



Career Builders	Law Firm Leaders	Solo & Small Firms	Podcasts	National Magazine	CBA PracticeLink In Depth
---------------------------------	----------------------------------	--	--------------------------	-----------------------------------	---



■ The Ups and Downs of Law Office Moves
■ << Back

[Printer Friendly](#)

The Ups and Downs of Law Office Moves

The best-laid plans don't guarantee a smooth law office move. Factor in the need for good timing, quick decision-making, and expert help to increase your chances of a successful relocation.

By Ava Chisling

If you have ever moved your law office, you know the planning required can be a drawn-out affair. But if you thought the inconvenience of one move was bad enough, try this: moving twice in a single year.

That's what happened to Kasandra Cronin's Vancouver law office of La Liberté Cronin & Company. Cronin's lease was up and she could not reach a suitable agreement with her landlord. So, she found a shared space a few kilometres away in Gastown and moved in.

"We rented a large space with someone who had a very busy immigration law practice," says Cronin. Soon after they moved in, however, the person they were sharing space with decided to leave to become a partner in a large firm.

"We could not stay there because it was four times the space we needed. We spoke to the landlord about partitioning the office and re-leasing part of it, but those negotiations didn't come to fruition," says Cronin.

So after only nine months in a new office, Cronin had to move again. And she had about six weeks to find another place, pack up and leave.

On the move, with six weeks' notice

Rare is the law-firm office move that goes off without a hitch. When plans go awry, you need a calm demeanor and a flexible state of mind, and you need the help of experts. "The best advice I can offer," says Arthur G. Greene, a law firm consultant based in New Hampshire, "is to make sure you plan the move far in advance, that you move for the right reasons (not only for a fancier address) and that you hire professionals to do all the work. Don't do anything yourselves."



Cronin says she made the best move anyone can make when they find themselves in her situation: she hired an agent who, as she says, "saved our bacon. They know the market, they know the landlords, they negotiate on your behalf. I cannot say enough good things about him."

The agent helped Cronin come up with a shortlist of possible locations quickly. After the brief experience of sharing an office, Cronin wanted her own space. "There were not many suitable places. We needed a space that was immediately available, didn't require much renovation, [was] not too big, was convenient, and close to the downtown courthouse."

After showing Cronin a few offices, the agent then told her that, some time ago, a prominent lawyer had moved out of his office and the landlord was looking to move someone in. He didn't say so at first, but the agent was talking about Cronin's old office space. And so ... "We went back! Over that year, the market had changed dramatically and they were excited to have us back," she says. We are paying less now than we would have, had we stayed. Quite a bit less, including several months of free rent."

The landlord made some minor touch-ups to the space. Cronin put down new carpets, freshened up the paint, and switched offices with her partner just to shake things up. "With those improvements, it feels very different than it did before."

Limited selection

When you engage an expert to help you, you might begin to look more critically at your choices. Suddenly, an opportunity may not look as attractive as it once did. Or, you might have to assess, and act very quickly, on a new opportunity.

Guidance in overcoming these obstacles is just one area where the pros can help.

In a law-office move, there's also the question of whether a move "up" – to a nicer location – can serve your practice and, if so, when would it have the most benefit? Some professionals believe that moving into a luxury building will bring in the clients, but that is not necessarily the case. Relationships and referrals are key to a successful practice and a fancy office brings you neither of those things.

For Montreal sole practitioner Christine Kark, the size of the space had to match her client list. "Start small. And then you can grow," she says. "If your fixed fees are very high, there is pressure to build your practice quickly to pay your rent. Only move when the business is there."

Experts say that a prestigious address can be important, but only for certain kinds of legal practices, like criminal law, where being near the courthouse counts. "I think there are a lot of very good law firms that have decided that outside-of-town locations are smarter, and that their sophisticated clients appreciate that," says Greene.

Agreeable landlords

When Kelly Sample, managing partner of Kelly Santini LLP, first started looking for a new law office, all the planets were aligned: the right space became available, landlords were willing to negotiate, the perfect contractor was free and ready to renovate, and key members of her team were willing to work all weekend to make sure it was business as usual on Monday morning. Sound

Tips for a successful move

Make sure you can afford your rent in good times and in bad. Moving to a prestigious address is great, but it can increase your fixed expenses dramatically. Keep in mind that the market can tumble pretty quickly, as it did in 2009.

Find an agent who can help you find space and then have him or her negotiate the best price and terms. It costs nothing (the landlord pays) and saves you a whole lot of time and trouble. Like hiring anyone, make sure the agent is a good fit for you.

