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THE LEGAL TENANT

What sets law firm build-outs apart from traditional commercial offices

By **Fred Buscaglia**, Executive Director, Savills

Produced in partnership with the Savills Program and Project Management (PPM) team





\$400-\$600/sf

Furnished law firm space today



70%-80%

Private office space relative to open space in a typical law firm



\$65+/sf

Furniture today, up from \$45-\$50/sf pre-pandemic

A high-end law firm build-out runs well above a typical commercial office, and the gap is not about buying nicer finishes. It comes from volume, layout and acoustics, all of which follow from how law firms actually work.

1.

LAW FIRM SPACE COSTS FAR MORE THAN A TYPICAL OFFICE

A high-end law firm build-out runs \$400 to \$600 per square foot (psf) furnished, and one national architecture firm has priced a complete fit-out with audiovisual (AV) and low-voltage systems at \$650 psf—well above a typical commercial office. The gap comes down to a handful of recurring factors: acoustic privacy, HVAC demands from dense private-office layouts and premium finishes that firms are reluctant to compromise on. The range is wide because every firm's culture shows up directly in the budget.

2.

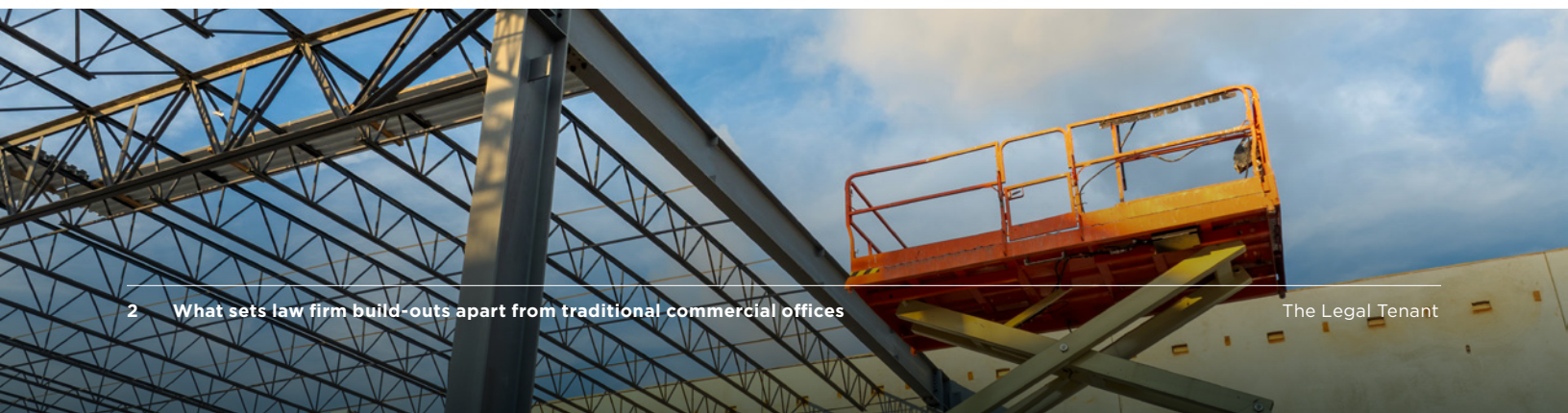
ACOUSTIC PRIVACY: THE COST OF SILENCE

Acoustic privacy is the biggest cost driver, and it shows up twice. Since law firms typically are a much higher percentage of private offices relative to open space, office front costs are considerably higher. On a comparable 20,000- to 25,000-square-foot (sf) build-out, a traditional tenant might use 500 linear feet of office frontage, while a law firm often needs 3,500—and they typically layer multiple treatments (sound masking, tonal cancellation, acoustic-rated sheetrock) instead of picking one, adding up to 30% to that portion of construction. The heavier design work is also why architects with legal-sector experience cost more and skipping that experience to save on fees rarely pays off.

3.

PRIVATE OFFICES BREAK THE HVAC MATH

Private offices force air distribution to be designed around rooms instead of zones, so each one needs its own ductwork, controls and tie-in to the building system. As a result, HVAC, electrical and carpentry are the three biggest subcontractor costs. A typical floor runs one variable air volume (VAV) box per five or six offices, while a law firm at 80% private offices needs one per two or three. On a 25,000- to 30,000-sf floor, that's 25 to 30 boxes, several hundred thousand dollars of added infrastructure and 12 to 16 weeks of lead time plus another 14 to 18 more if supplemental cooling is needed.



4.

ESCALATION HAS HIT THE LEGAL-HEAVY LINE ITEMS HARDEST

The categories that have risen most since the pandemic are exactly what law firms buy most of. Furniture costs have increased from \$45–\$50 psf to \$65+ psf, and above \$125 psf at some firms, while AV costs have climbed from \$15–\$18 psf to \$30–\$35 psf or higher. Building management systems have become more sophisticated and expensive, labor costs keep climbing (especially non-union labor in markets like New York), and tariffs have raised costs on imported components such as HVAC control boards. These increases have pushed variable refrigerant flow equipment up roughly 25% this year.

5.

THERE IS REAL ROOM TO MANEUVER—JUST NOT EVERYWHERE

Furniture and technology infrastructure are where firms can safely cut costs through measures such as fewer network drops and lower workstation power loads. Office fronts and HVAC are not, as compromising there tends to mean costly remediation within a year. Reusing existing air distribution, sprinkler and ceiling infrastructure in second-generation space can save 30%+ versus raw space, as long as walls stay put and the space isn't more than 10 to 15 years old.

The same build-out, two different tenants

	Typical commercial tenant	Law firm
Office front on a comparable 20,000- to 25,000-sf build-out	Might use 500 linear feet	Often needs 3,500 linear feet
Offices served per VAV box	Five or six	Two or three, at 80% private offices
Acoustic approach	One solution, or none	Layered acoustic treatments, including sound masking, tonal cancellation and acoustic-rated sheetrock



THE SOURCE

Fred Buscaglia, Executive Director at Savills, has spent more than 20 years on this problem, including managing real estate directly for law firms such as Davis Polk and Winston & Strawn before moving into brokerage and project management. Figures reflect his market observations as of July 2026 and are indicative, not a project estimate.



Contacts

Fred Buscaglia

Executive Director, Savills
fbuscaglia@savills.us
+1 646 296 5994

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