

Knoll Workplace Research

# The Emerged Law Practice

Progressive Traits of the Modern Law Office

**Tracy Wymer**  
Vice President, Workplace Strategy  
Knoll, Inc.

**Knoll**

# The Emerged Law Practice: Progressive Traits of the Modern Law Office

## Context

As one senior partner within a law firm asked, “Are we hurting our recruitment and retention efforts by maintaining the status quo of our workplace?” Law firms today are in key battles for top talent coupled with a quest for business practices to keep firms flexible. Within the legal profession, strong demands on the workplace include attracting and retaining top talent and allowing for the ebb and flow of the practice workforce, while providing support for a full spectrum of work that ranges from individual contributor to team collaboration.

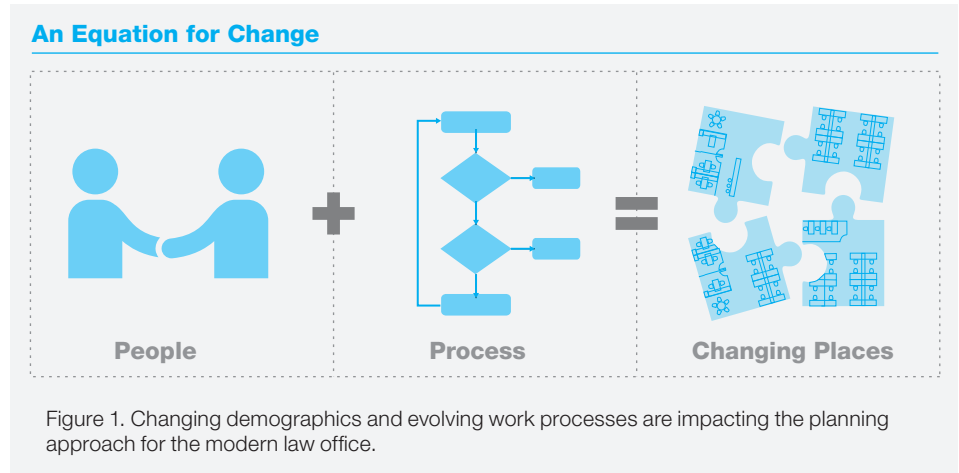
These demands place renewed requirements on the **three main elements** that must be in balance for law firms to prosper: **people**, **process** and **place**. However, as these elements are increasingly impacted by business, social, and demographic shifts, law firms must better understand how that movement influences effective workplace planning.

*“I am not a traditional 8 – 6:00 worker and would rather do things on my own schedule while attending family and social events, working weekends and after hours.”*

LAW FIRM PARTNER

## People

The practice of law is one of the few remaining tenure based professional service models. This structure impacts compensation, succession and attrition, while straining the expertise provided at various levels of service. Compared to a merit based approach, this tenure based model is a legacy that has few parallels today. However, as the legal profession has become more team based and interactive, the traditional model has required



an overhaul. As a result, an evolution beyond the existing model has begun and is escalated by the changing nature of both the work and the workforce.

## Shifting Demographics

The workforce population is poised to make a wholesale change within the next ten years. This change will be driven by a desire for more work/life balance as we see roles shift through flatter hierarchies, an ever increasing percentage of women within the workplace and, most significantly, a generational change that has already influenced the characteristic of today’s workforce.

While men continue to earn the majority of JD and LL.B degrees (53% in an American Bar Association study)<sup>1</sup>, women have made steady inroads into a profession long dominated by men.

While gender plays a role, the overwhelming influence on law firm demographics will be age. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Generation Y will comprise more than 50% of the workforce by 2020 compared with 25% in 2010. As a result, for firms negotiating a lease today, the makeup of the workforce will go through a substantial change before the end of that lease term.

This demographic shift is bringing with it new expectations for the workplace. Generation

Y workers seek an engaging workplace that appears a bit less “work-like,” with an often-cited “fun factor.” When polled during Knoll focus groups, Generation Y participants cited “atmosphere” as one of the top traits of an employer. That atmosphere varies depending on the culture of the firm and how that culture is expressed in the workplace.

One associate mentioned during a partner retreat workshop, “I like the calm I felt when I walked in the door.” The general expectation is that one size or energy level does not fit all. Younger workers expect the opportunity to easily transition through all facets of work—and that includes a social component.

