

Lynn McGregor



## Your Office Environment Can Improve Your Profitability

As January 1, 2000, approaches, notarial and legal firms must stay operationally efficient and technically safe, profitable, and “expandable”—while projecting an image that comforts and supports employees and clients.

Leaders in successful operations, now and in future, need to better appreciate the importance that office facilities and layout play in achieving the firm’s business and financial objectives.

Office space today must provide a *balance* by:

- ensuring cost-efficiency,
- promoting productivity, and
- supporting the recruiting and retaining of top talent.

A recent study contrasted traditional office-space standards with a new approach that features smaller offices—equally sized and modularly outfitted—for all lawyers in a firm. An increased number of small meeting rooms are available for spontaneous meetings. Using this new arrangement, a firm can accommodate 20 percent more lawyers per floor. This means 20 percent more revenue-generating power per floor.

Can a professional, who has been working his or her entire career to earn

a large corner office, suddenly be moved into a smaller office? Certainly. That smaller office could be far more ergonomic, and much better appointed. This concept still recognizes seniority, but not through the awarding of a larger office. Instead, special appointments are made to the standard office, such as a

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significant piece of artwork, distinctive lighting, unique seating, etc. These touches can be far more personal (for example, hanging the work of a favourite artist), and they are portable. Because these personal touches occupy the same square footage as “standard” fixtures, future re-organization of practise groups on a floor is easy to

accommodate. And, at the end of the day, higher profits can mean bigger pay cheques. Which is more important to a person’s happiness level?

Today’s high-tech world is definitely an employee’s market. Organizations must understand that their facilities can assist them in attracting the type of individuals they want, and that the right environment will help *retain* precious staff members.

Studies confirm that potential employees rate the work environment as the second-most-important factor in determining whether or not to join a firm. The merits of the work environment are considered, along with the salary. Wise employers are carefully evaluating the corporate culture preferences of the type of employees they want to hire—and are ensuring that their offices are designed to support that culture. Do your facilities stand out—and send the correct message to the potential employee touring your premises?

Some forward-thinking legal firms are working to design and implement new modular workstations for articling students. In the past, students received “hand-me-down” furniture, and had to

work hard to earn a good desk and a door for privacy. In today's market, legal firms are in competition to "woo" the top students.

### **Enlist Staff Input**

Unless we establish what is functionally and culturally needed to keep the users of our office space happy and profit-producing, we invite trouble. Staff may feel cheated, abused, and disposable—and they may well opt to consider job offers elsewhere.

*Before* potential solutions are developed, it is important to ensure that staff within an organization are asked for their opinion of what currently works well in the space, and what needs improvement. This sends the message that employees *matter*—and that the employer cares about their opinion and their happiness. It is equally important to convey—before discussion is opened for staff input—that a democratic

consensus must be reached in developing new standards.

Effective office design should be developed by a team of people, including:

- the CEO with the corporate vision;
- the Human Resources manager;
- the Facilities manager;
- a financial reviewer; and
- a professional consultant charged with analyzing the pros and cons of the current conditions. He or she will establish solution approaches that respect and address the cultural and functional needs of the individuals who *use* the space.

### **Determine the impact of Change**

A new facility standard should never be imposed without first going through the process of checking the potential impact of the change. A professional consultant can assist in the evaluation of the

impact. To achieve the appropriate space for your people, your consultant should share your vision and your enthusiasm for the opportunity of beneficial change, while respecting the reasons for your past successes. Successful designers of office spaces need to be experts in the areas of productivity, motivation, and political sensitivity. A design consultant with a seasoned perspective can provide you with a specific analysis of where your organization could benefit from a change. ▲

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