



# THE SLOW DEATH OF THE DEDICATED ATTORNEY OFFICE

LEGAL WORKSPACE STRATEGIES THAT SUPPORT A MOBILE WORKFORCE AND IMPROVE THE BOTTOM LINE



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*Some attorneys start to get nervous when workplace designers discuss the private office. Why? We live in a corporate world now dominated by open layouts and free address plans, some very successful and others, less so. As law firms continue to modernize and explore trends that were long ago adopted by other industries, we're seeing more of them embrace progressive space concepts than ever before. Does this mean dedicated, private attorney offices are on their way out?*

## A NOTE ABOUT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Mobility in the legal workplace has come into sharp focus thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ubiquitous stay-at-home orders have compelled law firms to adopt rapid changes to maintain business continuity. Attorneys at all levels, from associates to partners, are learning how to remain productive, nurture strong client relationships, and generate revenue with just a WiFi connection and a laptop.

With the likelihood that working from home will continue to be the norm once employees return to the office en masse, the study in this paper is a relevant example of a crucial design choice facing the legal industry: keep the status quo, or evolve to support the continuing, and now necessary, mobility of your workforce.

Law firms can adopt more flexible floor plans to preserve space efficiency, but also to properly support employees splitting their work hours between home and the office. Read on for strategies that will prepare your workplace for a post-COVID new normal.

As with any cost-saving measure in workplace design, a shared approach to occupancy is worth considering for the legal industry, which faces continuing downward pressure on fees, amongst other economic challenges. But we don't believe the issue is as simple as "just get rid of all private offices!" We find in other industries that such a radical approach is generally not nuanced enough in addressing the diversity of work styles and patterns that may comprise everyday reality for a business. So, let's take a closer look at the possibility of a shared or unassigned approach to attorney offices and how it might be most successfully applied to the legal workplace.



**59%** of disengaged workers attributed dissatisfaction to overall inability to easily move throughout the day.





## WHY OFFICE SHARING?

The impetus behind introducing a shared system is not just a simple exercise in cost-cutting. Shared, or unassigned office layouts, can serve as an effective remedy for staff disengagement. A recent survey of 10,500 office workers across 14 countries conducted by IPSOS and Steelcase presents compelling evidence of the link between the physical work environment and employee engagement. Of the sample population of disengaged workers:

- 59% attributed dissatisfaction to overall inability to easily move throughout the day
- 79% to lack of accommodation for mobile workers
- 86% to inability to choose a setting suited to their current task<sup>1</sup>

Mobility, supported by technology—inside and outside of the traditional workplace—has transformed the knowledge workforce. Design solutions that encourage more movement address these crucial shifts head on, and a shared layout can play an important supporting or starring role within the overall strategy.

## ASSESSING YOUR OFFICE CULTURE

Before introducing a shared system within any office culture, it's worthwhile to perform a qualitative assessment of staff needs and work patterns. Where are common vacancies in the office, and why? Who might be most amenable to a more dynamic and mobile floor plan?

At NELSON, we would not advocate for a blanket solution that forces a shared system across all practices and levels in the office. Across our legal workplace design practice, we've distinguished three profiles of attorneys that would fit the sharing model best (and of course, many attorneys match more than one of these):

**The Traveler:** Partners tend to travel the most. It's true that audiovisual technology has reduced the number of attorneys travelling to clients, but certain high-level partners take more international trips, leaving office space vacant for days at a time. In a similar vein, litigators often spend their mornings in court and head back to the office in the afternoon, or vice versa. Either way, attorneys who travel are leaving their offices vacant for some or all day, and a sharing model can take advantage of this "bonus" space.

With the right participants and support resources in place, an office-sharing plan can yield rewards in both productivity and the bottom line for years to come.

Above: Seyfarth Shaw LLP—Los Angeles, CA

Previous (Clockwise from top):  
Stone Pigman LLP—New Orleans, LA  
Husch Blackwell—Chicago, IL  
Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner—Chicago, IL

Cover: Stone Pigman LLP—New Orleans, LA

**The Technophile:** Technology, as in all professional services industries, has transformed the way attorneys interact with their colleagues in different locations as well as clients across the globe. As legal practitioners continue to embrace mobile technology, having a full-time fixed space will become less of a necessity. Targeting tech-savvy attorneys within the practice may yield some willing participants in a shared-office approach.

