

Baker McKenzie better together – the benefits of an open-plan office

With a big-ticket office move potentially on the horizon, Baker McKenzie was keen to trial new ways of working

By Gabriella Kane 10 June 2019

The move to open-plan working has considerable economic impetus. According to *The Lawyer* Operational Health Check 2019 report, the average cost of a London office for larger law firms is £2.72m, or £72.65 per sq ft. In 2014/2015, it was £2.09m or £57.42 per sq ft, representing an eye-watering 26.5 per cent hike in just four years. To move away from cellular to open-plan arrangement is fast becoming a priority for many.

At the same time, the function of business services has been dramatically affected by technology. Firms' document production and secretarial teams have always been the largest within business services, yet the use of technology to automate tasks previously carried out by this group means some of these more traditional roles are on their way out, or under significant pressure to adapt.

The Operational Health Check report states that document production staff represented, on average, 47.9 per cent of all business services staff in 2014/15. By 2017/18, they accounted for 42.8 per cent of all business services staff. While the average number of technology staff in firms is still considerably lower than the number of document production staff, it is on the rise. The typical number of technology staff per firm in 2014/15 was 17.9 – in four years this has risen to 21.4. Having been one of the first firms to establish an entirely separate legal services office (Manila in 2000), Baker McKenzie has continued to invest in its back office operations.

Last summer, it added 150 new roles to its Belfast legal services centre after securing extra space in the city. This was followed by the announcement that it was opening a global support facility in Tampa, Florida, and a business services centre in Buenos Aires. In September, it was revealed that 350 London roles were under consultation as part of a review of Bakers' professional and business services team. The firm stated that its three-year reorganisation will form a 'dual-track' approach –

first assessing the professional and business services teams globally and then looking at investments in new capabilities and technologies. Bakers is not alone in this: other firms to have concluded business services consultations over the past year include Ashurst, Pinsent Masons and Hogan Lovells. This case study examines how, in this context of significant change, Bakers moved its business services and corporate teams in its London office at 100 New Bridge Street to a fully open-plan environment.

Space issue

During mid to late 2017, Bakers began trialling new ways of working. Based on its growth forecast, coupled with its current workspace configurations, it estimated that it would soon run out of space in its London HQ. *“The benefit of a non-cellular based environment is you can fit more people on the same floor plate, allowing for more contraction and expansion. We’re creating additional growth space,”* says Bakers London chief operating officer Simon Thompson.

With five years left on its lease – not an inordinate amount of time to dawdle – Bakers was keen to trial new ways of working while it decided whether to remain in its current building or move.

The shift to open-plan involved two key elements: using the swing space as a testing ground for new methods of working which could be implemented when Bakers’ lease expires, and the redesign of the fourth floor at Bakers’ base in 100 Bridge Street. Once the corporate team had moved up into the fourth floor, the plan was to bring business services back into the main building on the seventh and eighth floors which had been vacated by the corporate team. A total refit was also scheduled to take place.

Stage one: testing the water

The firm organised a survey with workplace consultancy Leesman to understand what was working and what needed improving. It had input from different working groups throughout the stages of the project and provided regular updates via town halls, Q&A sessions, the intranet and email newsletters. In order to get a full picture of staff reaction, the firm collated anonymous thoughts and concerns using both an email box and a physical postbox. In addition, it organised tours of the new space following the strip-out of the floors and during the refurbishment. With sponsorship from London managing partner Alex Chadwick, the project was led by London COO

Simon Thompson and facilities director Scott Jones.

Bakers allocated a project manager and worked with architectural firm **KKS**, mechanical and electrical consultants Hurley Palmer Flatt and quantity surveyors Alinea. Furniture advisory and procurement was provided by Broadbase FS.

Stage two: the business services move

In the summer of 2018, the firm shifted its business services staff from the fourth floor of 100 New Bridge Street to a new 'swing space' at 5 Fleet Place. The project kicked off in November 2017 and phase one went live at 5 Fleet Place on 30 July 2018.

With the majority of the London-based business services team having moved into a single open-plan office floor, the firm implemented the following:

- Agile team zones (instead of allocated one-to-one desking)
- Desk-sharing (ratio around 1:1.2)
- Reduction of storage provision by 30 per cent
- Access to flexi-offices and quiet rooms
- New AV infrastructure to meeting rooms
- Open-plan meeting zones, including booths, sofas and meeting tables
- Elimination of pedestals and introduction of 'hot boxes' and personal lockers to facilitate clear desk practice
- Social break-out space, with food offerings, free coffee and TV screens for staff and acoustic baffles to mitigate noise.

