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SPACES & PLACES

LAW FIRMS SAYING GOODBYE TO CORNER OFFICES; HELLO TO OPEN, COLLABORATIVE DESIGNS

By Erika Strebel

estrebel@wislawjournal.com

In the 25 years Pat Algiers has been designing law offices, she has seen plenty of change.

For one, firms no longer necessarily put lawyers who have moved up in the ranks in larger office spaces, said the president of the Shorewood-based design firm Chemistry in Place. Rather than having offices of three or four different sizes, firms are providing lawyers — no matter their seniority or partner status — with essentially the same accommodations.

Whether you're a partner or an associate, your office is likely to be close to 10-feet-by-15-feet.

Much of the change has been driven by economic considerations — the less space a firm leases, the lower its expenses.

In another change Algiers has seen, lawyers are tending to work more closely with their employees. Workspaces have accordingly been adapted. Many law offices, for instance, now have conference rooms designed specifically to let part-



STAFF PHOTO BY KEVIN HARNACK

Pat Algiers, who has designed dozens of law offices over the last 25 years and is president of Chemistry in Place, says glass has become more prevalent in law office designs in recent years. It helps create a feeling of having a collaborative work environment, as well as an atmosphere of openness and accessibility, she says.

ners work collaboratively with their teams.

Still other physical changes have been meant to imbue offices with an atmosphere of openness and accessibility. One result has been a greater reliance on glass as a building component.

Amidst all the change, one constant has been the emphasis placed on choosing the right location for a law office. It's one of the first things Algiers says firm officials should think about if they're considering a move or redesign of their office space.

"Location is everything," Algiers said. "Multiple age groups, not just millennials, want to work in a city or live in a city. So a downtown area, regardless of the size of town, seems more often than not to be the most desired location for a law firm to be."

But all the satisfaction that firm officials might get out of new furniture or a move to a new place should take a backseat to one looming con-

sideration: The terms of their rental agreement.

"They should think about how many years out they are signing a lease," Algiers said. "They should not be short-sighted. If it's a 10-year lease, they've got to stretch themselves to say what's appropriate 10 years out so that their space does not become obsolete."

This often means taking a hard look at a firm's brand and thinking about how it could be complemented by current trends in design and architecture. That's why, before drawing up plans, Algiers and her team spend as much time as possible learning about a particular client.

"Every firm is different," she said. "They're different because of say the type of law, the type of personality, the culture. And in order to say the design is accessible, you have to be able to say that it both looks and feels like the firm. It can't come off as generic. It has to come off so you can read the personality of the firm."

John Peterburs, executive director at Quarles & Brady, noted that firms must also consider clients' needs and expectations.

"I think clients want to see your space as efficient and practical, not something that's very opulent and just over the top in terms of furnishings and spending," Peterburs said.

In addition to taking a hard look at their brand and identity, firms must also try to peer into the future. This can mean everything from trying to gauge the expectations of future recruits to attempting to foresee what sorts of technological advances might come along and prove useful.

"It's so hard to predict with people's work habits changing and technology," Peterburs said. "People are working more from home, they're working more remotely. There isn't as much emphasis on their office workspace, and they don't bring clients to their office anymore like they once did. They bring them to central reception areas."

One way to adapt to the changes, Peterburs said, is to use open spaces that lend themselves to reconfiguration and modular designs.

Still, Algiers, who has designed various Quarles & Brady offices throughout the country, cautioned that only so much can be accomplished with an office's layout. Even with the best designs, she said, change is seldom easy.

"Sometimes it's really hard to let go of how they work, how space is laid out, but everything about the way in which we work is changing," Algiers said. "They cannot be change-adverse. They need to look to the future, to crystal ball it and take their best guess on how space works together and how space would be laid out as appropriate for their practice."



PHOTO BY TRICIA SHAY, SUBMITTED BY CHEMISTRY IN PLACE

Chemistry in Place designed Quarles & Brady's Milwaukee office, which incorporates glass sliding doors that create a sense of openness and accessibility.