

To attract workers back, offices are being designed around needs and comfort

SUZANNE BOWNESS

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Even before national law firm Cassels Brock & Blackwell LLP started their office redesign in spring 2021, executives had already been leaning toward a less traditional approach than the stereotypical mahogany-panelled, closed-door-offices-around-the-perimeter design of law firms past. “We knew early on we wanted to be innovative, committed to making a warm, welcoming, inclusive space to collaborate in,” says managing partner Kristin Taylor, who led the charge on the renovation when the firm moved to the Bay Adelaide Centre in downtown Toronto.

The pandemic only confirmed the need for flexibility, and the Cassels office space, designed by global architecture firm Gensler, reflects a lot of new design ideas. Workstations are identical regardless of role, including for senior lawyers. Each workstation is 10 by 12 feet with light wood, coloured desks, glass walls on all sides with a privacy frost panel at eye level, multiple filing cabinets, cupboard doors with white-board fronts and sit-stand desks.

“It’s a third the size of my old office but so much more functional and inviting,” says Ms. Taylor, adding that her assistant has the same view and light, making it very different from the traditional setup.

With 525 lawyers and staff in Toronto alone (Cassels also has offices in Vancouver and Calgary) over five floors, they've also reserved 20 per cent of the office for hotelling or hot-desking (sign-in desks used by multiple employees), and a third of the space can convert into more workstations for their growing workforce. Besides these individual spaces, common spaces have changed as well.

The firm has installed cafes, minus the baristas, on every floor so lawyers can invite clients over to their own space rather than leave the building. While there are still traditional boardrooms, they've added a lot more types of meeting spaces, including boardrooms with couches — Taylor notes that if you're doing a 12-hour mediation, you don't want to sit in the same chair — plus event spaces. The firm even has workspaces to offer clients a space if they need it.

Gensler principal and strategy director Kevin Katigbak says the most consistent request from clients is variety.

These requests include enclosed spaces, open spaces, formal and informal spaces, with diversity of options being key not necessarily a specific space type throughout. At the top of the list is a focus room with a closed door. "Say you're at a desk or in the open plan, and your phone call goes from congenial to a bit tense, you can get up really quickly and walk away from that space and close the door. That is absolutely one of the No. 1 request," he says. Noise- and technology-free space is another top request, as are informal spaces that look more like homes than formal offices.

These requests are confirmed by Gensler's first Canadian workplace survey, which surveyed 2,000 office workers in 2022 and found employees' top three reasons to come to the office were "to focus on work," "socialize with colleagues" and "access technology."

On average, respondents said they spent 53 per cent of their work time at a company building, 30 per cent from home, and 17 per cent from other locations. Selecting from a list of spaces they would like to inspire office design, respondents chose residential, boutique hotel, coffee shop and creative lab.

In response to a question of how many days they would add to their work-from-office mix if the company provided an ideal environment, 48 per cent of participants said one more day per week, 25 per cent said no change, 12 per cent said one day more per month and 16 per cent said they would be back at the office full time.

The goal for all these changes, according to Rebecca Wignall, team lead and senior interior designer at Canadian firm SGH Design Partners, is to attract those reluctant work-from-home fans back to the office.

“Before, we used to see a variety of requests that might have been more linked to business. Now, clients are largely maintaining their spaces because they’re not looking to make big real estate decisions [like moving or downsizing], but to make spaces more attractive to bring people back,” Ms. Wignall says.

One of the most common requests she hears from clients is for spaces that facilitate virtual collaboration, whether one-person phone rooms or smaller boardrooms. “Pre-pandemic, boardrooms were built around people having large meetings of 12. Coming back, there’s a lot more need for more enclosed spaces for smaller groups of people,” says Ms. Wignall.

Hybrid work is having an impact on the amount of individual space needed, with many clients moving to a two-to-one ratio of employees to desks, reducing desks by half. Whereas pre-pandemic there was a trend toward benching, with long rows of desks grouped together to allow for collaboration, postpandemic the shift has been in the opposite direction. “We’re seeing that landscape regress, back to something that I think is a bit more human and palatable for employees,” says Ms. Wignall.

Adding comforts is another aspect of this trend. At Cassels, showers for employees who bike to work, a Peloton workout room and sit-stand desks as standard instead of by request are just a few added perks. A lactation room was top-of-mind for Ms. Taylor. “My daughters are 22 and 19, but that’s not so long ago that I don’t remember pumping at work in bathroom cubicles,” she says. In fact, that sort of people-first mindset drove their whole plan. “Once you get over the concept that you’re trying to force people into offices, you get to think about what people need to succeed at work. [A] lot of things that make a difference in peoples’ working lives and build loyalty to the organization.”

Editor’s note: An earlier version of this story stated the law firm Cassels Brock & Blackwell LLP had 450 lawyers in Toronto. In fact, it has 525 staff in total, including lawyers, in Toronto. This version has been corrected.