Sharing an office is a good way to keep expenses down. Take the time to find people you will be happy to see every day. However, note that sharing can cause confusion for clients as they often presume there is an association between you and your co-renter, when there is none.

CBA PracticeLink is featured in each issue of [National Magazine](#).

CBA Preferred Supplier:



eXpd8 software will

help boost your productivity levels and allow you to grow your business with time and money saving software.

Subscribe to our Newsfeed [What is RSS?](#)

[Share This](#)

ideal? It was.

Sample's 65-person Ottawa firm had been in the same building for 13 years and the lease was about to expire. Sample looked into various options, including renewing the lease and renovating the office, but in the end, she needed more space. So she started looking for a suitable new office.

"Our first priority was size," says Sample. "Rent was also important. And we wanted a building that was of nice quality but not opulent." After a few months, she found a 15,000-square foot office in downtown Ottawa. It was the perfect fit: an open, contemporary office, with less traffic, better parking and more services than her old space. It was across from the courthouse and available at the right price.

Divide and conquer

For Sample, finding the right space took a few months, but it was not hard work. Sorting out who sits where, on the other hand, was by far her biggest challenge. "The floor plan and placing people within departments was definitely the trickiest part," she says.

Sample opted for a "divide and conquer" strategy, sitting down and talking to one lawyer at a time. "We didn't hold any meetings on the subject because that is where things can get difficult. I did first cuts on the plans and then presented them to the partners individually."

In Sample's experience, this one-on-one approach allowed her to gather feedback without the drama. "And then I reached a point where I just said 'this is it.'"

Consultant Greene, who practised in a large firm for more than 30 years and served as managing partner of the firm for several years, has his own theory on how office space gets allotted. "Here is my secret advice on the topic: I was on the building committee in my firm and I wound up with a corner office, as did all the people on the same committee. It's always the strongest performers or those who run the show who have a better chance of getting a good space."

Once the haggling over spaces is over, communicating the move to your clients is another important hurdle. Sample used a range of methods to ensure a smooth transition. "It wasn't so bad with our institutional clients because we were in contact with them all the time. But we have a lot of individual clients, and making sure they knew we were moving required figuring out the best strategy to reach them. We didn't want our clients to be irritable!"

In Sample's case, she notified them via mail-outs, newspaper ads and email reminders. Her firm also made a bit of a promotional campaign out of the move, asking a marketing person to help them get the best bang for their buck and to present the move as something positive.

As for budget, "we were able to negotiate some inducements which helped us offset costs," Sample says.

"It cost us around \$1 million for our move, but we now have more space for lawyers and that means more revenue," she adds. "It was worth it for us."

Narrowing the search

Montreal lawyer Christine Kark believes the type of space you choose reflects your practice. "I want clients to see the address. I think that is important when you are a reputable lawyer. I believe it inspires confidence."

But before you invest in your ideal office space, you have to have the clients, Kark cautions. She thought of everything long before she started her own practice in September 2009. When she left McCarthy Tétraut after seven years, she didn't move into a fancy space as many solo lawyers do. Instead, she rented a small space within an existing law firm to save money and develop a clientele.

It gave her everything she needed at the time. "I had access to the Internet and a receptionist to answer my phone," says Kark. "This gave me the opportunity to develop my own practice."

Knowing she would eventually open up her own office, Kark made sure she had her own phone number, fax number and email address – none of which would change when she moved.

When looking for her own place, Kark established a budget, met with an agent who proposed 10 different locations, and then spent a day visiting the top five or six selections. She eventually chose the office where she could best see herself.

"It's a very beautiful space, in the size I need. It has big windows and it's new, located in a prestigious building in Old Montreal. Everything is clean and renovated and well maintained. I could see myself there."

Ava Chisling (avachisling.com) is a longtime magazine editor and a media lawyer based in Montreal.

Regardless of whether you are in your own space, a shared space, or working from home, make certain you have your own phone and fax numbers and your own email address. It is exceptionally important that all three remain with you, no matter where you go.

According to law-firm consultant Arthur G. Greene, many small and medium-size firms are choosing not to place their practice groups together. Instead, they are mixing it up, putting a litigator next to a real estate lawyer for better integration. Consider this strategy when moving.

When deciding where people will sit in the new office, use a one-on-one approach as opposed to group meetings. People tend to act more reasonably when expressing their feelings to one person instead of the whole team.

Moving will always cost more than you think it will, so budget wisely.

— A.C.

[Comment on this article](#)