

New Office Space - Yes or No?

A June 2010 discussion on SoloSez, the email listserv for general practice, solo and small firm lawyers

I'm debating getting new office space. I'd love your thoughts on things to consider.

Current space:

Single large office in a coworking facility (it's hard to focus when me and my assistant are both on the phone)

Month-to-month

\$400/mo - all inclusive

Loud sometimes due to other users of the offices in our hall

4.2 miles from home (we moved - it was 1 mile from our old house)

New space:

540 square feet - 2 offices, large reception area, bath

3-year lease (but I can probably get landlord to do 2 years)

\$895/mo - includes all maintenance and utilities

1.1 miles from home

The new office isn't the best I can imagine, but it's pretty good. A bit dated, but professional and well-maintained. The price is right.

The location is definitely awesome. I want to be close to home, and it's an easy place for clients to find.

I'm worried about signing a lease. Who knows what my needs will be down the road. And what if I end up unhappy?

How do you folks approach decisions like this?

Thanks in advance!

I usually decide things like that with my heart; if it puts a big smile on my face, I do it. After I have made the decision, I rationalize why that was the best decision anyway and use that reason to explain the change to others. Life is too short to be clever all the time; sometimes being happy is worth a lot more.

D.A. "Duke" Drouillard, Nebraska

A good office is worth a lot. I love mine. It's about 500 sq. feet, I have my own office, a waiting area and a conference/work room (that's where the fridge and microwave are, and also the copy machine, a couple of file cabinets, cabinets for office supplies, pencil sharpener and postal scale, shredder, etc. My office is expensive (all real estate in Hawaii is insane), but it has a great view, it's quiet, and it feels professional. I think clients like it. I know I am much more productive here than at home (where I have a little nook, it's noisier, hotter in summer, etc.). The only thing that would make it better would be a shorter commute (it's about 20 minutes).

To me, your proposed new office sounds like a big win. I think you would be much more productive and happy there. And I bet your assistant would be happier also, with a space of his/her own.

I'd go for it. And a lease is not too much of a big deal - I signed a 3-year one as a new solo, and one year is gone already. Time flies.

Cynthia Hannah-White, Hawaii

There was once a time when I wouldn't even taking a parking space by the month. I had been laid off by Mother X then after 6 weeks as a contractor with Microlimp I was gone,

That said I signed my first 3year lease in 2006 I had no idea if I'd make it as a solo. Apparently I have. I still wonder if I'll be in business 2 months from now, However, I've got court dates all the way to October so I don't think I'm going away. Though my first office did the landlord remodeled the building.

I'd say go for it.

John A. Davidson, Pennsylvania

I too used the same test as Duke. You've seen my office. I looked at it the day it went on the market (very good commercial real estate agent!) and hesitated only because it was beyond my budget. Debating what to do, I spoke with a wonderful colleague mentor who asked two questions -

1. Would going there every day make me smile?

2. After I said yes, he asked why we were having this conversation.

These decisions are about more than just dollars. I thought the office of my former firm was nice, we worked hard thinking about the buildout and furnishing it. I was really taken back by the very positive comments from clients about my new office and the less than nice ones about the old place, especially the multiple ones about the good atmosphere in the new place. I want my office to convey stability and a sense of expertise. My reception area has a very nice desk set with matching shelves and file cabinets - which were in my office at the former firm. My personal office and conference room have solid wood furniture, sure it used which kept cost down, but I think you'd agree that one can't tell it wasn't new. I had no idea the benefit of looking out my windows at the activity of Market Square (reportedly the oldest continually operating market in the country) and the Potomac. If I'm stressed, watching school kids gathering for tours, children putting their feet into the fountain, sailboats on the river, the weather moving through, or the colors of sunsets, the stress just melts away.

Your practice is doing well. Invest in it. Having a workplace that makes you smile is important, as Duke said.

Deborah Matthews, Virginia

Wow. If I could get space at that price I'd grab it!

Seriously , once you have the space you will see so many opportunities to use it.

Carolyn Elefant, District of Columbia

I appreciate the input, everyone. I particular like the heart and happiness analysis.

I think I'm going to go for it.

I would definitely be more happy there than in my current space. And Cynthia's right: a 3-year lease isn't long at all. Heck, I may be jumping to renew. Or if things don't fit right in a short 3 years, I can change.

I still have to ponder this a little more, though.... Maybe I should drive by it today and see how it makes me feel

I agree. Personally, I seem to become easily effected by my surroundings. I can't stand clutter and I need lots of light and fresh air to stay sane.

My office space is nice, I spent a ton of time decorating it. I got creative with the furnishings and shopped estate sales and "closeout" office stuff. But I've got actual color on the wall, and paintings that I did by my own hand.

I know, some people think that where you meet clients is not important and that solo's get caught up in trying to create and maintain an "image"...but I think it is very important. I told my family "I need this space to be comfortable and secure- people are going to cry in this room" (I do mainly Elder Law, Estate Settlement and Estate Planning) and I have had many many clients tell me how great and happy the space is.

As an FYI: I have been in my space for two months.

If you are happy- and your assistant is happy- then it will come across to your clients as a confidence.

Good Luck

Metta Delmore

I agree with all that has been written so far. Having your own office is great. I worked from home for awhile when I first opened my practice, and while there were some advantages, there were many more disadvantages. It was difficult to stay focused, working from home. And it was very embarrassing when I was on the phone with a client and the dog came running in barking, or my daughter threw open my office door screaming, "Mommy!!!"

I was very nervous when I first signed my lease which is for 3 years. And I was nervous when I began ordering office furniture, wall hangings, computers, printers and the like when I saw how much everything was costing! But I must say I had lots of fun doing it! I can't tell you how many hours I spent on art.com and those kinds of websites trying to find nice and appropriate things to hang on the walls! ("Stop ordering pictures!" my husband kept joking). I had so much fun decorating my office suite, and making it attractive and comfortable. And the building is very nice and it's less than 2 miles from my house. I have never looked back. It was definitely the right decision to make.

There's also one advantage no one has mentioned yet - because you are "out there" and not hidden away in a home office, people find you and you pick up

some work. We have gotten a few clients from being known in our building. A few divorce clients and a guy who was delivering candy had a pretty good claim we took on a contingency.

Best of luck!!! I know you'll be happy you did this!!!

Cindy

Cindy D. Salvo, New Jersey