**The Flex-Timer:** Those tech-savvy lawyers may also have work/life balance at the forefront of their priorities, since mobile technology enables working from home and greater flexibility. Anyone interested in flex time arrangements will easily fit into a shared office scenario. Working from home or away from the office takes the often “dead” time of the commute out of the equation altogether, and does double duty promoting work-life balance and freeing up workspace at the office.

In any shared scenario, at least one element must stay dedicated: the floor in question must serve as a home base for the sharing attorneys’ specific practice. Separating lawyers from their most relevant colleagues can foster inefficiency or disconnection within collaboration and mentorship processes. Identifying the most appropriate candidates for office sharing within the firm and then organizing a pilot program can be an effective way of testing the shared option.

### GATHERING THE RIGHT DATA

Backed by strong qualitative and quantitative analyses, a law firm can create a strong foundation for a pilot program with their design partner. Workplace surveys allow employees the opportunity to provide personalized feedback and valuable insight into their individual patterns and work styles. To support this, quantitative data can be culled from occupancy sensing which analyzes everything from desk chair to room usage. Data from security card systems can

also provide anonymized information on who is in the office, at what times, and how often.

### CASE STUDIES

In response to our clients’ willingness to explore shared layouts, we developed two different “beta test” scenarios for two Am Law 100 firms:

#### Am Law 100 Firm 1

**Strategy:** This client wanted to take a conservative approach to reducing square footage. They opted to retain fully dedicated, private offices for equity partners. To gain efficiency, however, they agreed to explore three other methods: implementing a universal/single office size, placing some revenue-generating attorneys away from the window wall, and distributing the rest of the office spaces using a 1:2 (one office for every two people) ratio. Shared offices would be occupied by associates, income associates, and those not on the partner track.

The floor plan opposite illustrates how this would look on a single floor. Mint green spaces are dedicated, while avocado green spaces are shared, or “hotel” spaces. Meeting areas placed strategically around the plan allow ample space for collaboration or extra individual workspace, as well as choices and options for the activity or task at hand. Gray areas are central to the operation. These areas contain space for personal affects and files, and would function as the home base for administrative staff to retrieve and deliver items to attorneys in their booked office at the correct day and time.

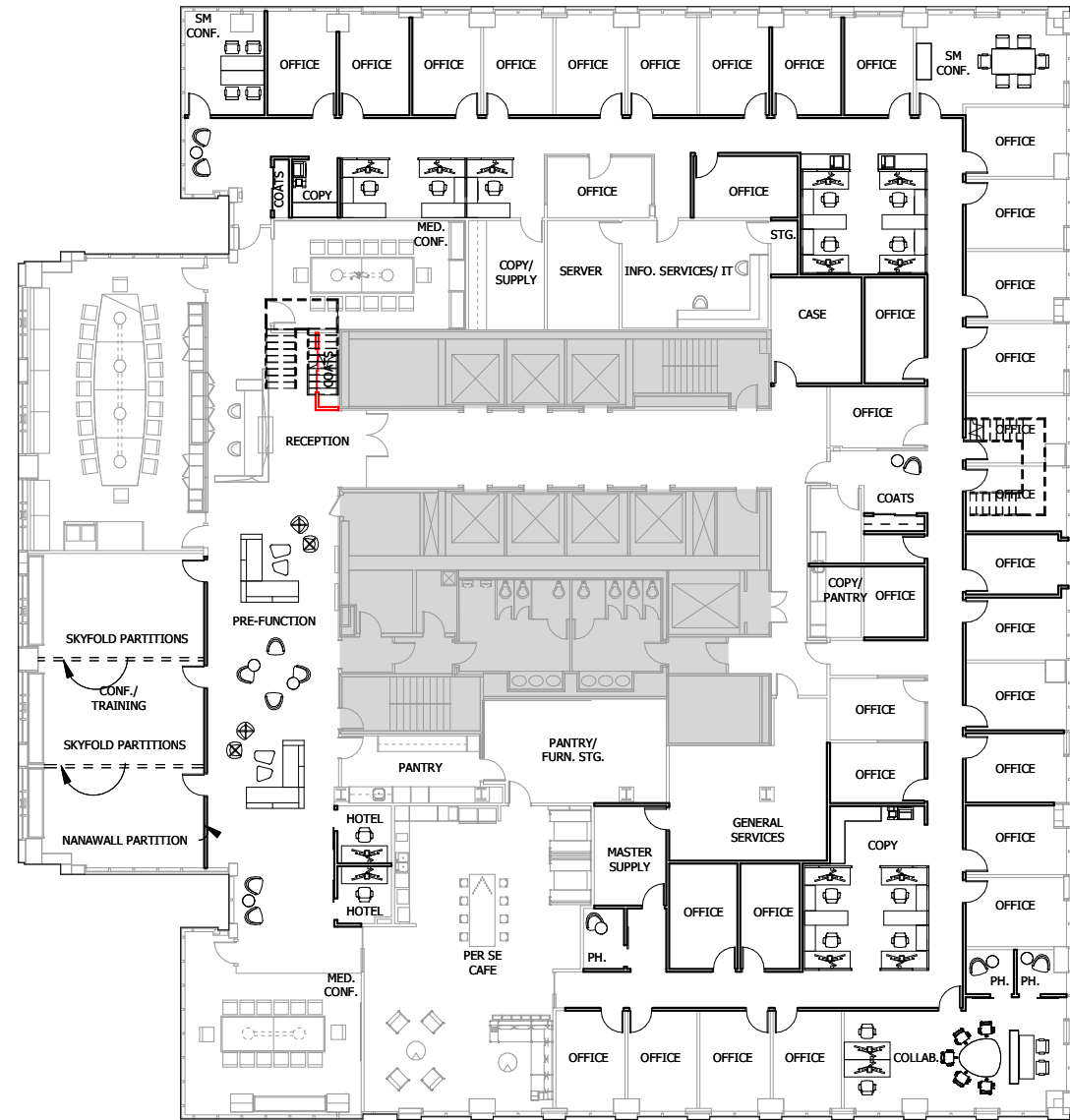
Important to note in this arrangement is that no attorney making use of the hotel spaces would be expected to occupy a space already in use. The layout, tailored to the culture of the firm, offers attorneys the private use of an office when booked—but the shared scenario guarantees that those offices are occupied only when needed.

