



OfficeMoversExpress

A photograph of three business professionals (two men and one woman) in a meeting, looking at documents. The image is overlaid with a blue tint and is positioned behind the main title text.

MAXIMIZING OFFICE EFFICIENCY POST-COVID

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MAXIMIZING OFFICE EFFICIENCY POST-COVID

Office space usage has changed dramatically in the last ten years thanks to a combination of shifting priorities and the implementation of technology that vastly improves connectivity. A heavier focus on collaboration and on making the office a space that employees actively enjoy being have led to several radical changes in office structure. Space is more open, wireless technology makes it possible for people to move around freely while working, and collaboration happens more sporadically. There are fewer structured meetings and more crossover between workstations.

Of course, change persists and following the year of COVID-19, many offices are evaluating how to consolidate and maximize efficiency. With some employees remaining partially or fully on a work-at-home capacity, and the need for some barriers in the office to minimize the risk of transmission of the virus, efficiency-boosting measures are in high demand.

We recently sat down with Office Movers Express General Manager Jim Durfee to discuss this very concern. Durfee has 44 years of experience working exclusively in the office moving industry and currently oversees all operations and general administration for OMX. A member of more than a dozen industry associations, Jim has extensive expertise in working with 90 percent of DC's largest law firms, government agencies and Fortune 100 companies to maximize space, improve efficiency, and execute large-scale moves smoothly. In this guide, you'll find Jim's insights and advice on the most effective ways to streamline space usage while providing an accessible, enjoyable workspace for all employees.



Radical Changes to Office Space Use

In the past ten years, there have been several radical changes to how office space is used. Many of these changes are visible in the current layout of modern law offices, but others are evolving, especially after the significant impact of COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021.



How Technology is Influencing the Use of Office Space

Some of the most significant changes in office space use are driven by technology. WiFi networks make it so that employees don't need to be hardwired, and digitization of paper records has eliminated many space-consuming rooms like law libraries and supply closets. Employees can now move around within a space, remain connected, and remain productive whether they are sitting in a booth or at their desks.

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Evolution of Perceived Space in the Modern Law Office

It's not just the opening of physical space, but of perceived space, that has changed in recent years. Floor-to-ceiling windows have become particularly popular with far fewer private offices, and even those with doors frequently have glass doors or full windows so that the absolute privacy of the past isn't as persistent in the space. People are more willing to acknowledge each other and quickly engage, even if someone looks busy. Being able to physically see one another and know that someone isn't on the phone or in a meeting makes it easier to breach that barrier.

Another major change that has occurred recently to accommodate the return to work is that there are simply fewer people in the same amount of space. Because of COVID, desks and chairs were removed to ensure people have sufficient space between workstations to meet social distancing guidelines when reopening started. In some cases, there may even be plastic screens installed to ensure a safe barrier between employees.





How Firms Are Improving Efficiency in the Office

With so many offices focused on collaboration and general ambiance over the last two decades, how do you roll back some of these changes or make others that improve efficiency without undoing the positive effects that have come from those changes?

To start, let's look at some of the efficiency-boosting improvements that have already happened over the last twenty years. These are positive changes that have occurred in many law firms, and that may be a source of inspiration for your own if you're just starting the process.



DIMINISHMENT OF THE LAW LIBRARY - Over the last 10 years, the law library went from being the center point of a law firm to the basement or even sourced to a school and accessed online. Many law firms have reduced or removed their law libraries entirely at this point.



REMOVAL OF SUPPLY ROOMS - The reduced need for physical supplies has led to all but the elimination of supply rooms. While there are certainly some basic needs that will always be present, digitization has severely reduced the need for large dedicated spaces on every floor.



CONTRACTION OF THE MAILROOM - Mailrooms similarly are no longer needed at scale. "Firms used to have large mailrooms with upwards of ten people working in them distributing print materials. These have been all but eliminated and are frequently in the basement as well."



REMOVAL OF WAITING ROOMS AND RECEPTION - Well before the pandemic, waiting rooms and reception as a whole were contracting. Frequently, when you enter a building or floor now, there is no seating or place to wait. There may be an information desk and then you'll be directed to the appropriate person you are there to meet.



FEWER OFFICES - With more people working from home, or working from home a higher percentage of the time, fewer offices are actually needed in many firms. A recent FlexJobs study found that 50% of workers prefer to tackle their most important projects from home to avoid distractions and 80% would be more productive and loyal if given this flexibility. Following the impact of COVID-19 on remote working trends, it's likely that we'll see fewer physical offices than ever in the future.





How Tech Company Trends Influence Law Office Space Utilization

Many of the changes being implemented in law firms were born in Silicon Valley, driven by tech companies that thrive on the ability to attract and retain top talent and ensure they have the space and environment needed to collaborate effectively.

It turns out that many of the tactics used by these companies are becoming best practices for businesses in other industries. Some examples include:



OPEN, STOCKED KITCHENS - Kitchens stocked with full-sized refrigerators, a large selection of ready-to-eat food, and plenty of dishes to facilitate eating real meals at the office are increasingly common.



