The Emerging Law Firm Practice

Tracy D. Wymer
Senior Director Research, Strategy, Media
Knoll, Inc.

Knoll

Introduction

This report highlights the emerging changes in law firm practices as observed by Knoll from discussions with (1) architects and designers that specialize in planning for law firms and (2) administrators that manage large law firms in the United States.

The practice of law is changing. As the variables of demographics, competition, global service and mobile work possibilities are impacting the profession, change is occurring through the dynamic integration of people, work processes and the workplace. This mix is critical in today's legal office, where attorneys must efficiently manage a global team in a collaborative effort. In order to more thoroughly understand a profession in transition, these elements – people, process and place – create an outline for the report that follows.

People

The law profession is unique in that a single pivotal moment defines one's climb: becoming partner. Law firms are headed by partners, who are typically shared owners and business managers of operations. The new partner is independent, fluent with technology, a source of information, and a strategist; he or she represents a new self-sufficient demographic.

While much about a law firm revolves around its partners, it is important to understand and identify all the key players, who are identified here in descending order of rank:

‣ Partners

‣ Associates

‣ Paralegals

‣ Secretaries

‣ Assistants

‣ Interns
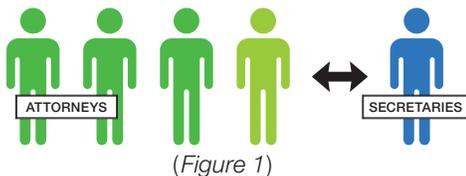
(*Figure 1*)

Associates are lawyers that work directly under partners, and who aspire to one day become partners themselves. Paralegals, who are not lawyers but usually have some form of legal training, work under the direct supervision of associates and/or partners. In addition, paralegals' time can be billed at a high rate to customers. Support for the modern attorney is consolidating into a core team led by the legal assistant or legal secretary. Finally, interns are comprised of law students in seasonal associate positions.
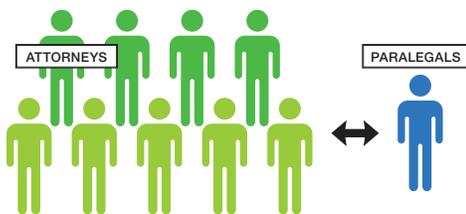
It is also important to understand the relative proportions of these roles within law firms. Knoll survey results reveal that a typical organizational goal for the attorney-to-secretary ratio is 3-4:1 (*Figure 1*). In reality, a commonly achievable goal is 2.5:1, while some remain closer to 1.5:1. These ratios vary depending on how a firm evaluates other areas of support, and a broader attorney-to-support ratio might be a better measure. Note: partners and associates are both considered "attorneys."

(*Figure 2*)

The attorney-to-paralegal ratio ranges from 9:1 to 4:1 (*Figure 2*), depending on the firm. In many markets, it is the norm to assign paralegals their own private offices. However, this varies from region to region.
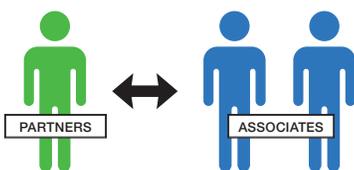
Partner-to-associate ratios are traditionally 1:2 (*Figure 3*). Today, many partners are deferring retirement to a later date or, instead, deciding to work on a part-time basis. This shift adds additional real estate requirements. Sometimes, firms dedicate a suite just for legacy partners.

(*Figure 3*)

Knoll

Finally, the organization of various types of support personnel is changing. For example, until recently graphic design for litigation was commonly outsourced to professionals off-site. Today, many large law firms are employing full-time graphic design departments. Their work visualizes the case for arguments, with large organizational charts, timelines, floor plans, scene depictions and/or computer animations. As the production of this material moves in-house, firms must make accommodations to support new creative workstyles within the office.

Process

Every case has a lead attorney who manages a team. As the person in charge, he or she assigns responsibilities and tasks to other lawyers, paralegals and assistants. However, the essential nature of legal work is team-based and collaborative. Case teams assemble, work intensely for a period of time, disband and re-form as a part of the work process. Over the course of a single day, work between several individuals might begin in a private office and migrate to the case room, the litigation room or eventually the courtroom. Work flows across the team and across the real estate.

