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REARRANGED

As COVID-19 drags on, law firms assess their largely empty offices

By Tatiana Walk-Morris

As COVID-19 halted the courts in March, Kendra Spearman finally found the time to start a nonprofit.

Starting the Justice Renewal Initiative in April, which she planned to do since law school, allowed her to serve her clients beyond the courtroom and provide services such as mental health services, job searching and education. Though Spearman, lead attorney and executive director of the Justice Renewal Initiative, has an office at 150 N. Wacker Drive, she's working from home, attending client meetings and court hearings via Zoom.

The coronavirus pandemic has freed up time to work on the nonprofit now that Spearman is free from long commutes between courthouses. Coming downtown and paying hefty parking fees was usually inconvenient for her clients coming from the South or West sides of the city, and the remote arrangement works for her, too, she said.

"When it takes me two, three hours to get to and from court just to set a date and I get home, I'm just drained from the commute, and I can't get to the substantive work like drafting motions and petitions," Spearman said. Working remotely "has given me more time to do things I wanted to do more of."

Now that the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled the traditional court system to adopt new technologies and alternative methods for administering justice, law firms are weighing what to do with their office spaces. As the pandemic continues and after it subsides, attorneys and experts say some law offices may opt to increase or slim down their spaces in response to their staff size and the number of remote workers as well as seek out enhanced safety tools and procedures in their new dwellings.

For Spearman, having a downtown law office allows her to conduct depositions in conference rooms as needed for her civil rights cases. In the future, she'd like to open an office in Austin or another community closer to where her clients live.

Plaintiff's attorney Sean Park said that for his injured clients, coming downtown to pay high parking fees and navigate high-rise elevators wasn't ideal. The majority of The Park Law Firm's client intake and visits took place outside the office before the COVID-19 pandemic. Park doesn't plan to let go of his office space, but he said the safety considerations spurred by the coronavirus pandemic, from ventilation to proper spacing between staffers, might push larger firms away from the typical law firm setup.

"I've practiced at large firms. I've practiced at smaller firms. And I think a lot of times, the law firm mentality is we need to have a prestigious address to show that we're successful and maybe even to justify the hourly rates that we're charging," Park said. "With COVID, especially given the safety concerns and considerations that you have to have in running an office, you're likely going to see a reimagining of the law office space."

Spearman's nonprofit, which services clients alongside her law practice, is comprised of volunteer staffers until she raises funding to pay them. So far, the shift to remote work due to the coronavirus pandemic as well as the Black Lives Matter protests following the killing of George Floyd have sparked more productivity among her team, she said.

Spearman said it's still undetermined whether schools will allow interns to shadow attorneys via Zoom calls. If not, having a physical office space for law students to visit is critical, especially for students interested in the issues her nonprofit aims to address, she said.

As for the shift to working from home beyond the pandemic, Charles Valente of Kaplan Saunders Valente & Beninati is concerned about younger employees being able to learn alongside their colleagues and make connections that could influence their careers as they move in and out of different firms, he said. In the interim, the firm hosts virtual lunches on Tuesdays and



Kendra Spearman

Lead Attorney and Executive Director

Justice Renewal Initiative



Sean Park

Personal Injury Attorney

The Park Law Firm

Fridays. And to acclimate one of their new employees to the office, they invite her to ask questions of her colleagues as part of its "Janice Wants to Know" segment, Valente said.

DOING THE MATH

For larger firms, the calculus for keeping their office space depends on several factors, including the firm's finances, the number of attorneys who continue to work remotely and how often they return to the office, said Steve Steinmeyer, senior managing director at JLL.

Steinmeyer has heard from law firms that have renewed their lease for a year until they better understand what lies ahead, and they don't want to remain in their offices for too short or too long of a period.

Kaplan Saunders Valente & Beninati is one of many firms deciding what to do about their lease, Valente said. The firm hasn't worked out whether each partner will have his or her own office, and the practice of hanging up pictures and awards in one's dedicated office space to impress clients could be going away, he said.

The possibility of firm mergers or other financial changes has always been there, but the pandemic has changed law offices' space considerations, Valente said. So far, the pandemic has proven that people can be productive



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Michelle Lawless

while working remotely, but the staff isn’t rushing to get back into the office, opting to do depositions and meetings digitally, he said.

Before the pandemic, some firms were examining how to be more efficient with their law spaces, but the coronavirus pandemic will likely accelerate the pace at which law firms reassess the efficiency of their workspaces, Steinmeyer said. He suspects some firms will continue to flock to newer buildings with up-to-date safety features such as better ventilation and faster elevators, leaving less-expensive buildings to suffer. Depending on their culture, a few firms may cling to their tradition of offering larger offices to partners, while others will provide partners and associates with offices of the same size and pass along the savings to employees, he said.