Am Law 100 Firm 1—Universal office size



## Am Law 100 Firm 2—Universal Office Size

Attorneys share offices in a 1:2 ratio (office-to-people), but are booked for use by one attorney at a time.



34,398 USF  
41,820 RSF

**Result:** The single-size office approach coupled with interior offices for first through third-tier associates realized a 30% reduction in square footage from 305,000 RSF to 190,000 RSF. A shared approach to occupancy at a 1:2 office-to-attorney ratio in the future would shed another two floors of occupancy (53,800 RSF), leading to an estimated savings of nearly \$3.5 million annually over the lease term.

### Am Law 100 Firm 2

**Strategy:** This client was examining its occupancy nationwide and wanted to make bold and significant reductions. Data showed that the typical attorney was out of the office 25 to 30% of the time. NELSON developed a floor plan with the following assumptions: all attorneys would have access to a private office when needed, but space would be unassigned, and the overall work environment would support all daily functions.

The floor plan on the opposite page shows how the layout would function. Offices are unassigned in a 1:2 ratio and universally sized. But in this scenario, a key substitution has occurred at the upper left and lower right corners where dedicated offices used to be: highly efficient, multifunction spaces within a 1,100 SF footprint provide fundamental support for attorneys on the go.

The diagram above visualizes the multifunction space. From the left, a subdivided desk area provides extra individual touchdown space where attorneys can quickly and easily dock their laptops without having to book



The primary benefits of the shared approach are obvious: a reduction in occupancy costs, potentially up to 50% depending on how rigorously the approach is applied. This will have a positive impact on the bottom line.

Above: Axiom—Chicago, IL



**Docking Station**  
For individual work

**Collaborative Setting**

**Technology-Supported Setting**  
For meetings

**Acoustically controlled,  
closed environment**  
For heads-down work  
and private phone calls

a space. The middle section provides a comfortable area for smaller meetings with colleagues or clients. The righthand section offers a place for meetings requiring more audiovisual and tech support. To the right of this space are enclosed heads-down rooms where attorneys can make phone calls or perform other tasks needing acoustical privacy.

The system achieves separation and privacy through strategic placement of furniture. The layout would be highly reconfigurable. Expected accommodation would be for four to six attorneys at one time.

**Result:** The multifunction area, as a part of an overall size reduction strategy including unassigned private office space, will assist the client in reducing their three-floor stack to two floors.

