Law practices face the same pressures that corporate entities have been facing since the Great Recession and just like those corporations, they are feeling fee pressure and the need for efficiency and reduced real estate costs in order to be competitive. As a result, lawyers are thinking more like Corporate America.

At the same time that they are feeling economic pressures, they also are experiencing cultural changes from a younger workforce who, in many instances, may be equally or more interested in work/life balance than being on the partner track. The increased rise of contract attorneys is an example of this topic. The emerging younger, partner-track attorneys also have different goals than many of the legacy partners who have established the past or current culture.

One of the primary concerns that our law firm clients relay to us when planning for the future is their ability/need to attract and retain top talent. According to The National Jurist (“the Voice of Legal Education”), 78 percent of law firm associates leave their firm within five years! Why? We believe more often than not they simply don’t enjoy their daily work experience. That points to the environment and culture of the office.

When we discuss design approach with our corporate clients, we talk about the blurring of the line between work and home, creating variety in the daily work experience, the value of unplanned interaction, the need for casual/comfortable spaces, less allocation of space to individuals and more to group space etc. These are cultural topics that affect not only corporate entities, but law firms as well.

Lawyers have an enormous pressure to be billable and, culturally, nonbillable time has been limited and possibly discouraged. The fact is that in the rising generations, the workplace is an important part of social life. Those firms that recognize that good social interaction leads to a strong connection and commitment to the firm and plan accordingly will be in better position for future success. Law firms are concerned about and are listening to these issues as they are planning for the future. This is not to say that what may work for a technology company will also work for a law firm, but some of these underlying drivers and trends apply to people whether they are lawyers or software developers.

As designers, it is important to find the right balance of the business model and investment in the workplace, and the correct balance will vary with each firm. A token nod to “collaborative space” may not be enough. You can’t force culture. It just happens and, when it does, it is usually in group, not individual, space. Clients are beginning to realize that these group spaces are not synonymous with nonbillable activities and that while promoting the desirable cultural interaction, they also have dual purpose and support work activities.

Of course, law firms will continue to have a substantial commitment to private offices, but the law firm that provides focus space at the same time as creating variety in the workplace and encouraging interaction will be more successful in attracting and retaining talent. A law firm’s office space has always been a strong brand and image statement for the firm, but more than ever it is becoming a recruiting and retention tool and statement of the culture of the firm. What does your office say about your firm?

owen@acquilano.com
melissa@acquilano.com

Owen Leslie
Principal, Acquilano Leslie Inc.

Melissa Marlow
Principal, Acquilano Leslie Inc.