UNASSIGNED SEATING - WiFi makes it possible for someone to freely move around the office with a laptop and remain connected. Tech companies popularized unassigned seating, providing booths for collaboration, open seating plans, and other creative approaches for where someone might work on a given day. Law firms are utilizing similar techniques.



HANDS-FREE DESIGN - Hands-free technology was already on the rise in tech companies specifically, but with COVID-19 pushing for a more hygienical approach to office design, the technology is booming. Touchless check-in for visitors, app-based access to certain areas of the office, and voice activation tools are becoming more common in many spaces.



SMART MATERIAL USAGE - Many offices are looking for ways to improve sustainability, but also improve air quality and circulation to reduce the risk of virus transmission. Plants are becoming increasingly common, as is the use of nature-inspired materials and more natural barriers.

The one thing you likely won't see cross over from tech startups to law offices is the toys that often dot those offices. The ping pong tables, video game arcades, nap rooms, and other areas for "play" that are so common in tech campuses are not particularly popular among law firms.





Ten Most Important Changes You Can Make to Optimize Utilization of Office Space

With all of these factors in mind, how can you better optimize the utilization of office space in your law firm? Let's look at ten of Jim's most impactful tips:

➔ **Ask The Right Questions** - There are no hard and fast answers to office optimization. So it's important to start by asking key questions about how you currently use your space. Common questions to consider include:



Which rooms or spaces are most popular with your employees and why? Is there a conference room that is used more than another? Evaluate why this is.



Are there spaces in your office that no one is using or that remain empty more than half the time? Can these be removed or consolidated with other space?



Are your meetings being accommodated? Do you have more ad-hoc than scheduled meetings and where do they typically occur?



What is the breakdown in where your employees work? Are they primarily in the office during business hours? At home? Shifting from desk to other spaces in the office?



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Moving Store Rooms to the Basement - Storerooms of all kinds are moving to the basement or being removed entirely. This includes supplies, mail and mail supplies, and storage for other materials that may not be needed on a regular basis.



Equalizing Office Sizes - Rooms used to be designed to indicate who was in charge. If you entered an office space, you knew who the boss was based on the size of the offices. That's less the case as many offices have focused on equalizing office sizes to avoid inefficiencies.



Addressing Persistent IT Closets - IT closets remain a persistent challenge in many firms. The parts and materials needed by IT need to remain on-site, but it can create excess clutter. Some firms are addressing this by moving the supplies to the basement or coordinating with off-site providers to get parts and supplies on-demand.



Removing the Enormous Conference Table - The conference table itself is an inefficient use of space, taking up entire rooms, often in windowed corners of the floor. Smaller conference rooms, open collaboration spaces, and meeting hubs are being implemented to offer those meeting options in the form they are most likely to be used.

→ **Massive Paintings and Art Installations** - Paintings and art installations are still common on many law firms, representing the taste and aesthetic of the firm, but many of the open, welcoming spaces in which they might have been displayed in the past are being removed.

→ **Installation of Glass Boards** - Interactive glass boards are being installed to replace whiteboards and make for a more efficient space for groups to collaborate. Rolling whiteboards and blackboards are far less common.

→ **TV and Screen Placement** - Hanging screens, large TVs, and monitors are decreasingly common as people can participate in meetings or watch training sessions on their own monitors via conference software. That said, there are more frequently TVs mounted in shared spaces for collaboration.

→ **Supporting Work from Home Initiatives** - With the majority of workers saying they get more done at home, and COVID-19 resetting our relationship with remote work in general, consider the benefits of supporting a work-from-home initiative for your employees when it makes sense. Upgrades to networks to support secure access at home, productivity tools, and open office places that support people spending time in the office when necessary can reduce the total amount of space needed without impacting productivity.

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→ **Measure People Not Space** - Supplemental to shifting work patterns, work within the trends currently sweeping through modern offices. Open floor plans are being replaced with flexible floor plans that focus on the space people need when they need it. Forget about a certain amount of square footage per person, and consider the way in which those people will use the space.

This means, of course, that how much space you need will depend on your firm. It requires a more proactive approach to the way in which you optimize that space. Different types of workstations for different tasks and types of employees are needed. "Quiet areas for focused work, open space for robust collaboration, booths for hushed conversations, and phone booths or pods for private conversations are increasingly common for this reason. You may even consider an elastic office model or coworking supplement to scale your workspace as needed."

