LAWYERS NEED SPACE – OR DO THEY?

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kks savills

KKS Savills has a strong reputation for designing and delivering unique environments for lawyers.
Our extensive experience over 30 years has seen a transformation in how legal services are delivered, how trusted partnerships have changed and how innovation has crept into a traditional institution.

We are keen to explore learnings from numerous projects – many starting out as **Proof of Concept pilots** – and share our knowledge of trends for legal workspace, underpinned by psychological and sociological human behaviours.

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> **"THE OFFICE ENVIRONMENT HAS A PROFOUND IMPACT ON HOW PEOPLE FEEL AND PRODUCE."**

Workplace Demands

Habitat matters. The natural and built environment affects human behaviour, cognition, emotion, well-being and performance. Therefore the office environment has a profound impact on how people feel and produce.

Different organisations require different environments, and within that, different personalities will have different demands. The key is to define and articulate the role of the work environment in the employee experience, aligning the infrastructure with the habits and preferences of those who occupy it.

The debate surrounding what people want in the workplace after the last few years has zeroed in on more fluid

workplaces, with an emphasis on training, trust and technology. However, organisations are struggling to bring people back to the office with lawyers being cited as one of the harder cohorts to persuade. Ironically, only a few short years ago, they often said it was impossible to work from home.

As experts in law firm design, and especially in the design and delivery of Proof of Concept pilots, KKS Savills suggest a pause though before launching headlong into providing multiple different work settings for every task. Consider the research undertaken over the past few decades, which demonstrates when people face more options than they desire, they suffer from choice overload and can experience a wide range of negative outcomes, from frustration and confusion to dissatisfaction, and even choice paralysis. The right balance of settings for the workforce is fundamental.

Through evidence-based workplace strategies and psychological and sociological research, the design of the workplace will improve satisfaction and heighten well-being for both employees and employers, improving occupancy and financial performance.

Different industries will have differing needs and corporate structures can push through change top down, however with legal partnerships, in particular, this can be an interesting challenge with all partners as 'equals'.

In 2022, The Law Society Reported six key challenges that were being faced by the legal profession:

1. Talent recruitment and retention
2. Return to the office and hybrid working
3. Fee earner burnout
4. Lawyer competency and training
5. Right technologies and AI
6. Social value and engagement with the community

The majority of these challenges can be addressed by providing the right environment for fee earners, balancing the need of the firm with the individuals.

Lawyer Personalities

Lawyers often have pronounced personality traits, as Dr Larry Richard has discovered over the past 30 years. He is a leading expert on the psychology of lawyer behaviour and his consulting firm focuses on improving lawyer performance through personality science.

Amongst the traits, he found that lawyers have a higher need for autonomy and don't want to be told what to do; have elevated levels of abstract reasoning and they love to argue and analyse.

legal training. Lastly, they are prone to urgency, they cannot wait and always want to cut to the chase.

URGENCY
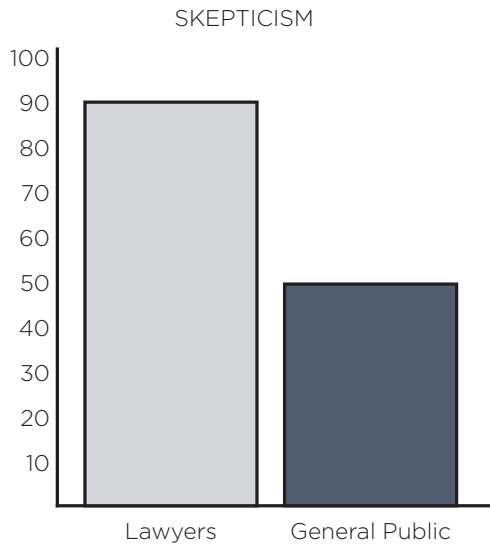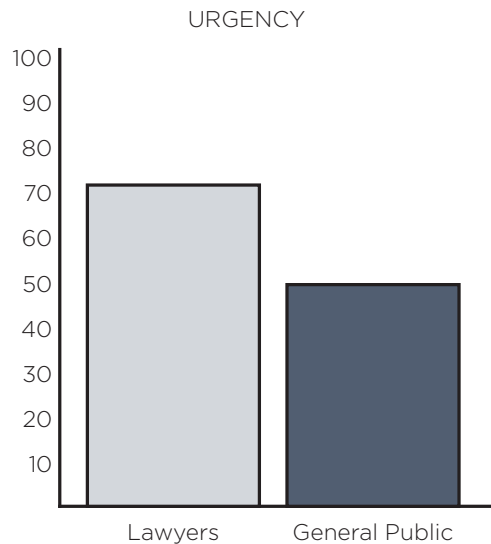
Lawyers need proof, they will often ask for precedence on proposals being suggested. Naturally risk averse, they want to know where something has already proven successful and with whom.