A younger, more technology fluent demographic embraces change, even in the context of an existing office population that

## Expanding the Profession’s Appeal

Women are projected to account for 51% of the increase in total labor force growth between 2008 and 2018 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics). This gender impact stresses a firm’s ability to craft a work/life balance model that makes the profession attractive to women. Certain strategies are being adopted—flex work, job sharing, broader support and contract attorneys—that offer some degree of balance within a demanding work schedule.

## Evolving Composition of Legal Teams

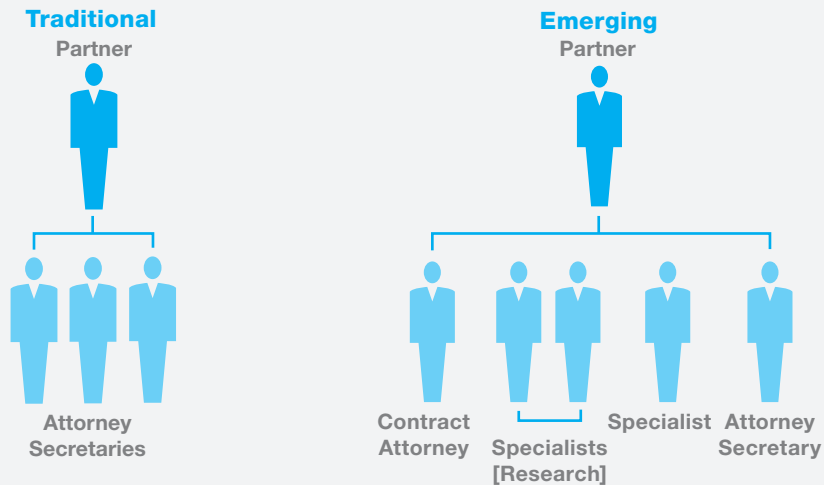


Figure 2. Traditional attorney: secretary ratios are giving way to expanded attorney: support ratios.

often protects the status quo. Legacy partners are viewed as a bridge to the past, and historically heavily influenced the planning of a new law firm facility. However, those partners are increasingly retiring or participating less in facility planning, opening the door for a wider variety of planning directions.

### The Growth of Contract Attorneys

An accelerated degree of team work is portrayed in the deployment of a higher number of contract attorneys. This “attorney for hire model” is dramatically permeating law firms today as they seek creative solutions for the non-partner track attorney.

The growth of this model stems from two needs: the individual seeking greater work/life balance that a term contract provides and the firm endeavoring to balance costs in an ever competitive and increasingly cyclical market. Many of the contract attorneys are coming to firms through newly established placement agencies focused specifically on the legal profession.

The contract attorney is hired for a set period of time on a particular case as detailed in the contract. The obligation to the firm is simply the case, and not the fulfillment of partner track obligations. This means shorter hours for the hire bundled with a lower rate of pay.

The contract attorney model influences other branches of the firm. The structure allows the partners to better phase their time, and possibly work a bit less as their

work is subsidized by the contract attorney. The contract model also makes up for an ever shrinking pool of summer associates, and also begins to usurp some of the duties historically the domain of the paralegal.

### Breaking the Bridge

Historically, the legal secretary fulfilled the role of linking the culture of the firm to new associates. However, there is a shift to a tiered approach, with a stronger role for technology. Instead of support centered on a single person, it is dispersed among a broader team all proficient in core business software programs.

Litigation specifically requires a higher level of support, yet the nature of that support is changing dramatically with technology.

The onset of resource centers with technology proficient administrative teams supports not only the associates, but paralegals as well. This broader definition of support has shifted the firm’s resources focus from the traditional attorney-to-secretary ratio to an attorney-to-support ratio. As a result, the resource center is populated with fewer legal secretaries per partner. This dovetails with the diverse skill sets required to support a modern day law practice: research, discovery, editing, processing, and filing.

*“Storage is the black hole of the office. The more we provide, the more gets filled up.”*

-LAW FIRM ADMINISTRATOR

### Changing Attitudes towards Storage

The practice of law remains one of the more paper intensive services provided, yet there is an increasing emphasis on electronic

## The Evolving Composition of Legal Teams

Overall, the complexion of the modern legal team has changed dramatically. There is a supply and demand imbalance of attorneys graduating from law school and, as a result, more signing up with contract agencies. Within the firm, the traditional emphasis on associate and partner attorneys is shifting to staff and specialist attorneys. While this diversity better places the right talent with the right client, many clients identify “right talent” as a partner and prefer a sharp partner or specialist to lead their case.

