

The bigger the better: design trends in law firms

Nigel Oseland considers why the majority of lawyers continue to resist open-plan layouts despite the rise of more flexible and collaborative ways of working.

This article builds on a presentation I recently gave on workplace developments in law firms at the Legal Services Property Forum, held at the City offices of Allen & Overy. While the building is a fine example of the modern workplace of a legal practice, and was a great setting for the event, it is nonetheless quite traditional.

When discussing workplace trends, whether affecting the offices of law firms or other organisations, we first need to understand the past and the current situation. Image 1 is a painting of a 17th-century local law practice. It shows that the two lawyers are either sharing an office or are even perhaps in an open-plan working environment. What is unusual is that the lawyers have allowed clients into their personal workspace rather than meeting them in a client suite. But, as expected, they have lots of paperwork (case notes) on their desks, shelves and the floor.

The layman's perception of a lawyer's office these days is quite different. The stereotypical view is of a large perimeter private office with plush furnishings, dark wood and copious bookshelves filled with leather-bound tomes, as portrayed by Hollywood and TV programmes such as *Desperate housewives* and *Ally McBeal*. However, as image 2 of Norton Rose shows, lawyers' offices have got lighter, with more glass, and the furniture is more modern and minimalist. Nevertheless, most law firms still have private perimeter offices for partners, lawyers and associates, with support staff located at the centre of the floor plate. So has there really not been any significant development in the working environments of lawyers?

The Lawyer carries out an annual survey of the top 200 law firms, and last year the magazine enquired about the workspace¹. The survey results indicate that only one-third of UK law firms have moved to fully open-plan working environments, with the others resisting change. Alternatives to open plan are the shared office for a lawyer and their junior, or the "hybrid studio", but there is very little appetite for agile working. I want to discuss why there is resistance to changing the office layout but first it is worthwhile describing hybrid office designs.

HYBRID LAYOUTS

The hybrid studio was adopted by Eversheds a few years ago (see image 3 on p.14). It is not a new concept, though – for example, it was proposed to, but rejected by, DLA Piper about eight years ago. It mostly consists of perimeter partitioned bays, and the partitions are in the region of two metres in height; they have no doors, so they are not fully enclosed. The cynics might consider the hybrid studio to be a modern version of the despised cubicle, but there are some differences that are subtle but important. The

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Image 1: The Village Lawyer's Office, by Pieter Brueghel the Younger, 1618



Image 2: Fee earner's office at Norton Rose, 3 More London Riverside



Source: MCM Architecture.

Image 3: Hybrid studio space at Eversheds



Source: Woods Bagot.
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partitions are perpendicular to the windows, allowing light to pass through to the areas at the centre of the floor plate (which usually accommodate the support staff in the open-plan scenario). The partitions are also made of glass above the height of the desk screen, providing some acoustic privacy but again allowing light to pass through.

The default perimeter area provides space for two desks side by side, perhaps for a lawyer adjacent to the window and a junior gatekeeper next to the circulation route. However, the partitions are sufficiently flexible to allow bays for four, six and eight lawyers to be created. Pink noise is introduced to help reduce acoustic distraction and the bays are supported by collaboration spaces, informal meeting spaces and so on.

Employee feedback surveys reveal that Eversheds lawyers appear satisfied with hybrid studio space and say it helps collaboration, represents their culture and gives a good impression to clients. So perhaps the hybrid studio represents the state of the art for law firm offices.

TRADITIONAL VS FLEXIBLE OFFICES

The key question is why lawyers are resisting open-plan and agile working when the drivers for change indicate that this is the way forward. Those drivers include:

- **Globalisation:** law firms are offshoring and outsourcing basic services, and lawyers now have to manage global teams;
- **Competition:** the Legal Services Act 2007, as well as globalisation, has increased competition, so that reducing costs to maintain competitive advantage is now a priority;

- **Client proximity:** law practices are now relocating closer to their clients and lawyers are increasingly expected to visit clients rather than clients coming to them;
- **Collaboration:** individual concentration is still important but there are more team sessions, with legal teams replacing individual stars, and in addition case teams regularly assemble, disband and reform;
- **Support:** secretarial support is decreasing as new lawyers are more self-sufficient and capable of using technology to assist in basic administrative tasks; and
- **Flexibility:** surveys of lawyers indicate that 36% believe flexible working options are important to attract and retain staff.