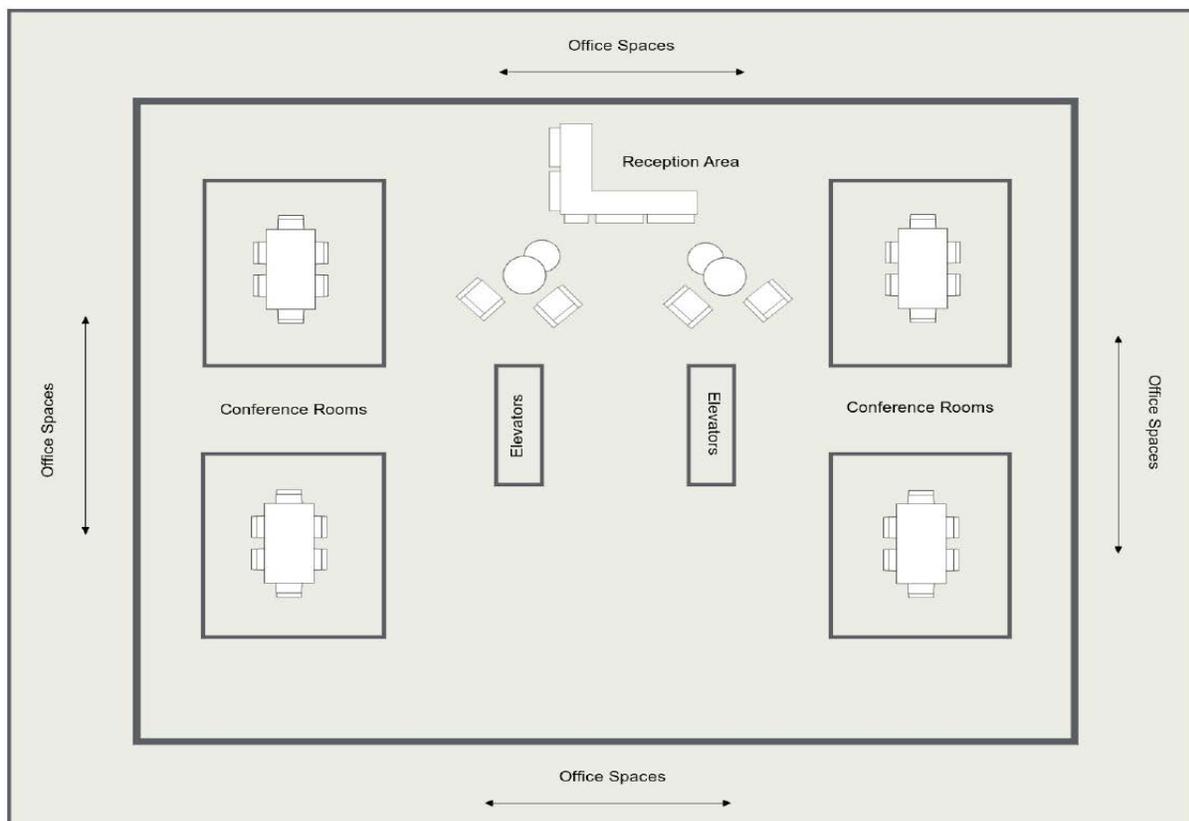
As you evaluate your office space and the ways in which it can be streamlined for greater efficiency, always think in terms of the role technology plays.



Developing an Efficient Flow for Office Traffic

Considering the additions that have been made to most law offices in the last few years, and areas that can be addressed to streamline space, what does an efficient flow look like?

From a mover's perspective, the most efficient layout for office traffic to flow smoothly is the double rectangle. On a single large floor, there would be a rectangular space on either side of the elevator bank that allows for a reception area and a meeting space where visitors would enter. On either side of this entry space is a rectangle of office spaces along the perimeter and center with a walk space around the ring of rectangles.



The goal of this layout is to have two separate passageways in the space. The inner passageway has no windows, but the shift to glass doors and floor-to-ceiling glass walls means that light still gets into this corridor, making it a more useful, pleasant space in which to work.

At the same time, there's little need for conference rooms in the modern office. They're almost always empty, and while it can be useful to have a single conference room ready and available for the specific meetings that might call for them, most of the time, especially for internal meetings, they simply aren't used. That's a deeply inefficient use of space. With the advent of Zoom and other online meeting platforms, it's likely these spaces will be used even less than ever.

That said, we are seeing the implementation of smaller conference rooms that serve the purpose of offering shared space for in-person meetings when needed without using up a large percentage of the available floor space in an office. Smaller collaboration spaces are designed for casual conversations and may not even have tables. These small areas may have ten people at most, and generally, they will be standing and not sitting at a large central table. There are also small collaboration spaces for 2-3 people to connect and discuss issues privately. Private rooms that allow for phone calls are highly in demand as well.



Maximizing Efficiency in a Rapidly Changing Office Environment

As the modern office changes to accommodate the advent of new technologies, new work habits, and the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, efficiency matters more than ever.

Whether rearranging your office space to accommodate these changes or preparing for a big move and mapping how you'll use your new office space, a partner with extensive experience in the field can help.

If you have a specific office efficiency concern or are preparing for a move and don't know where to start, contact OMX to learn more about how to get the most from your space. We can work with you to address specific challenges in your workspace and provide a commercial space planner that walks you through the process.

Want to discuss how your office can benefit from modern efficiency trends? **Give Jim a call or reach out on the OMX website to schedule an appointment.**

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