

office space

Maximizing the Efficiencies of the New Office Designs through the Effective Deployment of Support Services



Robert C. Mattern

Mattern & Associates
rmattern@matternassoc.com

Office Design: This article will focus on the structuring of the support services to maximize the efficiency of the new wave of the legal office environment. Areas of focus will be deployment of multifunctional equipment, exploration of the services that should be offered and the concept of off-site services.

The role of support services in the new wave of law firm space design is critical to the success of maximizing the efficiencies and effectiveness of the new layouts. Equally, if not more important, is the technology utilized to support these services. The move to dedicated conference center floors, increased usage of print and scan technology, flex space, and the use of pod type layouts necessitates a thorough understanding of the new role of the support services in supporting these initiatives. Another role is the firm's strategy on cost recovery and the relationship with the support services.

Support Services — Defined

For the purposes of this article support services are defined as reprographics (copy), both convenience and centralized, color and black and white, incoming and outgoing mail delivery, scanning, printing, convenience scanning and "light" on-site litigation scanning usually accomplished, but not always through the use of the front-end portal to the firm's network.

What is Happening Now?

Most firms are in the process of migrating from a copy and fax world to the print and scan world. Multi-Functional Devices (MFDs) also known as Multi-

Functional Printers (MFPs), which are "copiers" capable of printing, copying and scanning, are slowly becoming the backbone of the firm's output. The biggest shift in support services in the past two years is the explosion of print output and the decrease in copy output. It is our experience that a typical firm's print volume is 200% greater than its copy volume. Very few CFOs will dispute the decrease in per attorney billable copy volume. Depending upon whether the firm is capturing and billing for printing is the key that has proved devastating from a financial point of view. Equally important is the continued decline in the usage of facsimile and the subsequent increase in scan/PDF volume. Both of these factors must be weighed in adapting support services to the new law firm design concepts.

Dedicated Conference Center Floors

Probably the most prevalent movement in office space design in the last two years has been the proliferation of law firms dedicating entire floors for conference centers. These floors are staffed with reception, require hospitality services, have heavy audio/visual requirements and in our experience, sporadic support services (copy, scanning, print). While it looks good to clients and upper management, the placement of a dedicated support services center staffed with dedicated personnel can be dramatic overkill and a waste of labor hours.

What we typically recommend is one or possibly two support services centers. Depending upon the footprint of the floor it can be equipped with a mid-volume MFD

with facsimile functionality, color output capability either provided via laser printer or MFD, and of course, B&W print capability provided through the MFD or again, a laser printer. Dedicated labor should be assigned to the floor on an as-needed basis determined by the usage and the functions utilizing the facility.

Flexible Work Areas

The second design feature that has had an impact on the support services is the growth of flex zones. These are areas on the floor that can be modified through the use of modular workstations. Many times the zones are divided with hard walls with doors giving the appearance of a "normal" permanent design. These flex zones can be configured with paralegal offices, work or war rooms, storage areas, document prep areas, or scanning centers. Obviously the usage will dictate the type of services that the support services must provide, and the equipment that should be provided. This is where the flexibility aspect of your equipment contract comes in handy. Under your equipment or outsourcing agreement, you should have the ability to upgrade, downgrade or delete equipment at your choosing without incurring lease buyouts, early termination fees, penalties, etc.

Did you hear the joke about why a law firm has a 100 page per minute copier running 1,000 pages per month?

The problem is that it isn't a joke.

Your equipment fleet, as with your labor, should be able to be right-sized as the service and volume levels fluctuate. Failure to do so can result in bloated per copy labor and equipment costs.

Pod Work Areas

Another movement we are seeing in law office design is the use of "pod" type work areas. These are groupings of secretaries, paralegals, and attorneys that share the same area and the same resources. These pods are ideally suited for the sharing of one mid-volume MFD or MFP. The strategy here should be limiting the number of standalone laser printers which are your most expensive form of output. In addition to the workflow benefits of the pod design, their use also lends themselves to the shared use of support service assets resulting in a lower cost per attorney.

Offsite Support Facilities

While on the subject of new space designs and their impact on the support services, it is worthwhile to note that a number of firms have relocated some of their back office functions. They have moved accounting, human resources, and word processing to separate facilities located in the same or separate cities, the suburbs, different geographic regions, or even overseas. It should also be noted that outsourcing providers are also offering their services in this capacity. While this concept makes tremendous sense under the right situation, it obviously does have limitations for quick turnaround/on-demand functions such as reprographics and scanning. Also, the cost for structuring services to support these now "remote" locations may negate the anticipated cost savings.

Flexibility is the Key

In summary, the key word for the marriage of support services and the new office designs is flexibility. Flexibility in the type of services provided, flexibility in how the services are provided and flexibility in equipment contract terms. The most efficient office designs are worthless unless the services to support the end-users are in place to maximize their efficiency.

Robert C. Mattern is President of Mattern & Associates LLC, support services and cost recovery advisors that service mid-sized and large law firms. Rob can be reached at rmattern@matternassoc.com or comment on this article on their blog www.matternoffact.com.



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