The firm moved around 180 business services people in total. The reaction from staff has been positive: the firm cites the openness, colours, break-out space and meeting areas as all major factors.

Stage three: the corporate team move

The next phase of the project – the relocation of corporate teams from levels seven and eight to the fourth floor – went live on 11 March. Following input from the practice group business manager and two partners, the firm flexed its approach to layout to respond to different needs. *"Business services teams are much happier to sit with their colleagues in an open-plan environment, while the corporate lawyers place more emphasis on quiet spaces to focus and concentrate, and on easy access to small meeting rooms for confidential phone calls,"* says Thompson.

All legal staff other than PAs in the corporate team had been based in private offices, which comprised of seven single offices, 48 double offices, five three-personnel

offices and two four-personnel offices. By contrast, there are no private offices on the new fourth floor. In total, the firm moved just under 190 people, including about 50 partners and about 26 PAs.

Thompson describes it as an activity-based space, designed to support different ways of working. He adds: *“There are social, collaboration and deal spaces where lawyers can congregate. The design aims to enhance and support better collaboration.”*

While the teams were kept the same, their adjacencies were changed: in short order, the feedback from the corporate team was that opening up the floor and eliminating private offices improved communications and collaborations. With 220 desks and 23,500 sq ft, Bakers’ fourth floor is slightly smaller than the 25,000 sq ft than the combined seventh and eighth floors covered. Desks are allocated to each person, while there is use of some hot desking at the swing space in 5 Fleet Place.



Simon Thompson

How did Thompson tempt corporate lawyers – conservative beasts by nature – away from their enclosed, private spaces? With the open-plan space comes more flexibility, increasing agile working opportunities and interconnection. *“Partners are finding that they’ve met more people within their own department than they have done in the past*

year,” explains Thompson. *“Everyone has a laptop, allowing for better interaction and support as people can move around.”*

The future of design is driven by data. Tech is enabling Thompson and his team to monitor the utilisation of space, in order to help inform workplace strategy going forward. Sensors in the workplace can track presence, usage, access and air quality, then relay information to cloud-based analytics platforms. Digital twin technology, the highly complex virtual representation of a physical object, collects crucial information about the object in real time. Creating a thread between the physical and digital world, internet-enabled objects – printers, doors, desks, coffee machines, fridges, phones, screens – amass data that can be mapped on to the virtual model. If you can understand how these objects are being utilised by people and how they are performing on a computer screen, you can formulate ways of positioning and using them better. *“If there are 20 printers on a floor, we can pinpoint which ones are used the most. The tech allows us to monitor the things that people use everyday in an objective way, without even being on the floor,”* Thompson explains. *“Most offices only use 50 to 60 per cent of their space – we are looking to see how the 40 per cent that isn’t being utilised can be better put to use.”*

Trial and error

“Having learned lots of lessons from the process and post-move, we would probably undertake more employee engagement across a wider group.

“In particular, we have some people who like the furniture setting and others who would prefer an even more open environment across the floor. In hindsight, this should have been trialled in advance in smaller settings across the team prior to rolling it out wholesale.”

Simon Thompson

Future developments

One aspect of Bakers’ review involved commuter analysis to understand the impact of where people live on their working life, their commute times and where they will be coming in from in the future. With the impending Crossrail and Elizabeth Line, there will be new transport links, which will begin to impact on location decisions.

Tech such as VU.CITY offers a computerised view of how an area will look in the future. Viewers can overlay this with additional information, such as new transport links and environmental information (good quality/poor quality air).

For those literally wishing to see into the future, it allows the viewer to take a

particular building and particular floor and ascertain what the outside landscape will look like in just five years' time. *"When looking at location and space you need to understand not just what current transport links there are, but how they are evolving and developing," Thompson says. "You need to be constantly on top of the development plans in London."*

Thompson concludes that Bakers will not opt for cellular offices in the future, choosing to continue the open-plan, activity-based environment. *"Fundamentally, we've learnt it is possible to move away from cellular space," he says. "If it can be done with corporate and transaction lawyers, it is possible. A mixed environment like this recognises that everyone in the firm contributes to the bottom line and is working to serve clients. As it's a shared effort, people across the firm come together."*

The firm is scheduling a new satisfaction survey in September, six months on from the original move.