Seyfarth Shaw had moved into Willis Tower and offered staffers a remote work option long before the pandemic, which made the transition to full remote work easier given that it already had the infrastructure to do so, said Tracy Billows, co-managing partner of Seyfarth’s Chicago office and chair of its labor and employment practice. As the health crisis stretches on, the firm has no current plans to modify its space in Chicago, but it will reevaluate its real estate needs if things change, Billows said.

Before leaving another law firm to start her own in June, family lawyer Michelle Lawless had multiple support staffers at her disposal, including a dedicated assistant, a paralegal department, law clerks and project assistants. Now she relies on paralegals and other administrative staff offered on demand through Amata Law Office Suites.

Long before the pandemic, having a corner office space with high-end furniture was perceived as a sign of success. But Lawless predicts more clients will take advantage of virtual consultations to avoid traffic, especially if they live far from downtown. For now, she is coming into the office at about one or two days per week, and she foresees her office becoming primarily a space for her to be productive.

“Work from home is great, but there are times when home is noisy,” Lawless said. “It’s nice to have an office where I can sit and have a deposition or have a significant court appearance and know that the dog isn’t going to start barking or ... [there’s] a knock at the door.”

A FRESH FEELING

Some buildings have updated their facilities with high-tech features such as touchless door technology, ultraviolet light treatments and new HVAC systems, which tenants are taking into consideration, Steinmeyer said. Updating existing buildings with better quality ventilation could be a challenge, he added.

With the risk of transmitting the coronavirus indoors, implementing other lobby and elevator safety measures may become more complicated as more employees return to the workplace, Steinmeyer said. It could be cumbersome to take every visitor’s temperature as they enter a building. But some facilities, for example, are rolling out temperature screeners akin to an airport scanner. If a visitor’s temperature is too high, the building staff may pull them aside for a separate screening to verify the measurement and send them home if it’s too high, he said.

Office buildings are subject to the city’s capacity restrictions but getting employees through the lobby and onto the elevator in a distanced manner will be difficult for office spaces as more employees come back, he said.

Unassigned offices aren’t unusual for corporations in other fields, but law offices historically have allowed partners to customize their dedicated office spaces, Steinmeyer said. And though law firms have begun adopting unassigned offices, every attorney typically has an office on their own, and the

COVID-19 pandemic may cause concern about shared office spaces, he said.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, Seyfarth Shaw allowed remote attorneys and employees to reserve in-office space and work in the space of their choice, but partners have their own Chicago offices. In response to its coronavirus concerns, the firm created a task force to work through return-to-work procedures and health precautions; each of the firm's locations had to submit plans for maintaining a safe office environment, Billows said.

The firm has introduced new protocols including placing hand sanitizer, wipes and spray throughout the office; training employees on new expectations; screening employees entering the office; and removing and spacing furniture to maintain social distancing to keep staffers safe, she said. The firm communicated with the landlord to find out the extra precautions it planned to take and stepped up its own cleaning measures, too.

In April, Amata invested in more than \$400,000 in safety features and measures, including touchless doors and glass sneeze guards at reception areas, to address clients' safety concerns, said Ron Bockstahler, Amata's CEO and founder. The company doesn't have control over its suites' ventilation systems, but the landlords of its office spaces are reviewing new ventilation options, he said.

During the pandemic, Amata, which provides sole practitioners and smaller firms virtual services and office spaces, received more requests from smaller law firms of between five and 20 attorneys for virtual support services and scaled-back office space, Bockstahler said. Some clients have said they will have a few attorneys return to the office once the coronavirus pandemic has passed, but they're swapping out direct leases for Amata's services, he said.

While some law firms seek to downsize their space, others that are looking to grow their practices may be in the market for larger spaces than before as they poach talent from competitors, Steinmeyer said. Regardless of headcount changes, a more spacious design could be well suited for a pandemic environment because of the physical distance it allows between employees, he said.

At present, law firms in Chicago typically provide individual office spaces for their partners and associates, but support staffs, which have shrunk over the years, usually have workspaces in the middle of a floor, Steinmeyer said. As they reevaluate their spaces, firms may seek out more translucent or transparent divided spaces in the middle of their offices to house their associates and other staffers, allowing them to fit more attorneys per floor, he added.

Though Seyfarth has no plans to alter the size of its Chicago office, the firm plans to continue offering employees the flexibility to work from home in the future, Billows said. Its safety protocols like having more sanitizer available throughout the office for staffers will probably remain in place for the long term, she said.

Such flexibility has always been part of the firm's culture, but the pandemic has changed how it maintains a safe workplace for its staffers, a shift that has also occurred at other companies, too, Billows said.

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Tracy Billows

Co-Managing Partner

Seyfarth Shaw

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