Despite these drivers, resistance to change among lawyers continues. An article which appeared in the *US Law Practice Magazine* back in 2004 proposed that lawyers believe traditional office space is essential owing to “three Cs”:

- **Core services:** lawyers require basic facilities to carry out their core work activities, for example storage space for filing, technology and office equipment for communication and reports, and a room for conducting quiet work and transactions;
- **Collaboration:** lawyers need to come together to collaborate with their colleagues, to share knowledge and help each other resolve cases, plus they need to meet clients and opponent lawyers for negotiation; and
- **Control:** lawyers want to be able to see their junior and support staff and call on them as and when required.

But these barriers to more flexible working can mostly be overcome with simple, inexpensive modern technology. Low-cost office furniture and equipment makes it easy to set up a home office. Thin client technology allows lawyers to access applications and files from their home computer and mobile devices. Lawyers were early adopters of the BlackBerry, so they should welcome the enhanced functionality of computer tablets that allow them to work on the move or from a variety of locations in and out of the office. Voice over Internet Protocol technology allows calls to be easily forwarded so that the lawyer is always contactable. Collaboration tools such as WebEx and LiveMeeting allow lawyers to stay in touch and work with colleagues.

The new application service providers, such as CaseShare, CaseCentral and Lextranet, centrally store litigation documents for sharing, downloading and annotating. Tablet technology means that such documents can now be comfortably read on-screen without the need to print off. There are even examples of law practices going completely paperless, and they report knock-on benefits in terms of efficiency, flexibility and productivity.

But is technology sufficient to overcome the barriers to change or does much depend on the lawyers' attitudes and their firm's work culture?

EFFECT OF SPACE ON PERFORMANCE

Another question is whether or not the space provided affects performance. The space analysis produced by *The Lawyer* provides a useful insight into the space required and used by law firms: the magazine found that the average occupational density was 206 sq ft/person. This is comparable with the British Council for Offices 2009 figure for law firms of 225 sq ft/person but much larger than the median average of 114 sq ft/person across all sectors. So it does indeed seem that lawyers like it larger.

The Lawyer's figures show that Allen & Overy has the second lowest density at 340 sq ft/person, whereas Minster Law has the highest density at less than 100 sq ft/person throughout the building (see figure 1). This is quite a large range and it would be useful to know if the amount of space provided affects the performance of the business.

Interestingly, *The Lawyer* not only provided standard space metrics, such as density and total cost of occupancy, but also reported the revenue per square foot. This is akin to sales per square foot in retail, and a good indicator of how well the building supports the business (a proxy measure of productivity). The survey indicates that Minster Law's space not only costs one-tenth of that of Allen & Overy (£1,900 per person compared with £19,000 per person) but the revenue generated per square foot is also much higher (£1,508 compared with £685).

