



How Denver Law Offices Are Returning to Work

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Businesses across the globe have faced a variety of challenges in returning to the office amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Responding to these unprecedented circumstances requires finding a balance between upholding and instituting policy, and ensuring health and safety, which could involve altering the physical workspace. As an architecture firm that supports workplace design, Eppstein Uhen Architects (EUA) has spoken with many clients about how they are handling this transition. This article highlights conversations with Denver-area leaders in the law sector, an industry with a traditionally in-person, office-intensive design. Their organizations operate in a variety of settings—from a new office design completed within weeks of the pandemic’s start to a legal coworking space. While each was deemed an essential business

and permitted to stay open during the pandemic, their approaches varied considerably.

Arnold & Porter: Slow and Steady

With 14 offices across the globe, Arnold & Porter has taken a phased approach to its return based on each office’s geographic setting. EUA helped the firm put the finishing touches on its new 25,000 square foot Denver office. We met virtually with Christopher Ruschaupt, director of administrative project management, and Scott McCombs, Denver office administrator, who described their firm’s “slow and steady” approach to returning to the office.

Transitioning to a Remote Work Force

According to McCombs, “business remained steady through March and April, in part because our clients needed legal guidance on how best

to navigate the impacts of COVID-19.” When it came to the immediate need to work remotely, he felt Arnold & Porter transitioned seamlessly. Most case files were already in electronic format, and the firm’s technology infrastructure allowed everybody to work effectively from home, even staff members who previously had no remote access. Ruschaupt added that before the pandemic there was no formal work-from-home policy, but technology quickly stepped in, allowing for industry-standard remote working requirements, such as enhanced videoconferencing technologies (e.g., Zoom and webinars), to support communication and connectivity between attorneys, clients, and staff.

Modifications to the Denver Office

When it came to the layout of the Denver office space, Ruschaupt said there was not much to address because there are only four workstations located in the shared office area, with each occupant facing away from each other and all other workspaces enclosed. “Fortunately support densities have come down, so we are not benching on top of each other. Over time we’ve been increasing that ratio,” he said. Ruschaupt discussed future considerations, including whether people will be sitting in open spaces, and if so, how to maintain a safe spread.

The current plan is to close some spaces traditionally used by groups, like conference rooms. In many cases, larger conference rooms will be used to support the six-foot social distancing requirement. He added that most of the changes relate to policy versus physical guidelines. Each Arnold & Porter office has a different real estate footprint, so the firm will adapt based on the constraints presented at each location. For all offices, the firm has introduced signage and paths of travel, and the new Denver office is working on a plan to slowly migrate back with alternating schedules for staff, monitoring density while allowing people to work safely.

Looking Ahead

Due to its size and various geographic locations, Arnold & Porter has always tried to be as space-efficient as possible. In the practice of law, this can be a difficult approach, balancing enough reasonable vacancy to adapt to changes

in hiring, acquisitions, and practice group shifts without having multiple offices sitting free. But Ruschaupt predicts there will likely be a change, with potential for some level of office-sharing considered in the future.

LawBank: Maintaining Operations

LawBank is a shared office space for lawyers that operates in the Denver metro area but plans to expand across the United States. We talked with co-owners Jay Kamlet, founding partner of Kamlet LLP and founder of LawBank, and CEO Jordan Deifik, as well as their marketing consultant Meranda Vieyra. An underlying theme of our conversation was the importance of adding value to membership during COVID-19 while creating a safe environment that supports diversity and inclusion.

Creating a Safe Space

LawBank's approach was to maintain normal operations as much as possible. With lawyers considered essential personnel, LawBank kept its doors open from the onset of the pandemic. Within the open space, tables are reconfigured to create additional distance, and in conference spaces disposable paper is placed over tables and replaced after use. Cubicles with glass partitions between them were already available, and most tenants have been opting to use these spaces rather than the open tables. Overall, the transition has gone smoothly for LawBank, with tenants still coming to the office for meetings and actively practicing social distancing and following mask guidelines. Deifik said, "It's important to us to follow guidelines, but it's also important to show that we care about our members, taking necessary steps to protect them at this time as well."

Preserving Community

When the pandemic hit, LawBank had to think on its toes about how to continue to provide value for members who were not actively using the office. Said Kamlet, "It's all about maintaining the community, and no matter what the space looks like, we are laser focused on helping continue that sense of community." Previously, one to two monthly educational sessions were offered as a way for members and nonmembers to earn

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CLE credits through guest speakers and panels relevant to the legal industry. LawBank moved to a digital weekly offering starting in March. While the connections made are different in a virtual setting, they have seen some sessions achieve higher than normal attendance rates. Deifik said, "This has been about taking a bad situation and still finding ways that, even while they may not be the same experience at the time, add value operationally."

Looking Ahead

LawBank has seen an increase in tenant interest during the pandemic. "This is exactly what we built this for," said Deifik, "to appeal to practitioners who were used to firm amenities but didn't want to deal with the politics or requirements of working with a firm." Still, he explained, "It's the uncertainty in terms of trying to standardize layouts and operations that keeps me up at night." With active plans for growth across the United States, Deifik says he will continue to focus on positive tenant experiences while developing floor plans that optimize revenue generation.

Common Thread: Adaptability

Though these organizations approached operations differently, a common theme in our discussions was adaptability; with change of this scale thrust upon an entire society, we all have to be agile. This forced divorce from the office, while inconvenient for many and desired by some, has changed the dynamic and expectations of today's workforce. No one knows what the future holds, but pre-COVID-19, we were already seeing a shift in law firm design toward "right sizing"—decreasing private office space to increase flexibility and maximize real estate.

The key to employee satisfaction may be in how law firms handle remote work. Working from home is no longer an outlier, making now a good time to reevaluate real estate portfolios and leases for a solution that makes sense. For example, moving to a free address design would give attorneys the flexibility to work remotely but still come to the office for collaborative work and meetings. This setup could also attract talent.

With furloughs and layoffs, attorneys are now looking to leverage remote work and collaboration among their peers, resulting in a cultural shift. This begs the question of how this shift will play out in the future. In a May 2020 law firm survey, Loeb Leadership reported that 85% of its respondents expressed confidence that they could remain productive while working from home, with 67% preferring that their jobs stay remote.¹ Some measure of in-office/in-person interactions will likely always be necessary, so in addition to policy, law firms must embrace designs that support employees' choices of where and how they work best. **CL**

Eppstein Uhen Architects (EUA) is an architecture, interior design, and master planning firm with locations in Milwaukee (headquarters) and Madison, Wisconsin, and Denver, Colorado. A version of this article appeared in *Colorado Real Estate Journal*, Nov. 7-14, 2020 edition.

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NOTE

1. Loeb Leadership, *The Legal Industry's Handling of the Disruption Caused by COVID-19: The Findings Report* (May 2020), <https://loebleadership.com/s/Legal-Industry-Survey-May-2020.pdf>.