



ON THE MOVE

Benesch's swift growth in Chicago forces move to modern office at 71 South Wacker

BY JOHN MCNALLY

By any measure, Benesch's growth in Chicago has been rapid and impressive.

Starting in January 2016 with two partners, the office has swelled to more than 60 lawyers, their paralegals and the office support staff. The firm's growth also meant a short stay at its initial home at 333 W. Wacker Drive.

In early September, Cleveland-based Benesch celebrated the move to its new Chicago offices in Suite 1600 at 71 S. Wacker Drive.

"Our growth has been explosive across the firm overall and particularly in Chicago," Benesch's Operations Director Mark Biddlestone said. "We quickly outgrew the space that we had. We liked 333 West Wacker, but there wasn't enough space to accommodate us. We needed to uproot and go someplace else"

Biddlestone, David Pope and the group the two assembled quickly ramped up and started scouting locations. They found 71 S. Wacker to be an ideal mesh of convenience for Benesch clients and employees, suitable amenities and elite neighbors.

"It has high-end tenants," Pope said. "It has a caliber of firms and busi-

nesses that we like to associate ourselves with."

Pope, who is a co-founder of Benesch's Chicago office and a partner, had worked in the building while with Mayer Brown. He and Biddlestone appreciated that the 71 S. Wacker building had updated its food options, common areas and gym as they began the move.

Pope and Biddlestone developed focus groups and project teams to help the design process. They wanted insight by staff members who worked with other firms. They called the effort critical.

"Everyone here came from someplace else first, and most of us from large, white-shoe firms," Pope said. "People had an idea of what did and didn't work from their old firms. That was a big help in the process."

WELCOME TO OUR HOME

Biddlestone believes when you step into someone's house, you quickly learn a lot about that person. Benesch took that mindset to heart when designing its new offices. Clients walking around the approximately 64,000-square-foot office spread over two floors will see seven distinct collaboration

spaces for attorneys to work.

There's the one with a large television that just might be playing an afternoon Cubs game. Or there's the "Fireplace Lounge" that adds a touch of warmth while an associate keeps his or her head buried in documents.

"We have a lot of space dedicated to teams working outside of offices, collaboration spaces," Biddlestone said. "I know that's popular now, but it's functional for us. We want people to get out of their offices. We want them to mix, think and work together for clients."

Benesch had deep discussions about universal office sizes, knowing that it's a trend many law offices utilize when they relocate or renovate. In fact, it was the initial plan for Benesch, but plans changed when they heard from a colleague that came over from another firm.

Pope recalls the attorney saying how gung-ho everyone was for universal office sizes in the planning stages. Then, when move-in time came, partners were less than happy.

"It put the brakes on (our plans)," Pope said. "And in hindsight, we did the right thing. It's just a more comfortable working environment."

Biddlestone added: "We backed away from it because that's not our approach. Partners wanted offices that would allow them to meet with individuals in their office on an on-the-fly basis. It's about servicing clients."

Inside the offices and at the secretarial stations are full-size, height-adjustable solid wood desks. There, associates and partners can sit or stand to do their work. These go beyond the traditional sit/stand computer consoles. Lawyers have plenty of space to write on legal pads and day planners.

"The entire structure moves to whatever height you want it to be," Pope said. "People love that and it's another modern touch. (I've heard) people say sitting is the new smoking."

SOUNDING OFF

Each of Benesch's conference rooms feature floor-to-ceiling windows with privacy screens, up-to-date audio/visual and online conferencing equipment so the Chicago office can connect with clients or the Benesch offices around the globe.

Biddlestone said the firm took its time selecting vendors, especially when it came to sound and lighting. The glass walls for the conference rooms are slightly opaque but allows some light to come through. Biddlestone noted the firm wanted to "chase out shadows" and have lots of natural light. Certain areas, such as in the lobby and the east secretarial station, were specifically

designed for Benesch to emulate skylights.

"A lot of light comes through, but provides the privacy to clients," Biddlestone said.

Despite the use of large office walls and windows, Benesch made sure to break up the look of the office with solid wood doors for the conference rooms and offices. That provided a challenge for sound privacy, requiring Biddlestone and team to go to vendors and perform extensive sound testing.

They went to multiple vendor facilities and ran sound tests that entailed speaking at normal volumes and raising their voices when needed to ensure they would have the privacy needed for the offices.

"We asked for the data and engineering statistics specific to (sound)," he recalled. "When I was working with the architect, I wanted to ensure all walls go to [the ceiling]. The walls go to the bottom of the above floor and they're sealed off."

FUN AND GAMES

Biddlestone and Pope highlighted the areas of their office that will provide Benesch lawyers and employees a chance to relax. Pope said the "green wall" that accents the staircase between floors gives a neat feel that connects the litigation department on the 15th floor to corporate on the 16th floor.

"Having that stairwell that's connected by the green wall ... I just always like the feeling of walking up those stairs," Pope said.

There's a popcorn machine, grab-and-go snack area featuring healthy protein bars and savory treats. The office also has a pair of locker rooms, fully equipped with showers for attorneys that bike to work or use the gym before or during work.

"People take advantage of them," Pope said. "Some bike to work so they don't leave a carbon footprint."

Benesch already has hosted some parties in its new locale and appreciate having all the extra room in the lobby, cafeterias and multiple common areas.

The firm can host multiple events at the same time and not feel as everyone is on top of one another.

"We have some fun spaces too, like the cafeterias that are open and connected to other open spaces. They're really designed for people to get together. We have had a couple of parties already. This was designed to have fun in, enjoy being here and interact." CL

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