



RETURN TO OFFICE SUCCESS:

SHORT-TERM V. LONG-TERM
WORKPLACE STRATEGY

Savills introduced “The Way Forward for Law Firm Offices” series in November to serve as a guide to redefine the purpose and value of law firm office space. **In our first article**, the Savills Legal Tenant Practice Group offered advice for how to lay the groundwork for data-driven real estate decision-making. Our team continues the series with advice for how to assess and prepare your current offices and adjust your workplace strategy for the new priorities of face-to-face work.

RETURN TO OFFICE SUCCESS — Short-term v. Long-term Workplace Strategy

The first step in assessing your law firm’s return-to-office strategy is to understand your current real estate obligations and the flexibility of your office as configured (our previous article discussed gathering this information as a basic metric for decision-making):



How much time do you have left on your term?



How much capital do you have invested in your current location?



How much demand is there in the market for your specific location?



And, finally, how dependent is your landlord on your current lease?



These are questions best answered with your real estate advisor in conjunction with your finance and operations teams. Understanding your short-term flexibility, or lack thereof, will help guide your short-term decision-making and investment. Resist the urge to let your competitors guide your actions.

Depending on individual circumstances as lease expirations come up, many firms are making the decision to remain in place and opting for short-term lease extensions —absorbing growth within the same footprint through doubling or hoteling—while others, more confident about their crystal balls, are taking advantage of tenant-friendly market conditions to secure new, long-term space commitments reflecting the new normal.

What’s important is to let your firm’s business priorities and real estate commitments guide both your short and long-term return-to-office (RTO) strategies. And, while the Omicron variant may cause delays to your firm’s timelines for bringing your people back onsite, there is no avoiding the necessity of a well-informed workplace strategy that is designed for the post-pandemic world.

Short-term Goals — Planning for RTO Success

Most law firms will be contemplating a return-to-office strategy based on occupancy in their current space. The short-term goal is to offer a post-pandemic office environment and workplace experience that is attractive, productive and relevant to your people and your clients.

The first step is communicating a clear purpose to the in-person experience — what makes it preferential to remote work? How are you acknowledging and addressing the concerns for those returning? It's critical to articulate your firm's priorities — not only to provide compelling direction, but to ensure clarity of purpose and consensus among firm and practice leadership.

In addition to providing an environment that considers and fosters good health and well-being, key in-person experience priorities include supporting mentorship, culture building, talent retention, recruitment and client experience, as well as practice group cross-selling and marketing.

Key In-Person Experience Priorities



The best planning needs the best logistical support.



It's critical to support your intentions within a planning framework. For example, advance scheduling is fundamental and needs to be balanced with individual attendance preferences. Mentorship requires both mentors and mentees be onsite at the same time. And, culture building begins with fostering a strong sense of lateral camaraderie — which will benefit from talent “classes” working in the office together.

Since most firms will begin with a hybrid office approach, it's also critical that technology solutions are in place to support seamless communications with remote and onsite colleagues and clients. And, reliable, user-friendly technology tools can provide the flexibility to schedule, customize and communicate workspace assignments.

Being proactive and thoughtful about these scheduling, communication and assignment logistics will result in more productive RTO experiences and show respect for everyone's time and commuting efforts. Being open and responsive to ongoing feedback will show sensitivity to an evolving new workplace and a commitment to developing the right solutions for both your people and clients. In addition, communicating how the new space protocols are designed to support a healthy workplace will demonstrate concern to existing and new talent alike.



Workplace strategists and space planners can assist in developing different design and cost options to accommodate your new priorities, while respecting your firm's specific tolerance for change.

Map Return-to-Office Priorities with Business Priorities

Most importantly, RTO priorities need to be led by your firm's specific business priorities. Planning efforts should be informed by what primary business challenges your law firm is facing — and what can be enhanced with on-site work. Fundamental priorities may include the need to elevate client interaction and confirm key client relationships, supporting talent attraction and retention, as well as investing in specific practice group requirements. The key to success is to be led by your own priorities and due diligence, not your competitors' RTO response. Conversely, if there are elements of your firm's back-office operations that have been impacted favorably by remote work, adoption of new remote workflows could free up space for added collaboration areas or alternative flexible space use.

Viewing your office with a post-pandemic eye, it's likely your management team will realize that any pre-pandemic inefficiencies and underutilization of space use are now amplified, offering more opportunities to reconfigure and reassign use based on meeting the demand for in-person, activity-based work requirements. Begin by mapping your priorities to the space types and settings needed throughout the onsite workday. Be sure to consider the role new amenity and collaboration spaces will play in supporting goals for diversity, equity and inclusion, as well as renewed mentorship and overall connection among attorneys and staff alike.

Rethinking Current Space Use and Design

With RTO priorities confirmed, the challenge is how to optimize current space use to meet the new requirements. Even for law firms whose offices offer limited reconfigurable systems furniture and open space environments, a thoughtful workplace strategy can optimize seat assignments for new in-person priorities and team building.

Even the most traditional firms, with variable private office sizes based on seniority, have opportunities now to turn larger offices into shared spaces, while still offering partners in part-time attendance their personal desk space and privacy when in the office. More progressive office environments offer an expanded set of options for creating new collaboration spaces. And, all firms have a new opportunity to reflect on how to express their unique brand and work culture through design — from reception and client meeting spaces to common areas and individual workspaces.

Your team will need to assess the firm's flexibility to reconfigure space with minimal capital outlay within your current lease term. Workplace strategists and space planners can assist in developing different design and cost options to accommodate your new priorities, while respecting your firm's specific tolerance for change.



Seeking Ongoing Feedback and Continuous Improvement

Open communication is critical to success. It's important to accept that all proposed solutions, no matter how well investigated, are experimental. Option development and contingency planning are key considerations for risk management, but only real-world trial will provide the feedback to measure success. Seek active feedback from all levels of your organization and be open to changing direction if needed. Building an agile workplace of the future will be an iterative process. Handled well, RTO success could be measured in a new level of trust and collaboration in your law firm that will strengthen your culture for the long-term.

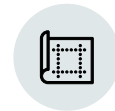
Next Steps — Long-term Real Estate Planning for Sustainable Success

With your firm's RTO plans in place, your management team has a new work model to observe and assess, and an evolving business model to inform future real estate plans. Your long-term real estate strategy begins with understanding if your current space obligations are appropriate for sustainable success. **In a post-pandemic world, there are some new key questions for your team's consideration:**



Have geographic talent residency and recruitment goals changed post-COVID?

How do those revelations challenge current space use and locations?



Do the cost and flexibility of current space obligations support optimal hybrid space use?

The answers to these questions lie in your firm's unique and evolving practice as well as your RTO strategy and response.

Next In The Series — Technology Solutions For Hybrid Work

An effective RTO and hybrid workplace strategy will also rely on investment in a user-friendly, secure and reliable technology platform to enable seamless on- and off-site engagement with your people and clients.

"The Way Forward for Law Firm Offices" series will continue with an exploration of the best new technology tools as well as configuration and adoption strategies to meet the new challenges of an agile hybrid workplace strategy.

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