Team composition is many times dictated by the corporate clients these law firms serve. For example, one trend is client refusal to pay for first year associates; the associates may attend meetings, sit in and observe, but the client won’t pay for the associates’ training. To offset this, many firms send first year associates to business boot camp to learn rudimentary business practices and tools. These training programs are considered an investment in the future and the road to increasingly billable hours.

## Process

The practice of law is consistently a more collaborative work process than casually perceived. A strong practice is reliant on great leaders, diverse teams, and the technology support that enables a firm to remain contemporary and realize efficiencies within the work flow.

document storage. Supporting this shift is the widespread acceptance of electronic signatures as binding. However, as one of the leading electronic discovery services, Lexis Nexus, states, “If electronic files are reduced to paper format at any stage in the review process, the benefits of true electronic discovery are diminished.” This translates into the number one cited goal of law firm administrators: reduce storage within the firm’s facility. Administrators share a simple



strategy: keep, move offsite or destroy. The tolerance for keeping actual paper is reducing.

Decisions need to be made specific to the life of a document, or more importantly what life form it should take. The original is electronic; if it translates to paper, then it must serve a purpose. If not, the move off-site or destroy options are preferred.

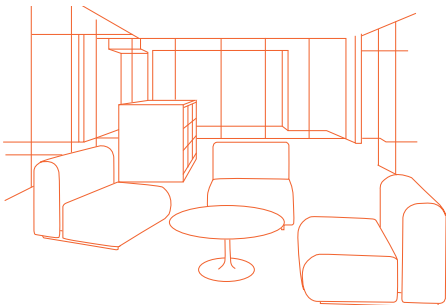
The attitude towards technology has shifted since Knoll's original study, "The Emerging Law Practice" (2003). Today's ubiquitous technologies like wireless were historically controlled due to perceived potential for security breaches. Now, the business driver is speed of transmission, avoiding any system that will clog the flow of information.

### Shifting Workstyles

Knoll collects data based upon industry segments, including the legal profession. The Knoll study, "Implementing Design for Integrated Work" (O'Neill, Wymer; 2010) revealed a subtle shift in the proportion of time spent in the dominant work modes of *focus*, *share*, *team* and *social activity*. In Knoll's sampling of law firms, a ten percentage point gain was projected in the group-based work modes of team and social activity by 2013 as the balance between individual and group based work continues to shift. The demand for group based work is most heightened by the expansion of contract attorneys, who are brought on board as a group targeted to a specific case. Their work and work settings are all group based.

### The Rise of Team Work and Need for "Proximity"

Increasing emphasis on team based work impacts the scale, size, and intensity of the office as team communication is more



*Integrating a neighborhood planning scheme supports gathering in more light filled and open environments.*

diverse, social, and tethered with technology. As the role of specialized skills grows, firms must bring disparate contributors together in a cohesive manner. That connecting bond can be technology, but in Knoll findings, people-to-people connections are significant.

The significance of physical proximity has grown, as attorneys desire peer-to-peer closeness to enable collaboration and fuel the buzz within the practice. While attorneys cite the banter and collaboration as a good thing, secretaries view it as a workplace distraction.

### Place

As attorney proximity becomes a practice norm, it places more emphasis on the importance of good workplace planning factoring in critical adjacencies. Effective zoning assures practice group to practice group adjacency and proportional planning begins to match the office plan to business flow.

### The Expanding Role of the Law Firm Office

"Efficient," "attractive," and "productive" are specific qualities that define the new law firm office, contrasting with the historic qualities of "tradition," "hierarchy," and "dedication." Today, the role and the demands on the office are expanded to serving as a touchstone for the firm's culture, a strong recruitment tool, an element of support for ever changing collaborative work, and a committed connection to the local community. Weaving these qualities into a modern law practice is the challenge.

In a Knoll sampling of law firm facility leaders, the top reasons cited for workplace change were supporting attraction and retention, followed by minimizing real estate square footage or cost per employee ("Implementing Integrated Work," O'Neill, Wymer; 2010). Clearly, legal offices are expected to support an increasing number of goals, and do so less expensively than in the past.