SKEPTICISM

Another predominant trait is scepticism. As a profession, law attracts people who are inherently sceptical which is further reinforced throughout their

What is a Proof of Concept?

The POC is a pilot space – ideally in the existing building for close proximity and to test occupancy usage, but it can be elsewhere – where proposals for the future workspace are constructed to test the concepts through daily working life. It will most likely be demonstrating change, whether this be in working protocols, such as unassigned desking and activity-based working, or the use of new furniture and technology. It is likely to look different to the existing environment, in all aspects of design.

A POC can vary in size, but we recommend it should be of sufficient size to enable whole practice groups to occupy the space, 8,000 to 10,000 sqft minimum. If on rotation, the occupancy should also be for a minimum of four months to enable people to adjust to the change and fully experience the highs and lows alongside the new protocols Pre- and post-occupancy studies, gathering feedback from the workforce on their existing spaces and after they have moved into the POC, are important to determine the performance of the pilot.

Many POCs are years in advance of an office relocation, giving ample time to rotate practice groups through the space, gather post-occupancy data and adjust both design, behavioural and etiquette guidelines as appropriate.

Based on our experience, here are 10 key factors to get right for a successful POC:

1. **Pioneers:** Find a team to occupy the POC first, where the leaders are eager to experiment and look for change. Lead with evangelists and doubters will follow.

2. **Leadership:** Elect a project steering committee (internal client group elected to drive the project and make key decisions) that has a balance of those with a positive approach to change and those with concerns. At least one key disruptor from early in the planning process should be included. The steering committee must feel they're in control of the decisions and play an active part in creating solutions, disseminating information with one voice.

3. **Engagement:** The POC is likely to suggest a different way of working. It is vital to include employees in the development of proposals through consultation. People are suspicious of change if they do not feel included.

4. **Communicate:** Ensure clarity in communication – one voice, one message - and understanding the reason for change as it affects both the individual and the firm. Shifting from perceiving change as a threat to an opportunity involves understanding the reasons and participating in the solution.

5. **Listen:** Workplace change can ignite feelings such as loss of status and fear of not being able to adapt. Supporting and communicating with people who find change challenging, or who take a negative stance, is best achieved through personal, face-to-face engagement. Identify change champions and include their voices in

6. **Evidence:** Quantitative and qualitative data is critical for ongoing design refinement. Data alone won't be sufficient for some, so collect the stories and anecdotes, the experience of living in the space.

7. **Design:** A POC should look and feel different to the place people are coming from. It should ignite inquisitiveness and even the envy of onlookers. Encourage participation with comms around the new, fresh aspects of the POC, whether the new technology or furniture and arrange social events to promote the space and its benefits.

8. **Technology:** It's critical that technology specialists are part of the design from the beginning. They should be involved from early stakeholder engagement – to hear concerns and issues – right through into concept, detail design and delivery of the best technology solutions possible.

9. **Commitment:** It is vital that once the decision has been taken to create a POC, it must be implemented well, this is not the time to cut the budget. The time and cost commitment should reflect the attention that a full relocation project would achieve.