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#### BENEFITS

**Cost reductions:** The primary benefits of the shared approach are obvious: a reduction in occupancy costs, potentially up to 50% depending on how rigorously the approach is applied. This will have a positive impact on the bottom line.

**Increase in billable hours:** The flexible working arrangements that unassigned office space can support also reduce commuting time, leaving greater potential for billable hours.

**Potential to increase employee engagement:** As stated previously, physical mobility within the workplace is closely tied to employee satisfaction and engagement.<sup>2</sup>

**A workplace tailored to all activities:** A shared approach can also be an excellent opportunity to embrace an activity-based setting, which is one of the most progressive approaches in workplace design today. Activity-based settings efficiently organize space to create a mixture of open and private areas optimized for specific work functions. The sharing of office space can encourage mobility within the office and collegial mixing in line with this spatial strategy. As we noted earlier, the availability of spaces customized to activity are tied to employee satisfaction.<sup>3</sup>

**Efficiency supported by technology:** In line with activity-based settings, adopting an unassigned layout also captures the benefits of today's "Space as a Service" (SaaS) model that has driven the incredible success of coworking companies across the country. SaaS has risen in response to a greater sea change in the workplace: the desire for more flexibility as technology has evolved to support it.<sup>4</sup> Through technology—such as sophisticated room booking systems in tandem with unassigned offices—the work environment becomes a well-oiled machine optimized for efficiency and tailored to the daily functions of employees.

#### CHALLENGES

**Status perception:** As is typical in the legal industry, any challenge to the status quo can make some waves, and this is the first situation, prior to implementation, that must be handled carefully. The perception and importance of status in the practice of law, at all levels, is still strong. Adopting an office-sharing program is a step in the direction of disassociating office size with prominence and rank—and with millennials prioritizing other issues such as work-life balance,<sup>5</sup> it may be one that dovetails nicely with shifting attitudes in the industry.

**Maintaining mentorship:** The foundation of a law firm's future is mentorship of the associate who may one day become a partner. Can this happen effectively with a reduced presence in the office? One answer is ensuring practices have dedicated floors to solidify connections within specific practices, but a greater reliance on technology in the mentorship process may also come into play.

**Operational support:** An adoption of an office-sharing program will require a focused operational effort to manage it effectively and on a consistent basis. First, alternative systems for storage of personal belongings and individual files will be necessary and resources will need to be supplied for on-demand transfer. A centralized booking system for orderly and documented space reservation will need to be introduced, but this requires a new understanding around scheduling in the office culture. Deploying the right technology to achieve this, along with acclimating attorneys and staff to this new approach, can best be handled by a comprehensive change management program prior to occupancy.

**Remembering privacy:** The need for confidentiality in law practice is one that will never go away, and must continue to be privileged in the implementation of any new layout. A highly efficient office-sharing scenario must not sacrifice spaces that will generously provide for heads-down, private and strictly confidential work. In the end result, attorneys should find that they haven't lost a fixed space to hold private calls or do quiet, individual tasks, but that they've gained a variety of tailored and optimized settings for any function they need to fulfill during the day.

## CONCLUSION

Moving away from what's comfortable and known is never an easy decision to make or execute when it comes to workplace design. As new generations move up the ladder and economic and industry trends continue to evolve and put pressure on the practice of law, exploring different solutions will become more important. But each firm must determine the right fit for their individual patterns and culture. With the right participants and support resources in place, an office sharing plan can yield rewards in both productivity and the bottom line for years to come.

*Adopting an office-sharing program is a step in the direction of disassociating office size with prominence and rank.*

Lawyers must have a floor or space that serves as a home base; separating lawyers from their most relevant colleagues can foster inefficiency or disconnection within collaboration and mentorship processes.

Right: AT&T Tower—Minneapolis, MN





## SOURCES

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Marty Festenstein leads NELSON’s Legal Workplace Practice, driving creativity and strategy for clients nationally. In this niche design market, Marty continues to challenge himself under the mantra “change is inevitable,” delivering creative forward-looking solutions for law firm clients that meet their functional parameters and exceed their expectations. Throughout his 30+ year career, he has managed over 10 million SF and over 300 legal workplace projects.

As legal practitioners continue to embrace mobile technology, having a full-time fixed space will become less of a necessity.

Left: Ferrara Candy Company—Chicago, IL





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