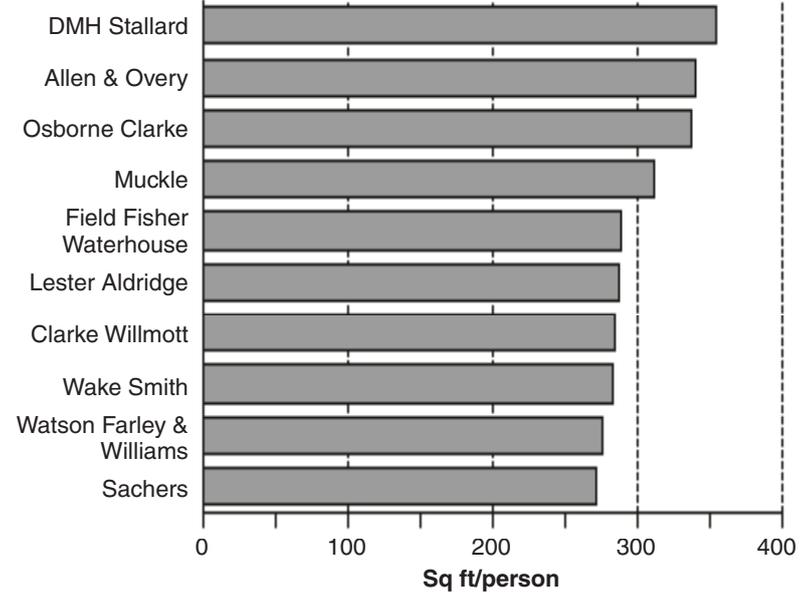
It is probably unfair to compare a large city law practice (£1,183 million turnover) with a small regional one (£104 million turnover), or to compare a building designed by Norman Foster with a speculative office in an out-of-town business park. So caution is required in interpreting such benchmark figures. However, the results do appear to illustrate that a higher-density, predominantly open-plan workspace does not necessarily hinder business performance.

CHANGE OF PERCEPTION NEEDED

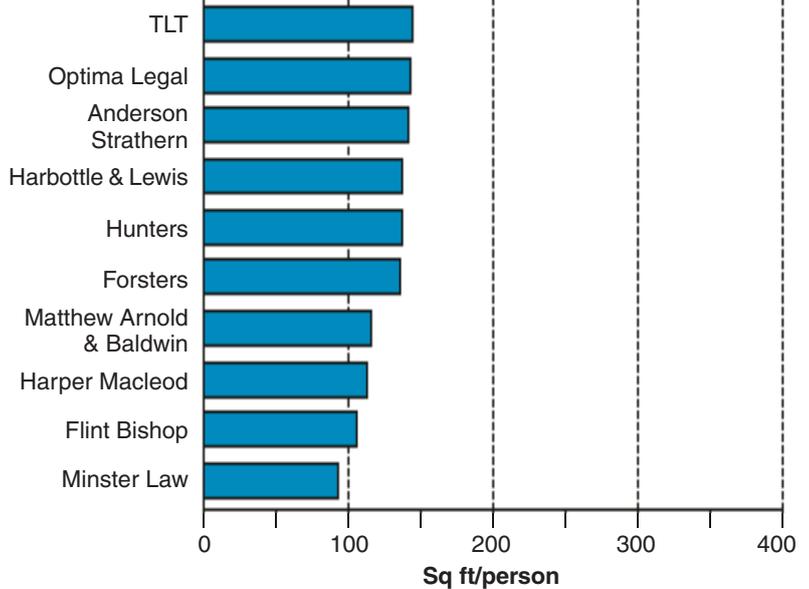
Personally, I believe the jury is out on whether open-plan environments are more productive than more enclosed ones – there is as much evidence for private offices as against. But what is clear is that open plan is more space-efficient and cost-effective, and that is a key driver in the UK. I wholeheartedly agree with providing the right space to support work activities and productivity. However, I do not condone providing private offices to lawyers simply because they consider themselves a "special" case and different to all the other knowledge workers – ones who insist that they need an office but then adapt and are contented with a well-designed landscaped office environment with flexible working arrangements.

Figure 1: Occupational density (sq ft/person)

Ten lowest-density law firms



Ten highest-density law firms



Source: *The Lawyer*.

It is likely that private offices are currency in the legal sector; they are a perceived prerequisite for attracting top lawyers. With competition becoming fiercer, hiring the best lawyers is fundamental to business success. It therefore takes a brave property or facilities manager to undo this outmoded obligation to provide private offices.

So the drivers for change indicate that a move to modern working practices is beneficial, the technology can overcome the need for a traditional office, and open-plan offices do not necessarily have a negative effect on law practice performance. One can only arrive at the conclusion, therefore, that it is the attitude of lawyers that proves to be an obstacle to a shift in office design. *Quod erat demonstrandum*, I rest my case.

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REFERENCE
¹ www.thelawyer.com/good-offices/1014802.article.