   The business will have to invest time to engage with the process, enable the design team to develop the right solutions, be open to new concepts and work within their own organisation to champion change. The level of financial investment should be such that the pilot represents an authentic facsimile of the future environment.

10. **Courage:** Be brave, reach beyond your comfort zone to feel nervous, and push boundaries to find new opportunities for your firm to grow and flourish.

" HOW WILL THIS BE BETTER THAN WHAT I HAVE TODAY?"

Evidence

Lawyers will demand evidence. 'Why should we change?' 'How will this be better than what I have today?' This data is gathered in multiple streams including observed or recorded utilisation of how the existing space is used, staff and leadership engagement to obtain feedback on what people need and the current stress points, employee groups, partnership visioning and operational requirements. This is viewed through a future business strategy lens to establish parameters for forthcoming design.

When you consider typical lawyer traits, the concept of introducing change into their workplaces for lawyers can present significant challenges. We have found that working with law firms to deliver an ideal POC pilot scheme, well in advance of a move or drastic change, is a highly successful method of conveying the proposed design and direction of travel, illustrating new protocols and allowing the firm to physically test it will be working in the future, only on a smaller scale than in the final relocation.

Law Firm Offices

Different industry sectors will arrange their workplaces to suit their specific needs. Traditionally, law firm offices/ workplaces have been arranged in hierarchical, cellular arrangements with prime locations being given to the most senior fee earners, larger offices for partners, and smaller offices for associates with support staff located in the central areas. However, this model has been evolving and we have seen law firms embrace new ways of working. Clearly, there is not one solution that suits all unlike, for example, the established model of highly densified floors for traders in the finance sector.
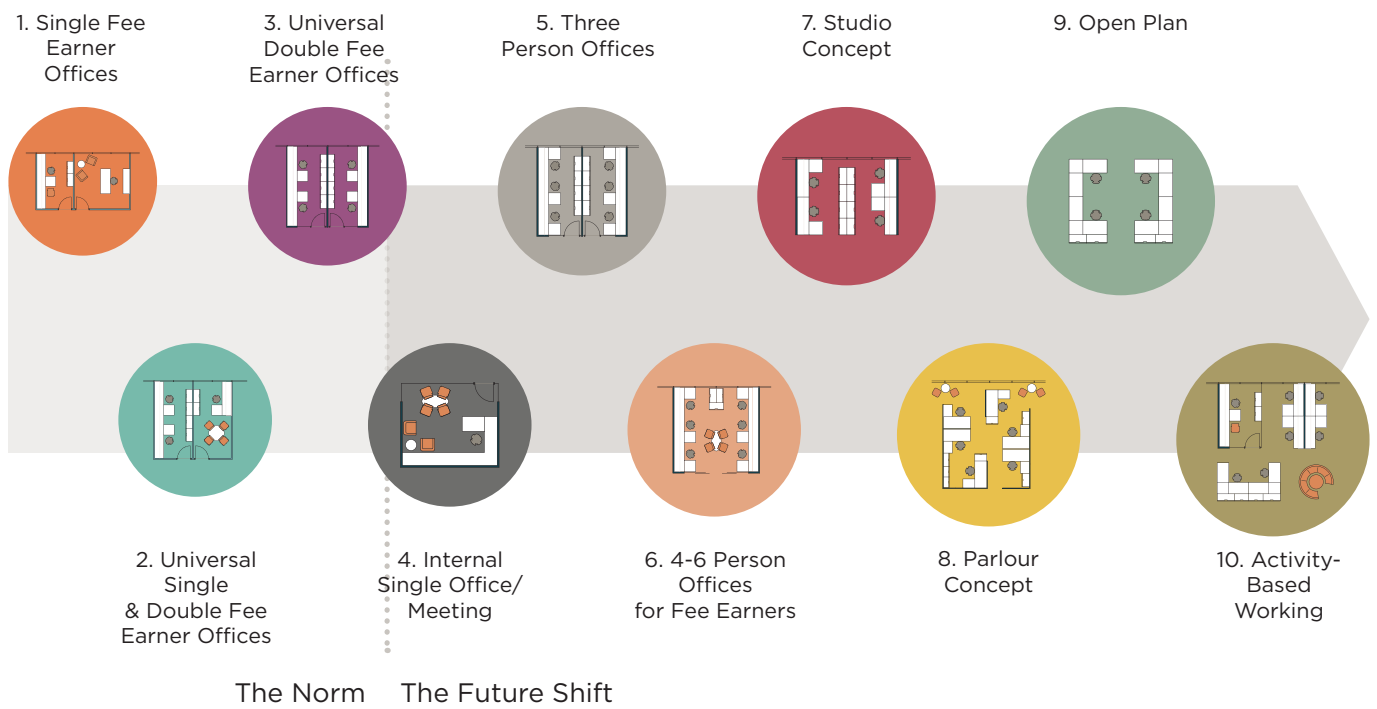
From our pre-occupancy data of law firms and our analysis, we have found that whilst the cellular model is favoured in many cases for its privacy, personalised space and recruitment aspects, there are inherent challenges:

