their intended target market. So to establish how to respond to current trends, firms need to first understand their firm-s specific, unique market; and appreciate how their response will be regarded by that market. If your >brand message= is a successful one, reinforce it. If your brand message needs to change to draw in a new client base - this is your opportunity to effect the impression your firm makes.

Law Firms all want to be responsible corporate citizens. Clients want their advisors to conduct themselves in manners that they find acceptable. Should your Client-s opinions be driving yours? Is it more important to your firm to reduce your operating costs (so fees remain low); or is it more important to demonstrate your commitment to your staff, the environment, and to your community?

The hard part comes when your firm decides it wants to do both. AHave your cake and eat it too®. It is possible. But it takes a creative approach to find that comfortable balance. The way you do this should be as unique as your firm is. Every firm needs to respect it-s own priorities. No one should be blindly following trends.

For example; If a firm wants to implement a more environmentally responsible approach to their facilities, they could either:

Re-design their offices to a LEED Platinum standard, and incur the costs of full certification. This approach would provide this proud firm with a plaque, that would demonstrate to all who visit, this firm-s commitment to a better, more sustainable world. Very admirable, and possibly rather pricey...

or...

They could choose to make smaller changes, such as choosing sustainable options when no cost premiums are involved, (e.g. Carpet with recycled content). This approach would not provide a plaque to hang; but in the heart-s of all the firm-s staff, they would know they are making a positive difference. Without any cost premiums.

Each approach involves making a change for the good - one has a much larger financial impact than the other. But the bigger, more expensive approach might actually attract more business from a certain sector, making it fiscally, a very financially responsible approach. Which approach is best depends upon the firm-s objectives, and the message they want to send.

If you would like more examples of how legal firms can demonstrate leadership in their office design, while being fiscally responsible, please feel free to view project examples on the McGregor Design group's website **Clients Page**.



The following international trends are listed in order of reporting frequency.

1. Flexibility: designing a space that will receive change gracefully, with minimal Re-construction@ cost
2. Get More Into Less Space
3. Share daylight with those who are at their desks all day
4. LEED Environment = Good Corporate Citizens (sustainable, better air quality, etc.)
NB: Incentive programs are available to assist in paying for improvements that reduce your firm's use of energy - up to 30% rebates.
5. Add more Spontaneous Teaming / Collaboration Areas
6. Use Design to Reinforce or Modify Current Culture
7. Same Sized Universal Offices
8. Design Public Areas for Sharing with Good Causes (i.e.: Fund Raising Events)
9. Meeting Complexes / Conference Centres, clustered around dedicated service areas
10. Attorney to Assistant Ratios have gone from 1:1 to 3:1 or 4:1 (teaming approach in space)
11. War Rooms designed to be presentable Multi-Purpose Rooms (so space not completely lost)
12. Staff Lunchrooms becoming more pleasant social areas with Atouchdown@ spaces
13. Law Libraries going Aon line@ - requiring less space
14. Frugality and Technology are triggering a perceptible reduction in square footage and grandiosity
15. Electronic filing of documents is reducing the need for so much space devoted to filing
16. More Videoconferencing / TeleVideo Conferencing for Global work
17. Shifting Practice Groups to keep Associates busy on whatever needs manpower
18. Minimize the number of office & workstation standard sizes - and outfit / furnish in a standard manner (to facilitate the move of practice group boarders)
19. Better security on client files / China Wall files, given Canada's Privacy Act requirements
20. Preparing for upcoming Accessibility Acts

Biggest Reported Current Challenge

The McGregor Design Group was invited by TLOMA to present on this topic of *How to Re-Purpose Space to Suit Current Trends* on April 26, 2012, to their membership. It was identified in this session, that most attendant's current facility challenges were similar: How to fit more people into current space without needing to expand; and secondly: the management of file boxes, that seem to reproduce over night.

One participant asked if Lynn McGregor could offer solutions during the session.

Her Response: It is difficult to responsibly provide a solution, without understanding the geography of the spaces involved, and without appreciating both the Law Firm's current space standards, and their functional requirements. But the best way MDG has found to *get more into space* when a firm becomes land-locked, is to execute quick planning sketches, in an attempt to find ways to plan in more staff, and more storage. (Firm management needs to also encourage compliance with any new housekeeping protocols.) Costing these quick sketches further verifies if the changes being contemplated are worth the effort and the expense. These studies provide what firm Management usually requires, to appropriate the funds needed for the execution of the project. Other solutions might involve: centralizing files to open floor space up for people, creating bays of legal assistants, moving to universal office sizes, etc. But there is no magic bullet - each firm needs to identify the physical and organizational opportunities that are unique to their building structure and their firm's cultural needs, while respecting their staff's tolerance level for *change*.



Some Additional Food for Thought...

When reviewing trends, remember that the need to keep employees satisfied should not be ignored. The following are researched Staff Satisfaction Issues® in order of Importance: (Herman Miller, 2002)

1. Ability to do distraction-free solo work,
2. Support for impromptu interaction anywhere,
3. Support for meetings and undistracted group work,
4. Workspace comfort and enough space for workplace tools,
5. Workplace arrangement that supports side by side work,
6. Location near or within easy access to co-workers,
7. Good Place for Breaks,
8. Easy access to technology and shared equipment,
9. Quality Lighting and Access to Daylight,
10. Temperature Control and Air Quality.

Where competition for top notch new Associates is acute, the following Alife style® amenities have helped increase levels of recruitment success:

1. Health Facilities
2. Cafeterias
3. On-Site Daycare





Trends should not be followed blindly. Firms should consider their unique culture, before deciding to integrate a major change. A firm-s way of responding to trends can either reinforce their identity; or change it dramatically. Ensure you understand, and maintain control over the effect of change, so you use the cost of change, to your advantage.