### The Ongoing Dependence on the Physical Office

In a Knoll survey of square footage targets across multiple industries, one takeaway was exceptionally clear—workplace leaders are driving ever shrinking smaller square footage

### The Office as Destination

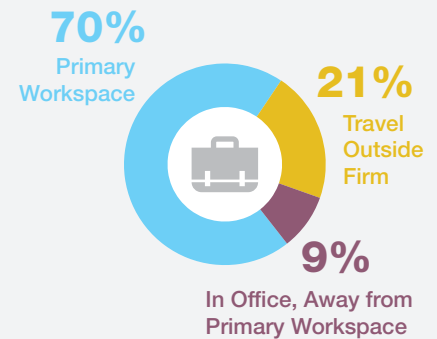


Figure 3. The Knoll "Implementing Integrated Work" study reaffirms the office's significant role in the practice of law.

planning targets within the overall real estate portfolio. Today, the reported planning target per person is 135 square feet where three years ago it was 180 and five years ago it was 205. ("The Metrics of Distributed Work," O'Neill, Wymer; 2011) While these numbers are aggregates across multiple industries, not specifically law firms, they do represent an important trend.

Knoll has also studied where work is occurring within law firms and tracked the changing nature of the workplace as the dynamics of the firm have shifted. In a previous report, Knoll documented the percent of time spent

*Legal offices are expected to support an increasing number of goals, and do so less expensively than in the past.*

in various defined locations for work ("Implementing Integrated Work," O'Neill, Wymer; 2010). The findings for the legal profession indicate, as logic would presume, that the vast majority (70%) of the time is spent within the primary

workspace. Travel outside of the firm takes up 21% of attorney time, and the remaining 9% of the time is spent elsewhere in the firm's office. Within the building envelope, collaboration most often occurs in the open environment. Therefore, it is important to create the right type of space to meet the collaborative and cultural requirements of the client.

### The Need for Community and Connectivity

While the above studies provided interesting quantitative data, Knoll's participation in an intensive partner retreat with a regional law firm unveiled key criteria for the office space: more technology, a more modern aesthetic,

and space that welcomes the community for various functions. This engagement also revealed insights on where the firm's required activities occurred: attorneys work from client offices, home offices and other locations. When it comes to collaboration, the most effective collaboration occurs more than twice as often in open areas as in conference rooms. Significantly, the attorneys felt most productive within the workplace, far out-ranking other options for places to work.

Team work affects the nature of areas provided within the workspace that encourage collaborative behavior. The historic norm of gathering in the office is more difficult with the smaller size; however the deployment of gathering spots within the planning of a workplace fulfills that need. To foster team work, firms are creating a more neighborhood-based plan and providing the appropriate number and size of meeting spaces to meet their needs.

The findings from this firm wide retreat also emphasized *proximity*, the need to be close to colleagues. That closeness was expressed through technology. The connection the attorneys have through mobile devices offsets the reality of them being in the office. This approach assists in achieving an oft cited goal - obtaining work life balance with a life outside of work and still obtaining that peer

*Technology provides digital proximity for the individual, keeping associates connected to the firm; the office provides the physical proximity for the many.*

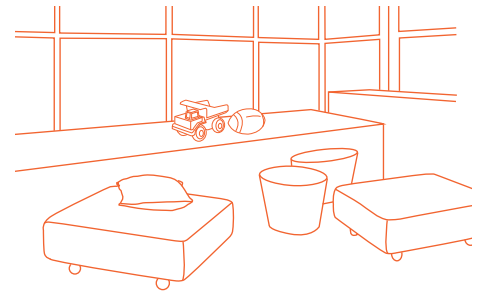
to peer proximity. While technology provides digital proximity for the individual, keeping associates connected to the firm, the office provides physical proximity for the many.

### The Concept of Proportional Planning

As firms better identify and understand the dynamic nature of the work, the fluid movements through various work modes that occur and the need to match the business plan to the physical plan, the idea of *proportional planning* has surfaced. In deploying this practice, first identify dominant work modes and in what proportion they occur, and then match the appropriate settings within the facility to those proportions. This can occur firm-wide or based on practice groups to better align the workplace with the work process.

### Emerging Planning Ideas

Planning practices for law firms are becoming increasingly experimental. As we see the corner office becoming more negotiable in its importance to some firms, there are a small number of firms evolving the planning model from the exclusive perimeter office model to a more mixed approach that moves some offices to the core. This reduces the number of offices along the window line and opens the floor to a more open plan. The notion of a complete departure from the private office



*Casual break out spaces provide areas for contemplative moments, and a good setting for associates' children on working weekends.*

has only been realized in Europe, but is in the discussion phase within select North American firms.