- A single fixed workspace (allocated desk in an office or open plan) for all tasks results in little physical movement throughout the day, known to be detrimental to both physical and mental wellbeing
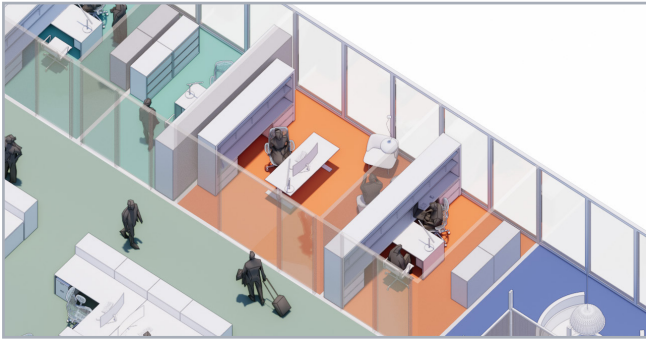
- Fixed locations mean that chance interactions are few and, for the more junior staff, less contact with their peer group

- Fixed offices built in a variety of sizes limits flexibility for moves and changes both in disruption and expense

- With hybrid working and reduced occupancy over the working week, for those in fixed locations, the office can feel deserted with limited opportunities for cross-group collaboration.

Legal Workplace Evolution

The workplace evolution we have seen over the past 10 years has taken different forms depending on the challenges faced by the individual firm.

The diagram below charts the changes in legal workplace and design over this period.

1. Single Fee Earner Offices

3. Universal Double Fee Earner Offices

5. Three Person Offices

7. Studio Concept

9. Open Plan

2. Universal Single & Double Fee Earner Offices

4. Internal Single Office/ Meeting

6. 4-6 Person Offices for Fee Earners

8. Parlour Concept

10. Activity-Based Working

The Norm   The Future Shift

1. **Single fee-earner office –** larger and smaller offices based on seniority and equity.

2. **Universal single office –** removing hierarchy by size.

3. **Universal single and double office –** standardised office sizes, allowing for working individually or in pairs for increased mentoring.
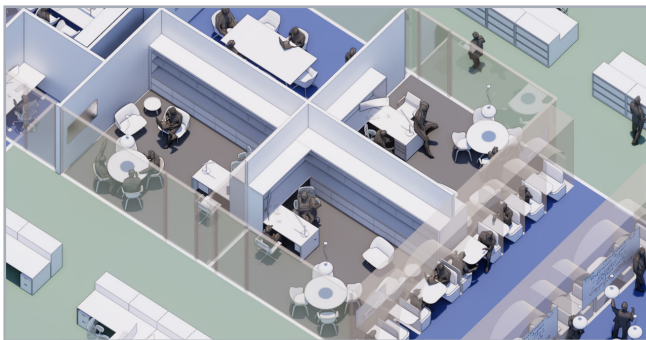
4. **Internal single office/meeting space –** utilising internal spaces away from the window, dual functionality as meeting room and office.