Perhaps more than any other profession, law requires the examination of large amounts of information and written documents, often in the form of lengthy legal contracts. In most law firms, the methodical stacking of papers and files is still the norm. Frequently, documents pile up in boxes on the floor, where they remain over the course of a project.

One surveyed firm has all of its documents optically scanned off-site, as per a mail service, and delivered via e-mail or FTP…Knoll found that approximately 25% of all legal documents are now being accessed electronically.

While most firms have become accustomed to this work process, others are experimenting with the electronic storage of information. For example, one surveyed firm has all of its documents optically scanned off-site, as per a mail service, and delivered via e-mail or FTP. Sometimes, multiple monitors are utilized to compare different versions of the same document, and if necessary, a request could be made for the original. While this is indeed the far end of the spectrum in the field, Knoll found that more and more law firms are using documents that are only electronically accessible. Furthermore, as more states within the U.S. begin to accept electronic signatures, this technology will continue to reshape the industry.
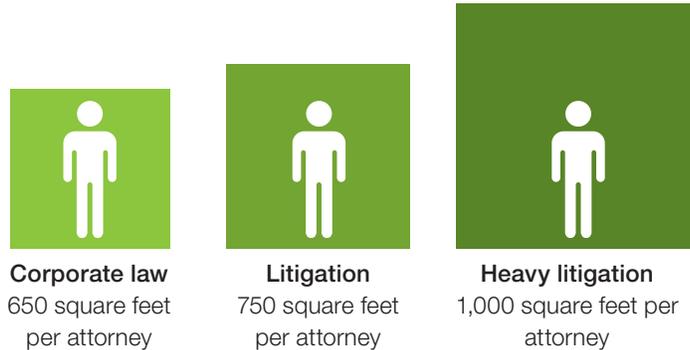
The next major development that will affect the work process in law firms will come when technology can seamlessly transcribe verbal communication: when an attorney's voice is automatically translated into a document. This is the final tether to the conventional office.

Place

A firm's predominant culture emanates from the partner office and transcends throughout the facility. Visionary legal partners anticipating growth in their firms are planning as much as 15 years ahead for future partners. Not only are they concerned with the physical capacity of their office but also the attraction and retention of current and future employees. In order to effectively plan for the future health of the business, the Knoll study shows, law firms must implement a flexible planning model. This means that architects and designers must conceive of workplaces that can grow or adapt as needs change.
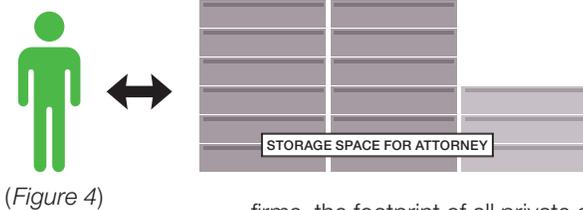
Knoll

Space Allocation

When planning an office for a law firm, architects and designers can use the following floor area-to-attorney ratios as a general guide:

Corporate law
650 square feet per attorney

Litigation
750 square feet per attorney

Heavy litigation
1,000 square feet per attorney

These numbers are inclusive of circulation and support, and they are dependent upon the type of legal activity that takes place. Corporate lawyers, for instance, require less full-time support services and staff than those undergoing heavy litigation.

In terms of storage space, planners should allot room for 12-15 lateral file drawers per attorney (*Figure 4*), though some applications will require more filing capacity.

STORAGE SPACE FOR ATTORNEY

(*Figure 4*)

Universal Private Office Size

In general, there is a great demand for private offices among lawyers. Privacy is valued, respondents explained to Knoll, as a barrier to outside distractions. It is also, perhaps more importantly, a mark of status. In an attempt to respond to this need while also allowing for flexibility in the planning model, many firms are adopting universal office sizes. In these firms, the footprint of all private offices is the same, but amenities change depending on rank. For example, a partner may have the same size office as an entry-level associate, but his furniture will be personalized, or he will have a better view.

With a universal office size model, some firms dedicate the corners of the building to common meeting areas, while maintaining the private office connection to the window line and views. This layout is a more egalitarian approach for firms that have many partners and not enough corner offices.

Collaboration

While firms hold private offices in high regard, they also appreciate the need for a good deal of collaborative space. In evaluating the needs of legal secretaries, a 30-year veteran said, "Honey, if you are giving me a transaction counter, you do not know what I need." In law firms, an esoteric document management process combines with a fast-paced, multi-faceted work environment. The legal secretary went on to explain that much of her time is spent simply trying to grab the attention of lawyers – for consultation, advice, or sometimes just a signature.