There is more pressure today for organizations to become more sustainable ("Five Trends that Are Impacting Work and the Workplace," Ouye; 2011). The legal profession is weighing the desire for a larger embrace of sustainability with cost implications. Recently, a firm documented the difference between a conventionally built office and one built with USGBC's LEED guidelines as criteria. The findings realized a slight difference in cost that was associated with the process of documenting the criteria for LEED certification. This validated this particular firm's decision to continue building sustainable environments depending on the circumstances, assuring the space is "LEED ready" while not always fulfilling the certification process.

## Emerging Planning Ideas

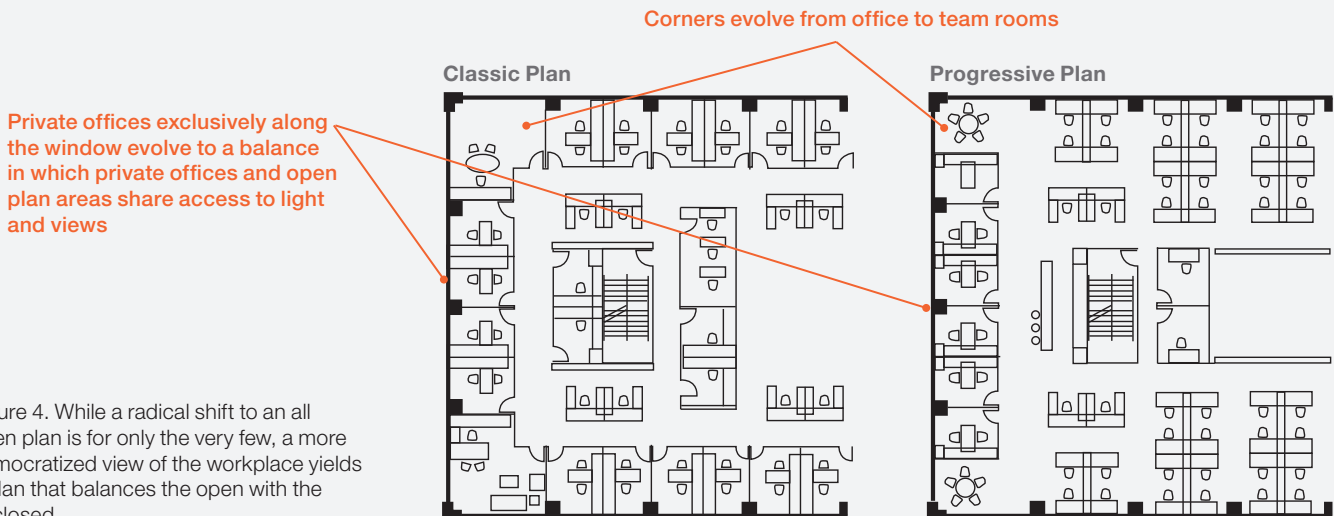


Figure 4. While a radical shift to an all open plan is for only the very few, a more democratized view of the workplace yields a plan that balances the open with the enclosed.

## The Flexible Private Office

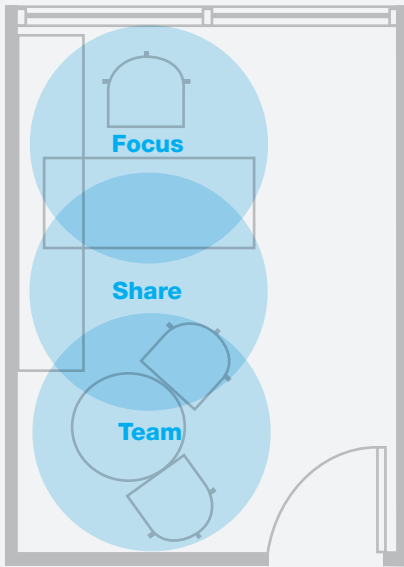


Figure 5. Proportional planning on a microscale: supporting multiple workstyles within the private office.