5. **Three-person office –** reduced area per desk to increase mentoring/ teamwork. This is often used by two out of three people at any one time based on office occupancy and agility protocols.
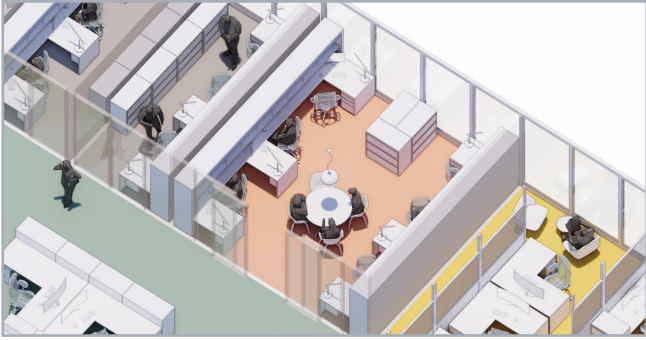
6. **Four to six person offices –** larger shared spaces, supported by additional spaces to take private or confidential calls, reducing construction costs, and increasing collaboration.

7. **Studio concept –** a furniture solution based on the same footprint as a constructed office but without full-height walls and doors.

8. **Parlour –** a semi-open-plan layout that maintains desk privacy and low-level visual distraction in an open team space or neighbourhood.
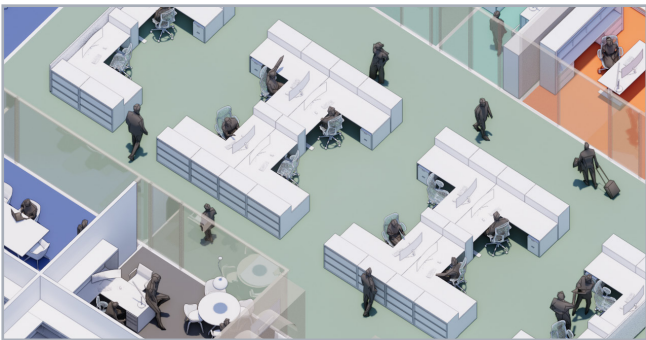
9. **Open-plan –** a standardised footprint of desks, generally in groups of four for fee earners and six for business professionals, with adjacent meeting rooms and quiet rooms; neighbourhoods of no more than 12 to 16 desks.

10. **Activity-based working –** a mixture of two or more layouts, the quantities of each designed to match the tasks of the users.

Aside from the layout type, use of workspaces can also differ. Choosing whether workstations are assigned or non-assigned, a concept many organisations explore – particularly with the rise of hybrid working – can be highly emotive, requiring significant change management.

Summary

Our experience with POC projects leads us to conclude that they are a vital tool in workplace transformation for the legal sector. The opportunity presented by a relocation project is huge, and for those considering changes to working practices, relocation is the correct time to implement one. These changes, likely based on business strategy and psychological concerns can range from organisational structure to new technologies, spatial efficiencies and health and wellbeing success. Regardless of the project drivers, a POC provides the opportunity to test theories and proposals on a smaller scale in advance of any move or new expenditure, to gather feedback and opinion and make adjustments well in advance.

For success, lawyers need to understand what the proposal for change is, when it

will happen and why, and how much will it cost. They need to have confidence the data driving those decisions is robust, and finally to have the ability to adjust design proposals based on feedback. The proof of concept, created well, using the above frameworks, can deliver all of this and more.

Trends

As the workplace transforms from a static environment to a more dynamic workplace, we have observed key trends emerging across all sectors:

- **Support:** The increase of agile workplaces, due to hybrid working, means alternative places are required to focus as well as collaborate. Users need personal, accessible storage and reliable connectivity – and good coffee!