Indeed, legal work demands a command center, and often that role is filled by the legal secretary or assistant. While most law firms remain ensconced in a private office model, this arrangement is contradictory to the collaborative work process that needs to take place there. In response, new architectural solutions attempt to stimulate interactions between individuals. For example, transparent partitions between private offices and workstations or casual meeting areas and communal eating spaces increase the likelihood of collaboration.

Some firms are integrating cafés into their planning models. Employees at one respondent firm actually enter their office through a café, ensuring one common point of interaction per day. Workdays there often begin with

breakfast briefings, and sometimes associates work until well after dinner. The facility's ability to support these long hours keeps employees engaged and tightly knit.

Formal conference areas are often well removed from most private offices and located on a dedicated floor, coupled with all the amenities and technologies – video and satellite conferencing, hospitality services – that allow for productive sessions. These meeting rooms should have a central work wall that integrates phone, technology and information with wireless Internet and network access around an interactive vertical plane. Global offices have facilities that can accommodate a large visiting case team, or the ability to connect to a remote team, wherever they reside.

A general rule of thumb: for every 8-10 partners, there should be one 6-8 person meeting room.

Materials

Wood finishes are still preferred in law firms, but the use of elaborate or exotic finishes is more selective. The tone varies from one to the other, but firms generally like to emulate the look of their clients. Some designers could not imagine a non-millwork secretary station, while others realize that the flexibility afforded by a workstation is key.

Conclusion

For law firms, finding the right balance between people, process and place will effectively support the right work for the right people. The key is to support a highly active workplace that embraces the full spectrum of work, whether that work occurs in the private office, the case room or a collaborative area. A strong, dynamic real estate strategy – as a means for attracting and retaining talent, fostering collaboration, or boosting worker efficiency and morale – is the most effective strategy for an industry in transition.

Knoll researches links between workspace design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the users' experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments. To learn more about this topic or other research resources Knoll can provide, visit knoll.com/research.

Appendix: Planning Ahead with Focus Groups

One Firm's Experience

To gain additional insight into the legal profession, Knoll was invited by a law firm to participate in a partner retreat and lead a discussion to examine the importance of the office as a business tool. This particular firm was motivated by a particular question a senior managing partner posed: "Are we hurting our recruitment and retention efforts by maintaining the status quo in our workspace?" Here was an opportunity to define what solutions they might incorporate into future workplace planning.

Responses from the firm's Employee Survey:

Where do you work?

‣ 48% of workers spend some time working from home

‣ 17% spend time working at client's locations

‣ 19% spend time working in other locations

Rate the work settings where you feel most productive.

‣ 67% feel *most* or *somewhat* productive working at home

‣ 98% feel *most* productive at the office

When you collaborate with others, where do you meet?

‣ Private office: 39%

‣ Conference room: 41%

‣ Open shared space: 85%

This summary highlights the importance of place in the overall business strategy of the firm, along with process and people. The office was evaluated as a business tool and specific qualities were revealed:

‣ The office is a touchstone to the firm's culture

‣ The office is a strong recruitment tool

‣ The office is a support element to the ever-changing collaborative work of a law firm

‣ The office should support the firm's strong commitment to the community

Conducting a Real Estate Strategy Session

When conducting focus groups of your own, the following topics should be used as a general guide. This is an effective way for firms to begin discussions about what their ideal workplace should be. The results of this exercise should be incorporated into future planning decisions.

PART I: Discover and Prioritize

Purpose: Raise awareness about the office as a business tool.

Group participation:

‣ 1) Discovery: What is the most prized possession in your office?

‣ 2) Culture: What are some key characteristics of your people?

‣ 3) Work process: How do you get your work done?

‣ 4) Physical space: How do you describe your office?

Knoll

PART II: Identify Professional and Social Networks in the Office

 ▸ *Purpose:* Gather information which can be used in an office layout design that encourages and fosters collaboration and synergy.

PART III: Law Firm Planning Trends

 ▸ *Purpose:* Expose group to best practices based on Knoll research.

PART IV: Economics of Office Space

 ▸ *Purpose:* How does real estate perform as a business tool?

PART V: Comparative Analysis/Connections

 ▸ *Purpose:* Analyze connectivity of people, process and culture to office.