Private office attributes include:

- ▶ Transparency with clear glass floor to ceiling: Symbolically open and accessible; assisting in sustainability goals; connecting and aiding collaboration with the team
- ▶ Flexibility: Supportive for one to many and the variety of work modes
- ▶ Modularity: Providing sizes and product elements that transition from large to small

## Benching for Contract Attorneys

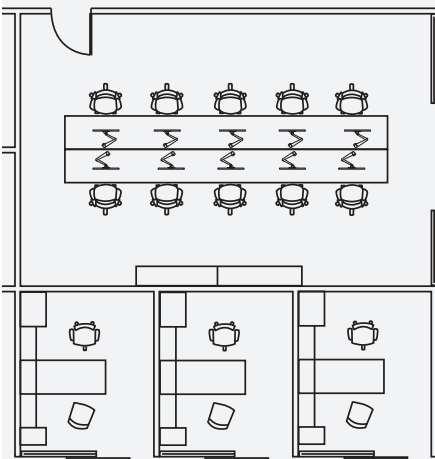


Figure 6. Clustering contract attorneys around a large table provides planning efficiency and partner accessibility.

## The Flexible Private Office

The primary location to engage in legal work continues to be within the private office. However, the private office is going through changes that are both symbolic and physical. Perhaps most significantly, there is a greater need for the private office to be a flexible resource as firms look to more effectively manage their real estate costs. Supporting that flexibility necessitates proportional planning on the micro scale, or within the walls of a smaller private office. As expressed by a major law firm planner, the need is to support three distinct work modes—focus, share and team—all within the confines of the private office. This is accomplished by an effective layout that is both logical and flexible.

While we are seeing less wholesale adoption of the oft touted universal office size, we are witnessing a tiered approach to the office. Firms are adopting two levels of offices, possibly one interior and one for the window line, resulting in office sizes of both 150 and 225 square feet as an example.

## The Collaborative Group Office

Firms are increasingly assigning a lead attorney's contract attorney team to one room for easier and more cohesive communication. Benching, or gathering contract employees around a central work table within one room, allows the firm to hit a planning target of approximately eight square feet of desk space per person. This tight planning model draws more similarities to a call center versus anything representative of a traditional law office. The density, high utilization rate, and non-ownership mindset of the occupants leads to greater wear and tear, requiring environments and products that are much more resistant to abuse. Collectively, these needs begin to define a new contract attorney planning model for which formal solutions have yet to emerge.

## Storage as a Means of Personalization

Reducing the amount of real estate dedicated to document storage is oft cited as the number one goal for law firm administrators. As they look to approaches in order to accomplish their goals, one that has emerged is a tiered structure to storage.

As the role of storage diminishes for documents, the role of storage as a display vehicle for culture is rising. A smaller footprint

## A Tiered Storage Approach



Figure 7. A clear strategy for storage makes it easy plan a place for “things.” Based on the function, there is a specific storage solution.

increases density which also reduces the realized privacy of any primary space. While privacy is on the decline, personalization is on the increase. This desire for a more personalized space fits squarely into the emerging role of storage as a display element.

## The Emerged Practice

### The Office as a Business Tool

The modern attorney, depending on the demographic, is either driving or experiencing significant change in the practice and the location of legal work. A technology fluent, group-based mindset permeates the law field today. The emerged law practice is expressing culture as a means to attract new clients and new talent. The role of the office has elevated in importance as a business tool and continues to be the resource around which a robust service is deployed.

## Footnotes

1. In a survey of 200 schools, the American Bar Association report of JD and LL.B degrees awarded in the 2009–2010 academic year show men earning the majority of degrees, 52.8% to 47.1% (American Bar Association, JD and LL.B Degrees Awarded, 1981–2010).

## References and Additional Reading

O'Neill, M. (2009). "Future Work and Workplace." White Paper, Knoll, Inc.

O'Neill, M. (2010). "Generational Preferences: A Glimpse into the Future Office." White Paper, Knoll, Inc.

O'Neill, M. and Wymer, T. (2009). "Implementing Integrated Work to Create a Dynamic Workplace." White Paper, Knoll, Inc.

O'Neill, M. and Wymer, T. (2011). "The Metrics of Distributed Work." White Paper, Knoll, Inc.

O'Connell, V. (2011). "New Lawyers, New Classes." *Wall Street Journal*, August 24, 2011

Schumpeter, "The Daughter Also Rises," *The Economist*, August 27, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/21526872>

Wymer, T. (2003). "The Emerging Law Firm Practice." White Paper, Knoll, Inc.

Through research, Knoll explores the connection between workspace design and human behavior, health and performance, and the quality of the user experience. We share and apply what we learn to inform product development and help our customers shape their work environments. To learn more about this topic or other research resources Knoll can provide, visit [www.knoll.com/research/index.jsp](http://www.knoll.com/research/index.jsp)



Follow Knoll strategy on Twitter [@NEU\\_Insight](https://twitter.com/NEU_Insight)