- **Hybrid:** Immersive rooms are becoming more widely used to deliver parity of experience between those in the office and those elsewhere. Immersive rooms enable better visual connectivity than static single-screen video calls.

- **Respite:** Organisations are placing increased emphasis on spaces beyond work. The physical and mental well-being of their staff is resulting in an increased provision of relaxation rooms, areas to exercise (with appropriate support facilities) and access to the external realm for fresh air.

- **Comfort:** The workforce expectation is for a workplace that is both welcoming and comfortable. It does not need to look like a home, and nor should it, but must deliver a comparable experience.

- **ESG:** As people talk about the social in ESG; there are much higher expectations that the workplace will not only be an accessible environment but that it will accommodate the needs of a diverse group of people and satisfy an egalitarian model.

- **Sustainability:** Key to many organisations, it is not only the internal policies that are changing, but tenants also have higher expectations of landlords and property management teams.

Silent Working Room

Guiding Ideologies

All workplaces must facilitate productive and purposeful work, including a POC. Our experience shows that if the following are given the appropriate attention, the result will be a successful, engaging workplace:

1. Remember the top five stress points in the workplace: ventilation, noise, natural light, workplace density and technology. If the project is in an existing building there may be additional challenges with services and plant.

2. Understand that human beings instinctively resist change, and make change strategy part of the process. If people know why something is happening they are much more likely to accept.

3. Ensure your brand plays a significant part in the workplace, supporting the culture and ethos of the firm.

4. Remember one size does not fit all.

5. Deliver an enriched environment with colour and texture to enhance productivity.

6. Provide quality tea, coffee (with a variety of milk options) and food for staff. Nourishment encourages people to break from their desks within a sociable environment.

7. Supply the right number of alternative workspaces to support the users, in an agile or open plan POC, if they are not sufficient, the perception will be that the proposed model does not work from the outset.

8. Provide equity in furniture. If sit/stand desks are being utilised in two-person offices, both desks must be adjustable, to deliver a uniform experience.

9. Consider what can be added to increase health and well-being, including amenities to support exercise, whether it is the cycle commute or lunchtime running.

10. Consider workplace distractions and annoyances, and orientate desks away from noisy printers and busy corridors.

11. Include the natural realm. Growing or farming programmes if there is outdoor space, to grow herbs, vegetables, or even a have beehive, and bring nature in, it can deliver 15% more productivity and decrease anxiety by 37%

12. Include technology professionals from the beginning of the process, from the initial stakeholder engagement, so that the needs of the business can be fully appreciated.

13. Engage teams in the selection of artwork. Art can be a positive distraction, boosting productivity and lowering stress levels

14. Consult people by asking what they want, need and desire to be happy and productive and consider whether any of these things can be introduced into the workplace. This will help employees feel both valued and engaged in the process.

15. Ensure the lighting is correct, it can affect both physical and mental health, with poor lighting resulting in eye strain and stress. Optimise the best daylight areas and think about how to utilise them, natural daylight can help increase productivity by 20%

16. Engage with staff on office etiquette, for instance, what can and cannot be eaten at desks and how best to take virtual calls.

17. Improve the sound in the workplace with acoustic materials, such as rafts or hanging panels.

18. Ensure that there are good cleaning regimes and maintenance, it does not matter how appealing it is if it is not clean, tidy and safe.

19. Ensure that the right headcount is allocated to your agile POC, if it is greater than what you intend for your relocation it is not representing an accurate future state. The novelty of the space will draw people in so a reasonable peak occupancy must be delivered.

20. Be brave, push yourself outside your comfort zone. You and your people will adapt with the right support. Change can open doors!
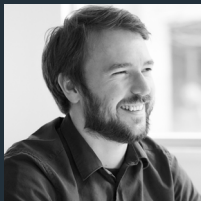
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